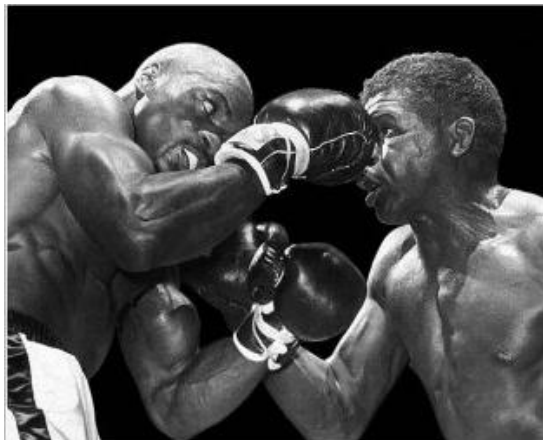


## Holly Mims: Splitting the Difference

By Mike Casey



***Rubin Carter won a unanimous decision but not before Mims (r.) had knocked him down.***

Mims never wailed about his losses. With a shrug of his shoulders and some gentle sarcasm, he took life's hits and just kept rolling on...

You just keep looking at the records of some boxers in open-mouthed admiration and disbelief. The sheer quality of their opposition pours off the page as your eyes count off names that ring like a bell.

Just recently I was re-acquainting myself with the impressive ledger of middleweight Holly Mims, from Washington, DC, who engaged in 102 bouts from 1948 to 1967. Holly's record is a very handy reference tool on the great fighters of that era.

Just one fifth of that record contains the following names: Johnny Bratton, Jose Basora, Gene Burton, Sugar Ray Robinson, George Benton, Lester Felton, Willie Troy, Bobby Dykes, Rocky Castellani, Milo Savage, Bobby Boyd, Spider Webb, Joey Giardello, Henry Hank, Rudell Stitch, Dick Tiger, Gomeo Brennan, Jimmy Ellis, Rubin Carter, Emile Griffith, Joey Archer and Luis Rodriguez.

Frustratingly, Holly Mims fell into that cursed category of the highly skilled but unglamorous. He was too dangerous for his own good, too much of a spoiler, one of those guys who got the short notice phone call from promoters when two or three other guys pulled out. Holly got plenty of short notice calls, often getting just a day or two to prepare himself. He trained constantly to cope with the ordeal of being one of boxing's short order cooks.

The story goes that Rubin (Hurricane) Carter didn't react kindly when Madison Square Garden matchmaker Teddy Brenner advised him that Mims was his substitute opponent for a 10-round match on December 22nd, 1962. Carter won a unanimous decision but not before Mims had knocked him down in the fourth round.

If justice had been done, Holly's professional record would have been considerably better than his official 68-28-6 log, for he was on the wrong end of many questionable split decisions. Somebody once said that those split losses were as frequent as a D.C. liquor

store hold-up. Mims was philosophical about this, saying, "I always like to at least let them know I was there."

For the record, Mims lost 27 fights by decision, of which nine were split verdicts and five were decided by majority.

## **Dangerous**

Holly Mims was a dangerous omnipresence, teak-tough and crafty, always ready to fight. He had entered the boxing through the local amateur clubs in Washington, helped by his brother James, and went on to win the Washington Golden Gloves middleweight title. Holly turned professional in 1948 and it wasn't long before he was swimming in the deep end of a very talented pool.

A stand-up boxer with guile, toughness and a versatile box of tricks, Mims could box and fight and handle any situation. He was adept at picking off opponents' punches with apparent ease and his sense of anticipation rivalled that of a top chess player.

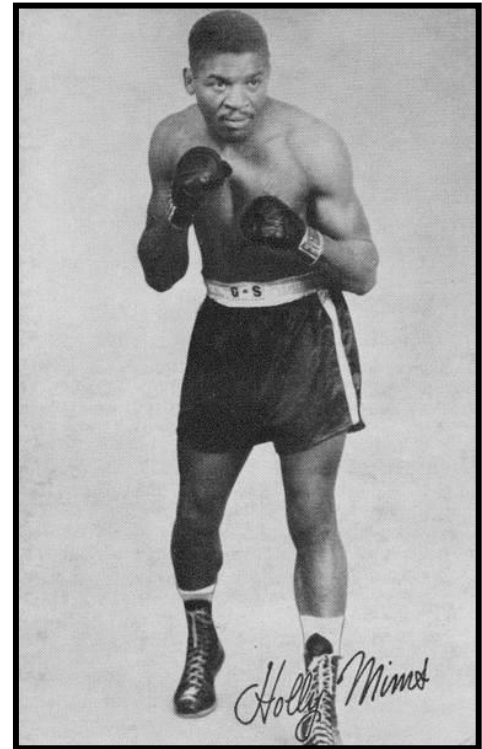
Fluid of movement, Holly could box traditionally or slug when slugging was required. Many an opponent had a rude awakening when he forced Mims to the ropes or into a corner. With his long arms, which he used to maximum effect, Mims would lash back with a volley of punches that left the aggressor stunned. Holly loved the ropes, springing from their haven as an octopus springs from its lair.

Mims held his left hand low, teasing his opponents to move into him. Many a puncher grabbed the tempting invitation, like a fish chomping at the angler's bait, but Mims was a hub of constant and slippery movement and incredibly difficult to hit cleanly. His excellent head movement was consistently confusing to his opponents and he took a punch well when he had to, barely reacting to it.

Holly learned his trade well and learned it quickly. By the Spring of 1951 and still only 23 years of age, he had been a professional for less than three years when he gave middleweight champion Sugar Ray Robinson a very testing time in their non-title 10-rounder at the Miami Stadium. Only two months before, Robbie had butchered Jake LaMotta to win the championship.

Mims lost a unanimous decision to Robinson but refused to be discouraged throughout the lively encounter and kept coming back to Robbie with all the quirky danger of a boomerang. Blaming a virus for his poor form, Robinson apparently told Mims after the fight that he thought Holly had won. "I guess the virus had me worse than I thought," Ray said after the fight. "A couple of times I had him lined up but I couldn't get him."

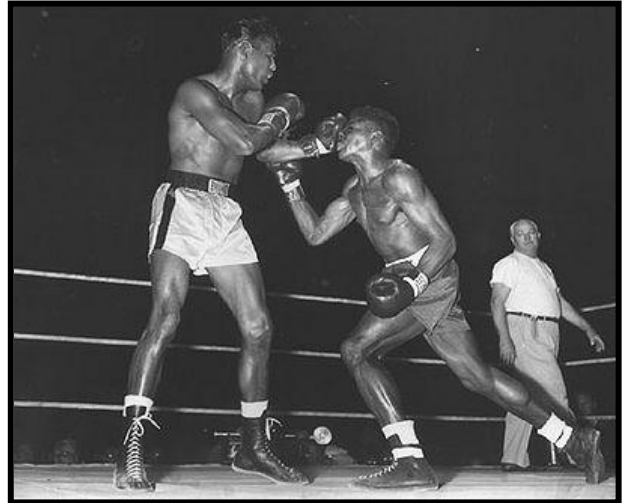
Mims was buoyant despite the loss and told reporters, "Robinson never hurt me bad any time."



## **Rollicking**

It was a rollicking good fight in which Robinson repeatedly tried to steady the ever active Mims and take him out. But nobody ever did knock out the remarkably durable and energetic Mims, who suffered only one loss inside schedule. That was at the tail end of his career in 1964 when a badly cut left eye ruled him out of his fight with Joe Louis Adair in the sixth round.

Tough as nuts, Mims had great bounce-back ability and wasn't at all deterred when the great Robinson decked him in the second round with a right and a left to the head. It was Holly who was the aggressor, surprising Ray on several occasions by punching out of a crouch and catching him with solid blows to the jaw.



Ray endeavored to keep Mims at distance with the jab, but the Washington underdog showed scant respect for Ray's reputation as he continually surged forward. In an exciting fourth round, Mims connected with a trio of solid lefts to the jaw, but Ray countered by driving his opponent into the ropes with a pair of whipping lefts and a right. Mims' commitment was evident in the sixth round when Robbie stepped on the gas and dominated heavily, only to have his tenacious opponent fire back at the end of the round with several looping right hands.

In the eighth round Robinson launched a big effort to stop Holly, punishing him with both fists, but back came Mims again with a spirited attack of his own. In the ninth, Robinson's frustration showed as he missed the mark with a big right hand and lost his balance. It wasn't too often in his glittering career that Ray was made to look inelegant.

## **Dedicated**

A dedicated professional, Mims never stopped learning the tricks of his trade. In 1958, ten years after he joined the pro ranks, Holly discovered that his right hand was a more effective tool than he had believed and gave him additional punching power. Two great results in succession catapulted Mims to number seven in The Ring's world ratings, where the eternal Robinson still reigned as world champion. Holly fought a draw with Bobby Boyd in Miami Beach and then upset Spider Webb on a unanimous decision in Fort Wayne, Indiana. The new-found wallop was clear to see as Mims floored Boyd in the eighth round of their meeting and dumped the highly fancied Webb for a nine count.

Webb, one of the best boxer punchers of the era, had become a hot star of the division by knocking out another fine operator in Rory Calhoun just a month before. With a possible title tilt against Robinson on the horizon, the match against Mims was a risky venture and Spider's trainer Carl Nelson wasn't comfortable about it. The popular Mims was appearing for the ninth time on a national television boxing show and Nelson knew all about his reputation as a busy puncher and a danger man on the ropes. "We are not going to dig him out of the ropes," Nelson said firmly.

Mims had lost a decision to Webb nearly two years before in a bout where both men came in as substitutes. Holly received only three days' notice of the fight and was coming off a four-month layoff. "I wasn't sharp and my legs weren't strong," he said. "I can lick this guy and I'll prove it." Mims did so emphatically and sent Spider tumbling from third to sixth in the world ratings.

The victory over Webb and the draw with Bobby Boyd revived Holly's career in a big way. His talent had always been acknowledged by boxing insiders, many of whom ranked him as the middleweight division's most accomplished operator behind Robinson. Sadly, unlike Ray, Mims wasn't fashionable and the trials and tribulations of being perceived as a reliable opponent inevitably made his form erratic. He had once climbed as high as number two in the world ratings, but circumstances constantly prevented him from gaining any consistent momentum.

How good was he? Consider that all the way back in 1950, when still learning his trade, Holly was thrown in with the highly talented Johnny Bratton at the Baltimore Coliseum. Bratton was heading for the welterweight championship but got a rude awakening from Mims, who won a unanimous decision. No fluke, that result. Three weeks later, Mims repeated the feat at the same venue. Four months after that, Bratton won the vacant NBA title from Charley Fusari.

**Best**

It was in 1953 that Holly hit his best and most consistent form, starting with a breakthrough victory in his hometown of Washington when he stopped the previously undefeated Willie Troy in eight rounds. Mims knocked Troy down in the eighth and Willie was in no fit state to continue. Mims, for the first time in his stop-start career, was suddenly flying. He won his next eleven fights and became a top three contender along with Joey Giardello and Rocky Castellani. It was the tough Castellani who snapped Holly's winning streak with a unanimous win in Cleveland. Years later Rocky would describe Mims as 'the real deal' and one of his toughest opponents.

1954	1955
Carl (Bobo) Olson, <i>Champion</i>	Sugar Ray Robinson, <i>Champion</i>
1. Joey Giardello	1. Carl (Bobo) Olson
2. Rocky Castellani	2. Charles Humez
3. Holly Mims	3. Eduardo Lause
4. Charles Humez	4. Milo Savage
5. Pierre Langlois	5. Rocky Castellani
6. Tiberio Mitri	6. Holly Mims
7. Bobby Jones	7. Gene Fullmer
8. Willie Troy	8. Bobby Boyd
9. Eduardo Lause	9. Ralph Jones
10. Johnny Sullivan	10. Artie Towne

How tough it must have been to fight Mims. He never gave you a moment's rest. Keeping him at bay was akin to trying to fend off a swarm of bees. The crafty Washington hustler was always ready to rock and roll and ruin a man's day.

His 1959 match with Joey Giardello was a peach, another 'squeaker' that went to the wire, full of give-and-take action as well as a generous helping of Giardello's blood. Joey finished the fight strongly to win a split decision (yes, another split decision!) but suffered a seriously messed up face from Holly's ripping punches. Joey's left eye was cut in the opening round and the right side of his face was badly gashed in a torrid eighth round as Mims went all out for the win. He stunned Giardello with a left-right

combination and then buckled his knees with a powerful left towards the close of the round.

However, Giardello, ever courageous, came on like a train in the tenth and final round, winning that vital frame to capture the tightest of decisions.

Tough of mind as well as body, the admirably persistent Mims never wailed about his losses. With a shrug of his shoulders and some gentle sarcasm, he took life's hits and just kept rolling on. He was the 'nearly man' of the middleweight division who, two months after the Giardello war, met another nearly man in the highly skillful George Benton. To this day, people still ask how good George Benton really was, just as they ask the same question of Mims. They want a definitive answer and there isn't one because there are too many variables and too many ifs and buts getting in the way.

In their 1959 clash at the Miami Beach Auditorium, Mims defeated Benton decisively, seven years after dropping an eight-round verdict to George in Philadelphia. Holly punished Benton with a consistent body attack. Keeping the fight in close and forcing the elegant Benton to fight against type, Mims dominated the bout and had George staggering in the seventh round from a left-right combination.

## **Beans**

Still full of beans and busy-bee menace, Mims extended his career deep into the 1960s and remained every top ranking fighter's least favorite pest right to the end. In 1964 at Madison Square Garden, Mims got the sympathy vote after losing an unpopular split decision to top contender Joey Archer. Joey described Holly as "a real cutie" and added, "I learned plenty from him."

Holly's response summed up the philosophy of every nearly man in boxing. "That's OK with me," he said. "I beat Archer even if I didn't get the decision. But that's an old story with me."

It would be another three years before Holly Mims fought his last battle to end his rollercoaster career with a nice little run of six straight wins. In the Summer of Love of 1967, he outpointed Georgie Johnson in Portland, Maine — by split decision!

***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).***