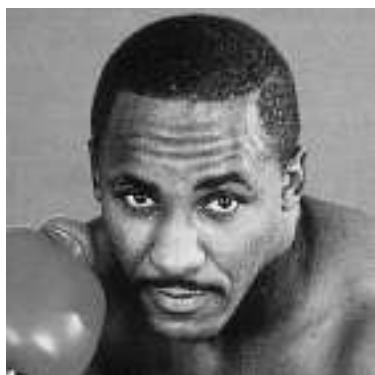


MIKE MCCALLUM: THE BODY SNATCHER

By Austin Killeen



It is a typical hot summer day on the Island, where ocean breezes act as the only air conditioning for most inhabitants in the early 70's. Two young boys are boxing in a make shift ring in the Tower Hill section of Kingston, Jamaica. This is a popular activity for young Island natives where most of the participants lack any formal training in the sport. Errol Corinthian, a former pro, watches the willing participants as they gamely toss leather at each other. When they finish Corinthian approaches one of the combatants and pronounces; "son you're a natural." Short of breath the boy replies; "what does that mean?" The confused but inquisitive boxer goes by the name of Mike McCallum.

It was not long before McCallum found himself training at the famous Dragon Gym in Kingston. His instructor was Austin 'Tealy' Taffe, a Cuban expatriate. Like Corinthian, Taffe saw raw natural talent in the youngster before him. Tall and lean he was taught balance, how to slip and counter and to work effectively on the inside. An enthusiastic learner, it did not take young Michael long to employ his new found skills in the amateur ranks. The presence of Bunny Grant and Percy Hayles in the gym, two of the greatest fighters to come out of Jamaica, also contributed to the nurturing process of the young lad.

Although he was a boxing neophyte, McCallum looked anything but in the ring. At fifteen years of age and only three months experience he was matched with the best fighter in his weight class. Vincent Sutherland was in his mid twenties and had nine years amateur experience. Sutherland was All Island champion and figured to be out of young Michael's class. The old adage you play the game because the favorite does not always win proved true in this contest. McCallum outclassed his more experienced rival, winning convincingly. In both 1972 and 1973 the young prodigy won the All Island championship of Jamaica. Additionally he was selected to represent his Island in international competition.

As a result of his representing Jamaica on the world stage, he had to switch trainers. Austin "Tealy" Taffe was replaced by Emilio Sanchez who was the trainer for the Island National Team. He continued his success in the amateur ranks but had difficulty with American Clint Jackson, losing decisions to him in the 1974 World Championships in Havana, Cuba and the 1975 North American Continental Championships. Outside of the ring McCallum and Jackson became good friends, resulting in the Jamaican moving to America in the late seventies to further his boxing career. In 1976 Michael won the Central American & Caribbean Games Championship, winning a berth on the Olympic team competing in Montréal, Canada.

Aspirations of winning Gold started well for Mighty Mike, winning a decision over Damdinjav Bandi of Mongolia. Robert Dauer of Austria lost on points to him in the next round of competition. Reinhardt Skricek of West Germany was next for the Caribbean hit man. It appeared that he did enough to win yet another decision but the West German was awarded a controversial verdict to the shock of the audience. Two judges voted for each boxer with the fifth scoring it a draw. As draws are not allowed in amateur competition the fifth arbitrator sided with Skricek. The dream of gold had turned into a nightmare of bitter disappointment.

Following the 76 Olympics McCallum was faced with the decision of turning pro or trying for gold in Russia in four years. Although Montreal had not made him a worldwide name, he clearly had proven himself to be an outstanding prospect; a prospect capable of making serious cash at the pro level. However, if he stayed an amateur and won Olympic gold he could name his own price for turning pro. The caveat; there are no guarantees in life, and a gold medal would not just be handed to him for showing up in the former republic of the USSR. He finally opted to remain an amateur and shoot for a gold medal.

Taking advantage of his friendship with the aforementioned Clint Jackson, Mike moved his base of operation to Tennessee to continue his amateur career. In 1977 he won the National AAU Welterweight Championship, defeating Marlon Starling and Roger Leonard in the process. In the case of Leonard it was the right family but the wrong brother. He also captured the National Golden Gloves Welterweight Champion that year.

Although criticized by some islanders for training in the United States, McCallum continued to represent Jamaica in world competition. Traveling to Edmonton, Alberta, Canada he won the gold medal in the welterweight division at the Commonwealth Games in 1978. The prized jewel of the Caribbean also repeated as National Golden Gloves Welterweight Champion in 79'. In claiming the title he beat two pretty good opponents in Doug DeWitt and Robbie Sims. In Sims case, once again it was the right family but the wrong brother.

In his final tune-up for Moscow, Mike traveled to San Juan, Puerto Rico for the 1979 Pan American Games. Blowing through the competition, McCallum scored two KO's and a decision to advance to the championship round against Cuban Andres Aldama. If he thought it was his pre-ordained destiny to collect gold he received a rude awakening. Carrying his right hand dangerously low, McCallum walked into a left hook from his southpaw opponent in the second round. The shocked Jamaican found himself in an unusual position, prone on the canvas. Saved by the bell he was helped back to his corner but ruled unfit to continue.

Disappointed but determined to win gold in Russia, Mike traveled to Moscow in the summer of 1980. There appeared to be only one obstacle in his way; Cuban Andres Aldama. The eagerly awaited rematch never happened. While training at the Olympic Village he was knocked out by acute appendicitis. With his Olympic dreams shattered it was time to turn pro.

Under the tutelage of Emmanuel Steward, he trained at the Kronk Gym. His style was similar to a safe cracker patiently listening to tumblers fall, until he hears the unique sounds needed to open the door. On January 14, 1981, a calm but confident McCallum made his professional debut against Rigoberto Lopez. Michael bided his time until he figured out Lopez's defense, scoring a fourth round knockout in Las Vegas. Traveling to Tampa, Florida, he faced 10-1-1 Rocky Fabrizio. In what was supposed to be a step up in competition, he placed Rocky on the canvas for a much needed rest in the first round. It was abundantly clear the Jamaican was having no problem adjusting to the pro style of fighting.

After eighteen months as a pro, Mighty Mike (as he was called in Jamaica) was fourteen and zero with all his victories coming by KO. In his biggest test to date he was matched with hard hitting Kevin Perry out of Joe Frazier's gym in Philadelphia. Like McCallum, all of Perry's wins had come by the short route. This fight virtually guaranteed a knockout. Although stung by Perry in the early rounds, McCallum controlled the action most of the way using a punishing left jab. After ten hard fought rounds McCallum was awarded a unanimous decision. He had passed his first big assignment.

Following his win over Perry, McCallum stopped Carlos Betancourt in three rounds. This led to the biggest fight of his career against former junior middleweight champion Ayub Kalule. McCallum completely dominated Kalule, dropping his valiant foe with an uppercut. Kalule had no answer for Mike's stinging jabs and hooks to both the head and body. "The Body Snatcher" as he was now being called by the media, finally stopped the former champ at the end of the seventh round. Allegedly the "Body Snatcher" nickname was the result of a sparring session between McCallum and Tommy Hearns. When the fighters finished sparring Hearns dubbed his stable mate the "body snatcher."

Four more wins, three by KO and McCallum was declared the mandatory challenger for Roberto Duran's WBA Junior Middleweight Title. The Panamanian was given until April 10, 1984 to meet McCallum or face being stripped of the crown. Although the "Body Snatcher" was a dangerous challenger he was not a super star in the eyes of the boxing public. Like Wall Street, boxing is all about risk versus reward. For Duran this meant a fight with McCallum's teammate at the Kronk Gym, Tommy Hearns made more sense. Facing Hearns would be risky for the WBC champ but, worth three times as much at the box office as facing McCallum.

Adding to the Jamaican's predicament was Emmanuel Steward. As trainer of both Hearns and McCallum he would make far more money from his cut of the purse if Hearns faced Duran. McCallum was odd man out, as Duran elected to face the "Hit Man" instead of the "Body Snatcher." Stripping Duran of his title, the WBC declared that Mike McCallum would face number two contender, Sean Mannion for the vacant WBC title. On October 15, 1984, Mike McCallum became the first Jamaican to win a world championship in the Island's history. Mannion showed he had a tremendous chin and courage but not the skills in losing a unanimous fifteen round decision at Madison Square Garden in New York City. When McCallum returned to Jamaica it was to a hero's welcome and a national holiday of celebration. Needless to say the business relationship between Steward and the new WBC champ was over when Duran agreed to face Hearns. McCallum signed with Duva Promotions and acquired a new trainer in George Benton.

It was boxer versus brawler when the new champ traveled to Milan, Italy for the first defense of his title against Italian Luigi Manchillio. Fighting before 10,000 fans at the Milan Sports Palace, skill topped muscle when Manchillio failed to answer the bell for the start of the fourteenth round. The Italian who went by the nickname "the warrior" fought out of a crouch, trying to land crushing blows to the body in close. But punishing left jabs by the champ kept Manchillio at bay most of the match. McCallum to reporters, "the fight plan was to keep out of the corners and in the center of the ring as much as possible."

Continuing his reign of terror on the junior middleweight division, the "Body Snatcher" faced challenger and former Kronk teammate David Braxton. Abandoning his usual strategy of attacking the body the champ went headhunting. The match was stopped at 2:26 of the eighth round with Braxton suffering cuts around both eyes. The cut on the left eye went through the eyelid, leaving referee Roberto Ramirez little choice but to stop the proceedings. "This was our strategy," said McCallum. "They all thought I'd work his body but instead I just kept putting the left jab in his face. From previous fights I knew he'd cut." McCallum felt he was bypassed for any title shot while training at the Kronk Gym in favor of stable mate Thomas Hearns. "Beating one Kronk fighter was great, but now I want another," said McCallum. "I want Tommy Hearns next. Beating him would be retribution."

In his third title defense, McCallum faced Julian Jackson of St. Thomas U.S. Virgin Islands at the Miami Beach Convention Center. A murderous puncher with either hand, Jackson exploded out of his corner at the opening bell. Caught by surprise, the "Body Snatcher" was nailed by an overhand right to the head driving him to the ropes. McCallum found himself in a squatting position but refused to fall. Jackson was relentless going for the knockout. Each time the Jamaican appeared to be

getting back into the fight, Jackson would score with a terrific punch to the head or body. Getting his wits about him during the rest period, Mighty Mike was ready when Jackson continued his assault in the second stanza. The St. Thomas banger while throwing wild punches at McCallum was leaving himself wide open. The champ was quick to take advantage of the situation, staggering Jackson



Mike McCallum stops Julian Jackson in the second round.

with an overhand right to the head, followed by a left hook to the side of the face. The force of the punches sent Jackson to the floor for an eight count. Rising on unsteady legs, Jackson was defenseless and taking a battering along the ropes. The Virgin Islander was saved by the referee at 2:03 of the second round. This was a sensational victory for McCallum over an extremely dangerous opponent. A victory that resonated with hard core boxing aficionados but failed to reach the casual fan like Duran, Hagler, Leonard or Hearn's victories.

Three more wins, all by stoppage, and the "Body Snatcher" was matched with the "Ice Man" Milton McCrory. McCrory was the former WBA welterweight champ having lost his title to Donald Curry in a brutal stoppage in two rounds. Having gained weight, the "Ice Man" was on a mini comeback having won four in a row. Adding to the drama, McCrory represented the Kronk Gym and would have Emmanuel Steward working his corner. If McCallum thought this would be an easy title defense he was in for a big surprise.

Taking advantage of McCallum's habit of starting slow, McCrory was leading after four rounds. Throwing overhand lefts and rights the challenger rocked his opponent on several occasions. Clearly he was throwing more punches which were catching the eyes of the officials. The champ was content to throw one or two punches at a time but make them count. The champ was digging hard punches to the body and inflicted a bloody nose on his challenger.

In rounds five through eight the "Body Snatcher's" punches started to deliver dividends, but McCrory's punch volume never stopped. The eighth stanza was the best of the fight with each fighter taking turns inflicting punishment. This caused ringside analyst Alex Wallau to call it "one of the greatest rounds we've seen this year." A visit by the ringside physician to the challenger's corner confirmed he had a broken nose in addition to a cut over the left eye and a partially closed right eye.

The ninth was painful for McCrory as the champ opened up on the facial injuries. With blood dripping into his eyes the challenger refused to surrender, firing back with both hands. His punches were finding their mark but lacked the power of earlier rounds. With the encouragement of Emmanuel Steward ringing in his ears, McCrory charged out for the tenth. Unfortunately for the Kronk fighter, McCallum looked as fresh as he did in the first. Methodically going about his business the "Body Snatcher" continued to land wicked shots to both the head and body. An overhand right sent the former champ into the ropes and a series of punches sent him tumbling to the canvas. With blood streaming from Milton's left eye the referee stopped the contest at 2:20 of round ten. In the post fight interview the champ called out Tommy Hearn's but it would be Donald Curry next on his dance card.

I spoke to Mike about the Curry fight when we met in Las Vegas. "Going into the fight I knew he had a terrific left jab, overhand right, left hook combination. He was using this combination to knockout fighters his entire career. But he was mechanical in throwing it, almost like hitting the heavy bag. I knew if he missed with an overhand right, he'd be off balance and vulnerable to a right uppercut to the body. That's what happened, he grunted when I landed the uppercut and my left hook was just for show." Watching video of the bout, Mike's description of what took place seems fairly accurate. For the record, the champ reenacted the KO in the dining room of the Texas Station Hotel. Unfortunately I got to play the role of "The Cobra", much to the shock of the dining patrons.



Curry is counted out in the fifth.

I asked if he was nervous trying to pull this off against one of the best

fighters of that era? Mike responded; “when I tried it in the second round, I got hit by an overhand right and almost went down.” Curry was ahead on the score cards going into the fifth. When the “Body Snatcher” landed his one-two, referee Richard Steele had the honor of administering the count at 1:14 of the fifth. The bout took place at Caesars Palace, in Las Vegas, Nevada. Icing Curry captured the attention of the world boxing community but failed to bring about a match with the “Hit Man.”

Having cleaned up the junior middleweight division, McCallum vacated the title for a chance to face Sumbu Kalambay for the vacant WBA middleweight title. The bout was held in Pesaro, Italy. For whatever reason Mike appeared listless, stalking his opponent but landing few punches. When the “Body Snatcher” attacked his favorite part of the anatomy, he was cautioned by referee John Coyle to keep his punches up. For his part, the transplanted African landed his left jab most of the fight, often following it up with overhand rights. After twelve rather boring rounds, Kalambay received a close but unanimous decision.

Bouncing back with three quick wins, McCallum was granted a second chance at the title when Kalambay was stripped of his title for fighting IBF king Michael Nunn. *(As the reader can plainly see the alphabet boys were up to speed, filling their coffers with sanctioning fees, for pretty title belts.)* The slick, switch hitting southpaw Herol Graham was his opponent. The bout was held at Royal Albert Hall, Kensington, London. McCallum took an eight count in the fifth when he slipped on water. Fortunately none of the judges counted it as such having correctly seen what had actually taken place. As the fight was extremely close this could have likely changed the outcome of the fight. After twelve rounds Jamaica had a reason for declaring a national holiday, Mike McCallum was now middleweight champion of the world.

Seven months later the “Body Snatcher” traveled to Boston, Massachusetts to face Irishman Steve Collins in the first defense of his title. Outside of Ireland there are probably more Irishmen per square mile in Boston than any place in the world. Perhaps that is why Collins never got discouraged after falling way behind in the bout. With the cries of Irish Americans every time the challenger took a breath, Collins staged a furious rally over the last third of the fight. But it was too little too late, and the judges correctly gave the decision to the champ.

Two months later on April 14, 1990 McCallum traveled to Royal Albert Hall in England to face red hot contender, Michael Watson. Watson was fresh off an upset of previously undefeated Nigel Benn, stopping him in six rounds. At thirty three years of age, the “Body Snatcher” was starting to look old and the betting odds reflected that. Michael Watson was installed the betting favorite. Perhaps this is why the much younger Watson started talking trash. Apparently he never heard the axiom let the sleeping dogs lie. Seething on the inside, Mighty Mike was determined to turn back the clock on his upstart twenty five year old challenger. With the great Eddie Futch working his corner, the plan was patience and discipline.

Watson started fast but the champ mixed solid defense with aggression to hold his own in the opening round. Warming to the task McCallum systematically took Watson apart each round except for the fourth when the challenger landed some good jabs and a thunderous overhand right. Like French composer Maurice Ravel’s musical composition Bolero, the fight was building to a crescendo. The climax took place in the eleventh when the exhausted Watson fell against the ropes. Using every punch in his arsenal, the wily champ dropped his challenger for the ten count, silencing his critics in the process.



McCallum is sent to a neutral corner after exploding a thunderous right off the chin of Watson.

As for the “Four Kings”, as writer George Kimball had called them; McCallum had failed in his attempt to get any of them into the ring. Marvin Hagler retired in 1987 after losing a disputed decision to Sugar Ray Leonard. Leonard was inactive in 1990 and would lose to Terry Norris by lopsided decision the following year. Roberto Duran, like Sugar Ray was also inactive in 1990, and would lose by TKO due to a shoulder injury to the infamous Pat Lawlor the following year. Tommy Hearn won a decision over Michael Olajide fourteen days after the Watson fight for his only activity of 1990. Did the “Four Kings”, duck the “Body Snatcher” or was he just a victim of timing. Boxing historians can debate the merits of that charge for the ages, but we can only speculate what would have happened if McCallum had been able to get any of them into the ring.

After his destruction of Watson, McCallum continued to box for seven more years at a world class level. Unlike Roy Jones who relied on exceptional reflexes, the “Body Snatcher” relied on basic skills; counter punching, slipping blows, blocking punches and timing. When Jones’s reflexes abandoned him he became hittable. McCallum’s fundamentals never deserted him; allowing him to avenge Sumbu Kalambay in a rematch and win the WBC light heavyweight title from Jeff Harding. Additionally he faced James Toney (3), Fabric Tiozzo and Roy Jones. In 2003, Mike McCallum was inducted into the International Boxing Hall of Fame in Canastota, NY. He was an exceptional talent, whose skills would have made him competitive in any era of the sweet science.

I met with Mike last month in Las Vegas at Johnny Tocco’s Gym. The gym was loaded with main event boxers working at their trade, with several pugilists eagerly accepting advice from the “Body Snatcher”. McCallum was preaching balance and knowing proper distance versus strength and power as the bases of success when working inside the square circle. Although he is frustrated that he never had the opportunity to face any of the “Four Kings” in the ring he never disparaged their talents. In spite of the failure of his business relationship with Emmanuel Steward, he regards his former trainer as helping him to reach his full potential. In discussing his defeats McCallum never offered excuses, feeling when you climb into the ring you should not be making any.

Mike McCallum was an extraordinary talent who would have been competitive with the greats of any generation. It was a pleasure talking with this straight shooting road warrior who was willing to face any of his contemporaries in any location in the world.

Today, Michael resides in Henderson, Nevada with his lovely wife Verona and his daughter Brenna and son Michael, Jr. I had the pleasure of meeting both his children who I found to be both personable and respectful. Apparently Michael’s parenting skills are just as good as his skills inside the ring.

