

Hanging Around: Oakland Billy Smith

By Mike Casey



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Some fighters spend their whole careers hanging around. Like "ghost" images in an overexposed old photograph or mystery guests in a wedding picture, the eternal wanderers of the sport never seem to find an identity or a satisfactory conclusion.

A lot of good fighters were left hanging around when boxing was still a big deal and made the front page of the newspaper. They compiled honorable careers, beat a lot of good quality men and won the respect of their fellow tradesmen. But never found a way to open the door where the elite gathered to drink from the high table and wear their championship medals.

Charley Burley, Lloyd Marshall, Cocoa Kid, Bert Lytell and Jack Chase all hung around. So did Oakland Billy Smith, the erratic and dangerous light heavyweight with the thunderous right cross, who fought all five of them. These were the so-called pro's pros who occupied their own little world in the shadowlands of a sprawling and chaotic game. Oakland Billy was more commonly known in his time as "Boardwalk Billy" after transferring his base of operations from his hometown of Oakland in California to Atlantic City.

What a rollercoaster career Smith had! Up and down and around like so many of the journeyman contenders of his tough era, fighting anyone and everyone as he criss-crossed the great American map. From California, he traveled to anywhere he could get a fight, logging up stops in Ohio, Hawaii, Indiana, West Virginia, Maryland, Michigan, Texas, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Illinois, New York and Florida.

Then it suddenly happened for Oakland Billy, as is so often does for a guy who hangs around for long enough. On October 8, 1954, after thirteen years of a see-saw campaign, Smith found the big punch to knock out top ranked Harold Johnson in two rounds at the Philadelphia Arena. The timing couldn't have been better for Billy and it couldn't have been worse for Johnson. Smith was suddenly in line for a crack at world champion Archie Moore. Johnson, just two months before, had been on his way to dethroning Archie before being taken out by a sudden blitz from the old fox in a dramatic fourteenth round.

Nobody quite knew where exactly to place Oakland Billy in the world ratings after his shocking knockout of Johnson. It was Smith's seventh consecutive victory, the most consistent streak he had ever had in a turbulent 56-22-4 career. Was he really there to stay or would he follow up by dropping a decision to Joe Blow and quickly disappearing back into the vast field of the also-rans? Whatever, there was no denying Billy's right to be listed among the top contenders along with Johnson, Floyd Patterson, Yolande Pompey, Paul Andrews and Jimmy Slade.

Familiar

Oakland Billy was all too familiar with Archie Moore and his box of tricks. Smith fought a draw with Archie in Oakland in 1946 and then lost a unanimous nod to the Old Mongoose in 1948. A month after that defeat, Billy sampled the explosive power of Bob Satterfield and got hammered inside a round. A third match with Moore followed in September, 1948, in which Smith was knocked out by a right to the chin in the fourth round. A fourth fight with Moore brought no joy either, with Smith being stopped in the eighth round in Portland, Oregon, in 1951.



Archie Moore

Not everyone was happy with the way that fourth bout ended and no wonder. In the deciding eighth round, Smith suddenly stopped fighting, ducked through the ropes and walked back to his dressing room. How he needed the inspirational Sheriff Gerry Gormley back then. Smith later said, "That is one incident I'll never talk about until I finish fighting for good."

But he couldn't resist adding a bit more. "All I will say is that if my manager didn't know enough when to quit, I did."

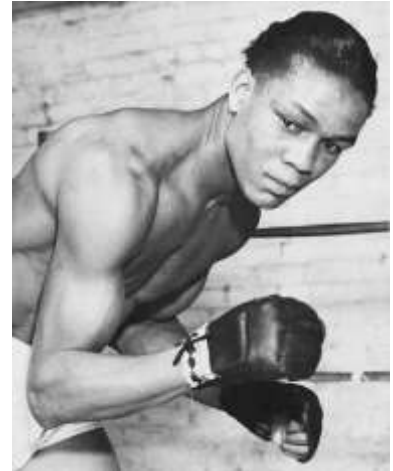
The controversial incident seemed to be a microcosm of Oakland Billy's erratic career: occasionally spectacular, often mundane, sometimes mysterious. This was the era, after all, of mob control of many fighters when "deals" were made. A win-some-lose-some career like that of Oakland Billy wasn't always an entirely true reflection of the fighter's talent.

Even the marquee names of the sport weren't free from being hassled and cajoled into putting in a mediocre effort. Harold Johnson's sudden second round collapse against Julio Mederos in 1955 got Harold suspended by the Pennsylvania commission. Johnson rather weakly explained that he had eaten a poisoned orange.

Harold certainly seemed to take a bonafide clout from Smith, with Billy striking suddenly in the second round after an interesting opening session in which both boys

demonstrated their skills and shiftiness in trying to create openings. Johnson was quite clearly dazed and disoriented after hitting the deck from Oakland Billy's formidable right hand. "I was dizzy," Harold said. "Smith hit me on top of the ear. It wasn't like being knocked out – just dizzy."

Now let's hold the phone for a moment and check out some of the other men Oakland Billy Smith had to get past. Apart from his 1-3 log against Moore, Billy held a 2-1 advantage over the worldly and hardy Jack Chase, went 0-2 against Bert Lytell, 0-1 against Jimmy Bivins and 0-2 against Charley Burley. Ignore the numbers and study the names. Right there you have a quartet of marauding dark horses who would be chomping at the bit to pit their array of skills against today's 175-pounders.



Jack Chase

Smith also posted a ninth round knockout triumph over the incredible Lloyd Marshall, who collected wins over star names as casually as others collect baseball cards. Whilst forever hanging around, Marshall claimed the scalps of Teddy Yarosz, Lou Brouillard, Johnny (The Bandit) Romero, Ezzard Charles, Anton Christoforidis, Curtis (Hatchet Man) Sheppard, Jake LaMotta, Holman Williams, Joey Maxim, Jack Chase, Nate Bolden, Freddie Mills and Tommy Farr.

Thank the Sheriff

Everyone wanted to talk to Oakland Billy Smith after he knocked out Harold Johnson, and Oakland Billy was only too happy to talk back. Life was good and had finally become steady. Smith had joined the light heavyweight elite and was also earning a regular \$65 a week as the jail keeper at the Mays Landing lock-up in New Jersey.

"I've been kicking around this fight business for nearly 14 years," Smith said, "But not until last April when Sheriff Gerry Gormley became my manager and gave me this job did I realize that security – something I never had until now – is the best asset a boxer can have.

"In the old days, when I was fighting fellows like Lloyd Marshall, Ezzard Charles, Bert Lytell, Archie Moore and lots of others just as tough but not as famous, I had other things to worry about – more important than just winning – such as eating. The Sheriff understood all that and when he picked me up out of Jersey Joe Walcott's training camp, where I worked as a 20 dollar a day sparring partner, the first thing he did was to give me the jail keeper's job. I was a new man after that. All I had to worry about was keeping the prisoners locked up and winning fights."

Sheriff Gerry Gormley, an animated and passionate Irishman, had a quick and easy way of clearing a room of mobsters and other eavesdroppers. Whether he was visiting Harry Markson, managing director of the International Boxing Club, or trainer Ray Arcel at Ray's 49th Street suite, the good Sheriff would boom, "I am Sheriff Gerry Gormley of Atlantic County, NJ!" All at once a hub of buzzing activity would drain its population and fall silent.

Gerry Gormley was one of those characters who had the knack. Before meeting Oakland Billy Smith, Gormley's knowledge of boxing could politely be described as minimal. But why allow a small disadvantage like that get in the way of promoting his boy as the next light heavyweight champion?

Gormley did the rounds, talking to Markson, talking to Arcel and yakking to anyone else who knew a bit about this boxing malarkey. Confident people have a way of doing such things. If something isn't working, go to the White House and tell the President, never mind all those guys in between.

A mildly stunned Harry Markson said of Gormley, "He spoke like Weill speaks about Marciano – as if Smith were champion of the world."

Arcel, as worldly a man as there was on the fight beat, couldn't make a decision on Oakland Billy Smith after listening to Gormley's enthusiastic pitch. Then Gormley said that he would personally sell \$1,000 worth of tickets if Ray could oil some wheels. Indecision departed from Arcel's mind and Oakland Billy was soon matched with Willie Bean in Atlantic City.

Wondering

The good Sheriff was left wondering if he had made a massive mistake. "I never saw Bean until he climbed into the ring," Gormley said. "When they pulled off his robe, I nearly died. The guy had a build that made Max Baer look like the Hunchback of Notre Dame. He was the most beautifully constructed human being I ever saw.

"Smith seemed out of place alongside him and when they came to the center of the ring for instructions Billy had to look straight up to see the guy's face. When I shook Smith's hand to wish him good luck, I felt I was saying goodbye."

Oakland Billy's formidable right cross canceled out the size differential when it put Willie Bean to sleep in the fifth round. Billy, who described himself as "a physical culture guy" had put in some hard work on his trademark knockout punch after noticing that it didn't sound its usual authoritative self when it struck the punching bag in the gym. He discovered that he had been pulling his right arm back a touch too far. Three months later, it was Harold Johnson's turn to sample the shattering effects of Smith's homework.



Oakland Billy Smith

Like every proud fighter, Oakland Billy had an explanation for the earlier defeats that specked his checkered record. Four of those losses, he vaguely explained, were "business deals."

However, the one opponent to whom he gave every credit was his old friend, the guy he called "Snooks" – the amazing Ezzard Charles. Ezzard outpointed Smith in their first meeting in 1946 and then stopped Billy in the fifth round of their 1947 return. Both fights were held in Cincinnati.

"Snooks is the hardest puncher I ever fought," said Smith. "I'll never forget the fifth round of our (second) fight in Cincinnati. I saw him pull back his right as he always did, and I moved a step back. Next thing I remember, I saw the same punch snaking its way for my face. I put up both my hands, but everything else is a blank. I didn't wake up until two hours later when I was all dressed and eating a steak in a downtown restaurant. Man, could that Snooks hit!"

Archie Moore had a similar experience in Cleveland a year later when Charles knocked him out in the eighth round. Archie saw that snaking right coming too but couldn't escape its dazzling curve and speed.

Breakout

Oakland Billy Smith must have thought he was on the brink of the big time after his knockout of Harold Johnson. A title shot at Archie Moore became a distinct possibility, as did the rarity of a really meaningful payday. Alas, the beautiful vision on the horizon was a mirage. After all the excitement and media interest, Billy's breakout year of 1954 turned into a prolonged anti-climax. The magic disappeared and the exit door came into view..

A sixth round TKO loss to fellow contender Paul Andrews in Miami, in which Smith was decked three times was excused because Billy had apparently been badly unwell before the fight and taken to hospital. He had Andrews on the verge of a knockout in the first round before fading as quickly as the pre-fight odds. From being 5 to 12 in Smith's favor, they had drifted all the way back to even by fight time.

Smith rested for ten months before coming back against heavyweight John Holman in October, 1955 in what would prove to be Oakland Billy's last fight. He was stopped in the seventh. Even the guys with a gift for hanging around have a finite time for making hay.

That last fight is now 58 years in the past and not too many boxers from that era are still walking amongst us. However, since there is no death date on Oakland Billy Smith's record, we must assume that he is still ticking at the grand old age of 92. Perhaps he and Jake LaMotta are trying to see who will live the longest.

Does anyone know of Oakland Billy's whereabouts and circumstances? We wish him well and hope that his situation is not the stuff of sad stories.

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