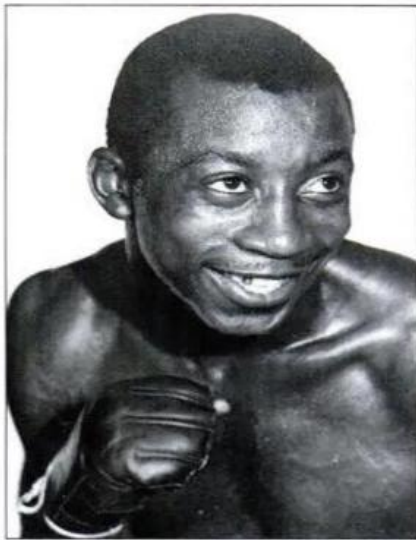
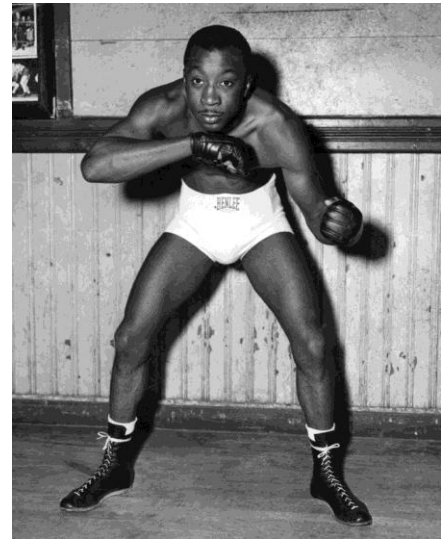


## Double Take: George Costner, the Man Who Would be Sugar

By Carlos Acevedo

He was one of the earliest Sugar Ray knockoffs, but unlike other first-wave Robinson devotees—Johnny Saxton, Freddie Dawson, and Johnny Bratton, for example—George Costner actually had the audacity to dub himself “Sugar.” Costner, a welterweight contender throughout the late 1940s, also had another unique distinction: He was the only “Sugar” imitator Ray Robinson actually laid mitts on. Twice Robinson lured Costner into the ring, and twice he steamrolled his brash counterfeit in less than a round.

For Costner, today little more than a historical footnote to the Robinson legend, these two humiliating defeats cast shadows on a career that spanned eighty-nine recorded fights over the course of a tumultuous decade. Despite his embarrassing showings against Robinson, which lasted a grand total of 358 seconds combined, George Costner was once the number-one ranked welterweight in the world, and wins over Hall of Famers Kid Gavilan and Ike Williams proved that his talent was real, even if his identity was fugazi. Outside of the ring, after he had suffered a career-ending injury that left him blind, Costner mounted a remarkable comeback from grievous circumstances.



**“I** was at the top.  
Right at the top. I had  
beaten everyone [ranked] in  
the top ten in the world,  
and now none of it  
mattered.”



George “Sugar” Costner, one of a handful of Sugar Ray Robinson pretenders, had a respectable career in the ring, but suffered two embarrassing losses at the hands of the only “Sugar.” Costner later gained a measure of redemption outside the ring, against great odds.

Born in Cincinnati, Ohio, on July 22, 1923, Costner was raised during the hardscrabble Great Depression. Less than a month after stepping into a boxing gym on Pleasant Street in downtown Cincinnati, Costner was swapping leather for loot. Or something like that. "I got \$1.50," Costner told the *Dayton Daily News* about his pro debut, which took place when he was only sixteen years old. "I owed my manager fifty cents, and my trainer got one-third of my purse. That left me with fifty cents, so I bought a half-gallon of beer and brought it back to the guys in my neighborhood."

From 1940 to 1942 Costner kicked up a ruckus throughout the Midwest with his raw street-fighting skills and two-fisted slugging. In 1942, Costner was still only a teenager when he dropped a decision to veteran contender Larry Cisneros in the main event of a card in Louisville, Kentucky, but his dynamic style promised a limitless future. Costner became a flashy banger with hands as fast as Kid Curry or Doc Holliday. Soon Costner began calling himself "Sugar" because of his electric combination of speed and power. In 1943 Costner served eighteen months in the Army but was discharged when a punctured eardrum he suffered against Cisneros began troubling him. He returned to the ring and scored knockout after knockout across Dayton and Indianapolis.

By late 1944 Costner, still only twenty-one, was shacking with relatives in Evanston, Illinois, and earning a reputation as a deadly puncher in Chicago. In six fights throughout the Windy City, Costner never had to go more than three rounds, and by blitzing both Lou Woods and Sheik Rangel faster than Robinson had managed in previous fights, the scene was set for a showdown between the two "Sugars."

"Robinson has been my ring idol ever since I started fighting for money in 1939," Costner told the *Chicago Tribune*, possibly referring to smokers before his professional debut, "and I always wanted to try my luck against him." On February 14, 1945, Costner would have his chance to roll the dice. For the promoters, it was no gamble at all—the fight had all of Chicago buzzing. An SRO crowd of 20,193 gathered in Chicago Stadium to see the two "Sugars" work out a sporting identity crisis.

"I expect Costner to give me a lot of trouble," Robinson said before the fight. No one, not even the Millerites, had ever been so wrong. Costner may have thought that fighting his hero was a dream come true, but once the bell rang it turned out to be more like *Nightmare Alley* for him. Confident, almost arrogant, in the weeks leading up to the fight, Costner appeared starstruck under the lights. "As far as I'm concerned Robinson is no better than any of the other opponents I've beaten," Costner told the *Chicago Daily Tribune* just days before meeting the man who first epitomized the phrase "Pound-for-Pound." "Ray's blocking my path to bigger fights and bigger purses and so I'll have to eliminate him."

A fearless banger who charged from his corner at the sound of the opening bell, Costner, like a bull just released from the gates and into the arena, was particularly dangerous early. Against Robinson, however, Costner emerged cautiously. If he was starstruck by Robinson when he entered the ring, he was merely seeing stars when he left it on shaky legs a few minutes later. Compared to Robinson, whose elegance and finesse often seemed at odds with his violent profession, Costner was virtually artless. With his hair-trigger reflexes and pinpoint accuracy, Robinson knew that it was only a matter of time before he would catch the onrushing Costner. It happened sooner, perhaps, than some expected. A whipping left on the inside wobbled Costner and a follow-up hook dropped him to the canvas like a cheap heavy bag. It took Robinson only two minutes and fifty-five seconds to show Costner that imitation is not always the sincerest form of flattery.

Costner fared no better with Robinson at a post-fight party. In her unpublished memoirs (excerpted in *Pound for Pound* by Herb Boyd), Edna Mae Holly, who was married to Robinson from 1943 to 1960, also revealed that unique mix of arrogance and graciousness "Sugar Ray"

specialized in. “We attended a large celebration after the fight that was held in the cabaret room of one of the large hotels,” she wrote. “Costner and his handlers were invited guests also. Costner... came over to our table and congratulated Sugar on his victory and asked if Sugar would allow him to dance with me. Sugar then asked, ‘Honey, will you dance with this fellow so that we can both teach him some lessons in the same night.’”

A few weeks after suffering such a humiliating defeat, Costner answered the bell against “The Bronx Bull,” Jake LaMotta, a snorting, sneering, snarling sociopath still on the prowl for a shot at the middleweight title. LaMotta and Costner also met at Chicago Stadium, where a crowd of over 11,000 gathered to see if “Sugar” could recover from what Ray Robinson—the original—had done to him so effortlessly. In keeping with his sharpshooting style, Costner rushed out of his corner at the opening bell mixed it up freely with his much bigger opponent. After six grueling rounds, however, Costner was battered into submission. A wire photo showing Costner laid out on his back, unconscious, and surrounded by several worried seconds might have been the aftermath of a crime scene captured by Weegee in a bloodstained alley. Later, he would recall the terrifying if temporary memento LaMotta left behind: “The left side of my face,” he said, “was paralyzed for a month.”

Still, Costner, only twenty-two, had plenty of time to recover. After a tour of the West Coast, Costner packed his rucksack and drifted over to Camden, New Jersey, to rebuild his reputation. It was a pattern Costner had repeated many times in his career. Like the “Bad Man” in Western mythology, he would drift into town, cause a stir, and cash in on a headline event—with “COSTNER” comprising one-half of the marquee. Over the next five years, the slash-and-burn barnstormer who rarely took a backward step compiled a record of 34-3-1, with two of those losses coming against contenders Earl Turner and Gene Burton. By 1949, Costner was ranked second among welterweights, one notch below Kid Gavilan. By then, however, he had already suffered the injury that would leave him at the very edge of the abyss.

On May 9, 1949, Costner faced tough Chico Varona in Philadelphia. At some point during the fight Varona connected with a blow that not only stunned Costner, it terrified him. “It happened in the sixth round and all of a sudden it was as if someone threw a ball of fire in my face,” he told *The Ring* in 1992 about the blow that would cost him his career—and nearly his life. Although Costner rallied to stop Varona in the final round, his troubles were just beginning. “They diagnosed the injury at first as a broken blood vessel and treated it thusly,” he would say later. “But it kept bothering me off and on until I realized I had almost no vision in one eye.”

Today, fighting half-blind seems like madness, but Costner was one of many boxers who entered the ring with impaired vision. Before the perfection of laser surgery, a detached retina meant early retirement in boxing and a diminished future in life. But a sport without a safety net or a rainy-day fund often left fighters at the mercy of a grim fate. Indeed, even all-time greats such as Harry Greb, Sam Langford, and Pete Herman fought with vision impairment. Greb was sightless in one eye for most of his last years in the ring and Langford was nearly blind when he was fighting for loose change in Mexico and U.S. backwaters such as Drumright, Oklahoma. Joe Frazier, Gypsy Joe Harris, Sugar Ray Seales, Aaron Pryor, among others, mixed it up with vision problems ranging from cataracts to detached retinas to, incredibly, a missing eyeball. Heavyweight title claimant Marvin Hart and 1940s welterweight Luther “Slugger” White both fought wearing glass eyes. Perhaps most surreally, Bill McCloskey, who faced an exiled Jack Johnson in a series of bouts across Spain, actually removed his glass eye prior to the sound of the opening bell.

Undaunted by his handicap, Costner continued lacing up the gloves and went on an 8-0-1 streak that led to another crack at Robinson. Despite his abysmal showing against Robinson in 1945, Costner was confident that he could reverse history. In fact, Costner began yapping about his chances to practically anyone within earshot.

Although Robinson was one of the fiercest negotiators the sport had ever seen—he bossed promoters and managers around with the same skillful disdain he showed against most of his opponents—he expressed a certain amount of professional bonhomie to his peers. At the weigh-in, an unusually peeved Robinson confronted Costner about his incessant chattering. When Costner insisted that he was only trying to boost the gate, Robinson responded curtly: “That may be all right, but when I boost the gate I do it by praising my opponent.” More than once in his career Robinson had carried a competitor, most famously Henry Armstrong—for sentimental reasons—and Charley Fusari—for a charity benefit. But Costner, needless to say, did not qualify for the soft touch. To hector Robinson (a man who once said, “My ego makes me tick. In the ring it would sometimes tick like a time bomb”) before a fight made facing him in the ring twice as hazardous. With his typical brutal flair, Robinson, now driven by personal enmity, rocked Costner with an overhand right within thirty seconds of the opening bell. Then he opened up with a crossfire barrage that had a wobbly Costner reeling. A final scornful left hook sent Costner crashing to the mat like a man who had emptied an entire bottle of Southern Hills bourbon before sundown. It was all over in two minutes and forty-nine seconds.



Once again, Costner had been mercilessly exposed as a pretender to the “Sugar” nickname, and once again, he managed to recover not only from a seemingly irreversible loss but from a physical limitation few fighters could overcome. Somehow Costner went on to score decisions over future welterweight champion Kid Gavilan and reigning lightweight kingpin Ike Williams before the Pennsylvania State Athletic Commission, aware of his debility, retired him. He was twenty-six years old, due for a title shot, and still fantasizing about glory. “I saw my dream of a lifetime vanish,” he said.

Not long after Costner was barred from the ring, the detached retina he had suffered against Varona developed complications and Costner began to lose sight in both of his eyes. Multiple surgeries over subsequent years were unsuccessful. By his mid-thirties, Costner was completely blind—and adrift. He subsisted on his pension and the occasional menial job he managed to find in his neighborhood. For a while, Costner was homeless. But the man who had traded punches with some of the fiercest welterweights of his time decided that a life of quiet desperation was tantamount to throwing in the towel and he decided to do what had come so naturally for him throughout his career: he decided to fight back. First Costner obtained a GED. Then he earned an A.A. degree from Cuyahoga State College. Finally, while in his fifties, he enrolled in Cleveland State University, from where he graduated with a B.A. in 1979. After that, Costner worked for the Ohio Civil Rights Commission until he retired in 1985, having turned a bleak life into one worth celebrating.

Of course, Costner, whose final ledger reads 74-12-3 (43), could never beat Ray Robinson—in those days nobody but Jake LaMotta had done so—but “Sugar II” had a unique legacy of his own. As he told *The Ring* magazine in 1983 about his late successes, “I was fifty and I was never a loser by nature, so I simply made up my mind that George Costner could still be somebody.”

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