

BOB FOSTER: THE BORGER BANGER

By Austin Killeen



Want to make some quick money? Bet ten boxing historians where Bob Foster was born. Lubbock, Texas or Albuquerque, New Mexico will be the popular answers. Well thank them for their currency and explain that Foster drew his first gulp of air on April 4, 1938 in Borger, Texas. Bob had always assumed he was born in Lubbock and moved to Albuquerque as a two-year old with his mother Bertha and older sister Mildred. Applying for a passport so he could travel to Lima, Peru in 1963, Foster was surprised to find he made his first public appearance in Borger, Texas.

Borger first attracted national attention in 1921 when “black gold” was discovered on its arid land. Rich in oil, the city quickly became a boomtown. Oilmen, prospectors, panhandlers and fortune seekers were joined by card sharks, prostitutes, bootleggers and drug dealers. Organized crime quickly took over the town and corruption found its way to city hall. Most young men and women arriving in Borger seeking dreams of riches quickly learned the

harsh realities of life. The same harsh realities light heavyweight title challengers would learn in the late sixties and early seventies from Borger’s most famous pugilistic export.

Bob’s childhood memories seemed to start with his arrival at the Ernie Pyle Middle School in the early fifties. It was here that he met Lorenzo Brown, forming a lifelong friendship. The boys’ mothers also became friends and Lorenzo’s father became a father figure to young Bobby. Foster’s parents were divorced and his dad played no role in his life. It was during this time that both boys first became interested in boxing. As members of the local Boy’s Club, they thought it would be a good idea to learn to defend themselves.

Bob and Lorenzo lived in a section of Albuquerque known as the South Valley. In addition to the Boy’s Club they joined a gang called “The River Rats”, due to its location near the Rio Grande. Bob stated “the gang consisted of all the black kids in the valley, all seven of us.” Lorenzo added “we did not have any weapons like knives or guns. We might have gotten into a fist fight once or twice, but it was just social; playing cards, talking about girls, music etc.”

When they arrived at Albuquerque High School, basketball became their main sports activity. As freshmen they were assigned to the JV Bull Pups and scrimmaged with the varsity Bull Dogs during preseason tryouts. Both Bob and Lorenzo could shoot and often scored over twenty points a game. When the rosters were posted for both teams, the boys’ names were on neither list. Confused, they spoke to the head coach. “He said we were too good for the Bull Pups but lacked experienced for the Bull Dogs.” Apparently the youngsters were getting a message; a message that was encrypted, not spelled out in black and white. With their hopes of an NBA career seemingly over, the boys returned to boxing.

As a sophomore, Bob took his amateur competition to the next level. Entering the Golden Gloves as a featherweight the “South Valley River Rat” won the state title. If the local boxing officials thought they had a potential repeat champion in their organization, they would soon be disappointed. Instead of returning to Albuquerque High School for his junior year, Bob joined the Air Force; a decision that would prove to be a wise choice.

In 1957, Bob won the Air Force Championship, placing him in the All-Service finals. "I lost a decision to southpaw Amos Johnson that year, but the next three years I would win the All-Service Championship. My final year in the service I was stationed at Boiling Air Force Base. Some of the pros would come around to work with us. My trainer said how about giving this guy a couple of rounds today? I said ok! We started to box and, bam, my head would snap back. Bam, bam, bam, I looked to my corner as if to say: how am I getting hit and I'm not hitting him?" That is when Bob learned about the art of counter punching from a master of the technique, Holly Mims. "He was only about five feet eight but had long arms. He could lay on the ropes and out jab his opponent."

Another time, Bob found himself sparring with a light heavyweight named Clarence Hinnant. "I asked my trainer who's Clarence Hinnant? He said: you never heard of Clarence Hinnant? I said no." His trainer produced a copy of Ring Magazine which showed the hard punching Hinnant ranked in the top ten of the division. "I got scared and he just spanked my butt." Bob was the recipient of some heavy leather and discouraged when he learned they would be sparring against each other again the next day. As promised, Foster and Hinnant hooked up again. "Bam, bam, bam; we started trading bombs, but I noticed Clarence would drop his left jab after throwing it. Whap, I dropped an overhand right over his jab and he was out on his feet, his eyes rolled up in the back of his head. I was wearing 18 ounce gloves and had just put one of the best light heavyweights in the world on queer street."

"I had about six months left in the service and I was thinking about staying in. I had won the Air Force Championship every year and the Inter Service Title all but once. I won the silver medal in the Pan-American Games and could have made the Olympic Team, had I fought at 160 lbs. They wanted Cassius Clay to fight at light heavyweight, so that was my only option. Hell, there was no way I could lose that much weight. All the branches were trying to get me to fight for them. I figured, if I'm that good, I might as well turn pro. So, I jumped in my 1955 blue and white Oldsmobile with my wife and four kids and headed for Washington D.C."

Bob finally turned pro in March of 1961. Exploding from the starting gate, he won his first nine bouts, five by stoppage. This resulted in Foster being selected to fight on the Friday Night Fights against Doug Jones. The Duke City native subbed for heavyweight contender Zora Folley, who withdrew because of a virus infection. Late in the first round, Jones landed an overhand right to the jaw to drop Foster on the seat of his pants. Rising on unsteady legs, Bob was saved by the bell. Overconfident due to his success in the preceding round, Jones allowed his inexperienced opponent back in the fight. By the fourth Foster was unloading on the surprised New Yorker, with the possibility of an upset at hand. But Jones was a 7 to 2 favorite for a reason, and by the eighth round he was back in control. An overhand right sent the exhausted substitute reeling across the ring, causing referee Teddy Martin to save Foster from further punishment. In suffering his first loss, Bob was very impressive and collected the largest payday of his career at \$4,000. He was so impressive that the rest of the light heavyweight division would now avoid him like the plague.

Bouncing back with two quick knockout wins, Bob found himself on a plane headed for Lima, Peru. His opponent would be top ranked light heavyweight Mauro Mina. Mina was awarded a unanimous decision thanks to some interesting actions on the part of the time keeper. According to Bob, every time he landed a hard punch on the South American, the bell would ring. When Mina had a good round, it would last four or five minutes. Once again the explosive punching Foster would bounce back with two quick knockouts.

This resulted in Foster traveling to Chicago to face world ranked Allen Thomas in the latter's home town. Apparently Allen was aware of Bob's losses to Jones and Mina but not the details. If Allen's management had been familiar with the Latin proverb "forewarned is forearmed" they might not have taken the match. A 2 to 1 underdog, it did not take Foster long to figure out Thomas was a sucker for a left hook. The "windy

city” boxer made three trips to the canvas before the match was mercifully stopped in the opening stanza. The victory placed Foster at ninth in the monthly Ring Magazine ratings. His rating would be short lived.

In July of 1964 Foster faced towering heavyweight Ernie Terrell in New York on a nationally televised bout. Terrell used his enormous size advantage to wear down his opponent. Bobby fell to the canvas in the seventh round as much from exhaustion as from a Terrell punch. Referee Arthur Mercante administered the ten count, while Foster struggled to rise. Ring Magazine dropped Bob from their rankings, despite the fact he was fighting above the light heavyweight division. For a magazine with an impeccable reputation, it is difficult to fathom how they could find eleven light heavyweights better than Bob Foster.

A seven bout winning streak, including two over Henry Hank, elevated Foster to fifth in the 175 pound division. Additionally, he had a date with Zora Folley in December of 1965 in New Orleans. Spotting his opponent thirty one pounds proved too much for Foster, as he dropped a unanimous verdict to Zora. Despite his size advantage, the Arizona native showed little offense to the displeasure of the crowd. Disgusted at his inability to get leading light heavyweights to fight him, Bob would take the next year off.



Bob Foster avoids a wild right from Henry Hank in their return go.

“I wasn’t doing too good. I had a black manager, Billy Edwards, who didn’t know anybody and I wasn’t getting any good fights. I was sitting in my apartment when there was a knock on the door. When I answered it, a woman asked me if I was Bob Foster and handed me an envelope; said it was from Mr. Nesline. I opened it and there was five hundred dollars all in twenties. There was also a note from a Mr. Joe Nesline that said Merry Christmas and asked me to call him when I had the time.”

“I called him and he picked me up the next morning and took me out for breakfast. Then he brought me downtown and he bought me some clothes. Then he asked what he could do for me. I said I think I can be light heavyweight champion of the world, because I haven’t seen anybody that can fight, except for Harold Johnson. He’s the best fighter I’ve seen out there. So Nesline called a guy named Mushky Salow and asked if he would like a fighter. Salow said over the phone that he didn’t have anybody right now, but liked that kid from Washington, D.C. by the name of Bob Foster. Nesline explained that he was standing next to him right now.”

“So the next day we drove from Washington, D.C. to Hartford, Connecticut to sign with Salow. Two lieutenants had bought into my contract when I turned pro, and he had to buy them out. Salow then told Nesline to pay me six hundred a month to live off of and take care of my family. Nesline then asked what kind of a car I wanted. I said I’d take a little old Cadillac. So he bought me a 1965 four door Cadillac. Then, he told me that if the FBI or anyone else asks you if you know me, just say you’re a friend and that’s all you know about me. So, this is how I got a shot at the title.”

With his daily expenses taken care of and financial backing needed to negotiate for a title bout, Foster was free to concentrate on his career. Over the course of the next twelve months, Bob would win eight in a row, seven by stoppage. Among his victims were Andres Selpa, top Argentina contender, and veteran Eddie Cotton of Seattle, Washington. With Morris “Mushky” Salow putting up \$100,000 dollars, there was

no longer an obstacle blocking Foster's title aspirations. On May 24, 1968 Foster would finally meet Dick Tiger for the title at Madison Square Garden.

Before a crowd of 11,547 and a gate of \$113,728, Foster captured the crown with a devastating left hook to the jaw of Tiger at 2:05 of the fourth round. Tiger fell on the seat of his trunks and fell backwards, striking the back of his head on the canvas. The champ's best round was the first when he shook the challenger with a winging left to the jaw. The new champ controlled the action with a stinging left jab, preventing Tiger from launching his own offense. The only controversy surrounding the title bout was the New York Commission's ban of Morris "Mushky" Salow, the new champ's manager. Salow was refused a license, not allowed to work Foster's corner or from

attending training sessions at Grossinger's because of a charge of affiliation with known gamblers. Salow stated New York would be skipped as a site for any future matches involving Bob. The champ closed out the year with three stoppages in non-title bouts.

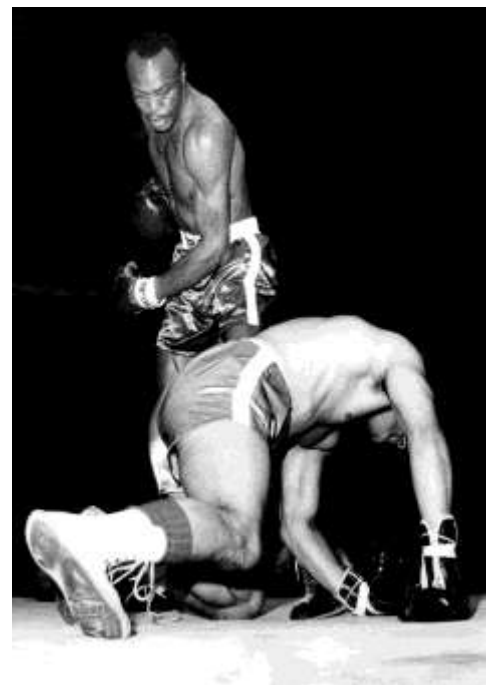


Foster KOs Tiger in the 4th round. Photo courtesy of Antiquities of the Prize Ring.

Foster's first title defense took place at Madison Square Garden; so much for the threat of "Mushky" Salow to boycott the State of New York. Bob's opponent was Frankie DePaula of New Jersey. DePaula had just fought Dick Tiger, losing a decision, in an elimination bout to see who would face the champ. Commentator Larry Merchant summed it up best; the fight theoretically was to be an elimination fight, the winner to fight Bob Foster for the light heavyweight title. What they didn't tell us was that the winner would get eliminated.

This actually made a lot of sense. More important than being a good boxer is being a good ticket seller, and Frankie could sell tickets! DePaula's fan base was not limited to the Hudson County area but included parts of Pennsylvania. This fact was not lost on Garden matchmaker Harry Markson. The Garden executive correctly realized that DePaula would generate more business than Tiger who had already been destroyed by Foster. In addition DePaula had a celebrity fan base including the likes of Joe Namath, Frankie Valli and "old blue eyes" Frank Sinatra.

A gate of over \$183,000 and 16,000 plus fans in attendance made Garden matchmaker Harry Markson look like a genius. A 5-1 favorite, Foster quickly found himself on the canvas, to the delight of the partisan Garden crowd. A left to the body did the damage, but the champ claimed he slipped. After taking a mandatory eight count, Foster returned the favor, dropping the challenger with a left jab followed by a right uppercut. Twice more the challenger tasted the canvas, causing the bout to be stopped due to the mandatory three knockdown rule in New York State.



Foster drops DePaula in wild first round. Photo courtesy of Antiquities of the Prize Ring.

Four months later Bob put his title on the line against Andy Kendall in West Springfield, Massachusetts. Andy was a scary looking dude who always reminded me of a rhinoceros because of his tremendous strength. The fight was shown on ABC's Wide World of Sports with Howard Cosell. Foster controlled the first two rounds with a punishing left jab, making Andy's face bleed from several cuts. In the third round Andy started having some success getting inside against his taller opponent. Stronger than the champ, Kendall's body punching seemed to annoy Foster until he was tied up in a clinch. Bob was making Andy pay a heavy price until he was able to close the distance.

The fourth round was a repeat of the third until Foster landed a vicious left hook on Kendall's chin. Dropped like he had been shot, the challenger somehow found the strength to beat the ten count. Andy was quickly trapped in his corner as Bob rained hooks and uppercuts on him. Only a granite chin kept Kendall on his feet, until the referee mercifully intervened. In our interview Foster said "Andy was one of the toughest S.O.B.'s I ever faced."

Six more wins all by stoppage including two defenses of his title resulted in a shot at Joe Frazier's heavyweight title. In our interview Foster stated he had a ten pound weight belt under his trunks and only weighed 178 pounds when he got on the scale. Fighting in Detroit, Michigan the challenger had a good first round. Working behind a stinging left jab and employing lateral movement, to a large degree Foster seemed to nullify Frazier's pressure. Joe made the mistake of carrying his left low and took a hard right to the head at the end of the first. The second round was a different story as Frazier twice landed brutal left hooks over Foster's low right hand for knockdowns. The second trip to the canvas left no doubt as to whether Foster would get up.

In 1971 the WBA stripped Foster of his title for not defending against Jimmy Dupree. Vicente Rondon won the bogus title by knocking out Dupree in Caracas, Venezuela. An enraged Foster finally confronted Rondon in Miami Beach on April 7, 1972 in a unification bout. Vicente ran for his life until he blocked an overhand right with his face. Bob quickly followed up his advantage with two vicious left hooks. Rondon took the canvas nap at 2:55 of the second round.

Two months later, the newly unified champ met up with Mike Quarry in Las Vegas, Nevada. Jerry Quarry met Muhammad Ali in the other half of the twin bill advertised as "The Soul Brothers vs. the Quarry Brothers. "In the third round I told Mike, Mike that's your last round. Every time I'd throw a left jab he'd slip it by leaning to his right. He'd bring his right hand back up when he returned to his normal position. I faked a jab and turned it into a hook when he came back up. Bam, I hit him right on the point of the jaw. When he went down, I couldn't see his eyes. I thought I killed him."



Mike Quarry lays unconscious on ring apron after absorbing a vicious knockout punch. Photo courtesy of BoxRec.

"In September of 72' I traveled to England to box Chris Finnegan, he surprised me. He was a southpaw and he could box. I couldn't get set, he'd faint me and I'd have to start over again." In the fourteenth round Finnegan landed a powerful overhand left that hurt Foster. Foolishly Chris started trading punches with the champ. Foster landed an overhand right dropping the Englishman on the seat of his pants, where he was counted out.

Two months later Foster met Muhammad Ali at Stateline Nevada. I use to believe Bob couldn't take his punch with him when he moved into the heavyweight division. I now realize he never was a heavyweight, he couldn't add muscle to his thin frame. Ali was on a nine bout win streak having only lost to Frazier. For the first time in his career Muhammad was cut above his eye in addition to swelling below his eye. But as with his other heavyweight encounters; Bob lost as much to size discrepancy as to his opponents skill. Ali was awarded an eighth round stoppage.



Foster would defend his crown three more times but the death of his mother Bertha would ultimately drain the champ of his desire to fight. Bob retired after his fifteen round draw with Jorge Ahumada only to make an ill advised seven bout comeback in the late seventies.

I found Bob to be a very honest individual who candidly spoke his opinion on many boxers. Speaking of his losses to Jones and Folley, he felt both men were accomplished boxers. His encounters with both individuals made him a better fighter. He loved Holly Mims; Holly was a great teacher in the gym and influenced his style. "Holly showed me I could carry my left low and protect my chin by turning my shoulder." His success with Clarence Hinnant while still an amateur convinced him he could be an outstanding pro.

Showing him a list of the twenty greatest light heavyweights by Ring Magazine from 2002 caused Bob to become very animated. He had no problem with Ezzard Charles at number one but felt he had the harder punch. He could understand why Archie Moore was ahead of him but felt confident he would knock Moore out. "I'd keep him at the end of my jab and destroy his crab defense. Seeing Michael Spinks listed above him, made Foster laugh. "He was terrified of Mike Tyson; I would carry that thought in my mind when we entered the ring. I'd knock him out. Bob has a great deal of respect for both Harold Johnson and Billy Conn.

I never would have known about Joe Nesline and Mushky Salow and the roll they played in getting Bob the title fight with Dick Tiger. There was a great deal of additional information on that subject including its bearing on the Frankie DePaula title fight. The reader is free to explore this subject on their own.

After his retirement from boxing, Foster worked as a deputy sheriff for the Bernalillo County for 24 years. Today Bob lives in a beautiful home in Southwest Albuquerque with his lovely wife Rose. His legacy in boxing speaks for its self, he is an all-time great.

NOTE: I'd like to thank Jacob Maes, boxing manager from Albuquerque, for making this interview a reality, and Bob's lifelong friend Lorenzo Brown for his generous help. AK.



Bob Foster and Lorenzo Brown, Albuquerque, New Mexico – March 2012