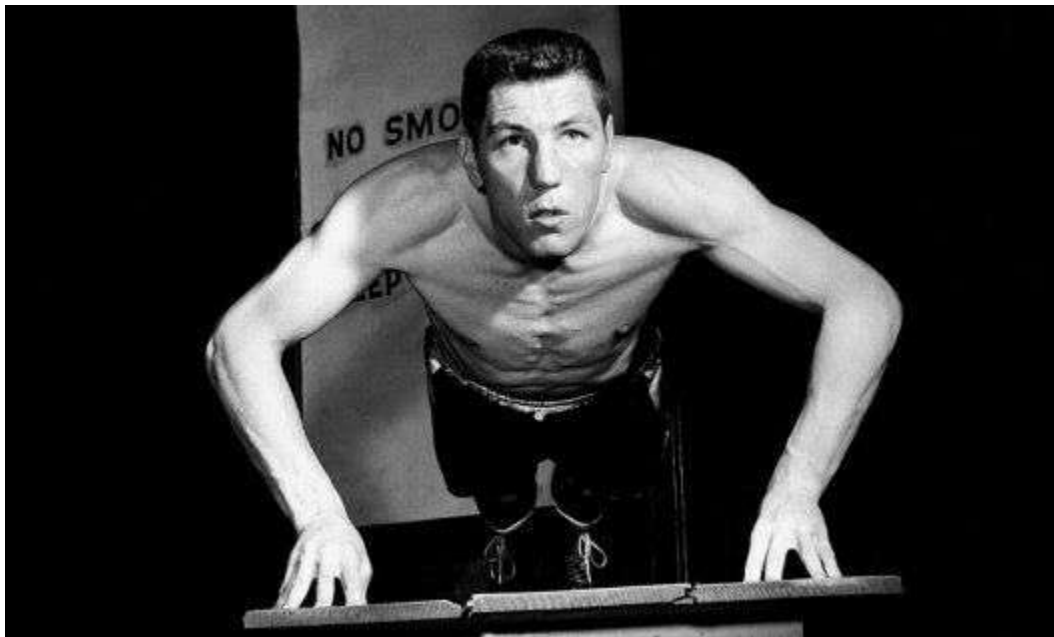


# Nearly Great: Irish Joey Archer

By Mike Casey



*People kept asking when the handsome Irishman was coming back. Joey Archer never did.*

Everything seemed to be going so well. Then everything stopped. The sparkling career of middleweight contender Joey Archer had ground to a halt. Clever Joey, with his silky, old-school skills, was The Ring's number one contender to world champion Joey Giardello after outsmarting two of the titans of the division in Rubin (Hurricane) Carter and Dick Tiger.

Archer was on a roll. The trouble was, he was suddenly rolling backwards. By the summer of 1965, the stylish Irish New Yorker had compiled a near perfect record of 44-1. But after outpointing Johnny Torres in February, Joey wouldn't see action again until November when he would decision what was left of Sugar Ray Robinson. In the more competitive era of the mid-sixties, those nine months of inactivity shunted Archer from first to fourth in The Ring ratings.

Joey Archer, quiet, magical and mysterious to the very end of his career, was also variously described as 'invisible' and 'forgotten'. Artful Joey, for all of his glorious skill and deft moves, never would push his way to the head of the line. 'Always the bridesmaid, never the bride' was how the old timers used to describe the great welterweight contender Dave Shade some thirty years before. Joey Archer probably knew what they meant.

As he sat on the sidelines after beating the unrated Johnny Torres, The Ring's managing editor, Nat Loubet, decided to do some digging. Referring to the Torres win, Loubet said: "One warm-up scrap for a man who was supposed to be a lively candidate for the middleweight championship. One bush fight for a prime attraction to whom the Garden was supposed to have a big interest."

Loubet then started pitching some tough questions and offering some theories: "Why hasn't Archer been kept busy? Why has the Garden filed him away among the inactive issues? How

can the Garden, catering to ticket buyers, afford to ignore a native middleweight with a vociferous, ticket-buying following?

“It has been charged that Archer has been mismanaged. This is something for Joey and his older brother Jimmy, who is his pilot, to settle between themselves. Jimmy is operating a bar and grill in New York and possibly does not have the time to devote to a thorough job of managing.”

Jimmy Archer, like any good fight manager, was quick to respond to his brother’s predicament, ramming a ton of hard luck stories down the barrel of a cannon and lighting the fuse: “We have been posting \$5,000 checks with the New York commission for a title match with regularity. We keep getting them back. Nobody wants to fight a clever Irishman who gave Tiger a boxing lesson.

“If we have to leave the middleweights to get action and money, we are ready. We will sign with Jose Torres (light heavyweight champion), if we are assured of a fight with Wayne Thornton, the number one light heavyweight contender, whom Jose doesn’t desire to fight.

“There are fine middleweights in Europe. You would think that the Garden would bring over Nino Benvenuti, Sandro Mazzinghi or the former bullfighter (Luis) Folledo., for an Archer fight. But the Garden has done nothing.”

With unintended humor, a frustrated Jimmy added: “I have tried to book a fight in Japan but they don’t have middleweights.”

He had searched long and hard in other nooks and crannies too. “I had something going in England and Ireland. But the alleged promotions fell apart. Believe me, I have tried. I now am ready to go before the New York commission and demand the kind of treatment and protection to which Joey is entitled.

“I hope that now, with the Giardello-Tiger fight out of the way, General Krulewitch (commission chairman) will do something in our favor. Up to now, he hasn’t admitted that Joey is alive. It is a situation the like of which was supposed to have been eliminated when we got a commissioner in New York.

“We would be better off if Joey were rated number ten.”

Slowly but surely, the gridlock was broken and Joey Archer got his shot at the world middleweight championship in 1966 against Emile Griffith.

## **Unfashionable**

Even back in the mid-sixties, the cuties of the game like Joey Archer were beginning to become unfashionable. Many new fans coming into the game wanted to see knockouts, excitement and a few buckets of blood into the bargain. Archer didn’t have a knockout punch and he wasn’t interested in sexing up his image by foregoing his skills and getting involved in slugging matches. To a large degree, Joey got a pass by being swept along by his large contingent of Irish New York supporters, which made him a box office attraction. But even some of his fans would be frustrated by their man’s reluctance to really go for it.

Archer was the Billy Graham of the era, a master of finesse and subtlety, whose tricks were sometimes as hard to catch as those of a magician. Welterweight Billy was another beautiful

boxer from New York who beat the very best but came up short at the moment of truth in losing a disputed decision to champion Kid Gavilan. Archer would suffer two such experiences against Griffith.

In 126 fights, Graham lost just fifteen times but posted just 27 knockouts in his 108 victories. The average modern day fan has always had trouble getting his head around a boxing artist who doesn't knock 'em dead and thrill. Nicolino Locche, another master craftsman, had a similarly paltry batting average in the KO column. Whether such boxers become champions or not, that average fan still looks at their records, shakes his head and says, "Yeah, but these guys didn't knock many people out, did they?"

In any event, Joey Archer still enjoyed an outstanding career at the top level and perhaps deserved to win at least one of those decisions over the great Griffith.

Turning professional in 1956, Joey's progress through the ranks was as serene as his style before his first loss to tough cookie Jose Gonzalez in 1962, which was quickly avenged. Archer systematically picked off some of the best guys around, including Don Fullmer, Mick Leahy, Denny Moyer, Blair Richardson, Farid Salim and the seemingly eternal Holly Mims, who boxed for seventeen years and logged up 102 fights.



*Joey Archer vs. Blair Richardson*

Boxing historian Mike Silver saw much of Archer and was always impressed by the grace and skill of the Irish New Yorker. Says Mike: "How does someone who, in Pete Hamill's words, 'could not break a potato chip with his punch' get to be the number one ranked middleweight in the world and along the way defeat two of the division's most feared punchers? I'm talking about those two monster middleweights - Rubin (Hurricane) Carter and Dick Tiger.

"He does it by mastering the art of boxing. He develops his jab, footwork, balance and, most of all, strategic thinking. It should also be noted that Archer had one of the best chins in the business. But it was a rare occasion when he was hit with two punches in a row.

"I saw him fight many times. Early in his career he came off a 16 month layoff because of a knee injury. His first fight after the layoff was against rugged Jose Gonzalez. Archer's timing was off and he lost the ten round decision. In the rematch two months later, Archer completely outboxed Gonzalez, even staggering him several times. It was a masterful exhibition of the art of boxing and showed that Archer was a thinking fighter.

"Joey Archer was a throwback to an era when fight fans appreciated a well schooled clever boxer. He was very good but not quite at the level of other Irish boxing masters such as Mike Gibbons, Gene Tunney and Packey McFarland. But really, how many were? In style Joey resembled Gibbons most. The film of Gibbons fighting Packey McFarland bears this out.

“What I find impressive about Joey Archer is that he went as far as he did without possessing a strong punch. And he never let any of his fights degenerate into a slugfest. He foiled those attempts with elusive footwork and his accurate and well timed left jab.”

## **Jewels**

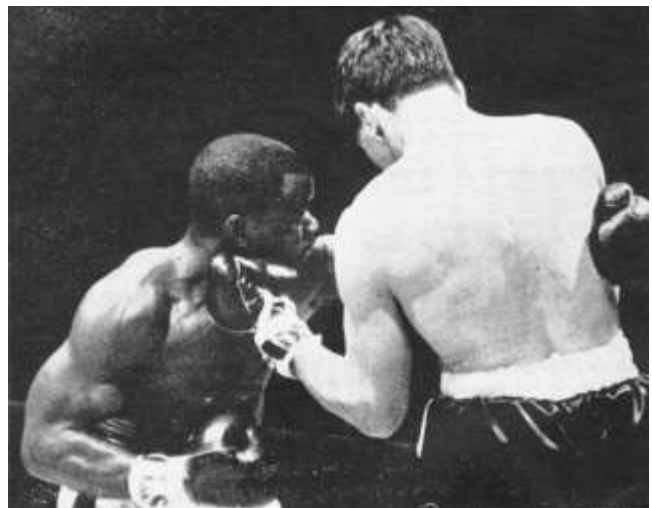
The two jewels in Joey’s crown would always be his five-star triumphs over Rubin Carter and Dick Tiger. Carter, living fully up to his nickname of ‘Hurricane’, was in his violent prime and putting the fear of death into his fellow pros when Archer came strolling along and outpointed him in October 1963 at Madison Square Garden.

Earlier that year in Pittsburgh, Rubin had smashed out welterweight champion Emile Griffith in one electrifying round. Emile was testing the middleweight waters in a non-title match with a view to jumping up a division. He put that plan on the back burner for another three years after Carter wrecked him. Rampant Rubin had already posted a first round blitz over Florentino Fernandez, rated by Gene Fullmer as the hardest punching middleweight of the era.

My good pal Ron Lipton – referee, writer, historian and umpteen other things besides – says: “The left hook Rubin hit Archer with in the tenth round had a wallop that would have dropped most anyone for a ten count. Joey had iron balls and came to win with a fierce mental attitude.

“Joey’s chin, his willpower and pride were top shelf, as was his balance, jab, timing and ring generalship.”

Archer was a constant irritant to the big hitters and the two-fisted swarmers who were accustomed to sweeping away most others. Ask former champion Dick Tiger, who was doing very nicely in campaigning for a return title tilt with Joey Giardello until Archer popped up with his now-you-see-me-now-you-don’t routine. Since losing the championship to Giardello at Atlantic City in 1963, Tiger had impressively accounted for a couple of tough nuts in Jose Gonzalez and Don Fullmer.



***Rubin Carter vs. Joey Archer***

What was it like to fight Dick Tiger? Well, it wasn’t fun. Crawling across broken glass might have been a marginally more preferable option. Ron Lipton sparred with Tiger and the very best middleweights of that golden generation, including Rubin Carter, Emile Griffith, Holly Mims and Jose Gonzalez.

Ron has especially fond memories of his time in the Tiger camp. “While in the basement of the old Garden before the Giardello title fight in ’65, I spent many hours with Dick in and out of the ring. Candy McFarland would box with him before me, and when Tiger was really warmed up, I would use all my skills, conditioning and power to survive him and give him good work.

“Jersey Jones and Jimmy August had brought Tiger through his major successes and in camp his focus was deadly. I knew he would come in on time, ripped, defined and with the bones and couplings of a Terminator.

“He kept me there because I kept turning him, firing on the pivot, and used my skills to avoid his major body attack. At 154lbs, I could not afford to be pinned in the corner by him and have him rip off body shots. He felt and looked like 172lbs with his rubber suit on to lose weight. His thighs and shoulders were like iron.

“His left hook would land on my powerful arms and I would ride out the shots that whistled past my headgear. He jarred me to the roots and now and then I had to take his body shots. Because of my speed of foot, he never landed the really big hook, but he nailed me with right hands that gave me pins and needles in my feet, they were so hard.

“I moved my head well, and unlike a knockdown I suffered once for about a five-count against Rubin Carter, Tiger never floored me. But his left hook felt like it shook loose every organ in my body.

“We were good friends, I got paid and I learned from him. I could make him laugh only after all the work was done, which made me feel great. His focus in training was one of a kind and his eyes in that ring were something to behold. I have never seen such intense focus and a deadpan look except for Joe Louis and Sonny Liston.

“I knew how Dick handled Hank, Fullmer, Carter, Gonzalez, Florentino Fernandez and the rest.

“He was the king of the shootouts if you chose to fight him. There was no one stronger at 160lbs than him, I don’t care what anyone says.”

Against the fleet-footed Archer, at Madison Square Garden in the fall of 1964, Dick often resembled a man trying to catch a fly with two fingers. Referee Zach Clayton scored the bout 6-3-1 in Archer’s favour, while judge Al Berl called it 5-4-1 for Joey. Judge Tony Castellano saw the fight 5-4-1 for Tiger. It was a costly defeat for Dick. Joey Archer was suddenly Giardello’s principal challenger and Tiger had to wait a while longer for his second title reign.



*Dick Tiger vs. Joey Archer*

Tiger, much like Sonny Liston and Roberto Duran, couldn’t understand a man who didn’t want to stand fast and have a proper fight. Those guys who danced and jabbed and pirouetted around the ring all night long – how were you supposed to have a proper fight with *them*? Ever the gentleman, Dick didn’t get spiteful in his post-fight interview but couldn’t help expressing his frustration at chasing the elusive Archer hither and yon for thirty fruitless minutes.

“They kept telling me I’d never get a decision over Archer in New York,” Tiger lamented. “They said I had to knock him out to win.” Some fans booed the decision, but Archer wasn’t bothered. “I fought strictly according to plan,” Joey said. “Only way to beat a guy like Tiger is

to box him. And that's what I did – most of the time. I bet people used to boo Tommy Loughran too.”

## **Emile Griffith**

Was he hard done by or was he not? Could he - should he - have done more than he did? These were the questions asked of Joey Archer after his two desperately close points defeats to Emile Griffith for the world championship. The title picture had changed by the time Joey got his first shot at the big prize on July 13, 1966, at Madison Square Garden. Old foe Dick Tiger had regained the title from Giardello but then lost it to Griffith. Rubin Carter had hit the skids with losses to Luis Rodriguez, Johnny Morris and Stan Harrington, and would be arrested for triple homicide later that year.

All Archer had to do was beat Griffith to become the king. Ah, that devastating little word, 'all'. Nobody quite knew how to assess hustling, bustling, artful Emile. He wasn't a classic boxer and he wasn't a dynamite puncher. But his very own recipe book was full of spicy ingredients that made him a confoundedly difficult man to beat. He nullified the punchers and cleverly bulled the boxers. One could see how Rubin Carter had destroyed him, but one could also understand why nobody else had found the right key to the lock.

Archer seemed to do everything right in that first match, but did he do enough? Should he have adapted his style when Griff began to figure him out? After losing a 15 rounds majority decision, Joey sat in his dressing room and clenched his fists in frustration. "I thought, I really thought, I had it 9-6 easy," he told brother Jimmy. In fact the best score that Joey got was a 7-7-1 draw from referee Johnny LoBianco.

"Yeah," Jimmy Archer concurred, "you did everything you had to do."

"In a sense Archer had," wrote Mark Kram in *Sports Illustrated*. "But in a sense he hadn't."

What puzzled Kram was the failure of the brainy, ringwise Archer to play a smart game of chess when Griffith started coming on. Joey had made all the right moves in the early going. Wrote Kram: "Griffith came out throwing punches, hard and often, but Archer, parrying and jabbing with his left in a classic style - he does not waste motion - did not catch much.



***Emile Griffith – Joey Archer I***

"However, as the fight progressed Griffith started to slip under the jab and come up with a right hand that had his head and massive shoulders behind it. He began moving Archer around just as easily as he had physically dominated the heavier Dick Tiger when he beat him for the middleweight title.

"More significant, though, was the fact that Archer did nothing about this. Over 49 fights, of which he has now lost only three, Archer always controlled the direction of the action. His moves were quick and slick, his long left jab precise and constant. But against Griffith he was not as mobile.

“There was no pattern to his fight. He said later that he did this to confuse Griffith, but it was a tactic that cost him. Archer was staggered in the sixth round when Emile raked his fair, smooth face with a left-right combination, and he took a bad cut high over the bone of his right eye when Griffith accidentally butted him on the ropes in the eighth.

“A destructive chunk of machinery when he wants to be, Griffith was all over Archer now, shooting both hands to the body and ramming up and through his taller opponent's guard. The Archer poise was fading. He was not thinking, and he has to think to win. Instead, he chose to trade with Griffith.

“It was not until the 10th, his best round, that Archer put it all together. He spun off the ropes like a matador, his feet moved to music and his jab was always there. The crowd did not roar aimlessly now. But in the 11th Archer reverted to muscle - he does not have much - and Griffith rocked him with a solid right. Archer smartened up some after that, but it was too late.

“Joey needed a big round in the 15th, but Griffith would not let him have it. Had he won it decisively, the Irish (fans) might have been able to build a solid case for Archer, especially in view of the scoring: one judge called it 9-5-1 for Griffith, the other had it 8-7 Griffith and the referee came up with a draw, 7-7-1. But now no one could grouse seriously about the result. Griffith, forever crowding Archer, had been swift and punishing.”

Later on, when Joey's supporters were commiserating with each other at Jimmy Archer's bar on 96<sup>th</sup> Street and Second Avenue, a fire engine screeched to a halt opposite. A longshoreman peering out of the window quipped, “That must be Joey's disappointment burnin' up.”

If Archer thought he beat Emile the first time, then he damn well *knew* he beat the champ in their return go at the Garden in January, 1967. Yet the second verdict was even more of a snub than the first. No majority decision for Emile. This time it was unanimous. ‘Griffith beats Archer in another squeaker’ ran the headline in *Boxing illustrated*.



**Emile Griffith – Joey Archer II**

Once again, Mark Kram wasn't convinced, rubbing a little salt in the wound by saying that Archer lost to a man who ‘would rather shop than fight’.

It seemed that everyone had an opinion and a back-handed compliment for Joey's technique. Griffith's co-manager, Gil Clancy, said of Archer: "He's the best negative fighter around. He's some guy to fight. He's never there, and he's always ready to run."

Kram, back in the Archer dressing room to hear more hard luck stories, experienced a distinct feeling of *déjà-vu*: “It seemed as if the three of them had never left the dim room in the belly of the Garden, as if they were wax figures and the room was a museum dedicated to losers.

“Freddie Brown, the trainer who looks like a trainer should, prowled from corner to corner. Jimmy Archer, the brother and manager with a waterfront manner, stood on the edge of the crowd circling the table, his eyes empty. Joey, his long, pale legs swinging slowly, sat on the table and held an ice bag on a cut below his right eye.

“Nothing had changed - same dialogue, same pictures - since Joey had reached out for Emile Griffith's middleweight title last July and lost on a split decision. Yet there was a certain quality to his anger and bitterness that first time, and you could feel it and you wanted to believe him, because he alone had made the evening special, made it hum like a huge electric cable.

“The Archer who brooded (this time) was just performing. Had he performed as well in the ring he would now be the champion.”

### **Perfect**

Perhaps Joey Archer tried to be too perfect. Perhaps he tried too hard to paint the perfect masterpiece. “You don't win poker pots by thinking up royal flushes,” said Barbara Long, the acerbic boxing critic of *The Voice*. Barbara liked Joey Archer, but she preferred Joey Giardello and recalled something that Giardello had said to her: “Archer, he just ain't hungry enough.”

Joey walked away from the game after the second Griffith loss, retiring to a quiet and private life. People kept asking when the handsome Irishman was coming back. He never did. His departure was in keeping with his understated style.

Would things have turned out differently if the post-Dick Tiger version of Archer had challenged Joey Giardello for the championship in 1964? Possibly, but not likely. The chasm between being a great boxer and a nearly great boxer is huge. But how this writer wishes that Joey Archer was jabbing and feinting on the boxing stage of today.

**Mike Casey is a features writer for Boxing.com and Founder & Editor of ALL TIME BOXING at <https://sites.google.com/site/alltimeboxingrankings> He is a freelance journalist and boxing historian and a member of the International Boxing Research Organization (IBRO).**