

TIGER JONES vs SUGAR RAY

# The Night They Fought a Classic Upset

THE EXPERTS had gone to bed the night before with easy minds. They'd had no doubts of their judgement in doping out Sugar Ray Robinson's first major comeback fight, with Ralph (Tiger) Jones at Chicago Stadium and on national TV. Robinson in a breeze had been their unqualified forecast. Make it any price, 5-1, 6-1, 7-1, and, if you want to bet Sugar, forget it, he's out in the betting, except on a knockout.

Sure, they knew this couldn't be Robinson at his very best. In this year, 1955, he was 34 years old, with his greatest glory well behind him. And he still had cobwebs clinging to his boxing. He only had

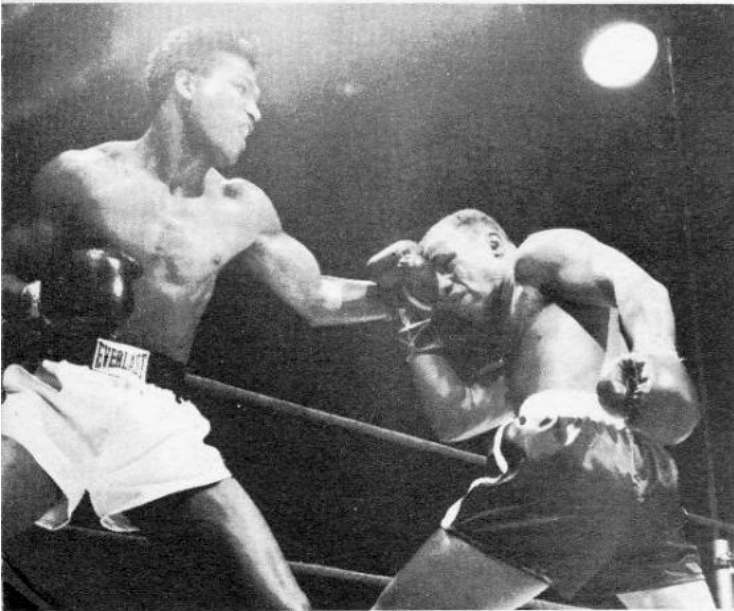
Tiger didn't waste any time going after Robinson. In the first round, he peppered the ex-champ with hard jabs.





Robbie's punching was stale, and Tiger's quick maneuvering enabled him to take hard blows without any harm.

Jones steps inside a vicious left thrown by Sugar Ray.



been back in action a few months, following two years' retirement.

But, they also insisted, he was Sugar Ray, a born master who knew more about the game from sheer memory than an average professional could learn by toiling at it. And they refused, with logic, to class Jones as anything more than average.

In the past eight months, he hadn't won a fight. Worse yet, he had lost five in a row. In four, he had been the betting favorite too, so ill-regarded was the opposition.

First, he had been upset by mediocre French import Jacques Royer de Crecy. Then by Pedro Gonzalez, awkward Rankin, Pa., plugger. Next, the only top-flighter, Joey Giardello, beat him. After that, it was Hector Constance, the calypso singer from Trinidad. And finally Peter Muller, a clown from Germany.

Yes, five in succession, par for the course when it came to not making friends among fans and experts. It also was good reason for Jones to have been picked as Robinson's first foe on TV. Or, rather, a good reason for Ray to have snapped up a \$19,000 guarantee offer to meet Jones, made by Truman Gibson, secretary of the International Boxing Club.

Not everybody around Sugar was eager for the match.

Joe Glaser, famed music booker and part of the managing cabinet, had objected strenuously.

The Jones match had been scheduled for a Wednesday night in Chicago Stadium, exactly two weeks after Robinson's non-TV return to the ring in Detroit.

That night, fighting Joe Rindone, a second rater, Ray had fumbled and bumbled for five rounds. Rust was apparent in every move . . . until he came alive early in the sixth with a swirl of heavy punches that put the Boston guy flat on his back.

With Robinson's problems that night in mind, Glaser argued: "This is too soon to go again; you need some rest to build up the strength you'll have to have. Jones loses fights, but he's young, and he'll be loaded for you."

Sugar, backed up by Gibson, laughed Glaser down. "I broke the ice in Detroit, Joe," he insisted, "that's when I was worried; now I've got it again . . . have no fear, Ray's here."

Gibson broke in. "I'll tell you how I feel about it. I wouldn't let you fight anybody else, Ray. If you don't take Jones, you lose the date. This guy just walks in, he's made to order for you, believe me."

Still, Glaser was disbelieving. "If he's nothing," he challenged, "why are you willing to give Ray 19 grand?"

Truman's return glance was mildly condescending.

"Joe, I'm surprised at you. Don't you know this money is a tribute to Ray and his reputation? The public is hungry to see him, and the sponsors know he'll draw the best TV audience in years . . . since he was on, there hasn't been anybody to replace him or come close to him. Yes, there's only one Robinson."

As Gibson talked, a glow came over Ray. It was obvious he enjoyed hearing such things. Here was an important man corroborating his self-belief. In the kingly role which Sugar always accorded to himself, he viewed it all as part of destiny. He was meant to scale the heights again. The middleweight championship was waiting for him. After all, hadn't he only given it up because there had been nobody to fight?

Meanwhile, in the same city, the inconspicuous party of the second part, Jones, also was awaiting the hour of battle.

There had been no promotional tycoon reassuring him. He was a working man who had ambition, true, but who was facing the match without illusions. Or delusions. He simply had a chore and was ready to give it his best.

Inside of Ralph (Tiger) Jones there was no fear of Robinson's magic. And this was something. Countless boxers of skills and reputation had choked up walking the last mile to combat with Ray . . . a namesake, George (Sugar) Costner, was a scourge until he was face-to-face with Robinson; in the fight; he wilted with the first good shot Ray threw.

Even Carl (Bobo) Olson, current holder of the title, had been bedeviled by his first encounter with Robinson years earlier. "Every elevator operator in the hotel (in Philadelphia) told me I would be lucky to escape alive. I tried to laugh it off but I believed

it." A late-round Robinson outburst proved it.

But the still-water-running-deep Tiger had welcomed the fight. He saw it as an opportunity to use a knack he'd had—coping with stand-up, jab, and one-two boxers, the Robinson technique.

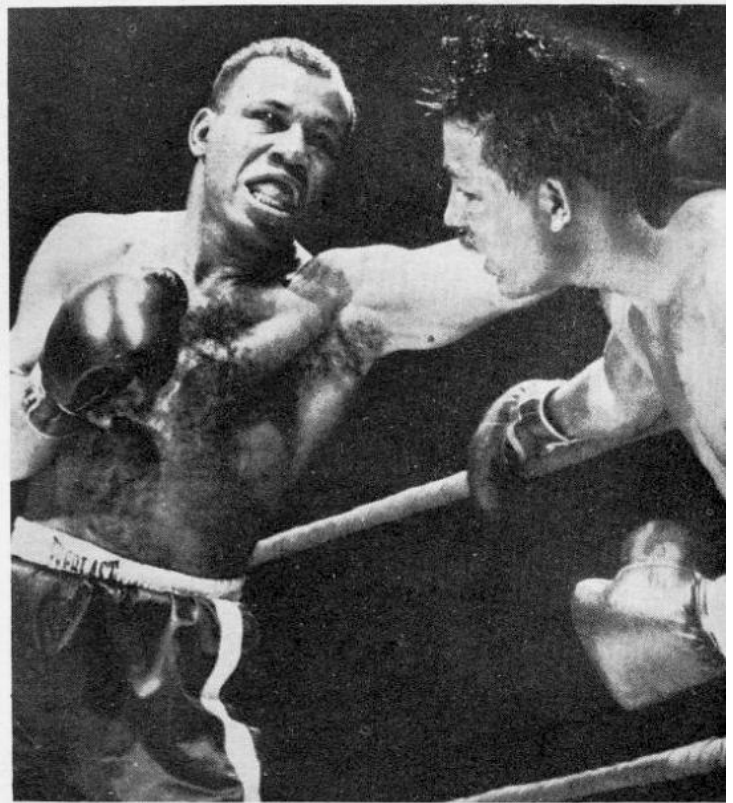
"When I was a Golden Glover," he recalled, "we were always in tournaments when we'd come up against fellows from the Salem-Crescent A.C., Ray's old club. He was the best to have come out of there. Naturally, they all copied him . . . but soon as they'd come up with another 'new Robinson,' I'd knock him off. I must have ruined a dozen of them."

In the pro ring, he had fought a reasonable facsimile of Sugar only a few years earlier. This was Johnny Bratton, a dashing, slashing boxer-puncher from Chicago, who had held the NBA welterweight title.

When they were matched, the gamblers immediately made Bratton 2-1 favorite. Who's Jones? Bratton, besides having licked 147 pounders, had gone into the middleweights and knocked out such stalwarts as Frenchmen Pierre Langlois and Laurent Dauthille. In his last in the Garden, Johnny had wrecked colorful young Joe Miceli. And Jones never had been in a Garden main event before.

Apart from his manager, Bob Melnick, only one voice in boxing was saying he had a chance with Bratton. This voice was Roger Donoghue's. Roger was a blond, bouncy personality kid who had boxed as a stablemate. Lately he had been in business and movie circles. Now, he was visiting the gym again, telling everybody that "Jones is the kind of fighter

Tiger keeps pressure on tiring Ray (holding onto rope).



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In previous bouts Jones pounded out a split decision over Charley Humez.



who tears apart fancy guys; he'll chase Bratton out of there." Few agreed.

Bratton came out pretty as a picture, ready to pulverize Jones at his first mistake. But he wasn't giving Bratton anything to capitalize. His chin was behind his left shoulder, his elbows across his body. He was stalking . . . now, he'd step in with a right-hand lead, now, a left to the body and a right to the head.

At the beginning, Bratton battled back. Jones' pressure only was intensified. Soon Johnny seemed content to fight defensively. And, at the finish, he was lucky to survive. Tiger had won a walkaway decision.

One New York newspaperman wrote: "I have been to the dictionary, and now I know the secret of last night's upset: a tiger is defined there as a *ferocious mammal that, even in captivity has been known to*

He also excited televiewers with a smashing victory over Chico Vejar.



devour men. That's the animal that made a meal of Johnny Bratton."

In Jones' dressing room, the delirium was led by Roger Donoghue shouting "Send me to Hollywood, who writes a better script?"

Yet in his very next Garden appearance one month later, Rocky Castellani's off-beat cleverness made Jones look terrible. All his new-found glamour fell away. He was back where he'd started, just an earnest club fighter.

What had caused this? Or, for that matter, what was to cause the five-fight losing streak, discrediting him as he awaited his bout with Sugar Ray?

Gil Clancy, an old friend and an experienced fight handler, once tried to explain him.

He's a sensitive kid. He trains like his life depended on it. He puts so much into it that he can't understand why he should fail. And, when he gets off wrong, he broods. He takes a defeat home with him.

"I discovered him is the 103d Precinct PAL Gym in Jamaica. The first amateur tournament I had him in, the Golden Gloves sub-novice, he lost. I thought he'd won big, but they gave the decision to the other guy, a fellow named Clarence Banks . . . you know it was a month before he showed up again at the gym?"

"That's what I mean — he gets into a mental rut. And nobody can pull him out but himself. But he has heart and common sense, and, eventually, he gets himself going again, when the public least expects it."

The common sense had shown when he got the Robinson fight less than two months after he had been beaten by Peter Muller. Though heavy-hearted, he went directly to a training camp, Ehsan's, a lonely plain place in suburban New Jersey. It had been just before Christmas, when a less dedicated ringman might have decided it was time for fun.

During the next few weeks Jones punished himself . . . roadwork each frosty morning over slippery ice-coated roads and round after round of sparring with the toughest hired hands manager Melnick could muster.

His occasional relaxation was a phone call to his wife, Cora, at their home in St. Alban's, Queens.

Cora, a college graduate and a junior high school teacher, later pin-pointed his attitude at the time.

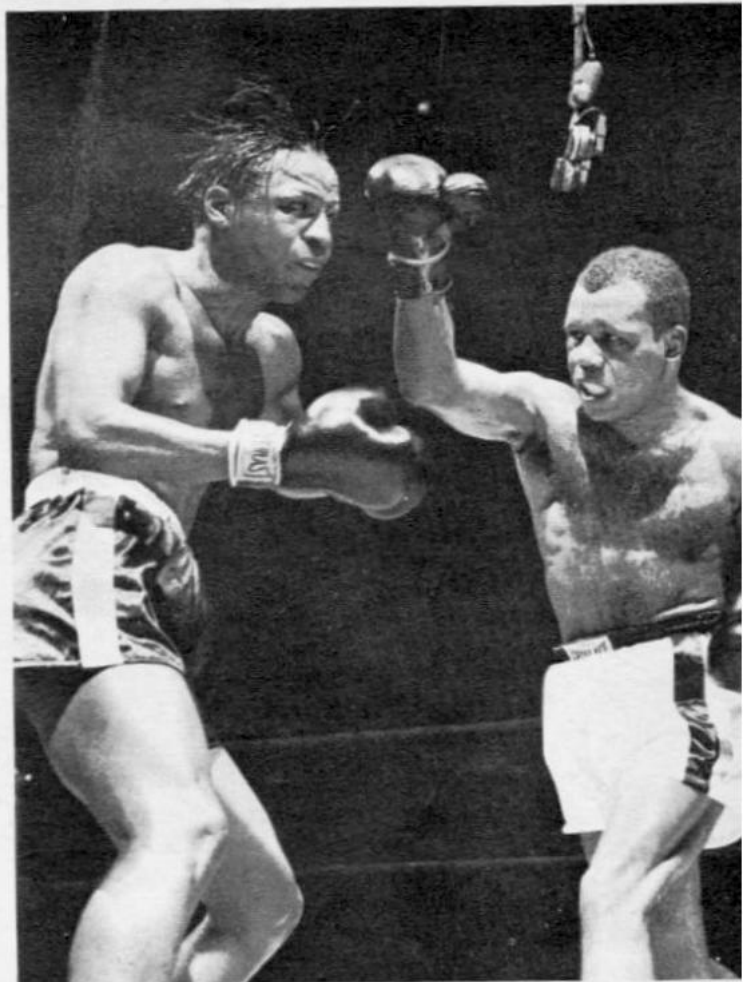
"He missed being away from home and the children. A wife can tell, even if he tried to hide it. So I'd try to cover it from my end by talking about everything but the things he missed.

"I talked fights. Funny, for me, with my background. Still, I knew there was only one thing he was thinking about . . . how he could make this the way to get back on top. So we discussed his planning, his weight, anyone listening in would have taken me for a strange kind of wife and mother.

"But I understood Ralph, and I was sure it was helping him."

To visitors, Jones was pleasant, even serenely confident. This puzzled the form players who had blown their money on him when he'd flopped so repeatedly as a betting favorite.

"Look," Tiger had said truthfully to one gambler who'd questioned him, "I don't care if I've cost you



And when Johnny Bratton tried comeback, Jones beat him.

a fortune, as you say. I never bet, I don't know what the odds are for any fight . . . all I can tell you is that I never felt better. I know Robinson's a big shot, but we're fighting in the ring, not in the newspapers. I'm confident because I've got the ability — and my bad luck has to end sometime."

As the crowd filtered into huge Chicago Stadium on Jan. 19, 1955, the fight people lounging in the boxing offices were commenting on the weights that afternoon.

"Look at Robinson, 159 on the head, he can't be in too bad shape."

"That Jones, he's heavy at 159, figures to be slow, so how do you give him any chance?"

"I don't, I come to see Robinson. For all I care, it could be Smith instead of Jones."

And in the Living Room A.C., the home TV viewers of the nation, there were similar views.

At air time, with a fair crowd of more than 7,000 in the building, they entered the ring, a study in contrast. Robinson was resplendent in a handsome new robe, and he was gesturing to friends while gracefully limbering up. Jones had on a garment that obviously had seen lots of service; he looked neither left nor right, heading straight for the resin box, into which he stepped, first the left foot, then the right.

Referee Frank Sikora's summons brought them to



Thus, when Sugar squared off against "club fighter" Jones, it promised to be a tuneup for regaining the title. At the end, only Tiger was around to roar.



the center of the ring, their robes off now. And Sugar's incredibly slim tall frame towered over the short, stubby Tiger.

"Ought to be able to jab his head off with the difference in reach," noted a man in the working press.

"The chain is there for a right hand, isn't it?" said another.

But Round One had come and gone before anybody realized it: Robinson would have trouble jabbing him or hitting him with right hands.

Jones was shuffling in under the straight lefts, and he was bobbing and weaving out of reach of the rights. It was defense going forward . . . most of the time. Every now and then, Robinson would be herded back to the ropes as Tiger bulled him. Only occasionally in the round did Jones lash out with a punch, and one of his lefts drew blood from Ray's nose.

In these rushes by Jones, something else was apparent: instead of using a sidestep or a spin of his opponent, standard practice for a boxer against a crowder, Robinson retreated, his feet often becoming twisted and causing him to stumble.

When he came back to the corner after the first, long-time handler George Gainford jumped him.

"Rob-ison, Rob-ison," he roared (and this was his way of pronouncing Sugar's name), "you gonna let him be boss? You make him respect you now. You don't — you gonna have trouble all night."

Sugar nodded assent, and, early in Round Two, he tried a policing measure, an overhand right. But it was wide and virtually telegraphed. And Tiger stepped inside to fall into a clinch which amounted to further control of the situation.

Another attempt to step up the tempo evoked an answer by Jones, a left hook which cut Robinson over the right eye. As the round ended, Ray was trying harder, yet results were not improving. When would he take over?

Before the third Jones whispered to manager Bob Melnick: "He'll be better in the next, but I'll be better than him."

Which was precisely what happened! Sugar was slugging with both hands. Tiger was blunting the shots by moving his head and then following up with his combination, left to the body and right to the head.

"Some more, Rob-ison, some more Rob-ison!" pleaded Gainford. "You gotta break through, you gotta!"

In the fourth round, he at least held Jones even. In the fifth, he was breaking through with his long-range drives, and the Tiger was unable to close ground. He did it in the sixth, and some at ringside began to wonder if he could maintain command down the homstretch in the 10 rounder.

Jones answered that point in the seventh when he swashbuckled Robinson into a corner, and Sugar merely tried to slip and slide, for he was too tired to rally back.

"I'll chase him now," Tiger told Melnick. "There's no risk; he's got nothin'!"

And in the eighth, Jones didn't seek inside cover — he went boldly to the line out in the open, lashing to the head. It was outright defiance, which Robinson had to accept. Aching limbs, inelastic muscles are not ammunition for equality.

Now the Stadium crowd and the TV watchers were ready to concede that Sugar's comeback had been roadblocked . . . by a fighter they would have—and did—bet wouldn't go the distance.

Yet, just as they wrote him off, he flared up again. His ninth was a big-effort round, slowed later by Jones' body shots. And his tenth was a loose, sweet-swinging round which made it appear the old man finally had fought his way out of his prison of rust.

It was too late with too little this night for Robinson.

The decision was not surprising — three votes out of three for Jones . . . the luckless guy who had lost five straight had got back into the win column with the equivalent of a perfect scorecard against the one-time perfect fighter.

There were cheers for Tiger — and aspirin for the experts. It was to be many another night before they slept soundly again; the rugged Jones had become their nightmare. And, in his great moment, he had proved a reminder for all time that fights on paper are not fights in the ring.