

Jimmy Carter: Grace, Elegance and Darkness

By Mike Casey on February 15, 2014

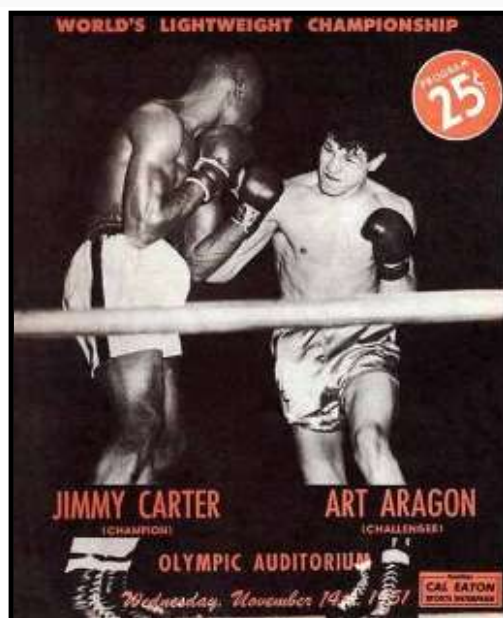
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It was quite some time before I came to appreciate the grace and elegance of former lightweight champion Jimmy Carter. It seems that Jimmy has always slipped through the cracks when discussion turns to history's great 135-pounders.

Perhaps that's inevitable in one of boxing's richest and most glamorous weight divisions, where the level of top talent has been quite phenomenal over the years. When I first began digging the mines as an eager youngster in search of tuition, I was naturally drawn to the poster names of Kid Lavigne, Battling Nelson, Ad Wolgast, Joe Gans, Benny Leonard, Tony Canzoneri, Barney Ross, Lou Ambers, Beau Jack, Ike Williams, Carlos Ortiz and Roberto Duran.

Only later on did I start finding out more about the likes of Jack McAuliffe, Frank Erne, Jimmy Britt, Rocky Kansas, Sammy Mandell, Al Singer, Sammy Angott, Bob Montgomery, Joe Brown and Jimmy Carter.

When I first studied Jimmy on film, he was defending his lightweight championship against the talented Rhode Island contender George Araujo at Madison Square Garden on June 12, 1953. Araujo was nobody's fool. Quite the contrary. He came into the ring against Carter with a 49-2-1 record and had claimed the scalps of Del Flanagan, Sandy Saddler, Orlando Zulueta, Charley Riley, Joe Brown, Paddy DeMarco and Teddy (Red Top) Davis.



Jimmy Carter

Against Carter, Araujo was a man outclassed. I couldn't believe how good Carter was. He was the consummate all round boxer who looked so thoroughly comfortable as he went about his work. He was an excellent boxer and a sharp hitter, moving with intelligence and grace as he gradually dismantled Araujo for a thirteenth round TKO win.

It is unfortunate in Jimmy Carter's case that grace and elegance came with a darkness that always makes us feel uncomfortable and compels us to ask uncomfortable questions. Like so many boxers of the fifties, Jimmy was often described as a 'Carbonized' fighter, plying his trade to the tailored needs of mobster Frankie Carbo. When Carter was left to his own devices, he was quite wonderful. When Carbo instructed his charge to try only to a certain extent, Jimmy would do a poor impression of an ordinary fighter. Such was his natural talent that any pedestrian performance would give off an odious whiff.

In his first fight after his masterful performance against Araujo, Carter dropped a non-title split decision to the distinctly ordinary Johnny Cunningham, who brought a 17-31-4 record to the table. Carter's earlier points loss to Golden Boy Art Aragon, in another non-title go, was also questioned. In a subsequent title defense against Aragon, Jimmy was a revelation in outclassing Art.

In a fractured title reign that ran from 1951 to 1955, Carter twice lost his title to Lauro Salas and Paddy DeMarco, two men he subsequently mastered without any great inconvenience. Indeed, Jimmy had already comfortably outpointed Salas in an earlier title defense. Perhaps those two defeats were perfectly legitimate. The point is, people asked the question. With Jimmy, you couldn't always be sure of what you were seeing, and that was a shame for a man of such obvious prowess.

But enough of the shady side. Carter's best performances - and there were many - undoubtedly prove that he was a great lightweight champion of the second tier in a weight division whose historical pedigree is par excellence. The sheer quality of the men he fought - and the men he beat - ranks among the best in boxing history.

In a 131-fight career that ran from 1946 to 1960, Jimmy scored 81 victories against 31 defeats and nine draws. He was stopped inside schedule on only three occasions. Fourteen of his losses came in his last 23 bouts when he was well past his fighting prime.

Carter defeated Wallace (Bud) Smith, Percy Bassett, Ike Williams, Enrique Bolanos, Del Flanagan, Art Aragon, Luther Rawlings, Lauro Salas, Tommy Collins, George Araujo, Carlos Chavez, Paddy DeMarco and Don Jordan. Jimmy also drew with Sandy Saddler and Tony DeMarco. Seven of those men were lineal world champions (Bud Smith, Williams, Salas, Jordan, Saddler and Paddy and Tony DeMarco).

Out of the Blue

When Jimmy Carter won the lightweight championship by stopping Ike Williams in the 14th round at Madison Square Garden on May 25, 1951, the shocking result reverberated around the boxing world. Jimmy had terminated the long and magnificent reign of a truly magnificent champion. Ike had slowly slipped away from his peak and was weakened by weight making. Nevertheless, few expected Carter, ranked just number seven in the quality-laden top ten of the time, to conjure up such a spectacular triumph.

Johnny Salak, a fine and knowledgeable reporter of the era, wrote: “Did you ever see a ghost walking? Well, I did. And so did James William Carter, hometown boy made good, as he stifled the yawns of the boxing world with a stunning upset to win the world lightweight championship.

“He saw the ghost, Ike Williams, weight-weakened and drawn, walk towards him for fourteen rounds, and as any self-respecting gent would do pounded the champion into submission. Carter, up through the closing rounds of the battle in which he was supposed to be the sacrificial lamb led to slaughter, was virtually unknown except to his family, friends and the habitués of Stillman’s Gym.

“As referee Petey Scalzo led a dazed and beaten, though gallant Ike Williams to his corner after halting the fight, a wild scramble ensued among the working press for biographical data on the nonentity who dared rush in, highly confident, where other lightweights feared to tread.

“The confidence he showed, though the fight can be termed one-sided, might have been his margin of victory. Another fighter, perhaps even more highly rated than Carter’s No. 7, might have held back, leery of Williams’ vaunted power.”

Jimmy Who?

Who was this sudden sensation, Jimmy Carter? That was the question that ricocheted around the Old Fun City after the dismantling of Ike Williams at the Garden, even though the South Carolina-born Carter had been a Harlem resident since his childhood. Less than four thousand people showed up at the Garden to see Jimmy’s incredible upset victory. In his previous three fights, Carter had dropped a decision to Calvin Smith, outpointed Percy Bassett and then lost to Bassett in a return match before challenging Williams. The locals weren’t too impressed with these credentials. It surely had to be a “marking time” fight for Ike while the long reigning king waited for a truly worthwhile challenger to step up.

Talk about a spanner in the works! Now everyone had to rummage around and find out about this Jimmy Carter guy. One could say that Jimmy, much like Charlie (Bird) Parker, was from “around.” Carter had certainly been around in his 27 years. He resembled that can that

people kick around until they lose it, except that Jimmy kept bouncing back. He learned his boxing at the Catholic Boys' Club in uptown Manhattan, joining the amateur ranks at the age of 14.

After joining the army in 1943, Carter made his mark by winning the welterweight title of Camp Clayborne in Louisiana. As a private with the Army Engineers, Jimmy got to travel to France, England and the Philippines, and it was perhaps a good thing that he grew accustomed to life on the road.

As a young professional, Carter didn't set the crowds alight in his native New York, despite dropping only three decisions in his first 25 fights. Hitting the road, he fought in New England, New Orleans, Detroit and California before venturing "down under" for a three-fight series in Australia. He lost the first of those bouts to Norman Gent, but won the next two when he knocked out Charlie Ashenden in four rounds and gained a points win over Bernie Hall.

Jimmy kept rolling along and improving his skills, but nobody was seeing him as a contender to Ike Williams, much less a threat. In his seven fights before challenging Ike, Carter had done no more than break even with three wins against three losses and a draw.

Boxing, of course, loves to tease us in this way and it is one of the major reasons why most of us can never walk away from it. We love the unpredictable. We love the guy who comes in from the cold and completely scrambles the settled order of nature. It makes us think we could do it ourselves if we could just give up the beer and cross the threshold of that cruel palace of pain known as the gymnasium.

Jimmy Carter's radar very quickly picked up the signals coming back from Ike Williams as their contest played to musical chairs at the sparsely populated Garden. Ike was lethargic and uncharacteristically hesitant. He didn't look assured, he wasn't following through. Suddenly the great man seemed to be questioning his ability to win. Not that the champion was offering meek resistance. He was still throwing those classic left hooks and overhand rights that had unhinged so many opponents. Carter, however, took them all and impudently fired back as he charged into the slowing Ike and ripped at him with hurting right hands.

Yet for Ike's many admirers, things had looked good for a while. After conceding the first round to Carter, Williams rallied and showed some of his old panache in sweeping the second, third and fourth. However, the old steam was missing from the great champion's punches and he was always vulnerable to Jimmy's damaging right hand.

It was that punch that produced the fight's first sensation in the fifth round. Many years and many fights had stacked up into a high and unsteady pile for Ike and a long right to the head from Carter sent the pile tumbling and gave Father Time the green light to go to work.

Williams hit the deck for a count of five and was soon knocked down again by two more rights to the head. The bell sounded at the count of eight, but it was a cruel reprieve that offered only a minute's comfort.

Thereafter, Ike's great heart kept him in motion, kept him looking at least a semblance of his old beautiful self. Fighters plod on in such circumstances because what else is there to do? Quitting is a repugnant and sacrilegious poison that is far more difficult to swallow than the oddly comforting consistency of physical pain. Williams was still there in the tenth round and felled again for a count of four. Now he had five more rounds to the finish line and the small victory of going the distance.



Williams is sent through the ropes

Carter would not permit it. Hungry, tired of being overlooked and undersold, Jimmy saw the chance to change his life completely and shoot straight to the top as the king of the hill. In the fourteenth round he uncorked a long, looping right and a following left uppercut to spill Williams again and this time referee Petey Scalzo had seen enough. Petey stopped the fight and escorted the beaten Williams to his corner.

Jimmy Carter was the new lightweight champion of the world, a title that meant much more in 1951 than it does today. It was just as well that it did. In hard currency, Jimmy's net earnings for dethroning Ike Williams fell three hundred bucks short of just four thousand dollars.

The Great Unknown

Carter's stunning victory set tongues wagging and had the game's writers reaching for comparisons. Ted Carroll, a great writer of the age, said: "That Jimmy Carter, 'The Great Unknown,' is world lightweight champion today is just additional evidence that in this life nothing is impossible.

"One has to go back about 26 years to find anything like Carter's victory in lightweight history. A seldom mentioned Buffalo battler, Jimmy Goodrich, figured in that one. Goodrich had even less to recommend him when he was included in the lightweight tournament to decide a successor to Benny Leonard back in 1925.

“Actually, there shouldn’t have been a tournament. Sid Terris and Sammy Mandell had clearly proven themselves the class of the 135 lb. boys of that period. They had met twice. Both were superlative boxers and the first match had been called a draw. In the second one, held in the old Garden in 1925, Terris, although a New York favorite, had dropped what most onlookers called a bad decision to the old Rockford Sheik.

“Sid refused to enter the tournament, thereby making a mistake that doomed his championship hopes. At first Mandell balked also, but made a last minute entry into the round robin. A big favorite over Goodrich in his first bout, he was called the loser on a foul in the sixth round.

“In the tourney final, Goodrich, again the underdog, went on to win the crown when his opponent, Stan Loayaza, the tough Chilean, suffered an injury and had to call a halt in the second stanza.

“So Jimmy Goodrich was crowned lightweight champion of the world, a title he relinquished in his first title defense against old warhorse Rocky Kansas. Goodrich was not a Benny Leonard by any means.”

Golden Boy Down

When Jimmy Carter was “on,” when he was really boxing at his best and not holding back, he was tremendous. He was certainly at his best against Art Aragon, the charismatic “Golden Boy” of the fifties, at the Olympic Auditorium in Los Angeles on November 14, 1951. The contest was eagerly anticipated as Aragon had won a split decision over Jimmy in a non-title go at the same venue just three months before.

The exciting return for Jimmy’s world championship fight went the full 15 rounds and Aragon put up a fighting performance, but the home crowd of 8,000 knew their Art had fallen short even before the dapper Jimmy Lennon walked to the center of the ring and announced: “By unanimous decision , the winner and still lightweight champion of the world – James Carter!”

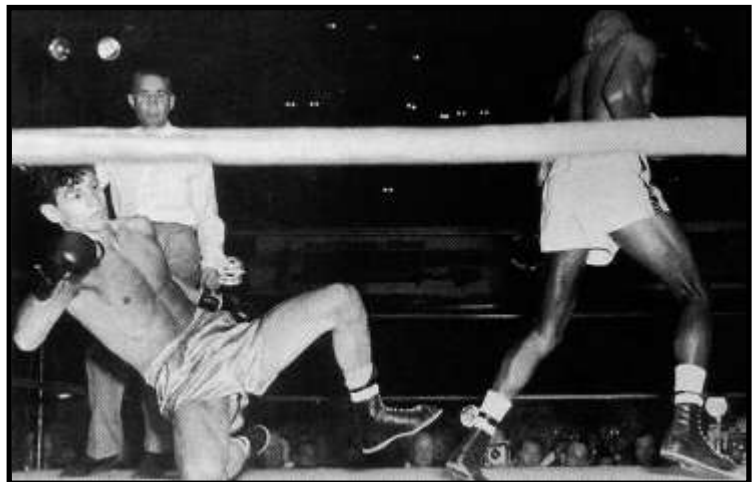
The champion started fast that night, charging from his corner and missing with a right. The two fighters had looked grim and intense whilst awaiting the opening bell and Carter’s misfire seemed more like a release of tension rather than a deliberate effort to cause damage. He had made the first move, let the stopper out of the bottle, but both boys needed that opening round to get them on track and tee up what transpired to be an excellent fight. Art, aggressive and purposeful, took the round as he scored solidly with some punches and missed with others. Carter wasn’t yet on his game, a little too loose and careless, and his lack of discipline nearly cost him dearly in the second round.

Aragon, a thrilling fighter at his best, found the target with a big left hook that sucked Jimmy into a hurricane that lasted for a good minute. Shaken and sagging, the champion touched the canvas with one glove for an official knockdown, although he didn't take a count. Aragon needed no further encouragement to start swinging. Art fired home lefts and rights as Carter ducked and dived and retreated. Jimmy's strength had gone out of him and he was forced to call upon his experience and courage to get through the crisis.

Then the skies cleared and the comeback began. Art had wearied himself with his big assault and left himself open to a hurtful right to the jaw. Then Carter knocked out the challenger's mouthpiece as the see-saw round drew to a close. The pace slowed in the third round as both boys drew breath and took stock. Neither man had the advantage, but the fourth round saw Jimmy upping the pace and finding his best form. Jabbing effectively and boxing with greater discipline, he made Aragon miss repeatedly.

Jimmy had begun to move through the gears and his fine work continued in round five. Taking the whip hand as he moved inside, he shook Art with a series of short uppercuts and hooks. Art responded with a jolting right to the jaw, but then his mouthpiece went flying into the crowd as Carter connected again.

The sixth round was a corker, even though it was a sign to even Art's most ardent fans that Carter was the boss and would likely remain so. Carter crashed home a mighty left hook that sent the brave Aragon tumbling to the canvas, hurt and dazed. Art's pride kicked in and he got to his feet at the count of three, sooner than he should have done. Seeing his chance to end the fight, Jimmy opened fire with a salvo of lefts and rights but failed to finish the tough and gutsy Aragon. Weary from his big effort, Jimmy began to tire and miss as Art survived and rallied with two good rights before the close of the round.



The pace of the battle slowed over the next few rounds as both boys seemed to sense that they were in for a distance fight, Infighting wasn't Art's strong suit and Jimmy kept the fight inside during these sessions with short left hooks and uppercuts that kept the challenger in check and chipped away at his resistance.

The fight burst into dramatic life again in the twelfth round as Jimmy found the sweet spot with a long, whipping left swing that caught Aragon flush as he was hanging his chin out to dry. The big punch sparked another Carter bombardment as Art shook and staggered back

into the ropes. Again Aragon weathered the storm and hit back with great determination as Jimmy flagged. The champion must have felt like a man trying to knock down a wall with his bare knuckles. Rugged, willing, hard and courageous, it was no wonder that Art Aragon was such a box office magnet.

However, while Jimmy might not have realized it at the time, he had finally pounded the effectiveness out of his persistent challenger. The final rounds – what were known as the championship rounds in the days of 15-rounders – were torrid for Aragon. Lesser men might have gone under from the punishment he endured as the clock seemed to stop ticking and the finish line seemed to melt into the sand.

Carter gave Aragon another caning in the thirteenth round with quick and whipping punches that resembled the lashes of a whip. One such blow, a fizzing left uppercut as Art missed and left his defenses down, jerked his head back with a viciousness that made the onlooker wince. Ringside reporter Harry Winkler wrote: “The champion then rocked Art’s head like a buoy in a rough sea.”

It was only Art’s big heart and endurance that enabled him to survive the last two rounds as Carter scored pretty much as he liked. The boxing public was now convinced. In Jimmy Carter, the sport had a thoroughbred champion. Harry Winkler wrote glowingly: “The bout definitely established one fact – Jimmy Carter is a real champion, a much better fighter than the public had generally tabbed him.

“Jimmy may not be as devastating a puncher as Ike Williams was at his peak, and he may not have the flashiness of such a ring stylist as Ray Robinson, but he’s a smooth mechanic who knows his trade. He’s a good boxer at long range, knows how to handle himself in close quarters and has a fine variety of combinations. He’s a cool ring general at all times, doesn’t become flustered, takes a good punch and is most dangerous when he’s hurt.”

This, then, was the prime version of Jimmy Carter in the late fall of 1951. Nine years later, like so many great champions who persist for too long, Jimmy was losing – and he was losing a decision in Mesa, Arizona, to one Luis Garduno, who lost 13 of his next 18 fights and retired with a 16–16–3 record.

Jimmy Carter died in 1994 at the age of 70.

(Photos Courtesy of BoxRec and Dan Cuoco)

Mike Casey is a Boxing.com writer 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).