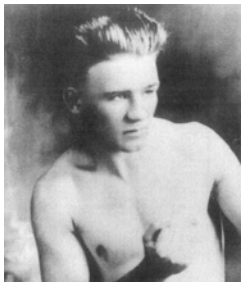
EVER HAMMER
By Douglas Cavanaugh



"I don't have to think twice about the man who gave me my hardest fight. As long as I live I will never forget the licking I received at the hands of Ever Hammer. He made me wish I had never laced a glove on my hands." - Benny Leonard

Ever Hammer, the durable Swede from Chicago, stormed out of the Windy City in the early 1910s and quickly proved every bit as tough as his name implied. His family came to America from Sweden in 1903, where Ever took up boxing at a young age. The competition in Chicago was fierce in those days, with top ringmen like Packey McFarland, Battling Nelson, Johnny Coulon and Harry Forbes regularly plying their trade in local rings and gyms.

Ever turned pro in 1913 and was soon dialed in to this local pugilistic scene, making an immediate impact by scoring kayos in half of his first 18 bouts. His rugged, give-and-take approach to fighting quickly endeared him to fans.

Hammer made his first impression on the world lightweight ranks in 1916, when he pounded out 10-round newspaper wins over top' contender Joe Welling and a faded but still dangerous Ad Wolgast. Wolgast, the former lightweight champion, was taken by this young blond tiger who had a style that so mirrored his own in bygone days. Wolgast was so impressed that he assisted in training Hammer for his next fight the following month, which was to be in Milwaukee against reigning lightweight champion Freddie Welsh.

Wolgast had fought Welsh on three occasions and knew his style well. In fact, "The Welsh Wizard" had beaten the old champion each time, so Ad received no small measure of satisfaction in watching his youthful protege subject Freddie to an unmerciful10-round beating that left him with a bloody mouth, a torn ear and a closed eye. The fight was declared a No Decision but the newspapers unanimously agreed that young Hammer had dominated the Welshman and that if the title had been on the line there would be a new champion. An attempt by the Welsh camp to take the luster off the Chicagoan's victory by blaming the champ's poor performance on an injured hand was dismissed contemptuously by sportswriters. Welsh himself admitted that Hammer had given him the hardest fight of his career.

Hammer next made a stop in East Chicago, IN, to face yet another great fighter-the fabled "Scotch-Wop" Johnny Dundee. Slick, fast and talented, Dundee had fought them all, from Benny Leonard and Freddie Welsh to Willie Ritchie and Johnnie Kilbane. Like Welsh he had a huge advantage in experience over his younger foe. But Johnny quickly realized that he had his hands full on this night. It took all the skill he could muster and every trick in his vast repertoire for Dundee to quell the tear away rushes of the mad Swede and secure a newspaper draw. A hotly contested rematch in Kansas City, MO, two months later was won by Dundee in 15 rounds, but it was so close and action-packed that neither fighter lost face with the press or public. All the commotion surrounding this newcomer didn't go unnoticed by Benny Leonard, who had been blazing his own brilliant trail through the lightweight ranks. The two contenders were soon matched in a bout which saw a sellout crowd pack the Convention Hall in St. Louis on Oct. 18, 1916, to watch Benny play matador to Hammer's bull. Ever tore out of his corner at the sound of the first bell and proceeded to give Leonard a calculated pounding. Benny later recalled: "He varied his attack and I was forced to take about as fine a tanning in three minutes of one-sided battling as ever I received before and since I became champion. I was a sight when I returned to the corner."

Hammer continued his relentless attack, pounding the body and ripping uppercuts to the head of his bewildered opponent. By the mid-rounds Benny's nose and mouth were bleeding. Even worse, his opponent seemed oblivious to his best shots and continued to bore in. Realizing that he'd better do something and fast,

Leonard began to use feints, jabs and speedy footwork in order to check the rushes of the Swede. The tide slowly began to turn and near the bell ending the ninth round Benny nailed Ever with a perfect shot right under the heart. The blow was the turning point of the battle and it didn't go unnoticed by Leonard, who watched the Chicagoan stagger to his corner and slump on his stool.

At the start of round 11, Hammer rushed at Leonard and straight into a right uppercut that detonated off his chin. Benny stepped back expecting Ever to fall forward as so many others had done before. Instead, his blow was answered immediately with a vicious left hook leaving the New Yorker dazed and hurt. Smelling blood, Ever swung madly at his retreating opponent, who danced and jabbed until his head cleared. At the break of a clinch in round 12, Benny nailed Ever again under the heart followed by a perfect one-two, dropping him. The brave Swede arose on unsteady legs and Benny pleaded with the referee to stop it. The ref instead waved them together, but as Benny moved in Ever crumpled to the floor.

The loss to Leonard began a low period for Hammer. In the space of just over six months he had fought four future Hall – of - Famers - Wolgast, Welsh, Dundee (twice) and Leonard - and a few top contenders to boot, but such a hectic schedule coupled with his reckless fighting style were bound to take a toll. His career hit a slump over the next four years - though he was never stopped - winning only seven of 24 fights.

When the 1920s dawned Ever headed west and caught a second wind. He beat top contender Phil Salvadore and battled tough Willie Robinson to a draw in their own backyards. But Hammer's most notable bout came against a streaking local hotshot named Dave Shade in Stockton, CA. Shade would later be considered one of the greatest fighters to never win a world title, battling on even terms with champions Jack Britton, Mickey Walker and Maxie Rosenbloom. But on this night Hammer nullified his opponent's speed advantage with crowding and fierce infighting. Being the local' favorite, Shade was given a draw by the judges, but the *Stockton Daily Evening Record* decried the hometown verdict, scoring it as a clear win for the Chicago battler.

As for Hammer, he returned to the Midwest refreshed and with a vengeance, reeling off 10 straight victories. This included newspaper wins over top contenders Richie Mitchell and Charley White, as well as gaining revenge on several of the pugs who had beaten him during his slump.

It all came crashing down again when he decided to rematch the great Benny Leonard, now lightweight champion. Leonard won a definitive newspaper decision in 10 rounds over his game foe, but it was clear that Hammer was a shadow of his former self.

The final nail in the coffin came shortly afterward in a clear case of history repeating itself. Hammer went to Omaha, NE, where he was thrown in against Ace Hudkins, a youthful tiger with a style and attitude eerily similar to his own in younger days. A decade earlier Ever held a similar position when he was matched against Wolgast, except now it was he who was the aging veteran being served as cannon fodder for the up - and-coming slugger. "The Nebraska a Wildcat" tore away at Hammer from the start and it took all of the old Swede's savvy to survive. Apparently the referee didn’t agree with his tactics and Hammer was disqualified in round seven for “stalling.”

Not content to end his career on a losing note, Ever took a year off and then came back to reel off four victories before retiring in 1930. He returned to California and took a job at Knotts Berry Farm in Buena Park, where he worked as greeter at the barn of former heavyweight champion Jim Jeffries (which had been relocated and turned into a makeshift boxing museum). In sharp contrast to fellow contemporaries Nelson and Wolgast, both of whom suffered greatly from pugilistic dementia in later years, Hammer suffered no ill effects, his mind remaining sharp and his memories lucid. He spent his remaining years living in Anaheim, where he died on Sept. 14, 1969. •

Ali And Frazier, Separated By Three Measly Rounds
by Frank Lotierzo

It was nice to see a documentary on the Ali-Frazier trilogy shot from the Frazier perspective as was the case in the one presented by HBO this past weekend. Other than referee Carlos Padilla revealing that Muhammad Ali sang a few nursery rhymes to Joe Frazier during the "Thrilla In Manila," I don't think much else in the way of news was learned from the piece. Most boxing observers are aware of Frazier's disdain for Ali and his theatrics before all three of their historic bouts. And like all HBO specials and documentaries, the production was terrific.

In full disclosure I must submit that I trained at Frazier's gym as an amateur and professional middleweight circa 1978-82. I befriended Joe's oldest son, Marvis, who happens to be one of the best people I've ever met in my life. Along with that, I've always considered Joe Frazier and Sonny Liston the two most underrated heavyweight champions in boxing history.

During the documentary, "Smokin¹" Joe conveyed how deeply hurt and bothered he was by the rants and cutting insults hurled at him by Muhammad Ali. And it's true that Frazier testified before Congress and President Nixon with the hope of persuading them to re-instate Ali's boxing license. He also lent Ali money during his 43 month exile. It's also a fact that Marvis Frazier bore the brunt of Ali's insults on the schoolyard playground the day after they were made in front of the whole world. However, Frazier isn't totally pure in his actions either, and his self-interest was in play too. Remember, Joe's biggest pay day before he fought Ali in 1971 was slightly less than half a million dollars. He knew Ali represented his lottery ticket ($2.5 million guarantee for their first bout). More importantly, Joe knew if he never fought and defeated Ali, history would view him as a caretaker to the heavyweight title, and not the all-time great he truly was. There's no doubt about it that it was in Frazier's best interest for Ali to return to the ring.

Joe's bitterness, although he may have carried it too long, is justified. Sure, Ali was a showman and drew attention to everything he did, but in the run-up to all three of his fights with Frazier, there was a reason for his sometimes over the top antics. And that reason was Ali knew Joe Frazier had no fear of him whatsoever. It didn't slip past Ali that he couldn't irritate or get under Frazier's skin like he did Sonny Liston, or disrespect him the way he did Ernie Terrell, nor could he intimidate him like he had Cleveland Williams and some other title challengers. Frazier clearly understood that he had the perfect style to give Ali a fit and make it hard on him in the ring, and by 1970 he had that style down pat. In Frazier, Ali was facing a fighter for the first time who he couldn't conquer psychologically before the bell to begin the first round. The fact is, Joe was not con-able.

The thing Frazier struggles with today is Ali's mythic popularity. And don't give me it's that way because of Ali's current physical affliction. Look how popular George Foreman became in his second career imitating Ali in many ways. Imagine Ali with good diction and clarity doing color on HBO Boxing during the years Foreman¹s second act unfolded? Had that been the way history progressed, Ali would be even bigger than he is today. Joe's blinded by his belief, and it's a legitimate one, that he's Ali's equal as a great fighter. It must be frustrating living in Joe's world watching Ali being celebrated on the world stage when he's not. Joe never got the credit he deserves for winning the biggest and most celebrated fight in boxing history on the night of