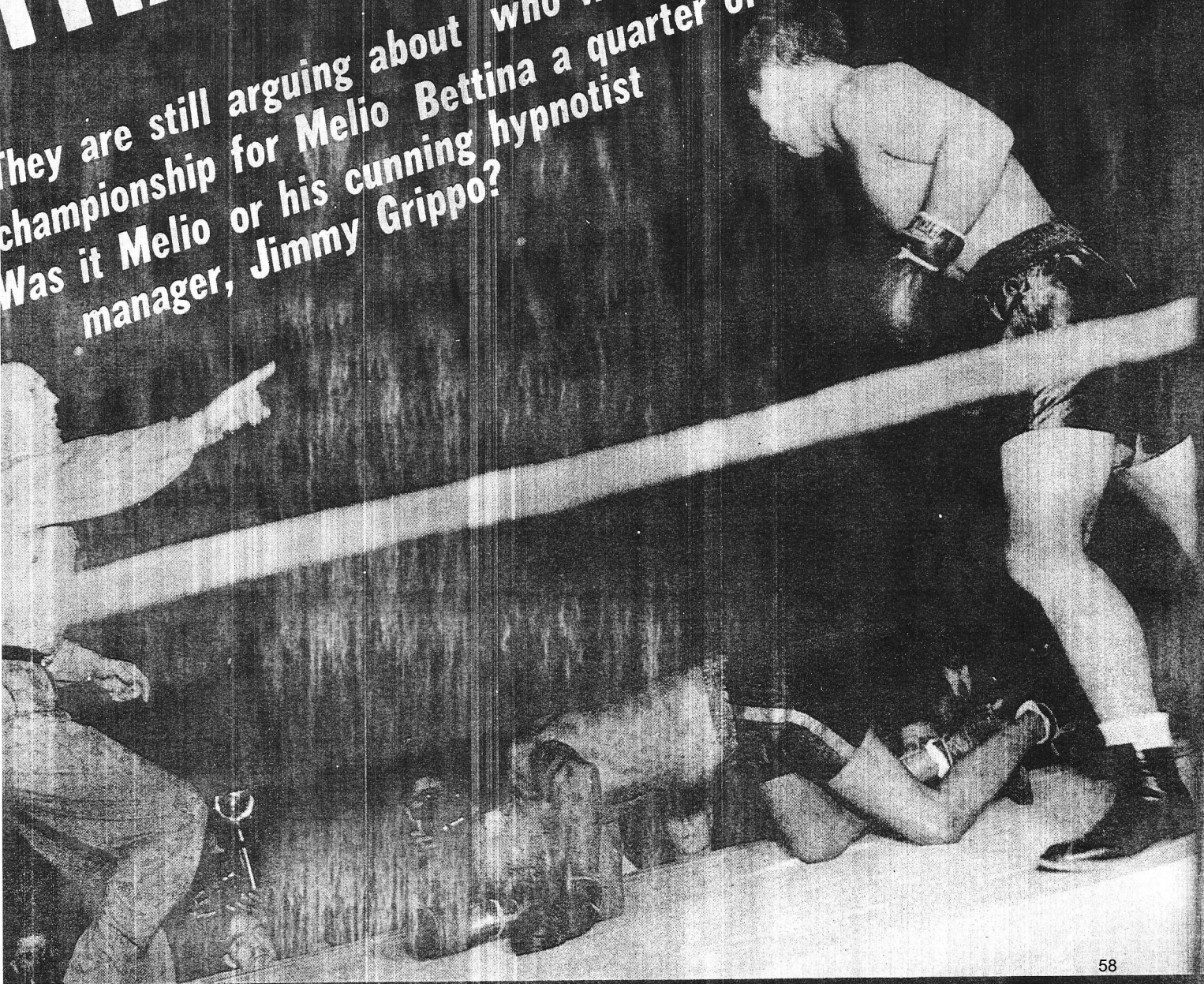


WAS THE HEX DEADLIER THAN THE PUNCH?



They are still arguing about who won the light heavyweight championship for Melio Bettina a quarter of a century ago. Was it Melio or his cunning hypnotist manager, Jimmy Grippo?



AMIA INTERNATIONAL BOXING JAN 1969

MELIO BETTINA! Remember him? Once he won the light heavyweight title, New York version. He won it with a pounding, boring-in southpaw style and he nearly chopped down Tiger Jack Fox doing it. But when the fight was over, the crowd that jammed Madison Square Garden walked away talking about a glib, brillo-haired man named Jimmy Grippo instead of Bettina.

You remember Grippo. He was the hypnotist. He was the man in Bettina's corner who supposedly hexed Tiger Jack Fox until Fox (some said) quivered as he waited to be chopped down. Bettina wore his crown only five months. After he lost the title, Bettina fought off and on for another nine years. Bread and butter years. Jimmy Grippo parlayed those five months into a career.

Melio, you see, never really thought he had been hypnotized. He thought he had won the title because he beat Tiger Fox with his fists—not with Grippo's whammy.

"Most of that was just show business," Bettina will tell you. "Hell, you know how it was back in the 30s. There were hundreds of good fighters. The guys who were putting on fights had an army to pick from: good fighters, hungry fighters. It took color to get anywhere. The 'whammy' was Grippo's idea; I'll give him that. It got us publicity and publicity got us fights. But I did the



Hypnotist manager Jimmy Grippo gives Bettina daily "treatment" before start of training session for title fight with Tiger Jack Fox. In photo on facing page, Fox goes down in ninth round and Melio is king.

fighting, not Grippo."

It wasn't that way at all, Grippo says.

"I had a gym in Beacon, N. Y. I didn't have any fighters but a lot of guys trained there. Well, one day this woman, Mrs. Bettina, comes to me and tells me she's got this kid, he's 14, and he's big but he keeps getting beat up. Now, she says, he won't go to school because some bully is waiting for him.

"Anyway, the next day she brings the kid to my gym and I

talk to him. Doesn't do much good. Finally I hypnotize him. During hypnosis I tell him he's strong and can fight like hell. I give him confidence. Sure enough, the next day he goes to school and wipes up the yard with the bully. The hypnosis works too good. Now the kid wants to be a fighter."

"Baloney," Bettina says. "For one thing, my mother never saw that gym. What would she be doing around a gym? And I was fifteen, not fourteen, when I

went there. My family wasn't too well off and I was working mixing concrete. That's tough work and I was tough, too.

"I went to Grippo's gym and trained because I was told I could pick up some easy money there. I fought in the amateurs—160 pounds—and won the Golden Gloves. I turned pro when Grippo asked me if I wanted to make some good money. I was 18. It was 1934."

The record books do not show how many fights Grippo won or lost for Bettina. But they show that Melio scored four knock-outs in winning his first seven fights. It wasn't easy to get fights when the Depression had the country by the throat and every strong kid would go through a meat grinder for a few dollars. And it was doubly hard if you were a good fighter—and a southpaw, too.

"I sent some money home; not much," Bettina recalls. "Sometimes Grippo lived off me and sometimes I lived off him. He had the gym working for him. All I had were my fists and a hell of a desire to win a title."

Melio won the title on Feb. 3, 1939. He was 23. And Grippo was in the corner, cocking his eyebrows and rolling his eyeballs at Tiger Jack Fox.

"I remember that night like it was yesterday," Grippo says. He still has the clippings. They tell about how Fox' manager hired Evil Eye Finkle, who threw a mean hex of his own, to be in Tiger Jack's corner where he could ward off Grippo's evil spells.

"My influence over Bettina gave the boy confidence. But my influence over Fox—he was su-



Bettina's strong right arm is raised in victory after he stopped Fox in New York on Feb. 3, 1939, to become light heavyweight champion.

perstitious—really won the fight for Bettina. Even before the fight—when Fox learned he was going to fight Bettina—he was scared. He was afraid that I would hypnotize him from Melio's corner. It got so bad that Fox' manager paid \$5,000 to Evil Eye Finkle just to stay in Fox' corner. He wanted to get the idea across to Fox that he shouldn't worry about me. All through the fight Finkle waved his arms at me but it didn't help. It was no use. It didn't convince Tiger Jack Fox.

"As the fight went along I had Bettina remind Fox that I was really warming up and getting warmer. By the ninth round, Fox was in such a state of fright that he became a defenseless target."

Bettina remembers the night with mixed emotions. There were about 1,000 townspeople who had made the fifty-mile trip from Beacon to Madison Square Garden. And if wanting to look good among friends isn't enough to make a man tighten, the gestures in both corners got on his nerves. As a result, for seven

rounds he floundered and stumbled. And the fans who had come to cheer, booed instead.

Then came the eighth round. Melio recalls it well. "It seemed as if I got organized just as the bell rang," he says. "Fox came at me and waved a left and I hooked him. It was a good hook. He seemed to get chilly all over and all at once. Then I started plastering him. Next day the papers said I hit him ten times solid without getting a shot in return. He got up at nine but he was all done." The referee stopped the fight in the next round.

In the dressing room after the fight, Bettina looked around for newspapermen to tell his story to. He wanted to tell them he would be a fighting champion; that he wanted to take on John Henry Lewis, Dave Clark and Billy Conn. But the newspapermen were busy in another corner of the room. They were listening to Jimmy Grippo tell how he had won the fight with his cocked eyebrows and myopic stare.

Men who are old enough will tell you that Bettina was a fight-



Bettina stabs Billy Conn with long right (top). But Conn relieved Melio of his crown. Gus Lesnevich caught Bettina cold in first round of 1947 bout (above) to score a lightning-fast upset knockout.

ing champion—as long as he was champion. Five months after he beat Fox he fought Billy Conn and he lost. But he lost by only a few points, points that Conn could always earn by craftiness and style. Two months later Melio fought Conn again and this time Conn beat him with a lot of points to spare.

This was the time that Grippo decided on plying his hypnosis elsewhere. Bettina went on to

find a new manager, Billy Gore, and steady work. But he never came close to the title again.

Any regrets? Plenty, Bettina will tell you. After Conn quit the division to fight Joe Louis, Melio went to Cleveland in January of 1941 to fight Anton Christoforidis for the vacant NBA light heavyweight crown.

“As far as the referee was concerned,” he says, “I wasn’t even in the ring. I couldn’t have won

that fight with a gun.”

But despair hadn’t set in—yet. Bettina was a likely opponent for Louis and a crack at the heavyweight title. But it didn’t happen. “Louis,” he’ll tell you, “never fought a southpaw and he wouldn’t let me break his record.”

But Bettina continued to fight. He fought many fights and fought them well. “Grippo was good for showmanship. Maybe without him I’d never have gotten a chance at the title,” Melio says.

“But Jimmy didn’t know much about training. I was never in shape for a fight, not for 15 rounds, anyway. If I’d had Bill Gore in my corner from the beginning, things might have been different.”

Such carrying on is sheer cacciatori, as far as Grippo is concerned. Jimmy today is a hospitality man at Caesar’s Palace, a gaudy jewel of a hotel on Las Vegas’ spangled strip. He delights in hypnotizing late dinner guests, mystifying dealers with his deft card tricks and remembering aloud what he did for Melio Bettina.

“I gave the boy confidence,” Grippo intones. “I made him champion. I could have made Sonny Liston beat Clay the both times he fought him. The big guy needed confidence.”

In Newburgh, N.Y., across the Hudson River from Jimmy Grippo’s old gym in Beacon, Melio Bettina sells cars. And sometimes he remembers the night he beat Tiger Jack Fox and how Jimmy took the spotlight away from him with that whammy yarn. And when he remembers, he grits his teeth. □