Big Elmer Rush: A man of the ring

By Pete Ehrmann

After Davey Moore died of a brain injury suffered in his unsuccessful featherweight title defense against Sugar Ramos on March 21, 1963, a headline in The Milwaukee Journal screamed, "Moore death looses new war on boxing."

For many, it was the final straw. Almost a year earlier, Benny (Kid) Paret had died after his nationally-televised welterweight championship bout with Emile Griffith, and the following September heavyweight contender Alejandro Lavorante was punched into a coma from which he'd never recover by journeyman Johnny Riggins.

Now powerful voices demanded the abolition of boxing. The Vatican condemned the sport as "intrinsically contrary to moral law" and "a means to useless massacre." "Right is right, and boxing isn't," wrote Los Angeles Times newspaper columnist Jim Murray, adding, "It has had more second chances than it deserves."

That spring, at least seven state legislatures considered bills to outlaw professional boxing in their jurisdictions. Among them was California's. Gov. Edmund G. Brown was a longtime foe of boxing who said, "The Davey Moore fight is one more illustration that boxing is a brutal sport even under ideal conditions — if it can be called a sport."

As the hysteria mounted, Elmer Rush told friends and colleagues "We gotta do something about this." Using his own money, Rush printed up and distributed flyers inviting the public and media to a downtown San Francisco gym to hear directly from the people who had the most at stake in the debate about boxing — fighters like himself.

A native of Ann Arbor, Michigan, Elmer Rush was an all-state fullback in high school. In 1957, he won the state Golden Gloves heavyweight title. While serving as a paratrooper in the military, Rush twice won the all-Army heavyweight championship, and at 32-1 he was favored to win the 1960 U.S. Olympic Trials. In the semi-finals Rush knocked down collegiate champion Harold Espy but then incurred a cut eyelid and lost by TKO. He went to the Olympic games in Rome anyway as an alternate.

Rush turned pro on June 25, 1962, winning a six-round decision in San Francisco over the man who'd made Lavorante an invalid — Johnny Riggins.

An audience of about a hundred people turned out for the April 3, 1963 meeting organized by Rush, and what they heard was reported around the world.

"Cigarette smoke hung heavily over the packed gym bleachers," began the story by Dick Barnes of the Associated Press. "The floors were swept clean; the boxers wore their best suits and their shoes shone. These men of the ring talked, sometimes with hesitation,

sometimes with twisted grammar. But they spoke emphatically, positively, emotionally, trying to save boxing — their sport; and for some, the only livelihood they know.

"From star heavyweight Eddie Machen down to a novice teenager named Bob, they tried Wednesday night to keep boxing from following Benny Paret and Davey Moore to death."

Machen told the crowd: "In my eight years I never went into a bout with the aim to create any injury — any serious injury. To me, boxing is a sport and an art. There's an art of defense. I think Gov. Brown forgot all about that — he only talked about the offense. But it takes years to learn to slip punches and duck and counter."

"As a rule I don't like to be put on the spot," said California state heavyweight champion Roger Rischer, "but in a case as important as this, I don't mind. I spent 15 long, hard, sweaty years working toward something. If some man says tomorrow it's no longer there, that's gonna hurt me. Sure, I can get a job; but boxing's what I want to do."

Professional fighters Norm Letcher and Hank Casey also spoke, along with some amateurs and trainers.

It didn't have the pomp of a Congressional hearing, but not the pomposity and hypocrisy, either, and at the end Elmer Rush summed up things succinctly and effectively by saying, "We want the public to know there will probably be more deaths. But we don't want them to take our sport. We're willing to take our own chances."

Boxing muddled through the crisis, and in the fall of that year it got what was widely considered a shot in the arm when Jack Hurley announced that he was returning to the sport to make 23-year-old Elmer Rush heavyweight champion of the world.

Hurley was a legendary manager-promoter whose partnership with lightweight Billy "The Fargo Express" Petrolle in the 1930s earned them both ring immortality. He also made Charley Retzlaff a heavyweight contender, famously turned around the career of Harry "Kid" Matthews in the 1950s, and promoted the Floyd Patterson-Pete Radamacher heavyweight title fight in '57. Then, dismayed by the dearth of malleable ring talent, Hurley became a traveling tub-thumper for the Harlem Globetrotters (and tried to convince Wilt Chamberlain to give boxing a try. "I've got too far to fall," protested the 7'1" hoops star).

Now, having scoped out the 6'2", 210-pound Rush when Elmer won a 10-round decision over Dave Furch in Boise for his fourth straight pro victory on October 17, 1963, the 65-year-old Hurley decided to get back to what he knew best.

"I have enough confidence in my ability to believe I can make a champion out of any young fellow who has what it takes — a strong chin, a stout heart and enough intelligence to absorb teaching," he said. "I'll teach Elmer the fundamentals from the ground up. I think this young California boy has the makings."

"Don't look now," wrote Harry Missildine in the Spokane Spokesman-Review, "but in five or six months Hurley and his heavyweight will be making a lot of noise."

In January '64, Hurley proclaimed his prodigy "the greatest heavyweight prospect in the country" and said: "I've had him in the gym about three months and after three or more fights he'll be able to meet any of the top 10 heavies in the world… There aren't six fighters

in the world today who know how to fight. And in six months Elmer will know more than the six put together."

In their first formal collaboration on March 19, Rush took out Archie Ray in 35 seconds. Two months later Rush and veteran Bill McMurray fought a 10-round draw. Big Elmer won the decision in a rematch, and when he flattened McMurray in the eighth round in their third encounter that October, Hurley pronounced his 8-0-1 scholar "ready to fight anybody."

Tod Herring disproved that by knocking out Rush on January 12, 1965 in Houston, but after three successive first round KOs Rush cracked the Top 10 by fighting a 10-round draw with Eddie Machen on May 10. Then he stopped Herring in a rematch and won decisions over Scrap Iron Johnson and Billy Daniels.

"I'll be heavyweight champion in 1966," predicted Elmer. By then Hurley had been injured in an automobile accident and was back in Seattle, leaving Rush's original manager, Fran Broughton of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union, in charge. Thanks to him, Elmer's full-time gig was as a checker on the San Francisco waterfront.

Amos "Big Train" Lincoln foreclosed the dream by twice decisively beating Rush in mid-'66, first on a technical decision and then by knockout in the ninth round.

Elmer's last hurrah showcased both his boxing and organizational skills. On February 21, 1967, he knocked out Amos Johnson in the fourth round of a "Fight for Brotherhood" conceived and promoted by Rush to raise money for San Francisco's Bayview Community Center.

Two months later he had two fights in Stockholm, Sweden, but only one counted. The day before Rush faced former champion Sonny Liston in the ring, he was accosted by a belligerent drunk while doing roadwork in a park and reluctantly knocked him out. "I suppose I'll have a tougher time tomorrow night," said Elmer correctly. Liston floored him eight times before ending it in the sixth round.

Rush moved to Atlanta and started a trading stamp business that bellied up, as did his brief ring comeback in the early '70s.

A few years ago one of Rush's brothers told me Elmer was living in Atlanta "like a loner and hermit." I hope things improved before he died at 75 on January 13, 2013.

The brother blamed Jack Hurley for Elmer's unfulfilled boxing potential, calling him a "protégé of Al Capone" who turned the 16-6-2 Rush into a mere "club fighter." I go along with Dick Sadler, George Foreman's trainer, who said that more than anything the problem was "Rush was too good for his own good. He couldn't get any fights."

One of the speakers at that 1963 convocation arranged by Rush was a ex-pug identified only as Don, who told the others the best thing they could do for boxing was be "the type of person people can be proud of."

No belt goes with that, but Big Elmer's name would be on one if there were.