

# Finally noticing Johnny Smith

*By Pete Ehrmann*

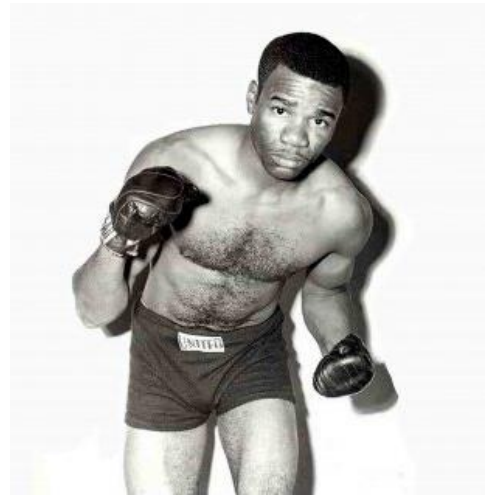
John Henry Smith became a professional boxer to get a story in the newspaper. An obituary, to be exact.

His own.

“He is in prizefighting for an elemental reason,” wrote sports columnist Jim Murray of Smith in 1964. “When he dies, he wants someone to notice.”

Explained Smith: “My father, my grandfather—they die, nobody says a word. It’s like they weren’t even there. I die, I want something in the papers.”

He decided boxing was the way to get it after he landed in Los Angeles in 1954. It took Smith three years to make it there from his native Monroe, Louisiana, which he’d left with his entire wardrobe—two sweaters, two pants—on his back and \$1.05 in his poke. Along the way he took whatever jobs he could get—truck driver, fry cook—often without having the first clue about how to do them—same as when the 6-foot-1, 150-pound Smith showed up at LA’s Main Street Gym and declared his intention to become a fighter.



What he became was a chopping block for every middleweight there. “He was losing a pint of blood a day,” recalled Cal Woods, later Smith’s trainer. “He could have gotten a better deal selling it to the Red Cross.” Knocked out in his first pro fight in 1958, Smith lost two of his next three bouts plus two successive managers who walked away from what they considered a lost cause. “He’s no good,” sneered one.

Somehow, Smith was undeterred. “I learned to fight back out of necessity,” he later explained. “I was taking a beating every day even if I kept trying to run away. So I started coming in. Pretty soon I began to get in a few licks and it became fun.”

The fun was non-stop in 1959 when he reeled off eight wins without a loss, six by knockout, and the Southern California Boxing Writers’ Association voted the KO artist now known as Joltin’ Johnny Smith “Preliminary Fighter of the Year.”

In his first main event, Smith flattened veteran Billy Hester in five at the Olympic Auditorium on March 29, 1960. Six more knockouts followed at the same venue, one over Tiger Al Williams on August 16, 1960 making Smith the California middleweight champion.

By then he was managed by Al Wise, a Hollywood furniture store mogul who offered big guarantees to Carmen Basilio, Joey Giardello, Paul Pender, Florentino Fernandez and other big names from the East to fight Johnny in LA, with no luck. So Smith went to New Orleans, where Top Ten middleweight Jesse Smith knocked him down three times and scored a ninth-round TKO. Then Johnny went to New Zealand, where he won two fights but also lost twice to national idol Tuna Scanlon. A Tokyo promoter brought him there, but not a single Japanese middleweight could be inveigled into the ring with the Yankee who hit harder than ITALICsake.

In late '62 Smith returned to the Olympic Auditorium and picked up where he'd left off, scoring three knockouts in a row to stretch his string of KOs there (going back to 1959) to 11—an Olympic record. The old record was 10, set 30 years earlier by Henry Armstrong.

Asked what kept him from showcasing Joltin' Johnny on a nationally televised "Fight of the Week," Teddy Brenner, matchmaker for the network TV bouts, said, "What can I do? Nobody wants to fight him."

Then somebody did. George Benton of Philadelphia was the fourth-ranked middleweight in the world, and in 14 years as a pro had never been knocked down, much less out.

"I would get someone like that for my first break," grumped Smith before their August 31, 1963 nationally televised fight at the Olympic.

Benton knocked him out at 2:25 of the second round. Smith rebounded with three victories, two by KO, but former welterweight champion Luis Rodriguez, whose demanded guarantee of \$4,000 to face Smith necessitated raising the price of ringside seats at the Olympic for their March 26, 1965 fight to a whopping \$5, finished Johnny's big-time prospects for good with a 10th round TKO.

After future junior middleweight champ Freddie Little stopped him three months later, Smith moved to middleweight-rich Mexico for some of that action, but after getting just one fight in six months returned to Los Angeles and defended his state middleweight title with a four-round knockout of Clarence James. He ended his 32-9 (24) career in '69 after seven straight wins, including a TKO over Wilbert "Skeeter" McClure.

Smith wasn't much in the news after that. When female boxing was allowed in California in 1976, Joltin' Johnny attended the first distaff card at the Inglewood Forum, and wasn't impressed. "When we went in there it was kill or be killed," he said. "Those girls were dragging it. You can't change the rules for them. They sell fights here, and it's a fraud if they don't produce what they promise. Make 'em fight proper; let 'em get in there and kill each other."

In 1990 he promoted at least one fight card himself, an experience that reinforced his belief that "fighters today have it too easy."

Johnny Smith died in Las Vegas on August 16, 2008, at age 70. There was no funeral, and his death notice in the Las Vegas Review-Journal was a mere four sentences. One identified him as "a former professional boxer."

It was better than nothing, but far from the obituary Smith figured a career in boxing would warrant.

Nine years late, this will have to do.

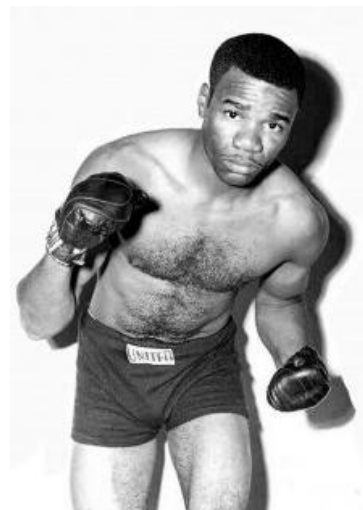
**\*\*\*\*\* This article originally ran on BOXING.Com October 17, 2017 \*\*\*\*\***

***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.***

## John Henry Smith

Alias Joltin - Bad News  
Hometown Los Angeles, California  
Born March 29, 1938, Monroe, Louisiana  
Died August 16, 2008, Las Vegas, Nevada  
Division Middleweight  
Weight 149-163 lbs.  
Won 31 (KO 24) Lost 9 (KO 6) Drawn 0 Total 40

Johnny Smith was an important fringe contender from 1960-1964. He was California State Middleweight Champion from 1960-1966. Compiled by Matt Tegen, Mike Attree, Wouter Van Alst and several BoxRec editors. Main sources: *1966 Ring Record Book; The Ring, Los Angeles Times; New Zealand Herald; Boxing News; New Orleans Times-Picayune.*



### 1958

Mar 8	Al Gamos	Hollywood, CA	L KO	2
Sep 23	Perry Hicks	Fresno, CA	W PTS	4
Oct 4	Ed Hickman	Hollywood, CA	L PTS	4
Nov 20	Willie Bell	Los Angeles, CA	L PTS	4

### 1959

Jan 31	Jimmy Buber	Hollywood, CA	W KO	1
Feb 14	Jeff Jones	Hollywood, CA	W KO	1
Mar 21	Harvey Burke	Hollywood, CA	W KO	3
Apr 4	Bob Anderson	Hollywood, CA	W PTS	4
Apr 17	Baby Ike	Hollywood, CA	W TKO	2
Sep 26	Ed Hickman	Los Angeles, CA	W PTS	4
Nov 5	Louis Ringo	Los Angeles, CA	W PTS	4
Nov 19	Edgar Jones	Los Angeles, CA	W KO	2

### 1960

Mar 29	Billy Hester	Los Angeles, CA	W TKO	5
Jun 7	Artie Dixon	Los Angeles, CA	W TKO	8
Jul 5	Eusebio Hernandez	Los Angeles, CA	W KO	2
Aug 16	Tiger Al Williams	Los Angeles, CA	W KO	9
	vacant California State Middleweight Title			

### 1961

Jan 26	Neal Rivers	Los Angeles, CA	W TKO	8
	California State Middleweight Title			
Feb 16	Ramon Hernandez	Los Angeles, CA	W KO	1
May 4	Tiger Al Williams	Los Angeles, CA	W TKO	5
Jun 20	Jesse Smith	New Orleans, LA	L TKO	9
Oct 9	Johnny Nomura	Auckland, NEW ZEALAND	W TKO	2
Oct 23	Peter Read	Auckland, NEW ZEALAND	W KO	2
Nov 9	Tuna Scanlan	Auckland, NEW ZEALAND	L KO	12
Dec 14	Tuna Scanlan	Auckland, NEW ZEALAND	L PTS	12

1962

Feb 13	Cleo Frazier	Sacramento, CA	W KO	4
Sep 14	Sonny Gill	Los Angeles, CA	W KO	6
	California State Middleweight Title			

1963

Jan 11	Gene Bryant	Los Angeles, CA	W KO	3
Jun 20	Charley Austin	Los Angeles, CA	W KO	3
Aug 31	George Benton	Los Angeles, CA	L KO	2

1964

Mar 2	Tevel Holeman	Santa Monica, CA	W KO	2
	California State Middleweight Title			
Oct 19	Hank Casey	Santa Monica, CA	W PTS	10

1965

Feb 26	Luis Gutierrez	Los Angeles, CA	W TKO	2
Mar 26	Luis Manuel Rodriguez	Los Angeles, CA	L KO	10
Jun 1	Freddie Little	Las Vegas, NV	L KO	3

1966

Oct 27	Clarence James	Los Angeles, CA	W KO	4
	California State Middleweight Title			

1967

Aug 2	Wilbert McClure	Los Angeles, CA	W KO	5
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1968

Apr 30	Dramane Ouedraogo	Bologna, ITALY	W KO	2
Jun 7	Johnny Hendrickson	Roma, ITALY	W PTS	8
Jul 5	Oscar Freeman	Torino, ITALY	W DQ	3

1969

Jul 15	Paul Patin	Woodland Hills, CA	W TKO	6
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