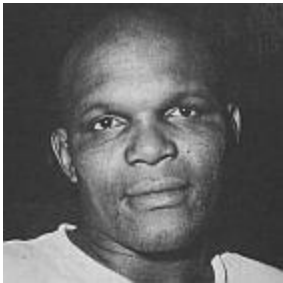


# Bennie Briscoe's legacy a victim of bad timing

*By Bernard Fernandez  
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December 30, 2010 - TO HEAR SOME people tell it, former middleweight contender "Bad" Bennie Briscoe, who was 67 when he died Tuesday, had the misfortune of coming along too soon.

Then again, maybe he didn't. It just might be that the much younger, much richer and much more widely exposed fighters, those select few pay-per-view attractions that the public is familiar with today, came along too late.

"Bennie's best work was done between the two eras of television, the end of the 'Friday Night Fights' in 1964 and the start of ESPN, HBO and the cable revolution of the 1980s," said J Russell Peltz, who was Briscoe's promoter from 1969 to '82, the last 13 years of a remarkable 21-year professional career that isn't nearly as celebrated now as it should be. "He never got the kind of purses and attention that fighters like Manny Pacquiao and Floyd Mayweather get today.

"The most money Bennie ever made was the \$50,000 he got for each of the last two [Rodrigo] Valdez fights and the one with [Marvin] Hagler. That was pretty good money for 30 years ago, but, with what's around today, he'd probably have made seven figures at least a couple of times."

It can be argued, however, that what Briscoe (66-24-5, 53 KOs) lost out on financially was more than compensated for by his towering stature as a local legend. During the last golden era of Philadelphia boxing, a halcyon period that featured the celebrated likes of Eugene "Cyclone" Hart, Willie "The Worm" Monroe, Bobby "Boogaloo" Watts, Stanley "Kitten" Hayward, "Joltin' " Jeff Chandler and Matthew Saad Muhammad - it was, obviously, also a golden era for sports heroes' nicknames - Briscoe was revered on or near the same level as the top players on the Eagles, Phillies, Flyers and 76ers. He routinely drew enthusiastic, sizable crowds to the Spectrum, where he was never booed, even when he lost. Most of Bernard "The Executioner" Hopkins' biggest fights, on the other hand, were staged outside of his hometown.

"We drew big crowds for fights involving all those other guys, but Bennie was the most beloved fighter of that time," Peltz continued. "He fought everybody, and he always gave the fans their money's worth. He was never in a bad fight. Put it this way: Bennie was the man."

Now the Spectrum is almost history and so, too, is the tough guy with the shaved head, menacing stare, fiercely competitive nature and the kind of punching power that could put even the most granite-chinned opponent down and out. But while the Spectrum, which is in the process of being demolished, isn't likely to be forgotten any time soon, the same can't be said with certainty of Briscoe, a very private man whose postboxing life included few public appearances and a refusal to trade on what remained of his celebrity.

Nor is the boxing community outside of Philadelphia apt to buff and restore Briscoe's reputation as the quintessential Philly fighter. Ask any current fight fan, here or around the world, who he is more familiar with, Bennie Briscoe or Hopkins, and the unanimous decision will go to B-Hop, whose legend is merited but has been helped along by the international media overload that Briscoe never got to experience.

Although Briscoe last year was voted into the World Boxing Hall of Fame in California, he has never even appeared on the ballot of the International Boxing Hall of Fame in Canastota, N.Y., which is to the sweet science what Cooperstown, N.Y., is to baseball.

"If the best Bennie fought the best Hopkins, I don't know," Peltz, who is extremely loyal to the fighters he promoted, said when asked who would win if the two men somehow could be paired prime-on-prime. "But Hopkins will go into the International Boxing Hall of Fame on the first ballot. He'll be regarded as one of the 10 greatest middleweights of all time, and rightfully so. For him to still be doing what he's doing at his age [45], Hopkins is a freak of nature. But Bennie probably will never make it to Canastota, and that's a shame."

John DiSanto, who in 2007 conceived the Briscoe Awards, which then were created by sculptor Carl LeVotch, agrees. The Briscoes - which are presented annually through the auspices of Ring One of the Veterans Boxers Association to the year's top Philadelphia fighter and the two men who engaged in the best local fight of the year - was meant to keep alive the memory of an underappreciated icon.

"I could have named the awards after a lot of really good fighters, but Bennie, to me, was the prototype," DiSanto said. "The legacies of guys like Joey Giardello [a LeVotch-fashioned bronze statue of whom is to be placed in South Philly in the spring] and Joe Frazier are set. They became world champions and they're in the International Boxing Hall of Fame. Bernard Hopkins is going in someday, too. Bennie probably never will be considered, which I don't necessarily agree with. I named the awards the Briscoes as a way to help people remember just how important he was to the city and to boxing."

Nigel Collins, editor of *The Ring* magazine, said Briscoe was so determined, so intimidating, he could still hold his own with some of the best 160-pound fighters in the world when his skills were clearly in decline. He cites Briscoe's 10-round, unanimous-decision loss to Marvin Hagler on Aug. 24, 1978, at the Spectrum as an example.

"The only time I ever saw Hagler back up most of a fight was against Bennie," Collins recalled. "Bennie was pretty much over the hill then [at 35], and Marvin [then 24] was just coming into greatness. But even Hagler wasn't going to stand toe-to-toe with Bennie."

"We're talking about someone who was never pretentious, who never went Hollywood. Bennie preferred being out on the street with the boys. He was a no-nonsense fighter, a real badass in the ring, but he was charismatic, even if he wasn't into shooting his mouth off. His philosophy of boxing was, 'I come in shape, and I come to knock my man out.' That struck a chord with Philadelphia fight fans."

That chord doesn't resonate as it once did. Like the man said, that is a shame.

Bennie is survived by his wife, Karen, three sons and a daughter.