

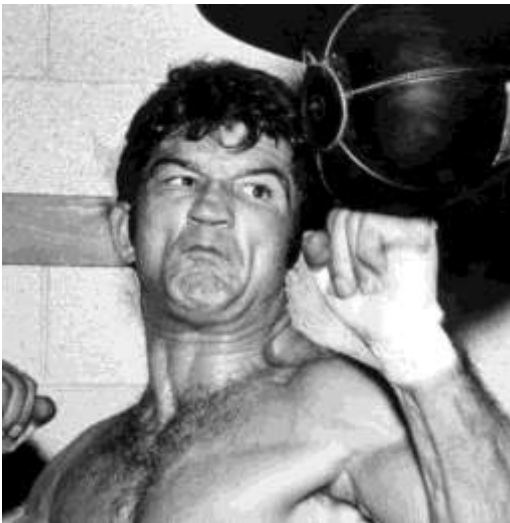
# Ron Marsh

By Pete Ehrmann

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*I was stunned to just learn about the death on Sept. 8, 2013 of Ron Marsh, a terrific heavyweight/light heavy in the late 1960s. He died at age 70, in Overland Park, KS, where he was a schoolteacher for 30 years (including during his career as a fighter). Buster Mathis knocked him out at the Garden, but Ron beat Andy Kendall at 175 and was ranked 9th.*

*Here is a piece I did about him in 2008 for the CyberBoxingZone. PH*



Inside the ring, Ron Marsh once said, "I'm just another Joe Palooka. I just come out swinging." He even wore polka-dotted boxing trunks to proclaim his kinship with the uncomplicated comic strip heavyweight champion.

Outside the ring, Marsh wore horn-rimmed glasses, coats and ties, and carried himself more like Gene Tunney, the real and straightest-laced heavyweight champion of all, who never read the comics and wouldn't have been caught dead wearing polka-dotted drawers beneath his somber business suits.

But stodgy old Gene himself might've offered a high-five had he overheard Marsh once reply to a stranger who inquired if he was a boxer with a Tunneyesque, "I'm a human being who happens to box."

That was the schoolteacher in him, which also would've endeared Marsh to the bookish "Fighting Marine." During a pro career that ran from 1965-'70, and saw him first regarded as a potential challenger to heavyweight champion Muhammad Ali and then become a Top 10 light heavyweight contender, Marsh was also a full-time junior high school physical education, science and health teacher.

The morning after Buster Mathis Sr. pounded lumps on his face at Madison Square Garden, Marsh was back in his classroom in Kansas City, wearing makeup to cover the damage.

Now 65, Marsh likes it that more people remember him as a teacher than the hell-for-leather fighter he was. "I'm proud of it. I think I've had a positive effect on a lot of kids," he said at his home in Overland Park, a suburb of Kansas City.

But, he adds, "You always dream of what it could have been like" – especially if 40 years ago there had been a cruiserweight division, and the 5'10", 185-pounder wouldn't have had to give up more than 50 pounds to guys like Mathis, or kill himself sweating and starving down to the light heavyweight class limit of 175.

When he starting fighting it was as a flyweight, and the 12-year old Marsh lied about his age to enter and win the Kansas City Golden Gloves. He looked and acted older. "Let's just say that I

had four tattoos on my arms by the time I was 12, (and) then got into trouble,” he told Milwaukee boxing writer Ray Grody in 1970.

Born in Boise, Idaho, in 1942, Marsh grew up in the poverty-stricken part of Kansas City known as “Siren City” because of the constant din of police sirens. Marsh was responsible for a few screaming squad cars himself, and after he got tossed out of Wyandotte High School in Kansas City he moved to Omaha and went to Omaha Tech. He played on the football team and got to know a running back for Omaha Central named Gale Sayers.

Marsh kept boxing, winning Golden Gloves titles all the way up to heavyweight, and making the quarterfinals of the national tournament. He also became a skilled one- and three-meter springboard diver thanks to a Kansas City coach named Chuck McKinley, and came in 26<sup>th</sup> place in the 1960 U.S. Olympic Trials. (Later, new boxing acquaintances would do a double-take when Marsh handed them a business card that said, “Diving is an art if performed in the correct places”).

One day, Marsh was hitchhiking from Omaha to Kansas City to visit his girlfriend, and got a ride from an influential alumnus of Kansas University. Hearing about his passenger’s football and diving exploits, the driver made a determined pitch to get Marsh to attend KU. “I don’t know why you’re going for a rummy like me,” Marsh told him. “Why don’t you go for somebody like Gale Sayers?”

Both Marsh and Sayers ended up with KU football scholarships in 1961, and for the next four years Marsh blocked for his friend on the gridiron as Sayers went on to become college football’s top running back.

Award-winning Boston sportswriter and author George Kimball (whose latest is the critically-acclaimed *Four Kings: Leonard, Hagler, Hearns, Duran and the Last Great Era of Boxing*) also started at KU that year, and became friends with Marsh and Sayers.

“I remember at the time Sayers seemed to be cold and overbearing, a bit of a bully,” Kimball recollected. “But he confessed to me later that it was all a persona constructed because in his own mind he feared he didn’t belong in college at all, and since he hadn’t spent a lot of time around white people was very insecure.

“Since it was our first time away from home, I guess we were all a bit that way – except for Ron. He always seemed self-assured without being cocky, a guy who was very comfortable in his own skin.”

The tattooed street kid “never acted the tough guy,” recalled Kimball, “but everybody knew he was the toughest guy on the block and wouldn’t have messed with him.”

Good thing, too. Kimball recalls the time his car got stuck in a huge snowdrift, and Marsh single-handedly picked up the front end of the 1956 Ford to free it.

After graduation in 1965, Sayers went on to gridiron immortality with the Chicago Bears. Too small for pro football, Marsh headed to Minneapolis because a former schoolteacher called Doc Milburn thought he could become heavyweight champion of the world.

Milburn – “a real nice, high-class family man,” Marsh recalled – installed him at his boys camp and Marsh started training under Ed Hazlitt, former U.S. Navy boxing instructor, and also worked as a substituted teacher at Franklin Junior High School.

Recognizing that Marsh needed better connections than his to ascend the heavyweight ladder, Milburn sold his contract to professional wrestler Verne Gagne and Joe Robby, president of the Miami Dolphins football team, and the climb started in earnest. Often fighting bouts on Gagne’s popular televised wrestling cards in the Twin Cities, Marsh ran off nine straight wins by early 1966, and when Sports Illustrated ran a feature story in the February 21 issue that year spotlighting the seven best prospects to “revitalize boxing’s No. 1 division,” Marsh was included with Jerry Quarry, Joe Frazier, Joey Orbillio, Tony Doyle, James J. Woody, and Buster Mathis Sr.

“As a pro Marsh punches with the same bottled fury that characterized his amateur style,” noted the article. “He also has the same faults: a lack of interest in defense and a penchant for getting hit on the jaw.”

In an effort to fix that after Marsh lost a decision to Minneapolis rival Ed Hurley on April 12, 1966, he was sent to the 5<sup>th</sup> St. Gym in Miami Beach for tutelage by Angelo Dundee. There Marsh also observed and was wowed by Ali, and just by osmosis “picked up a lot about how to relax and be a boxer instead of a fighter.”

Back in Minneapolis, he annihilated Hurley in a rematch and then ran off 12 more wins, fighting throughout the Midwest and also appearing twice on the undercard of Ali title defenses at the Houston Astrodome. In one he knocked out 6’7” John Collins, who outweighed Marsh by 50 pounds.

All the while, Marsh kept teaching because he loved kids and wanted to “pass along some of the inspiration I received from the men I was lucky to be exposed to,” like McKinley and Milburn. “If it wasn’t for those kind adults,” Marsh said, “I might have spent time in a penitentiary with some of the fellows I grew up with.”

He moved back to Kansas and was on the faculty at Norwood Jr. High School in Overland Park when he got the call to fight Mathis at the Garden on September 18, 1967.

Mathis was unbeaten in 20 pro fights since he’d beaten Joe Frazier twice to make the 1964 U.S. Olympic team, only to suffer an injury that kept him from going to the Games in Tokyo. Frazier replaced him and won the gold medal. As an amateur, the 6’3” Buster weighed 315 pounds, but for Marsh he was a mere 239 ½. Marsh weighed 186, and according to the United Press International account of the fight he seemed “like a midget beside a giant.”

One Mathis was daunting enough, but when Marsh stepped into the Garden ring he saw two of them. In his final sparring session before the fight, Marsh took a punch that damaged the oblique ligaments in his left eye, causing severe double vision. He faked his way through the eye test in the pre-fight physical, and in the ring there was nothing to do but wade in and start winging.

“A crowd of 6,668 roared throughout the brief fight,” wrote Robert Lipsyte of the New York Times, “because Marsh was tough. He took the best Mathis had, and climbed off the canvas four times. And for the first two rounds, at least, he forced Mathis to fight on his terms.”

It ended in the fourth with Marsh down again. He didn't fight again for 10 months, although that's not what the record books say. According to them, on March 11, 1968, Marsh was disqualified in the ninth round of a fight against light heavyweight contender Gregorio Peralta in San Juan, Argentina.

That still stuns Marsh almost as much as Mathis did, because in his entire life he has never set foot outside the continental U.S.A. "I have friends ask me about it all the time," he said. "It just never happened. Somebody must've used my name."

Marsh's first fight after Mathis was against Jimmy Christopher, on July 25, 1968, in Bloomington, Minnesota. It was the semi-final match on a card topped by Mathis, then embarked on his own comeback after Frazier had stopped him the previous March for the New York State version of the heavyweight title.

That night, Mathis beat James J. Beattie, another giant, but it was an uninspiring effort by both and reporting from ringside Robert Lipsyte of the Times mused, "There seemed to be something terribly amiss if Buster Mathis and Jim Beattie had to fight for their salvations instead of teaching or negotiating treaties or flying airplanes or building houses. Neither of them finds pleasure in the training or the boxing or even the winning, until the fight is over."

At the opposite end of that spectrum, Lipsyte wrote, was schoolteacher Marsh, who knocked out Christopher "in a brutal blood spray" and "enjoyed every moment of it, lusting behind each punch and somehow wallowing in the gore that dripped from his own face."

Five wins after that, Marsh's worsening double-vision put him on a hospital operating table. The delicate eye surgery was successful, and in 1970 he decided to "take another crack at hitting guys." He preferred that they be less than Brobdingnagian, but didn't make an issue of it until he won a hard-fought decision over 54-pound heavier Ben Black in a fight in which, according to Milwaukee Sentinel reporter Ray Grody, "there was hardly a miss in the carload of punches unloosed as both fighters sneered at any defensive tactics in their bid for a knockout."

"I ought to start picking on guys my own size, that's all there is to it," Marsh said after that. So it was that on August 3, 1970, he scored the biggest victory of his career, a decisive 10-round verdict over fourth-ranked light heavyweight Andy Kendall in Milwaukee. Kendall had lost to 175-pound champion Bob Foster in a title fight the previous May, and against Marsh, wrote Grody, "only the toughness of (his) chin saved him from complete disaster."



*Ron Marsh, in his polka-dot trunks, en route to a decision over light heavyweight contender Andy Kendall.*

The day after the fight, the elated Marsh warbled "Oh What A

Beautiful Morning” to reporters and even talked about putting teaching on hold for a while to concentrate on getting a title shot against Foster. When the next rankings came out, the 29-year-old Kansan was the ninth-best light heavyweight in the world, to the delight of the new Ron Marsh Fan Club whose membership was multiplying as if he were the fifth Beatle. A month after beating Kendall, Marsh stopped journeyman Billy Marsh to bring his record to 32-3 (21).

Then he astonished everybody by hanging up his polka-dotted boxing trunks for good.

“I got confused and maybe a little despondent,” Marsh said. “I had a fear of being a winner and not being able to handle it correctly.” Plus, “I was getting older, and it was hard to make weight as a light heavyweight. I had to really starve, take steambaths and jump rope just to lose those extra pounds.”

In 1972, Marsh got his Masters degree in school administration from Kansas University. He retired from teaching in 1996 after 30 years in the profession, the last 24 of them at DeSoto Junior High School in Overland Park, where once a year he showed films of his fights (even against Mathis) to his students and talked about his career as a boxer, until he stopped because “I started feeling like I was showing off.”

When George Foreman led a parade of old geezers back into the ring in the early 1990s, someone asked Marsh why he wasn’t joining them.

“I don’t need the glory anymore,” he said. “And I probably got hit a lot harder than they did.” Somewhere, Gene Tunney whooped.

