

A Few Pearls of Wisdom from My Interview with the Great Archie Moore By Mike Silver

On February 26, 1983 I had the great good fortune to meet and interview the legendary Archie Moore. The former light heavyweight champion (1952-1962) had amassed one of the greatest records in boxing history. After a long and arduous 17 year campaign Archie finally won the championship in his 177th professional fight. He fought from 1935 to 1963 and retired with an outstanding 186-23-10 won-lost-draw record (including one no contest). It is safe to say his extraordinary number of knockout victories—131—will never be eclipsed.



Archie was in New York City to present an award to one of his former opponents, Charley Burley. Burley was just one of at least a score of genuinely great boxers that Moore fought during his illustrious career. Many of the names in that record read like an entire HOF roster: Cassius Clay (Moore made it a point to say that

he never fought Muhammad Ali since the future heavyweight champion had not yet changed his name at the time they fought), Rocky Marciano, Ezzard Charles, Charley Burley, Jimmy Bivins, Holman Williams, Bert Lytell, Lloyd Marshall, Harold Johnson, Eddie Booker and Teddy Yarosz, to name a few. If Archie Moore were fighting today he would be heavyweight champion after already having won both the middleweight and light heavyweight titles.

Although his formal education ended in high school, Archie never stopped learning. He was a worldly individual and full of the wisdom of life experiences. He possessed an analytical mind and was intensely curious about a wide range of topics. Mostly self-educated Archie was, without question, one of the most remarkable, charismatic and accomplished characters I have ever met—in or out of boxing.

Archie was an artist in the truest sense of the word.

As author Joyce Carol Oates has so accurately stated—“The brilliant boxer is an artist, albeit in an art not readily comprehensible, or palatable, to most observers”. Archie was an artist in the truest sense of the word. In 1955 the near 40 year old Moore challenged Rocky Marciano for the heavyweight championship of the world. Although knocked out in the 9th round Moore put up a rousing fight, even dropping Rocky hard in the 2nd round for a short count. This is how the New York Times reported it the following day: “Moore...gave an exhibition of boxing skill that, even in defeat, was almost as thrilling and moving as the display of awesome power that eventually brought the victory to Rocky.” When this sport was still worth our time and attention Archie Moore’s name stood out like a brilliant shining star.

Here is the interview:

MS: Archie, you are in New York to honor one of your former opponents, the great Charley Burley. So I think it’s appropriate to begin with him. You lost a unanimous 10 round decision to Burley and were knocked down four times. What happened?

AM: Charley Burley had a very deceptive style of fighting. He just tricked me. He tricked me because we both boxed similar but whereas mine was an apparent forward movement Burley's was a continuous serpentine movement. He was like a threshing machine going back and forth. His body would sometimes lean over towards you and he'd pull it back just in time. Hitting him solid was almost impossible. But what made him so dangerous was that he could punch from any angle. He was never off balance although he appeared to be off balance on many occasions.

MS: You had one of the longest careers of any boxer who ever lived. You fought in five separate decades—the 1930s to the 1960s. What was the secret of your boxing longevity?

AM: Well, I knew how to fight. I was also a master of pace. It was very important to know how to force pace and set a pace. As a result very few people could make me fight out of my system of fighting. Eddie Booker, Lloyd Marshall and Charley Burley made me fight out of my system. In my winding up years Marciano was one, as was Durelle. I had to fight out of my system to get back into that fight. Another boxer I had trouble with was Jimmy Bivins. Jimmy knocked me out the first time we met because he had such a deceptive reach. Although he was no taller than I was (5' 11") his arms touched below his knees. When he pulled his arms up they looked no longer than mine, but when he reached them out he hit me with the hook.



MS: Well, you obviously learned from your mistake because you defeated Bivins four times after that. Looking over your amazing record I noticed that the great Ezzard Charles defeated you three times during your prime fighting years. Did Ezzard make you fight out of your system of fighting?

AM: No...no. He just outfought me. Ezzard was always in superb condition. He was a nice standup fighter and an expert boxer. Whereas he was not a terrific puncher, but he was a good puncher with both hands.



MS: Archie, you are acknowledged to be one of boxing's all-time knockout artists. Are great punchers born or can a boxer increase power by perfecting such things as balance, leverage, and timing?

AM: Those ingredients you just mentioned are conclusive; all are an admixture as such as you just described, especially timing.

MS: Who were some of the great punchers Archie Moore fought?

AM: Charley Burley was a terrific puncher, although to look at him you would not know it. His build fooled everybody. Burley's legs were skinny, he was not extra wide of shoulder, he was small in weight and his height was the same as mine. But that man could get more leverage into a punch than anyone I ever fought. Another great puncher was Curtis "Hatchetman" Sheppard who once missed a punch to the jaw and broke a man's collar bone. Lloyd Marshall was the snappiest hitter of them all. He could knock you out with either hand. Ron Richards was a tough hitter. Marciano was a very hard puncher—a bludgeoning type of hitter—super conditioned by Charlie Goldman. He was 100% aggression. There were others but I'd have to look at the record because I forget.

MS: Archie I think it's fair to say that since you were still fighting at an age when most other boxers were long retired you had to utilize every advantage, mental, physical and psychological, in order to maintain your edge over much younger opponents. Can you give an example?



AM: In 1955 I fought Nino Valdez in Las Vegas, Nevada. At the time Nino was the top ranked heavyweight. He was 6' 4' tall and weighed about 215 pounds. It was a 15 round bout and the winner was promised a bout with Marciano for the heavyweight title. The fight was staged at an outdoor arena in the late afternoon. As the sun began to settle on the west side of the ring I was sitting in my corner facing the sun and noticed that Nino was sitting with his back to the sun. The bell rings and I move to maneuver and before any activity starts I've already got my head under his chin and I'm muscling this big guy around. I face him into the sun and I keep turning him to the sun. He's trying to get back around and I keep cutting him off. I'm always maneuvering him back to face the sun which was very bright. And all the while I keep spearing him with the left hand and keep twisting and twisting and turning him and try as he could, he could never make me turn into the sun. The sun was of course bothering him and I kept thumping him with the left jab. Hard stiff stiff jabs. Pretty soon his eyes began to lump up. One eye closed up completely and the other was closing fast. By this time the sun was going down and the fight was coming to a close. I won 14 out of 15 rounds.

MS: What does Archie Moore think of today's boxers?



AM: "I think modern day fighters do not get proper basic training. Boxing is based on disciplined training and disciplined repetition. Do you know the best friend a fighter has when coming up? (Archie pointed to a large floor length mirror). A very important part of training is practicing your moves in front of the mirror. But most fighters never come in contact with the mirror until they start to jump rope. Since they skip rope in front of a mirror why don't they shadow box in front of a mirror? You can do that at home. You go through the motions. You learn how to duck. I can see where I'm going to hit my opponent. Am I at the right distance from

him? I can hit him over the heart. I can hit him in his liver. I can step aside and hit him in the kidney. Go over the top, whatever.

MS: After your victories over Joey Maxim for the title you defended it against Harold Johnson. This was your fifth meeting with Johnson, who you already had outpointed three times. In this fight you were behind on points when you knocked Harold out in the 14th round.

AM: Harold Johnson was a great fighter. A picture book boxer. I was just his nemesis the same way that Ezzard Charles was my nemesis. Joey Maxim was a difficult boxer to fight because he knew so much about defense. Joe was 99% defense. And Joe was very durable and tough.

MS: What are the ingredients that go into making a successful prizefighter and what advice would you offer to a young boxer asking for guidance and direction?

AM: The first ingredient is discipline. Discipline and desire. It is said that desire is the candle of intent and motivation is the match that lights it, and that candle must be kept burning. Once you make up your mind to go all the way to the top in boxing, first of all, go and get the best qualified instructor to teach you of the things you need to know. It should be someone you like, someone that you can deal with and someone you can listen to and obey. It should also be someone that you have trust in. Otherwise, somewhere down the line you're going to have a breakup, a mix-up, or an argument and you lose a friend. Because the person who is your instructor, your trainer, your teacher, he's closer to you than your father.



MS: Trying to find a qualified trainer nowadays is easier said than done. The number of expert boxing instructors, as compared to years ago, has diminished. What can be done about that?

AM: As far as the area of improving the skills of boxers is concerned, I have developed a whole new system of teaching the basic boxing techniques. It is a new and revolutionary technique. I taught it to George Foreman and we went down to Jamaica and won the title with it. I thought George had untapped reservoirs of strength and it was up to me to channel it.

MS: Can you describe your revolutionary system and how it works?

AM: I could readily describe it but I prefer not to at this time.

MS: OK. Let's change the subject. Who in your opinion was the greatest pound for pound boxer you have ever seen.

(Author's note: Archie did not answer immediately, taking about ten seconds to consider his answer)

AM: Henry Armstrong. Here is a man who won the featherweight, lightweight and welterweight titles all in the same year, and the men he beat to win those titles were great fighters in their own right.

MS: What about Sugar Ray Robinson?

AM: When Ray was active there was nobody any smoother. Watching Ray fight was like drinking a nice...soft...drink. I enjoyed watching Ray Robinson fight because I appreciate beauty in athletics. I enjoyed watching Oscar Robertson move on the basketball court, Jim Brown on a football field, Andretti in an automobile, Willie the Shoe ride the horses. Everybody had their way of doing things with skill. These are skilled men and there's nothing I like better than skill. When a guy does something, and does it well, I admire that. There's never been anybody more graceful, skillful with a rope than Ray and I've seen some awfully good rope skippers. I would rather



see Ray Robinson punch a speed bag than watch the average guy go out and fight a six round fight. Ray was a skillful man, he was a game man. In his time there was nobody more beautiful than he was, although there were one or two guys that might have beaten Ray in their time. I would like for someone to say, personally, that I think Charley Burley could have beaten Ray in Ray's best time. But people hate to go out on a limb.

MS: Is there anything about your boxing life you would have changed or done differently?

AM: I'd have like to have made some money and have more financial gain out of boxing. You see a boxer's wish is to be independent. This is a profession. I like to be without obligations to other people but I was obligated. But I was mindful of whom I borrowed money from and I was careful not to get mixed up with people who would be embarrassing to you at a time when they wanted to collect.

MS: Thank you for your time Archie.

(Mike Silver is the author of *Stars in the Ring: Jewish Champions in the Golden Age of Boxing* and *The Arc of Boxing: The Rise and Decline of the Sweet Science*. Both books are available on Amazon.com)

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