

Former World Champion Freddie Little: The High School Teacher Who Failed Geography

By Pete Ehrmann [The Ring Magazine, Originally Posted: March 1996]

If all the boxers who ever lost a hometown decision got together and had a contest to see who had been robbed worst, Freddie Little would win hands down.

But then, fittingly, the prize would probably be given to somebody else. And instead of ranting, throwing chairs against the wall, or running away to Italy to make bad action movies, the former junior middleweight champion of the world would just smile and make the best of the situation.



“You have to experience some downs before you can enjoy the life of being up,” said the 59-year-old Little, who finally won the undisputed 154-pound crown in 1969, and after two diabolical efforts to keep it from him that had everybody in an uproar but Little himself.

He is a soft-spoken, thoughtful man, as befitting a college graduate and former teacher who is now chief equal employment opportunity officer for the Nevada Department of Motor Vehicles in Carson City.

Education was stressed above all else in his boyhood home in Picyune, Mississippi, where Little was one of seven children. His mother told him, “Son, you’re the eldest, and you must set examples for your brothers and sisters. So I want to hear your name on the honor roll every six weeks.”

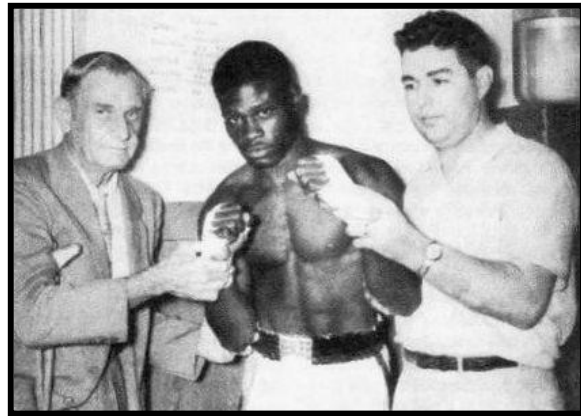
Little was a standout athlete in school, too, lettering in football and basketball. But after a dispute with one of his coaches, he turned his attention solely to boxing.

“I was always a fan of Joe Louis and Sugar Ray Robinson, and watched the weekly fights televised by Pabst Blue Ribbon and *The Gillette Cavalcade of Sports* in the ‘50s,” Little recalled.

In 1957, the year he graduated from high school, Little received 20 scholarship offers from colleges that wanted him to play football for them. By then he had also caught the eye of fight manager James Stevenson, who made Little his own scholarship proposition. If he would try boxing instead of football, Stevenson would pay all the

expenses for two years. Then, if Little wanted to go on to something else, they would part friends.

Little agreed, but there was still the matter of getting the matriarch of the Little clan to give her blessing, and his mother wasn't particularly delighted to have a family role model using his prize brain as a target in the ring.



Whitey Esneault (left) Freddie Little and James Stevenson in Bogalusa, Louisiana

Little and Stevenson went to her, and the manager made his pitch. “Your son Freddie,” he said, “he’s a good athlete and has some hidden skills. I’d like to bring him to Mr. Whitey Esneault, and whatever’s there, Mr. Whitey will find it.”

“Well,” said Little’s mother, “I’m gonna hold you to it.”

And so to New Orleans, 40 miles from Picyune, went Little. He enrolled at Dillard University to continue his formal education, and off-campus became a student of Professor Esneault. “Mr. Whitey” was the Crescent City’s foremost molder of boxers, under whose tutelage Little racked up 11 wins in a row, all but two by kayo.

In Little’s 12th bout, against tough Norris Burse, Esneault learned that even a college boy needs to have things spelled out for him once in a while.

“I was beating him until I got knocked out,” recalled Little of that 1958 bout in New Orleans, his first scheduled 10-rounder.

Before the fifth round, Esneault told him, “Freddie, go out there straight at Burse. Double-jab him and hit him with that right, *hard!*” Little did as instructed. “I had mother, father, and God in that punch,” he said.

But Mr. Whitey had neglected to tell him to do it in the center of the ring, where, upon being punched, Burse would not be obstructed by anything on his way down. Instead, Little hit him when Burse was against the ropes, which held him up. He recovered, then “straightened up and threw a left hook, and down I went,” said Little.

He stopped Burse in a rematch and didn’t lose again until cagey George Benton outpointed him in 1960.

By the time he graduated from Dillard with a degree in physical education and health and safety in 1961, Little was 24-2 (18). He wanted to become champion of the

world, but that dream was put on hold while he put his formal education to use. Little fought only once over the next three years.

He returned to Picyune and became a sixth-grade teacher, and the following year his new wife, Barbara, got her town-teaching degree from Alcorn State University. The Littles went to Chicago for their honeymoon and ended up staying to teach school there.



Even back in the early -'60s, gangs were a presence in Chicago schools. Little quickly reached an understanding with gang members in his classes.

“One thing about kids is they recognize territory,” he said. “I would tell them in school, ‘This is Mr. Little’s territory. When you’re in my territory, you do what I want you to do. When I’m in your territory, you tell me, ‘Teach, I don’t think you should be here,’ and I’ll get in my car and leave.”

He loved teaching, but there was still that other dream. As soon as he and Barbara were settled in for what would be a four-year stay in the Windy City, Little went down to Johnny Coulan’s boxing gym, where he and junior welterweight champion-to-be Eddie Perkins soon drew crowds to their sparring sessions, during which they would hone the slick moves that were their trademarks.

In 1965, a local restaurateur named Joe Kiernan decided to help Little revive his ring career. Boxing in Chicago was dormant, but the WBA held its annual convention there that year, and Kiernan met Jim Deskin, a WBA official who was also chairman of the Nevada Athletic Commission, Deskin, in turn, introduced Kiernan to Bill Miller, who was promoting weekly fights on the Las Vegas Strip and was always in the market for good attractions.

That year, Little commuted to Las Vegas for four fights, all wins, and in January 1966 the Chicago schoolteacher scored his biggest win by knockout out Denny Moyer in four rounds.

Moyer, who was the inaugural junior middleweight of the world in 1962, had been stopped only once before in 65 fights. “Against Little,” wrote Rich Howard, The Ring’s Las Vegas correspondent, “the clever young Irishman was much like a novice. Little beat Denny at his own game -- boxing. He out-jabbed him, out-hooked him, out-maneuvered him, and left him glassy-eyed and bloody on the canvas.”

Later that year, Little and his wife moved to Las Vegas, and while he continued his climb up the junior middleweight rankings, he taught health and driver’s education

classes at Rancho High School. He was popular with students, who didn't chafe under his firm but good-natured discipline even in those rebellious late-'60s.

"When Mr. Little's speaking, everyone listens," he instructed his classes. "There's no democracy here. I'm a total dictator."

"What about our Constitutional rights?" some future ACLU lawyer once inquired.

"Well, since you mentioned it, I have a good right hand," answered Little, instantly quelling the incipient uprising.

School kids became regulars at his fights on The Strip, and one of them, a fifth-grader named Barry, led the adolescent cheering section with a battle cry that resounded throughout the arena: "Okay, Mr. Little, learn him how to fight!"

And he did, until a 37-3 Little traveled to Seoul for a crack at the junior middleweight title held by native Ki Soo Kim. Then it was Little who got a lesson, but not in the ring.

The champion was a decent boxer who had won the 154-pound crown a year earlier by inflicting the first-ever loss on Italy's Nino Benvenuti after 120 amateur and 54 pro fights. But the American schoolteacher put Kim through a remedial course in the Sweet Science for 15 rounds before a stunned crowd of more than 10,000 in Seoul Stadium.

"Kim did little more than counter and defend himself, and was never able to get started," reported American boxing writer Jack Muhlenback.

Little put the champion on the canvas during the bout and recalled, "I was hit more by the referee that night than I was by Kim."

After the bell ended the one-sided fight, Little felt buoyant and thought to himself, *Gee, it's gonna be hard for them to take this.*

But the teach was out of his territory. That became clear when no announcement of the decision was made in the ring. Little and Kiernan were in their corner, waiting, when all of a sudden Kim began jumping up and down across the ring.

"Joe," Little told his manager, "go see why he's jumping. Something's wrong here."

A moment later, he said, "everybody skedaddled out of the ring." The championship belt was still around Kim's waist.

The decision, when it was finally disclosed, showed that Korean referee Yung Su Chong had voted for Kim by 71-69, and Korean judge Kwang Su Kim had scored for

the champion by 72-68. American judge John Fitzpatrick gave every one of the 15 rounds to Little, scoring it 75-64.

Even the Korea Herald, a newspaper published by the South Korean Ministry of Information, thought the American had won by a score of 72-68. Muhlenback wrote, “Kim’s inept performance is regarded as little less than a national disgrace,” and that the entire nation considered the whole episode to be “the greatest national disaster since the Japanese occupied the country in 1910.”

The only one not hanging his head was Freddie Little.

“I wasn’t over-surprised,” he said. “I figured over in those countries anything is possible. I just felt, *Why, heck -- I’ll get him another time*

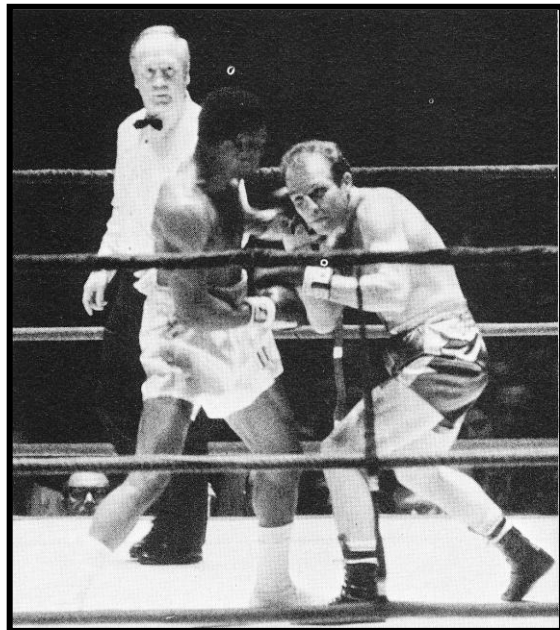
But Italy’s Sandro Mazzinghi got Kim first, luring the Korean to Milan, where the native son reclaimed, via split-decision, the title he’d held from 1963-’65, when he was stopped by Benvenuti.

It was a year before Little got his second chance at the championship. In October 1968, he met Mazzinghi in Rome’s Plaza Dello Sport, whose 15,000 paying customers chanted “Littler! Littler! And “Professori!” as the visiting educator took their champion to school from the opening bell.

“Sandro was just dull-tough and came right at you just gritting his teeth and punching,” recalled Little. “It was toe-to-toe pretty much. He was an infighter, and I was going to take his strong suit away. We gutted it out for eight rounds.”

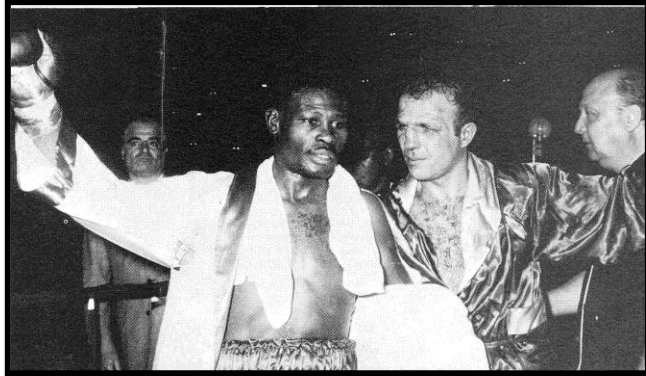
When the bell rang for the ninth, the thoroughly trounced Italian remained on his stool. The fight was over, and Freddie Little had finally made boxing’s honor roll.

Or so it seemed, until Little, waiting to be proclaimed new champion, saw German referee Herbert Tomser talking to ringside officials. With a growing sense of *deja vu*, he said to Kiernan, “Go see what this guy’s talking about.”



At least they announced the result this time, even if it was preposterous. According to Tomser, because the scheduled 15-rounder had not gone past the halfway mark (in fact, eight rounds had been completed), he had no choice under European rules (In

fact, it was a world and not a European title match) but to declare a no-contest. That, of course, left the battered, bloodied Mazzinghi still champion.



While Kiernan screamed international scandal and a phalanx of Rome police had to escort Tomser to safety, the man victimized by the heist again just shook his head and smiled, although this time more grimly than in Korea.

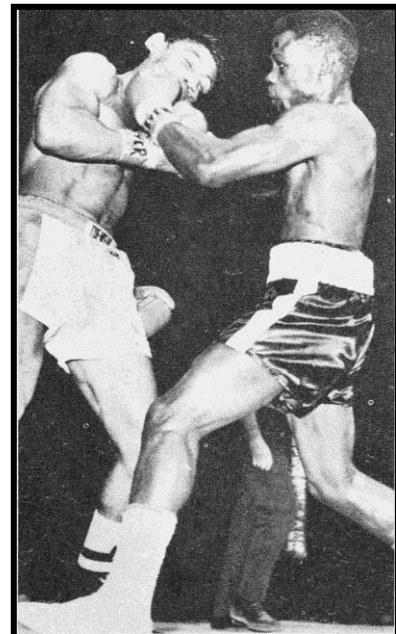
“I said, ‘Boy-boy-boy, justice gonna ring somewhere,’” recalled Little. “This is just another hurdle we’re gonna clear.”

It wasn’t that his heart wasn’t broken. Little was just trying to keep the damage from spreading to his head.

“You have to maintain that kind of attitude to retain your sanity,” he explained. “When those things happen, there’s nothing you can do about it, anyway. Making a lot of noise wasn’t going to change things. After all is said and done, the decision is going to stay as rendered.”

But this robbery was too much even for the powers in charge to ignore. The WBA, WBC and European officials ordered Mazzinghi to give Little a rematch within two months.

However, the Italian had learned an important lesson from the Nevada schoolteacher --never get in the ring with him again. Mazzinghi was stripped of the title, and Little and Philadelphia contender Stanley “Kitten” Hayward were matched for the vacant laurels in March 1969.



The fight went to a 15-round decision in Las Vegas.

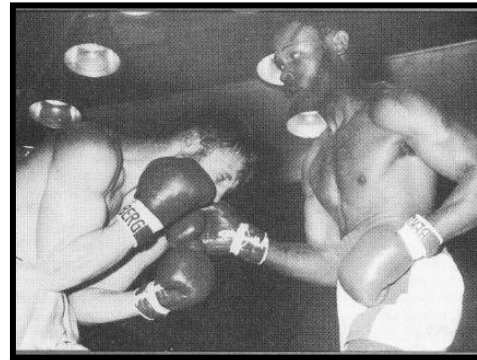
“Nobody gonna beat me in Las Vegas,” laughed Little. “It felt great to win a hometown decision.”

In fact, Little won easily, receiving all three votes by wide margins. Justice had finally rung for the man from Picyune, and when it did he let out the emotion he had struggled to hold in check in South Korea and Italy.

“I made a fool of myself,” he recalled. “I got teary-eyed.”

After all it had taken him to win the title, it would have surprised nobody if Little had refused to defend it anyplace but in his own rec room, with Barry the big-mouthed school kid as referee. But, he said, “it didn’t discourage me from fighting in guys’ backyards. I always figured I had a puncher’s chance.”

In his first defense, Little knocked out Hisao Minami in two rounds in Osaka, Japan. Then he won 11 of 15 rounds against Gerhard Piaskowy in Berlin -- and even got the decision.



In July 1970, Little lost the title to Carmelo Bossi, an Italian, in Rome. Was it another hometown?

“I thought I did enough to get it,” he said, although reports from Rome at the time indicate he was floored in the 11th round and did not box up to his usual standard.

In March 1970, Little retained his title against Gerhard Piaskowy in Berlin, Germany

But the man who left boxing in 1972 with a record of 51-6 (32) with 1 no-contest, said that not only does he have no regrets, but that even if he could he wouldn’t change anything that happened to him in the sport.

“I think that had a lot to do with enhancing my manliness and my attitude about life,” he said.

Besides, when it comes right down to it, added the fighting schoolteacher, what does it matter how somebody else grades your performance in the ring?

“Regardless of what the governing bodies do,” summed up Little, “we athletes know who has cleaned whose clock.”

Pete Ehrmann's work as a boxing journalist/historian over the past 40 plus years speaks for itself. Pete's first by-line appeared in The Ring magazine at age 14, and ever since he has written about the sport (and other matters) for newspapers, magazines and websites. Pete has been a valuable member of the IBRO since April 2013.