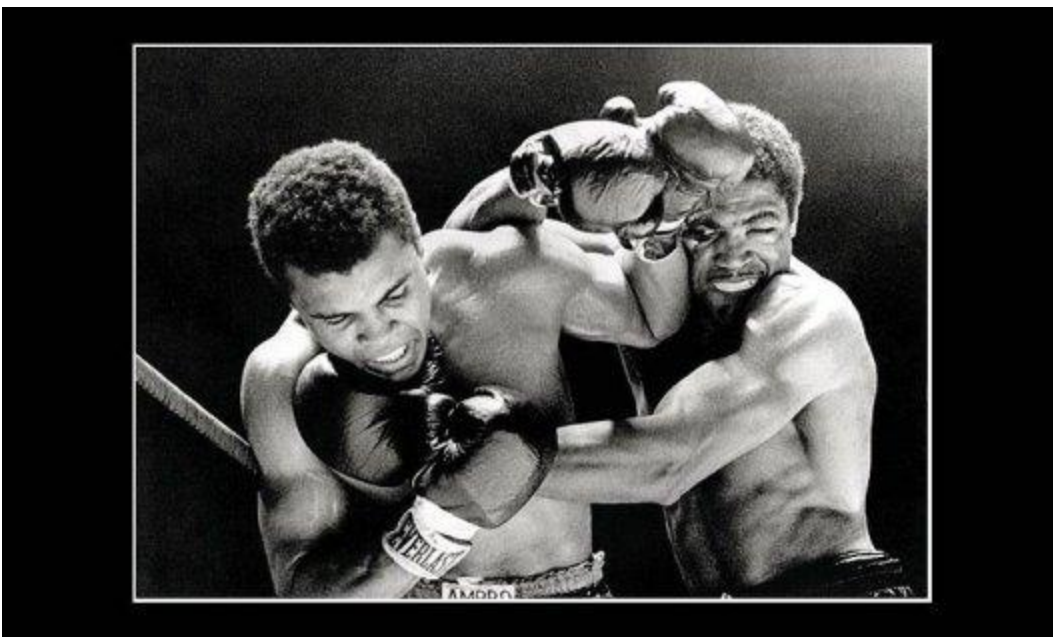


## Ernie Terrell: "We did the best we could."

By Pete Ehrmann



***"It was hard trying to get anybody else to not recognize Ali. We did the best we could."***

The notion that he was not an exciting fighter rankles Big Ernie. "What's excitement?" he asks. "To let somebody else hit you?"

*WBA heavyweight champion Ernie Terrell didn't get much love during or after his 46-9 career. Twenty-two years ago I shopped around a piece about Terrell and, like most of Ernie's bouts, it engendered only yawns from the editors who read and discarded it. Here it is, in honor of the decent fighter and dignified man who died on December 15 at 75.*

If you believe the Guinness Book of Records, Ernie Terrell was the tallest heavyweight champion in history. But then you have to ignore Jess Willard, who most boxing texts say had a quarter-inch on the 6'6" Terrell.

If you believe the World Boxing Association, Ernie Terrell won the heavyweight title in 1965. But then you have to ignore Muhammad Ali, an even bigger stumbling block than Jess Willard to the notion that Big Ernie was once the best heavyweight on the planet.

"It was hard trying to get anybody else to not recognize Ali," concedes Terrell, the first modern alphabet heavyweight champion, now 53 years old. "We did the best we could."

Terrell got his title by winning a 15-round decision over Eddie Machen on March 5, 1965, at the International Amphitheatre in Chicago. The WBA, formed in 1962, had striped Ali of the crown he won from Sonny Liston on February 25, 1964, after Ali signed for a return match with Liston in disregard of the WBA's rule against return bouts.

Big Ernie's victory over Machen gained him recognition as champion in a world comprised, as one scribe figured it, "of 32 states, South America and parts of the Orient." The rest of the globe agreed with Floyd Patterson's trainer, Dan Florio, who declined an opportunity to fight Terrell by saying, "What the WBA calls a title wouldn't mean a thing."

But it did to Terrell, who distinguishes himself from today's alphabet titleholders by maintaining, "When I won the title, it was the only title. There was no World Boxing Council, no International Boxing Federation. It was only the WBA that was crowning champions at the time. I was champion of the world as far as the WBA was concerned."

Legitimate or no, it was a significant achievement for someone who, growing up in Midnight, Mississippi, endured being pelted with rocks and garbage by white kids riding the bus to their segregated school, while Terrell and other black youngsters walked to the church that doubled as their school.

When Ernie was 11, the large Terrell family — there were 11 children — moved to Chicago in search of better opportunity. It was the early 1950s, when boxing was on TV three times a week and the Windy City was a strong fight town. Terrell followed an older brother to the Midwest Gym and found himself training next to the likes of Rocky Marciano, Sugar Ray Robinson, Kid Gavilan and other ring stars.

After winning the Chicago Golden Gloves, Terrell turned pro in '57. He was just 16, and by the time he was a senior in high school he was a main-event fighter.

Early in his career Terrell became a regular sparring partner for the boxer he calls "the most intimidating guy I've ever seen." But, he adds, once Sonny Liston "got to know you, he was all right. He was not educated, so he didn't trust anybody."

Ernie recalls driving in a van with Liston to Houston for Sonny's April 25, 1960 bout with Texas favorite Roy Harris.

"On the van he was jolly, kibitzing and playing cards. We got there and he looked out at the gathering of reporters and he picked up a newspaper. Sonny couldn't read, but he didn't want to talk to those reporters. At the weigh-in, Harris came in at 195 or whatever. They said, 'Let's get Sonny on the scales.' Liston never looked up. He just stepped on the scales with his street clothes and tie on.

"This perturbed the reporters, and one of them said to a commissioner, 'Don't the regulations call for him to at least strip to the waist?' This bugged Sonny. He slammed down his hat and paper, and as he was reaching for his tie a reporter said, 'Sonny, I understand you could have brought a neutral referee, but you didn't. Aren't you afraid of a hometown decision?'

"Sonny looked at him and said, 'Decision! I came here to kill this man (Harris)! If there's a decision, I don't want it.'"

Liston stopped Harris in the first round, and a year later did the same to champion Floyd Patterson. But by the time his ex-sparring partner became a Top 10 contender by beating Cleveland Williams in 1963, Liston wasn't talking so friendly about Terrell, either.

Asked about giving Ernie a crack at the title, Sonny said, "Nuts! He don't fight. He just hugs you. He hugs me more than my wife."

None of Terrell's bouts have been compared to Dempsey-Firpo.

"As a fight between two supposed contenders for the heavyweight title," it was written after the second Terrell-Williams bout, "it was a cross between a sham and a joke."

"A wrestling match that would have made Bruno Sammartino turn green with envy," said a critic after Terrell-Machen.

The notion that he was not an exciting fighter rankles Big Ernie. "What's excitement?" he asks. "To let somebody else hit you? The purpose of boxing is to hit somebody and not get hit back. You just can't stand there and let somebody hit you if there is some way to prevent it."

Terrell's way was to keep opponents at bay with a long left jab and then, when they got through his 82-inch reach, to wrap them up in those long arms. The strategy succeeded, albeit unspectacularly, against contenders Zora Folley and future light heavyweight champion Bob Foster; and in title defenses against George Chuvalo and Doug Jones.

But meanwhile the world in general continued to recognize Ali as champion. When Ali fought Floyd Patterson on November 22, 1965, even then-WBA president Jim Deskin conceded it was for the real title, prompting his immediate censure from a group of former WBA poobahs.

An attempt to unify the title in early 1966 unraveled when the New York commission refused to license Terrell because of his connections with Chicago underworld figure Bernard Glickman. Terrell denied then, and does now, that Glickman guided his boxing career. When he fought Machen, Ernie's manager of record was New York union official Julie Isaacson.

In a 1984 Chicago Tribune Magazine piece by Sam Smith, Terrell said he met Isaacson while training for his '62 bout with Williams.

According to the article, Isaacson approached Terrell and offered to get him a fight with Williams. When Ernie said he was already under contract to fight Williams, Isaacson told him, "You can either sign my contract and fight Cleveland Williams, or not sign it. But if you don't sign it, you might get a fight some day in Kalamazoo. But even if you do, it won't be worth anything."

Terrell signed Isaacson's contract. They parted company, Ernie said, in his dressing room after the Machen fight, when Isaacson gave him exactly \$1,000 for winning the WBA title.

"He tried to explain something, but I was in no mood for listening," says Ernie, noting that Machen received \$25,000 for the fight. "That's when I started managing myself, and it's probably the best thing that ever happened to me."

Terrell does acknowledge that Glickman was the manager of the boxer's musical group, "Ernie Terrell and The Heavyweights," but insists that Glickman had nothing to do with his boxing career.

The heavyweight title was finally unified on February 6, 1967. At the official signing in Chicago, when the contract stipulation calling for the fighters to arrive in Houston early to help promote the fight was read, Terrell said, "It's OK with me if it's OK with Clay."

That sent the man who demanded to be called by his adopted Muslim name of Muhammad Ali rather than his birth name of Cassius Clay into a tirade that continued all the way into the ring and throughout the 15-round bout before a then-indoor record crowd of 37,000 at the Houston Astrodome.

"What's my name?" Ali taunted as he made a pulp of Terrell's face in a bout most thought Ali could've ended whenever he wished.

"I was never unfriendly with him," says Ernie of Ali. "I thought the whole thing was hype. It got too far because his group thrived on that stuff."

Terrell retired after dropping successive decisions to Thad Spencer and Manuel Ramos. Two years later he unretired and made it back into the Top 10, but after seven straight wins came what Ernie emphatically calls "the worst decision in the history of boxing."

"I never beat anybody like I beat (Chuck) Wepner," he says of his June 23, 1973 12-rounder with the "Bayonne Bleeder" for the U.S. heavyweight title.

The fight was held in Atlantic City, and according to Terrell at one point referee Harold Valan came to his corner and said he was stopping the fight because Terrell's face was covered with blood.

"But when they wiped the blood off," says Ernie, "it was all Wepner's."

After the final bell, according to Terrell, referee Valan — the sole scorer — leaned over the ropes to promoter Willie Gilzenberg and shouted, "How in the world can I give the fight to Wepner?" Gilzenberg grabbed the scorecard from the referee and began scratching out points awarded to Terrell and giving them to Wepner. Seeing this, a Terrell cornerman took a swing at Gilzenberg and a riot broke out. The announcement of the decision was deferred for two weeks, says Ernie, and then it went to Wepner.

Stopped in his next fight by Jeff Merritt, Terrell retired for good. He toured with his band until the road life got to him, and now Ernie runs a maintenance service in Chicago.

The man who proudly wore the first alphabet heavyweight title now says that boxing is being hurt by "so many governing bodies sanctioning heavyweight champions. It adds to the confusion."

The tallest or second-tallest boxer, depending on whose tape measure you read, ever listed as heavyweight champion of the world, depending on whose by-laws you follow, now says that if he was 21 years old again he might go with an alphabet group known as the NBA.

"After looking at Michael Jordan and the money he got," says Big Ernie Terrell, "it would make me wonder what kind of basketball player I would be."

***Pete Ehrmann 's work as a boxing journalist/historian over the past 40 plus years speaks for itself. Pete's first by-line appeared in The Ring magazine at age 14, and ever since he has written about the sport (and other matters) for newspapers, magazines and websites. Pete has been a valuable member of the IBRO since April 2013.***