



Charles "Sonny" Liston

Born: May 8, 1932 (disputed)

Sand Slough, Arkansas

Height: 6 feet ½ inch (1.84 m)

Reach: 84 inches (2.13 m)

Boxing Record: 54-4-0, 39 by KO

Cassius Clay **VS.** Sonny Liston

Clay Becomes World Champ

► BY NATHAN LEE ADAMUS



Who was Sonny Liston? The answer varies depending on whom you talk to. His close friends say he wasn't the bad guy portrayed in the media, but his rap sheet, an estimated 19 arrests, speaks volumes.

Charles "Sonny" Liston grew up in Arkansas, the second youngest of 12 siblings. His father Tobe Liston loved liquor. His heavy drinking routinely led to physical abuse, and Sonny had permanent scars to prove it. Liston didn't talk about his father much, but when he did, he was blunt. "The only thing my old man ever gave me was a beating," he said.

His dad put him to work on the farm at a young age, and Liston was frequently absent from school. The lack of an education left him illiterate, and he soon found himself hanging with the wrong crowd. When he was 13, his mother gathered some of the children and escaped to St. Louis.

Legal Trouble

Liston would later leave his father behind and join his family in St. Louis, but the move only made things worse. The family possessed next to nothing, and Liston soon joined a St. Louis gang to make ends meet. The police called him the "Yellow Shirt Bandit" due to his habit of wearing a yellow T-shirt during armed robberies. In 1950, he was charged with two counts of larceny and two counts of first-degree robbery.

The conviction put Liston behind bars for a little more than two years, but the trip to the pen may have been a blessing in disguise. Missouri State Penitentiary athletic director Father Alois Stevens suggested that Liston give boxing a try. Stevens said, "He [Liston] was the most perfect specimen of manhood I had ever seen. Powerful arms, big shoulders. Pretty soon he was knocking out everybody in the gym." Good behavior and a blossoming boxing career facilitated an early release, and on September 2, 1953, Liston turned pro, knocking out Don Smith in the first round of his first fight.

The ring was about the only place where Liston was safe. Outside the ring, the St. Louis police and rival gangs were all over him. He dealt with the harassment for years until he cracked on May 5, 1956. During an unlawful stop, Liston assaulted an officer, stole his gun and left him in an alley with a broken knee.

He accused the officer of using racial slurs and eventually served six months of a nine-month sentence in St. Louis's Medium Security Institution commonly known as "The City Workhouse."

Not long after his release, Liston was in a scuffle with another police officer and fled to Philadelphia. Unfortunately, he was unable to leave his troubled past behind. Liston attempted to clean up his image, even living with a Jesuit priest in Denver for three months,



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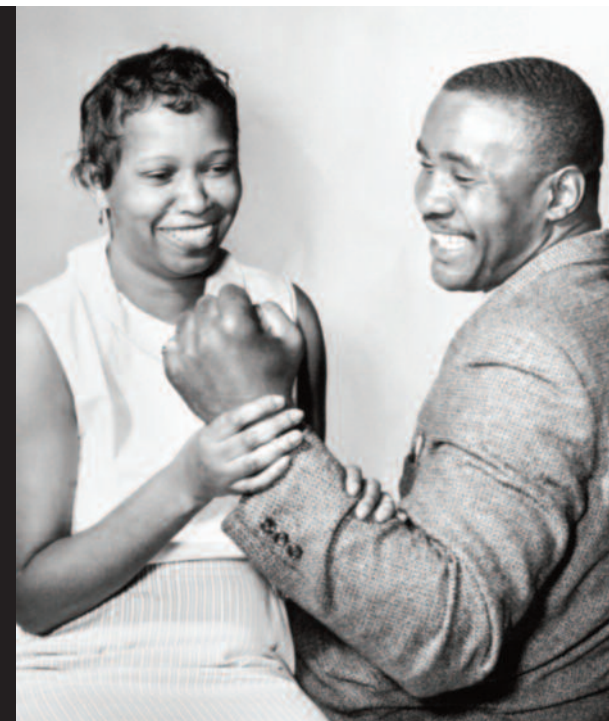
but depression and his personal demons continued to haunt him.

By the late '50s, he was kicking off his mornings with a cocktail. In 1961, he was arrested twice, once for loitering as he signed autographs, and once for shining a light in the car of a female motorist and impersonating a police officer. The charges were eventually dropped, but the controversy made it difficult for Liston to get the title fight he felt he deserved.

Heavyweight Champion

The boxing world didn't like Sonny Liston, and neither did the NAACP, who encouraged heavyweight champion Floyd Patterson to avoid Liston at all costs. They feared that the public perception of Liston as a ruthless thug would tarnish their positive efforts in the civil rights movement. Even JFK begged Patterson to steer clear of Liston and his organized crime buddies.

Patterson shrugged off Liston until 1962, but he



“He was a loner. He wouldn't talk to nobody. He wouldn't go with nobody. He always came to the gym by himself. He always left by himself. The police knew he'd been in prison, and he'd be walking along and they'd always stop him and search him. So he went through alleys all the time. He always went around things. I can still see him, either coming out of an alley or walking into one.”

– Johnny Tocco, one of Liston's trainers

probably should've avoided him even longer since he lasted only two minutes in their title fight. Liston fought Patterson in a rematch on July 22, 1963 in Las Vegas, but Patterson didn't fair much better, falling three times and failing to beat the count after two brutal right blows from Liston with 50 seconds left in the 1st round. Liston lost his title to Cassius Clay the following year and would never regain the belt. He did, however, only lose once in his next 16 fights.

Mysterious Death

Liston's life was shrouded in mystery, and his death, officially listed as December 30, 1970, was just as enigmatic. Upon returning from a two-week trip on January 5, 1971, his wife Geraldine found a dead Liston leaning against a bed with a broken bench nearby. The police initially determined he had fallen backwards while undressing and crashed into the bench, dying on impact.

One of the first officers on the scene found heroin and marijuana

in Liston's possession, but no needles or paraphernalia of any kind. Worth noting is that Liston's wife didn't call police for three hours after finding the body. Whether she dispensed of any evidence or whether foul play was involved is still an item of contention among conspiracy theorists. Investigators labeled the death a heroin overdose, but the official cause of death was listed as lung congestion and heart failure. Toxicology reports were inconclusive due to the condition of the body, however, track marks and scar tissue from prolonged heroin use were found on Liston's left arm.

Many of Liston's friends and family were skeptical of the heroin accusations, claiming Sonny was petrified of needles, noting that he routinely avoided medical attention when needles were involved. Close friend and trainer Jimmy Tocco offered another theory, “The month before he died, some guy ran into Sonny while he was making a left turn,” he said. “He had a whiplash, so they took him to the hospital. He said: ‘Look what they did!’ and he

was pointing at some little bandage over the needle mark in his arm. He was more angry about that shot than he was about the car wreck. A couple weeks later, he was still complainin' about that needle mark. To this day, I'm convinced that's what the coroner saw in his exam...that hospital needle mark.”

Many other theories exist. Some say local drug dealers had Liston killed after they felt he ratted them out to police. Others claim he was deeply entrenched in a loan-sharking ring and was shot with a lethal injection after requesting a larger cut. The most popular theory suggests Liston was murdered by the mob after he threatened to expose them for throwing his second fight with Ali.

Recommended Liston Resources

- *The Devil and Sonny Liston* by Nick Tosches
- “Sonny Liston: The Champion Nobody Wanted,” BBC Documentary
- “Sonny Liston: The Mysterious Life and Death of a Champion,” HBO Documentary

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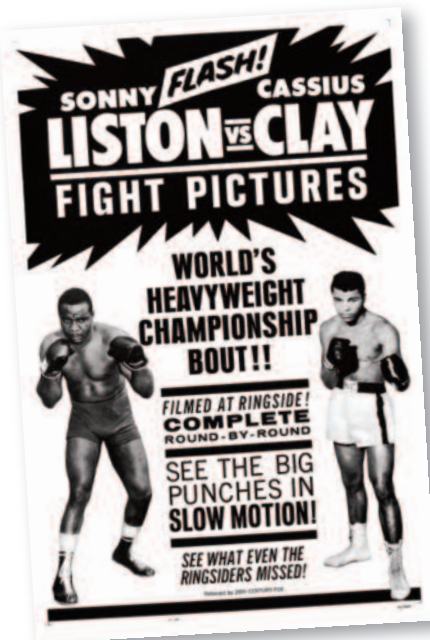
CLAY VS. LISTON

Clay vs. Liston I

Date: February 25, 1964
Location: Convention Center, Miami Beach, Florida
Winner: Cassius Clay by RTD (Referee's Technical Decision) before Round 7

Clay: 210 pounds
Liston: 218 pounds

Referee: Barney Felix 57-57
Judge: Bernie Lovett 58-56
Judge: Gus Jacobson 56-58



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The path to Cassius Clay vs. Sonny Liston began two years earlier at Comiskey Park in Chicago. Heavyweight champion Floyd Patterson dodged Liston's title challenges for years, refusing to engage the former Missouri State Penitentiary resident due to his rumored organized crime ties. Ironically, Liston's mob connection played a big part in his fights with Muhammad Ali. In 1962, Patterson cracked, and a title bout was scheduled for September 25. A crowd of 18,894 packed Comiskey Park to watch Liston

obliterate Patterson with a right uppercut in the first round. Patterson stayed up just long enough to get hit with a cluster of jabs and a mean left hook. Ten seconds later, it was game over for the reigning champ. After Liston defeated Patterson in a rematch a year later, Clay was next in line for a title fight opportunity.

Pre-fight Shenanigans

In 1964, there was only one person the press and fans despised more than Clay, and that was Sonny Liston. The media repeat-

edly slammed Liston for his criminal associations, even using racial slurs to describe the powerful heavyweight. Clay's issues with the press were primarily linked to his mouth, as many reporters found his exuberant behavior in interviews rather obnoxious. Before the fight, *L.A. Times* sportswriter Jim Murray exclaimed, "The only thing at which Clay can beat Liston in is reading." He later sarcastically referred to the matchup as "the most popular fight since Hitler and Stalin—180 million Americans rooting for a double knockout."

"He should be locked up for impersonating a fighter." - Sonny Liston talking about Cassius Clay before their fight

Even before the epic matchup between the two giants was scheduled, the pair had developed a bizarre relationship. Clay devised a plan to pester Liston until he agreed to fight him, often showing up unannounced at Liston's home and training sessions and heckling him with clever raps such as, "Sonny is a fatty. I'm gonna whip him like his daddy!"

According to Ali's autobiography, *The Greatest, My Own Story*, the circus act reached the boiling point at the Thunderbird Casino in Las Vegas when Clay caught the champ in the midst of a losing game of craps. Clay writes, "I started shouting at him, 'Come on, you big ugly bear! Let's get it on! Come on!' Liston kept rolling the dice, hardly looking up. 'I'll whip you right now!' I said. 'Floyd Patterson was a nobody. You'll knockout Floyd Patterson but I'm the real champ. I'm too fast for you and you know it! Put up all your money, Sonny! If you think you can whip me.' ...Suddenly he reached in his pocket and pulled out a long black pistol, pointed it straight at my head, pulled the trigger: BANG! BANG! ...When I got back to my hotel room, I threw myself on the bed, panting. My heart was beating fast, my hands



were shaking. I was thinking maybe I should leave Liston alone. I knew I was only acting crazy, but he might be crazy for real."

The gun was loaded with blanks, but the incident ticked off Liston so much that he agreed to the fight. Other reports suggest the incident was much less dramatic and that Clay merely approached Liston inside the casino and tapped him on the shoulder. Liston then spun around and slapped Clay. When Clay asked him why, Liston responded, "Cause you're too fresh." Clay would later say that Liston was the only one of his adversaries that truly frightened him.

Despite the apparent near-death experience, Clay continued the ruse after the fight was announced. He bought a bus, painted "Sonny Will Go In Eight" on the side, and rolled up to Liston's house in the middle of the night with his entourage and a mouthful of insults, calling him a "big ugly bear" that he was going to later use "as a bearskin rug."

Weigh-in, Worked Up

The pre-fight exam and weigh-in was also a chaotic event. Clay showed up wearing a jacket emblazoned with the words "Bear Huntin'" and began shaking a walking stick and yelling, "I am the champ." When Liston appeared, Clay went ballistic, charging at him and announcing that, "Someone is going to die at ringside tonight!"

The exam revealed that Clay's heart rate was 120 beats per minute and his blood pressure was a ridiculous 200/100. The Miami Boxing Commission's chief physician reported that Clay was "emotionally unbalanced, scared to death and liable to crack up before he enters the ring." The commission threatened to cancel the fight if Clay's vitals didn't return to normal, and an hour later a second exam cleared Clay to fight. Clay called the episode a scare tactic, stating, "Liston's not afraid of me, but he's afraid of a nut."



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The *Ring* magazine named Clay vs. Liston I the "Fight of the Year" and would later name it "Fight of the Decade" and "Upset of the Decade."

CLAY VS. LISTON

Fight Breakdown

Liston wanted to punish Clay from the opening bell, but the tactic proved useless as Clay bounded around the ring like a gazelle on amphetamines. With 30 seconds left, Clay punished Liston with a series of punches. Round two was an improvement for Liston, and he even managed to trap Clay in the corner and deck him with a spine-tingling left hook.

The little momentum Liston gained in round two was nowhere to be found in the third. Clay demolished the champ with a number of combos, raising a lump on his right cheek and opening a cut under his left eye that required eight stitches. A fatigued Clay took a few body shots late in the round, but it was too little too late.

During the 4th round, Clay seemed distracted, spending the majority of the round avoiding Liston at all costs. When Clay retreated to his corner, he told his trainer Angelo Dundee that there was something in his eyes. In an interview 25 years after the fight, Dundee said, "...I put my pinkie in his eye and I put it into my eye. It burned like hell. There was something caustic in both eyes."

Although many assumed Clay was blinded accidentally by chemical solutions used to clean Liston's eye, cutman Joe Pollino later confessed that Liston convinced him to coat his gloves in an astringent



solution prior to the 4th round. Another heavyweight, Eddie Machen, supported this theory, claiming Liston used the same shady tactic against him during a bout in 1960.

Clay continued to have difficulty seeing Liston in Round 5, but by Round 6, his vision was back to normal. With his sight rejuvenated, Clay let loose on Liston, landing punches with ease. Liston returned to his corner at the end of the round, spit out his mouthpiece, and would not leave his chair for the start of the 7th. When Clay realized that Liston wasn't returning to the fight, he charged over to a group of sports-writers screaming, "Eat your words!" and "I am the greatest!"

Post-fight

Many analysts assumed Clay didn't have the firepower to dispense Liston, and the Vegas odds

listed Clay as a huge seven to one underdog. Apparently Liston didn't think much of Clay's ring reputation either, as he later admitted he didn't train properly for the fight. In fact, reports suggest he spent the weeks leading up to the title match eating unhealthy foods, filling his belly with alcohol and being entertained by prostitutes.

In an interview at the conclusion of the fight, Liston cited a shoulder injury for his resignation, but the severity of the injury has been called into question. In *The King of the World: Muhammad Ali and the Rise of an American Hero*, author David Remnick writes that one of Liston's cornermen told him "[The shoulder] was all BS. ... We cooked up that shoulder thing on the spot." However, doctors at St. Francis Hospital in Miami reported that the shoulder was "too badly damaged for Liston to continue fighting."

The Fix Is In

Almost immediately, accusations of a fix spread like wildfire. Liston's links to well-known criminals provided conspiracy theorists with plenty of ammunition, and the rumors led to investigations by the State of Florida and the U.S. Senate subcommittee. The investigations found no evidence of anything illegal, but circumstantial evidence has surfaced over the years that support the fix theory.

**"He's too ugly to be the world's champ!
The world's champ should be pretty like me!"**
- Cassius Clay on Sonny Liston



Ali vs. Liston II

Date: May 25, 1965
Location: Central Maine Youth Center, Lewiston, Maine
Winner: Muhammad Ali by KO in Round 1

Ali: 206 pounds
Liston: 215 pounds

Referee: "Jersey" Joe Walcott
Judge: Coley Wallace
Judge: Russ Leonard
Judge: Joe Colvin



Threats of violence scared fans away and only 2,434 people attended Ali vs. Liston II. It was the lowest attendance for a heavyweight championship fight in boxing history.

As a result of a bunch of legal mumbo-jumbo, a planned rematch between Liston and Ali caught the eye of the World Boxing Association (WBA), which did not allow fight contracts with rematch clauses. When the two fighters agreed to a rematch, the WBA voted to strip Ali of his title and drop Liston from its rankings. However, other boxing organizations such as the World Boxing Council, the New York State Athletic Commission and *The Ring* magazine continued to



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CLAY VS. LISTON

recognize Ali as its champion. Unfortunately, the controversy made finding a venue for the rematch a difficult process. It took some time, but eventually Massachusetts agreed to host the fight at the Boston Garden on November 16, 1964. Despite the outcome of the first bout, Liston was announced as a 13 to five favorite.

Pre-fight Shenanigans Part II

Not long after Clay defeated Liston in their first meeting, Clay publicly announced his affiliation with the “black Muslims” and began using the name Cassius X. The announcement didn’t sit well with white boxing fans, who perceived the organization as a hate group. One month later, Nation of Islam leader Elijah Muhammad would give Clay the name Muhammad Ali.

Liston spent the layoff between the first fight and the second doing what he did best, getting into trouble. On March 12, 1964, Liston was pulled over and charged with speeding, careless and reckless driving, driving without a license and carrying a concealed weapon. The officer claimed Liston was driving between 75 and 80 mph in a residential zone. He was carrying a .22 caliber revolver and three empty vodka bottles were found in the vehicle.

To make matters worse, Ali was injured just days before the fight,

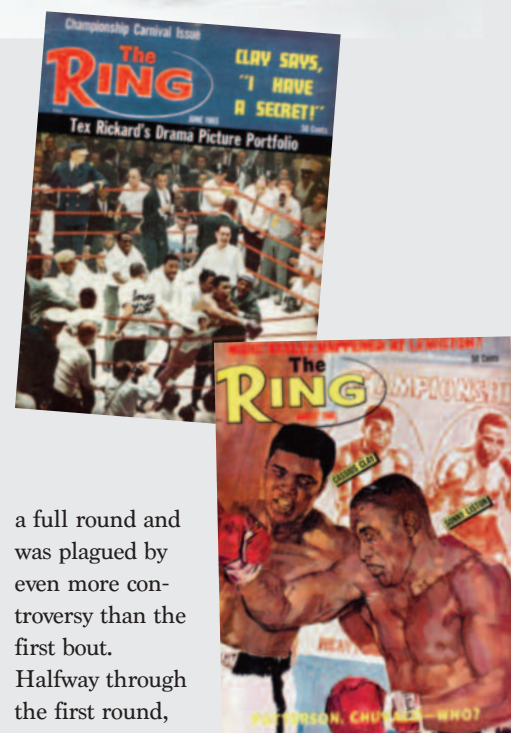


suffering a strangulated hernia that required emergency surgery. The fight was delayed for six months and rescheduled for May 25, 1965. However, just weeks before the scheduled fight date, Massachusetts officials got cold feet and pulled out on May 7. Governor John Reed of Maine came to the rescue, nominating Lewiston, Maine as the new site for the rematch. The Central Maine Youth Center was chosen as the location for the highly anticipated battle.

The assassination of Malcolm X in February 1965 only enhanced the pre-fight tension. Rumors surfaced that Malcolm X supporters were in the process of snuffing out Ali in retaliation for Ali’s derogatory statements about Malcolm X and his allegiance to the Nation of Islam. Most Americans assumed the Nation was responsible for Malcolm’s death, although they never officially took responsibility for the assassination. The FBI felt the threats were credible and sent a dozen men to guard Ali round the clock.

Fight Breakdown

The fight that was more than a year in the making didn’t even last



a full round and was plagued by even more controversy than the first bout. Halfway through the first round, Liston lunged at Ali with a left jab. Ali stepped out of reach and thumped Liston with what was later known as Ali’s famous Anchor Punch. Liston fell to the ground, made a half-hearted attempt to stand up, and then rolled over on his back. The punch was so quick that most of the fans in attendance were unaware that Ali had struck Liston with the blow.

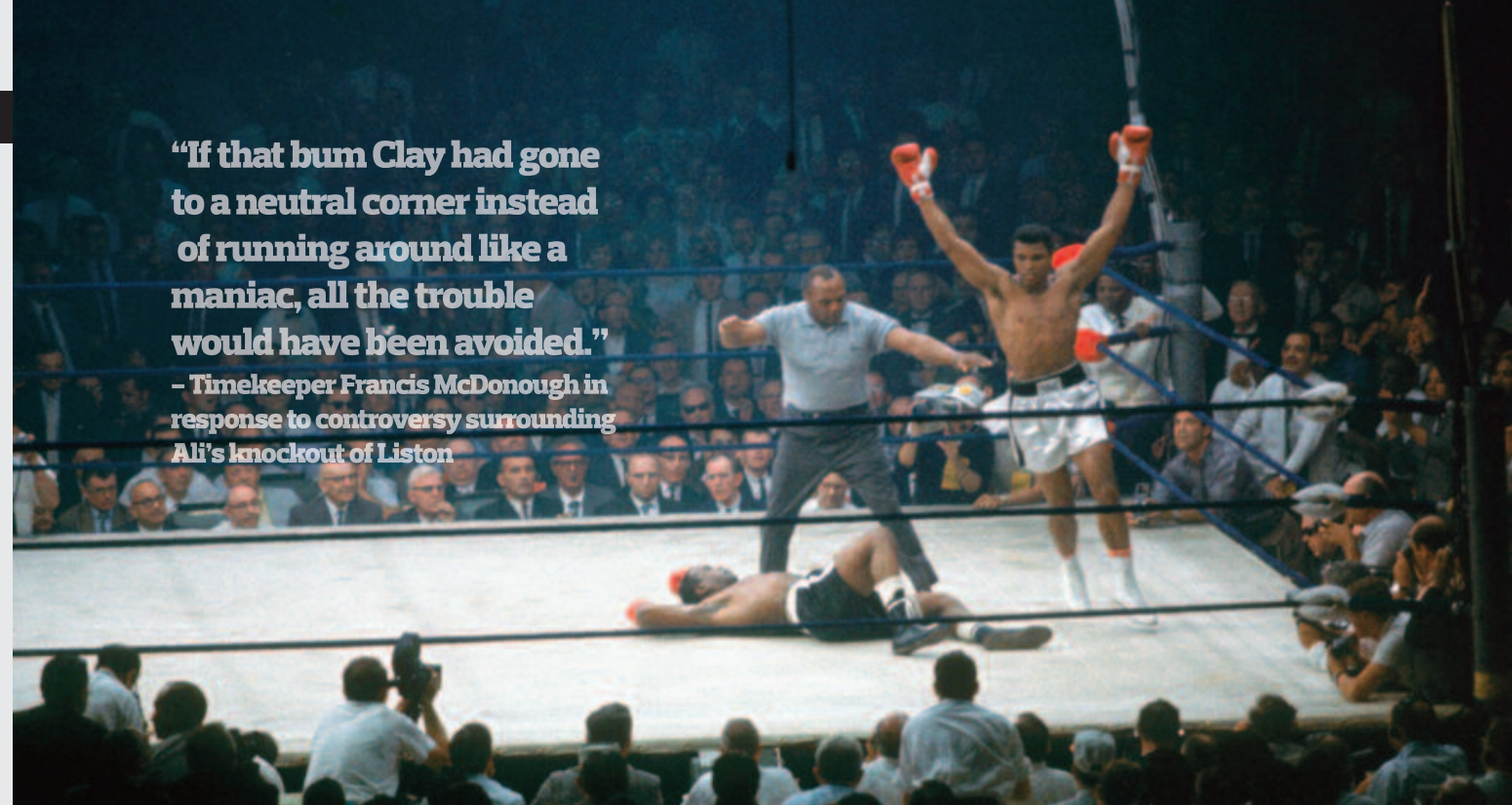
Ali scurried over to Liston, hovering above him while screaming, “Get up and fight, sucker!” The intense moment was captured by

TOP - HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES; BOTTOM - PICTORIAL PARADE/GETTY IMAGES; RING COVERS - THE RING MAGAZINE/GETTY IMAGES

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“If that bum Clay had gone to a neutral corner instead of running around like a maniac, all the trouble would have been avoided.”

– Timekeeper Francis McDonough in response to controversy surrounding Ali’s knockout of Liston



famed photographer Neil Leifer and became one of the most iconic images in boxing history. The chaos caused miscommunication between referee Joe Walcott and timekeeper Francis McDonough. Walcott claims he glanced at McDonough to stop the count until he sent Ali to his corner, but McDonough later stated Walcott was too busy staring into the crowd and never gave him a signal to stop the count. Liston eventually stood up and Walcott was set to get the match back on track, but McDonough told him, “I counted him out; the fight is over.”

The bizarre “count” incident and the “phantom punch” that led to the knockout caused the fans to start booing and yelling “Fix!” Film footage of the fight showed that even Ali wasn’t sure if he had connected as he turned to his entourage and asked, “Did I hit him?” In response to questioning, Nation of Islam minister Abdul Rahman later said, “Ali hit him so fast, Ali didn’t really know he hit him...and it took a long time before even he saw the punch he hit Sonny with.”

The Phantom Anchor Punch: The Fix Part II

The mysterious Anchor Punch still remains contentious. Some boxing historians claim the punch was solid but wasn’t a knockout blow by any means. Liston disagreed, later saying, “It was a good right-hand punch. It made me groggy. I got to my knees but fell the second time because I was off balance. ...I could have got up, but I didn’t hear the count.”

Heavyweight fighter George Chuvalo even jumped into the ring after the knockdown and confronted Ali, crying out “Fix!” Hall of Fame announcer Don Dunphy also felt the fight was fixed, saying, “If that was a punch, I’ll eat it. Here was a guy who was in prison and the guards used to beat him over the head with clubs and couldn’t knock him down.”

In the 1995 HBO documentary “Sonny Liston: The Mysterious Life & Death of a Champion,” Liston’s trainer Johnny Tocco says that he ran into mob boss John Vitale prior to the fight in Maine and that Vitale told him the fight would end

in the first round. Vitale was a notorious St. Louis crime boss who reportedly owned 12% of Liston’s contract. Former FBI agent William Roemer Jr. is quoted in the same documentary as saying, “We learned that there very definitely had been a fix in that fight.”

Others, such as former heavyweight champ Rocky Marciano, felt the punch was indeed a knockout blow. I didn’t think it was a powerful punch when I saw the fight from ringside,” Marciano admitted. “Now [after seeing the video] I think Clay, seeing the opening, snapped the punch the last six inches.” **MA**



The controversy surrounding Ali vs. Liston II created a divide between boxing organizations and politicians. In fact, after the possibility of a fix came to light, a number of states attempted to permanently ban boxing within their borders.