

# JIM LEE ELDER, GREAT PROMISE, TRAGIC ENDING

By Steven J. Canton



Jim Lee Elder was born on January 1, 1948 in Levelland, Texas, which was near the high plains of Lubbock...Buddy Holly country. Coming from West Texas which is also known for its rich oil fields, Elder had a normal and uneventful youth. Athletics was an important part of his growing up and he prospered. He starred in football during high school and began boxing as an amateur when he was 15. He won the Odessa Regional Golden Gloves tournament as a light heavyweight soon after he began boxing (1963).

Elder joined the Navy after graduating high school and was very successful on the boxing team, winning the all-Navy and all-Service heavyweight titles for two straight years until his discharge. After, he won the 1970 National AAU title and had several victories over top international competition.

Among his amateur victories was a clear-cut decision over future heavyweight contender Earnie Shavers. Elder concluded his fine amateur career with a record of 50-7 and was anxious and ready to embark on a professional career.

Elder was very introverted, quiet, and respectful. He was very shy, but once inside the ring he was all business, totally focused, confident and relaxed.

His pro career began on February 3, 1970 on a Pete Ashlock promotion, in Orlando, Florida. He stopped Abe Brown, a veteran of 15 pro fights, in the first round of a scheduled 6, and he was on his way.

Just three weeks later he scored a 2<sup>nd</sup> round K.O. over Brian O'Melia, at the Embassy Hall, in North Bergen, New Jersey. O'Melia, who went on to have a long career as a tough journeyman fighting the likes of Joe Bugner, Jose Roman, Scott Ledoux, Lorenzo Zanon, and many other good fighters, said that Elder is the only one who ever knocked him out cold. He had the utmost respect for Elder, saying "Though he was quiet and gentle, he was an imposing figure." O'Melia is of the opinion that Elder would have been extremely successful.

In his eighth fight, against Charlie "Emperor" Harris, Elder suffered his first (and only defeat), losing a majority decision over 10 rounds at the Freeport Stadium,

in Freeport, New York. The fight was described by the media as “a brutal and vicious bout.” Elder suffered a broken hand in the second round but refused to quit. He requested and obtained a rematch and eight months later, on the undercard of Muhammad Ali vs. Joe Frazier, on March 8, 1971, Elder turned the tables on Harris by winning a convincing decision. His career was now back on track.



Just one month later, Elder stepped up and fought the formidable and experienced Pedro Agosto, who was 20-2, and won a lopsided 10 round unanimous decision, dropping Agosto with a right hand in the second round.

After this impressive win, respected fight manager Abe Margolies bought Elder’s contract and promised him that his career would go to the next level. Elder was told that he would fight six times that year and if he won all six bouts the next one would be against Joe Frazier. It looked as if his dreams were about to come true.

Elder, and his wife Sharon, moved from Texas to New York and he began to get top sparring at Gleason’s Gym. Everything seemed to be going well when suddenly, he began to experience excruciating and frequent headaches and Sharon convinced him to get it checked out. They were stunned and devastated with the results; Elder was diagnosed with a malignant brain tumor and given five to six months to live. He lost his vision shortly thereafter and was not able to read the many fan letters that came in.

A priest wrote, “You are now in training for your future life with the Lord.” Another fan wrote, “Please, get well, I’m sorry that you are sick, I’m nine years old.” People sent money to help with the medical bills. One man even sent a five dollar bill though he was unemployed. Former opponents called. “He is such a clean young man,” said one of his nurses, “devoted to his family and strong in his faith. He’s so cooperative and he never complains.”

Jim Lee Elder underwent brain surgery on Nov 4, 1971 and passed away on May 25, 1972, at his home in Texas. He was just 24 years old. Though he died young his memory will live on for those who knew, love and respected him.

Such was the life of Jim Lee Elder, great promise, tragic ending.