# From Group Home Leader to Sports Hall of Famer: Former Heavyweight Boxing Contender Eddie Gregg Was Always a Winner

**By Eddie E. Gregg with Eric B. Thompson**


*"I never would have believed that you could be that tough. I wouldn't want to meet you in a dark alley", heavyweight contender and ultimate boxing tough guy Randall "Tex" Cobb after his ten-round war with Eddie Gregg .*

*"Son, do you know where you are?!", ringside doctor to Gregg between rounds after he'd been buzzed from a monstrous left hook in an early career six rounder. Swooning on his stool, eyes temporarily unfocused, suddenly sobering up, Gregg glares back at the doctor,* ***"Yeah, doc, I'm in a helluva fight!!!"***

Only at night, under cover of darkness, the bedding pulled up over his eyes, only then could the tears flow. Only then could he drop his defenses and let go. Though he was surrounded by a room full of slumbering youth, he had for a brief moment his own private, solitary space to reflect and purge a bit as he waited on the sleep that never seemed to come.

"Why me?", he asked himself repeatedly.

Eleven year-old Eddie Gregg felt abandoned, alone and afraid.

It had been only two days before that he'd woken up to the comforts of home, including a good morning kiss from his Aunt Dee (Delores) Gregg . But that kiss was to be a goodbye kiss, for it represented the last one-on-one he and his Aunt Dee would ever share together under her roof, and young Eddie knew that once she'd returned home from the hospital after delivering her third child, Michael, it was to be off to the group home with him. There would no longer be enough room and resources to go around in the Eli "Pete" and Delores Gregg household of five at 996 College Ave. in the Bronx, N.Y. to accommodate the "outsider", for that is how the youngster had come to feel about himself.

His mother, Betty Jean Gregg, had been committed to a mental institution in New Orleans in 1957 when he was three. Some of the locals believed that another woman had taken a fancy to Betty's husband, Edward "Bubba" Gregg, sr., and had spitefully invoked the power of voodoo, placing a hex on Betty Jean. Papa Gregg was a restless sort with an unquenchable wanderlust for whom the merchant marines seemed an ideal way to earn a paycheck and make good in this world.

"Home", for Gregg during the past five years had amounted to being passed around five times among five households among five sets of aunts, uncles and cousins, involving five different schools in the Bronx and Manhattan. The young man clearly needed some stability in his life. The group home on 936 Woodycrest Ave. just down the street from Yankee Stadium was the only answer.

But it was a hostile new world for a shy youth like Eddie who largely kept to himself and had a tendency to stutter which made him an easy target for abuse. It was a world in which he found his fragile, young sense of self, his budding manhood challenged and threatened at seemingly every turn. His every waking moment was preoccupied with this. Though he'd already found himself in his share of street altercations and neighborhood turf scuffles, he'd always had the reassuring comfort and refuge of home and family life such as it was at the end of the day.

But unknowingly, by having mustered the courage to stand down the number one and number two biggest bullies among his peers in as many days, he'd been immediately elevated to a level of respect and esteem among his fellow youth which he'd never known before. Though he cried himself to sleep that night, a necessary purging, he'd wake up to find himself thrust atop the pecking order and, though the role of alpha male never suited him and it was a notion he would continually reject, it would become his abiding mission to protect, defend and reassure the smaller, the weaker, and the shy among us.

Girded with his newfound status, his bearings now under him, Eddie soon found the group home to be a wondrous wellspring of opportunities for self exploration, opportunities which an inner city kid might never discover on his own. There were classes in arts and crafts, one could learn a vocational skill such as auto mechanics or electronics, but for Eddie self expression and self validation ultimately lay with athletics. Football, basketball, baseball, ping pong, horseshoes, volleyball, soccer, shot put, discus—you name it, over the years he would pursue them all and with an at times frighteningly aggressive zeal which belied his calm, reserved exterior.

In particular, Eddie wanted to prove to himself and other African American youth in the early 1960s that sports traditionally associated with white participation such as tennis and swimming weren't just for whites. His proving ground would be the annual summer camps in which he and his Woodycrest teammates, in Eddie's eyes an essentially color blind mixture of African Americans and, to a lesser extent, Latinos and whites, competed with and usually defeated strictly white adversaries from neighboring camps.

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Though Eddie would find kinship among whites in Woodycrest, the harsh reality beyond its grounds in the all white neighborhood was that a black child couldn't pay a weekend visit to the candy store up the street without the threat of being berated, chased or even beaten. The word was that a black child should never make the trek to the candy store alone. But naïve, solitary young Woodycrest resident Teddy Neville was of another mindset.

"Why would anyone bother me? I don't bother anyone", he would muse.

Teddy would go missing one afternoon. Eddie and the others were told the next day that Teddy had been injured, and that his injuries had been fatal. He'd ventured forth to the candy store alone and had apparently been chased into an apartment building and had either fallen or was pushed through a second story window at the end of a hallway. The fall to the outside ground below had broken his neck. If any suspects were ever found their identities were never divulged.

Death is one of the hardest experiences for a young mind to wrap itself around--especially when it happens to a fellow child.

"When they told us his injuries were 'fatal' we didn't know the meaning of 'fatal', and when we were told the meaning we just couldn't comprehend, couldn't accept it", Eddie says. "Teddy dead? How could it be?? We'd just seen him less than a day, just hours ago and, besides, he was too young to be dead!!"

They were all in a state of shock and mourning for days to come. Acceptance came slowly, if ever at all.

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Though football was to become his first love, it was basketball which secured Eddie a full ride scholarship to Winston-Salem State University in North Carolina. He didn't begin playing basketball competitively until his junior year in high school, but his contribution that year would be integral in assisting Alfred E. Smith High School in the Bronx go undefeated, and he was an all-city NYC performer his senior year. Though Alfred E. Smith didn't win a single football game his senior year, Eddie was chosen all-city (second best) at quarterback. He credits Artie Epstein, his Alfred E. Smith basketball coach, and Willie Worsley, Woodycrest athletic coach, for instilling in him the confidence to attend college and pursue academics and athletics at the next level. Worsley was a member of the 1966 Texas Western men's college basketball team which became the first team to ever win the NCAA national championship with an all-black starting lineup. That team's remarkable triumph represented a landmark victory in the civil rights campaign to racially integrate college athletics in the South, and within two years the Atlantic Coast Conference, the Southwest Conference and the Southeast Conference were all racially integrated. The 2006 Hollywood movie, *Glory Road*, commemorated the 40th anniversary of the Texas Western Miners' historic march to the championship.

But before embarking on his esteemed college career in both basketball and football, Eddie had distinguished himself in canoeing, one of those athletic endeavors traditionally associated with whites. Having not lost a single race at all levels of competition from age eleven to nineteen, Eddie had been invited to the 1968 Olympic trials which he unfortunately had to decline for it would have interfered with high school football preseason practice. Football was his first love and always would be.

It was an honor and a privilege to play basketball for four seasons under the tutelage of the legendary Clarence "Big House" Gaines who became one of the winningest college basketball coaches in history. Before Eddie's

arrival at WSSU Big House had coached Earl "The Pearl" Monroe who later went on to win the 1973 NBA championship with the N.Y. Knicks and earn himself a coveted spot in the NBA Hall of Fame.

"He was a hard man, Coach Gaines. More than just a master of the Xs and Os, he was first and foremost a molder of men", Eddie commented.

For a hotshot scholarship player who got a little too big for his breeches and complained about reduced playing time or a curbing of one's flashy offensive tendencies, a familiar Coach Gaines fatherly lecture might begin as follows:

"Look, son. The world don't owe you *nuthin'.* You got to prove yourself everyday in this life."

"During the offseason, in the summer months, we'd compete against the A.C.C. schools in unsanctioned 'pickup' games and, more often than not, we'd whip 'em", Eddie shared. "Those were the days when not all of the A.C.C. schools were fully racially integrated. We'd let loose with the showboating on offense, show you our butts, let you know what we could do."

Though Eddie would distinguish himself at WSSU and set several school records in both sports, he didn't get drafted into the professional ranks in either football or basketball. Yes, there were opportunities to play in professional foreign leagues, but one could make better money holding down a steady full time job back in the States at that time, in the mid seventies. It only seemed natural, inevitable that with his mentoring instincts life would take him back to New York and the group homes as he trained at night, keeping his dream alive that he'd one day make it with a pro NFL or NBA franchise. It was then that, courtesy of fellow group home counselor DeCosta Headly, that he discovered boxing as an alternative fitness and conditioning regimen for his chosen, favored sports.

But as the old adage goes, one doesn't choose boxing, the sweet science of bruising, the hardest game, but rather it chooses you--usually the most disadvantaged, the deprived and the desperate among us.

"I was determined to make my livelihood with my body, my physical gifts, and boxing was my last resort", Eddie says.

"DeCosta was only five four to my six five, but he had his way with me every time we got into the ring until I got the hang of it. He had a distinguished amateur career as a Golden Gloves competitor. Within a couple of months the shoe was on the other foot and I was getting the better of him."

With a failed NY Jets try out in 1976, Eddie committed himself fully to boxing.

When he entered a boxing gym for the first time no one had taken him seriously—the tall, quiet, deceptively lean muscled guy with glasses who'd never managed to leave his childhood tendency to stutter behind. He couldn't possibly possess a firm enough foundation to punch in at heavyweight what with those skinny legs, and it was still rare at that time for college graduates to campaign successfully within the ranks of professional boxing, the consensus being that they just couldn't possess the stomach, the "bottom" for it.

How could this guy possibly be tough enough?

After knocking out Renaldo Snipes in the joint New York / Chicago Golden Gloves tournament in 1979 (Snipes would later go on to give all hell to all time great heavyweight champ Larry Holmes in the pros) and securing his second straight Golden Gloves title, Eddie decided it was time to turn pro.

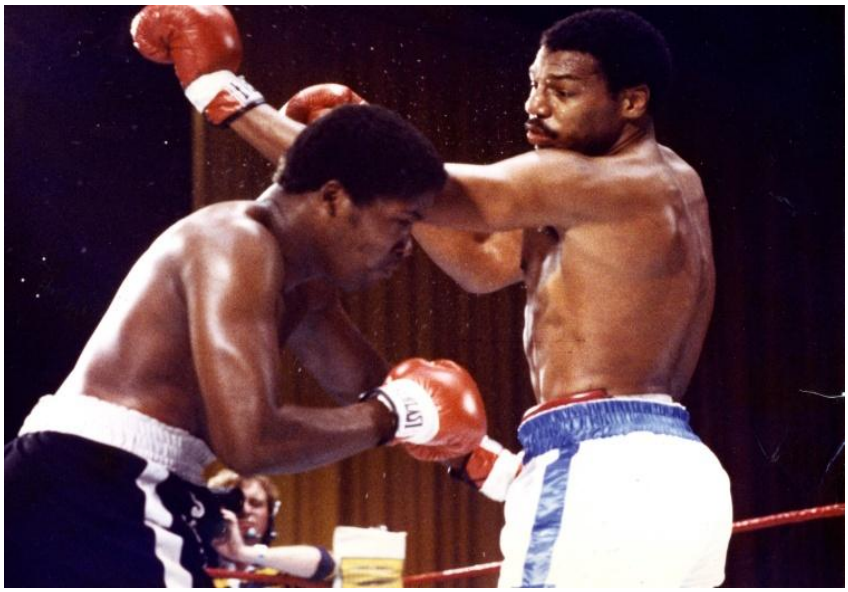
“You could win the title with your jab alone”, Eddie Futch, arguably the greatest boxing trainer who ever lived and Gregg’s chief second for a handful of his charge’s early pro career bouts, once commented. Until he suffered a potentially career ending elbow injury, Gregg’s jab was compared to that of Holmes, who possessed one of the great left sticks in boxing history, known for its blinding speed, snap and stymieing effectiveness if not outright power.

Though he was confident that his skills and dedication would ultimately take him to the championship, Eddie was 20-0 before he made any real money.

Gregg’s greatest win and greatest career payday was in a ten-round war against Randall “Tex” Cobb who possessed one of the most durable chins in heavyweight history. In the ninth round Gregg dropped Cobb with a beauty of an overhand right and had his adversary clinging on for dear life to finish out the round. It was the first time Cobb was knocked off his feet during his career after facing a who’s who of late seventies and early 80s golden age heavyweights including Larry Holmes, Ken Norton and Earnie Shavers.

Cuban émigré Jose Ribalta, a fighter who took the best a prime “Iron” Mike Tyson had to offer for nine plus rounds, once suggested that Gregg hit him harder than anyone else.

“When he hit me it sounded like a bomb went off”, Ribalta recounted.



**Gregg (right) en route to a fourth-round TKO of Danny Sutton in 1983**

Though Eddie never got a title shot, he did secure a high profile fight with hard hitting contender Gerry Cooney the winner of which would then square off for Michael Spinks’s world heavyweight championship. It ended in a heartbreaking first round loss. Eddie fought only once more before retiring.

Gregg remained completely dedicated to boxing throughout his career, always turning up in peak condition for every fight, and emphasizes that drugs, alcohol and relationships with women were never a limiting factor.

“I liked boxing, but I didn’t love it, so the Lord said I’m gonna cut you short. Truthfully, I really didn’t love it until I later became a trainer. It was the nurturing, mentoring aspects which led me back to the boxing gym.”

“I shudder to think what would have become of me if I’d never discovered athletics”, Eddie reflects.

"And the group home", he smiles, looking back all these years.

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Though Eddie did see his mother again at age eight during a visit to the Chicago mental institution where she resided, the experience proved so traumatic that he doesn't recall anything about the conversation they had together. The intervening five years had aged her horribly. She was no longer the vibrant, gorgeous woman he'd known before, and she seemed absent and incoherent.

He'd never see her again.

"I dreaded it every year when Mother's Day approached, and I couldn't wait for it to pass. I especially missed not having a mother as a young man to help me screen a woman as a potential mate."

**Two year-old Eddie Gregg and his mother at home in New Orleans, 1956 (left), and Betty Jean Gregg as a young bride (right)**

Though largely absent during Eddie's formative years, Eddie sr. would check up with his son when in New York on leave from the merchant marines, offering him cash gifts, lessons in street smarts, and enthralling stories of exotic ports of call. During one such episode when Eddie interrupted his father to pose a question, Eddie, sr.'s eyes suddenly closed and his head nodded forward alarmingly, chin to his chest, jerking slightly every few seconds.

Near panic, Eddie thought his father was having a stroke.

But suddenly he snapped out of it abruptly and responded to his son as if nothing had happened.

"We'd never discuss it, but I later learned that he was a lifelong heroin addict", Eddie sighs wistfully.

Like the jazz bebop artists he'd so revered who would experience heroin induced "nods" between solos on the bandstand, Eddie, sr. didn't let his habit sabotage his on stage performances, jumping right back into the flow of the dialogue with his son as he did without missing a beat. Though he'd eventually kick his habit, retire from the merchant marines, return to NYC and work as a security guard, their father and son relationship was never what it could or should have been.

“What my father and I had at times felt like a conditional, qualified love. As a youngster whenever we’d part company he’d shake my hand to see how hard I could squeeze back which was his way of gauging my ability to hold my own in this world, to see if I could at the very least give as good as I could take. But, sadly, he was never able to tell me that he loved me. “

“ Feeling like an outsider, I didn’t know if I was truly loved at all growing up. I wasn’t able to tell anyone else that I loved them, male or female, until I was well into my twenties. I couldn’t tell another grown man I loved him until I was in my forties.”

“I wanted to give to children better than I got”, he explains. “The passing years and my career in the ring had seasoned me with some hard-won wisdom, and I was more than eager to share.”

It was inevitable that once his career as a fighter was done life would take Eddie back once again to New York and eventually North Carolina to continue his work with youth. On average it would be a smaller number of children now for him to oversee, four to seven, and it afforded him greater quality time with each.

“When I had to chastise, rebuke or restrain them during a scuffle, I’d emphasize that they wouldn’t appreciate the advice I had to offer, but one day they might. I always finished off with a big hug and told them that I loved them.”

Eddie has been back in Winston-Salem since 2000, working with adults now in mental health services and training fighters, but his greatest empathy will always lie with the welfare of inner city children of the streets. Nothing provides him with more satisfaction than hearing from a survivor he might have influenced in some small way who got out and got ahead in this life.

Several years ago while out on the block in downtown Manhattan he was greeted by a beaming, expectant young man and his wife and children.

“Honey, if this man hadn’t been so tough on me I don’t think I’d even be here today!”

In August 2004 Eddie and multi-division female titlist Carlette Ewell, Eddie’s most accomplished fighter to-date, ran into perennial boxing bad boy Hector “Macho” Camacho, the first seven division men’s champion in history, at the Grand Casino Coushatta in Kinder, Louisiana. Camacho’s eyes immediately lit up and as a display of affection the ecstatic forty-two year old former Puerto Rican superstar leapt into Eddie’s arms.

“I was so touched by that. Like me, Hector was a child of the streets and I, being a little older when we trained together in our primes, was something of a big brother figure to him and the other younger guys in the gym. Carlette and I were so devastated when we heard the news that he’d been gunned down on the streets of Bayamon (Puerto Rico) during a drug-related altercation. He’d struggled with drug abuse and had been arrested on a number of charges over the years, including burglary, but we’d hoped that he’d finally gotten himself on the straight and narrow.”

Eddie’s Class of 1971 football team was inducted into the Winston Salem State Hall of Fame in the fall of 2014. He was a four year starter and an all-CIAA selection in 1972 and 1973 as a football defensive back. He is the WSSU career interception leader and holds the single game record with five interceptions in one game and the record for interceptions in a single season with thirteen. He was a member of the 1970 CIAA Championship Basketball team as a WSSU Ram, and he still holds the team record for rebounds in a single game, thirty-one—a record which may never be broken. He cherishes his fraternity among his fellow Rams almost as much as that bond which he shares with his fellow group home survivors and mentors.

As of this writing Eddie is preparing himself to compete in basketball, archery and swimming in the upcoming fifty-five and over senior Olympics in Winston-Salem.

But even at age sixty Eddie still has an ulterior motive for maintaining his strength and fitness, for no matter how old he gets he'll never abandon that street credo, that street mentality of his youth even if he wanted to.

"I'll always strive to keep myself in shape because you never know when you might have to defend yourself."

For anyone who's been around him for any length of time, it's hard to imagine that anyone could provoke this serene, soft-spoken gentleman to violence, but it happened not long ago when a man perhaps twenty years his junior accosted him in public without provocation, got in his grill and found himself promptly deposited on the seat of his pants from a swift one-two left jab, straight right hand.

"I once saw my dad knock out two men at a time who threatened us out of the blue . Matter of fact, it happened on three different occasions. He always said, 'when they come at you like that you got to strike first 'cause they won't be expecting it back.' "

When he was sixteen Eddie, jr. once did fifty pushups with his cousin sitting on his back. That was the first time his father acknowledged his son's sheer strength and imposing physicality which assured him that his son would make good in whatever life endeavors he might choose.

"I recently aggravated an old football injury to my shoulder, but just as soon as it's better I'll do a hundred pushups for you. And you can count'em."

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