

The Story of Harry Wiley: Boxing's Greatest Unsung Trainer

A deserving IBHOF entrant

By Buddy Gibbs - October 28, 2018 The Grueling Truth



Harry Wiley watches on while Ray Robinson spars.

"I am indebted to my father for living, but to my teacher for living well." – Alexander the Great

If you ask the average boxing fan who 'Sugar' Ray Robinson was, they will know exactly who you're referring to. But, if you ask them who trained this ring legend into perfect fighting form you might as well be speaking another language. Harry Wiley trained Ray Robinson from the time he was an amateur until the Sugarman was nearly grey-headed and he also worked with many other fighters in his career. Although training a world champion and pound-for-pound great like the Harlem Hurricane is a great accomplishment, it is far from being the only success this forgotten teacher had in his career. It is almost criminal that one of boxing's greatest trainers in its history never gets even a whisper of his name among fans and experts alike today. Somehow even the International Boxing Hall of Fame have shamefully not given him the credit owed to him. Hopefully, this article will shine some light on not only the impact that Wiley had on his fighters but on the sport of boxing.

Growing up in the Harlem section of New York in the early 1900s was not for the weak. If you did not possess a fighting spirit, you were not going to survive. Wiley had it and learned he could handle himself well whenever tested. So, he started boxing in local gyms under the encouragement of his

father. It didn't take long for him to get a reputation or for him to get mixed in with some of the local kid gangs that roamed the streets trying to survive life's daily struggles. His father, of course, wanted the best life for his family and after getting a promotion at the post office, moved them to New Jersey for what he thought would be a better environment for his children. But Wiley's reputation had touched the ears of some of the boxing boys back in New York and it was not long before they had him back in Harlem and boxing at the Y.M.C.A.

While Wiley got his start in the amateur ranks he also had the privilege of working as a water boy and helping in the camps of some of the top names in the pro ranks. This meant Wiley could pick up some pointers and advice from the fighters and maybe even their trainers. Two of the camps that Wiley was in as a helping hand was with heavyweight contender Harry Wills and heavyweight champion Jack Dempsey. Wiley might have even picked up a few pointers from Jimmy DeForest, Jack Dempsey's trainer. Wiley even had the pleasure to see Sam Langford, the bogeyman of boxing, in action and called him the hardest one-punch fighter he ever saw. Whatever he absorbed during this time worked for him. Harry was said to have racked up a pretty good record as an amateur, however, his boxing career was cut short. In a time when today's luxuries like household refrigerators were not available, they had companies deliver large, heavy blocks of ice to put in their iceboxes inside of their homes. Wiley was working as an iceman delivering the cold stones to various people when his work vehicle was struck by a passing taxi, leaving Wiley with a broken leg. After the injury, his father would no longer allow him to box. But Wiley had such a strong passion and love for the sport that he decided to become a trainer.

He worked at the Salem Crescent Athletic Club in New York training young men who were looking to embark on a promising amateur career and hopefully work their way to the paid ranks. Wiley proved to be one of the best trainers that amateur boxing has ever seen. He worked wonders as the trainer for the New York National AAU championships and produced some of the country's finest amateur boxers in the 1930s. His teachings did not go unnoticed and he was asked to be the trainer for the United States Olympic boxing team in 1932. Unfortunately, after working with the young men for some time he was replaced before the Olympics started due to racial discrimination. This made him the first black man in history to train the members of a United States Olympic boxing team. Lou Salica, who was trained by Wiley in the amateurs, went on to win a bronze medal in the 1932 Olympics in Los Angeles, was the National AAU flyweight champion the same year, and would later go on to win the world bantamweight title as a pro.

For years Wiley was picked as the trainer for the National and Junior National championships in the New York Golden Gloves and in Boston as well. In 1934, Wiley was put in charge of organizing the Montclair Y.M.C.A. in New Jersey under J.N. Williams. As an amateur trainer, he worked with other standouts such as, Tom Chester, Mart Hough, the very promising Buddy Moore, and Richard Carter, who won over a dozen amateur titles. Wiley was said to have a champion in every weight class. It was another amateur fighter by the name of Walker Smith Jr., later known as 'Sugar' Ray Robinson, that would be Wiley's top pupil. Despite what Robinson would want people to believe, he did not train himself; and despite what George Gainford tried to make people believe, he was not the mastermind behind the Sugarman.



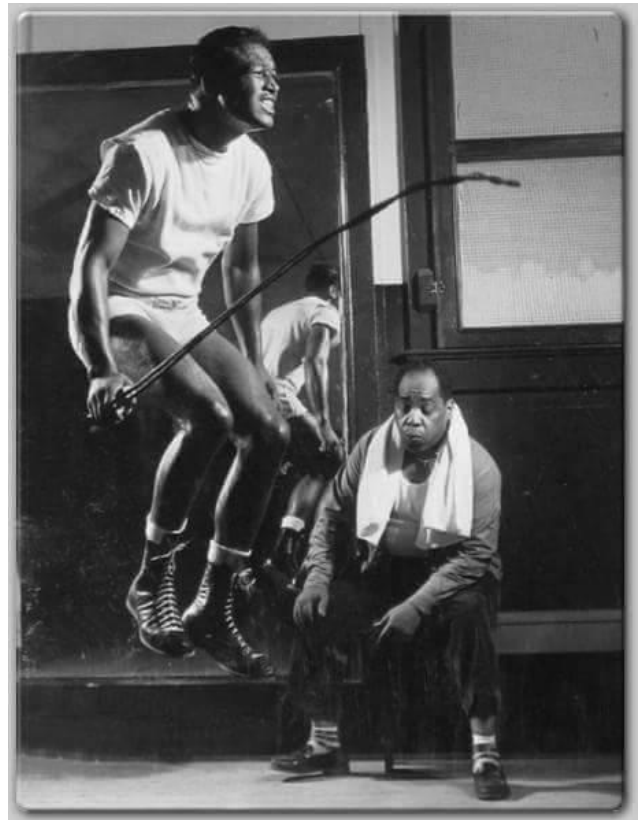
HONORED SON — Ray Robinson, middleweight boxing champion of the world, receives plaque from Salem Methodist Church, 2190 Seventh Ave., for being the most outstanding product of the church's athletic club. Presented by the Rev. Joshua O. Williams (left) pastor. Helping hold the plaque is Benjamin Wilson, Salem's boxing coach, while trainer Harry Wiley (right) looks on.

It is partially because of those two things that Wiley most likely has been underrated by so many. In Ronald K. Fried's book, "Corner Men: Great Boxing Trainers," there is a quote from former junior welterweight champion Saoul Mamby that describes Wiley's situation almost to a T. Mamby remarks: "Trainers work hard but they get less publicity [than managers]. When a fighter wins a fight everybody looks at the fighter, 'Oh wow, yeah, that's good.' But they never look at the trainer. You'll see 'Manager of the Year.' But he ain't did nothin'. Fighter of the Year. Yeah, he did it, but who helped him to do it? The trainer. The one who thinks about him, the one who puts up with attitudes, the one who puts up with his sarcasm. The trainer. And funny thing, whenever a fighter loses today, nine times out of ten they fire the trainer."

In Wiley's era, the trainer was many times an afterthought if they are thought of at all. But it was Wiley who whistled out a tune for Robinson to get a rhythm going while he jumped rope and got into shape. It was also Wiley who bandaged Ray's hands just how his fighter liked them. This was something very important to Robinson, who had always had hand issues. The protection of his tools of the trade was left to Wiley. Many fighters lose their punch because of hand issues but Robinson never did. Robinson's punching power is legendary but one of his more underrated attributes was his punch placement. He knew where to hit you and when to hit you there. Punch placement was something Wiley drilled repeatedly into Ray's workouts all through his career, it was one of the most important parts of boxing in his mind. Looking over Robinson's career it is hard to argue with the results. Another thing Wiley kept a close eye on was Robinson's diet. And by diet, I mean he made sure Ray would eat because Wiley said Ray was the lightest eater he had ever seen in a fighter. Wiley found the perfect diet for Robinson to keep him trim for battle.

Wiley also played the role of a master strategist. Before Ray's fights, Harry would collect the film of Ray's next opponent and study their strengths and weaknesses or would catch a gym workout or a live fight to find a chink in their armor. Ray was never a fan of film study and would have Wiley study the film and lay the plan of attack out to Robinson. Planning the strategy was one part but the other was having Ray execute it in the ring. This required Harry to find the best sparring partners available to get Ray in proper form. Sometimes they were picked to mimic the fighter that Robinson was about to face. He would tell each of them just what to do and when to do it. As the sessions unfolded Ray would get advice from Harry on just what he needed to improve and what openings were there that he was missing.

Wiley would do all of this while dealing with Ray's bi-polar like personality and constant mood swings. They would fight like brothers and then go back to a teacher-student type of relationship when it was time to train. These two were opposites in many ways and it balanced out beautifully. Ray was very sociable and loved the limelight, as did his advisor George Gainford, whereas Wiley was quiet and enjoyed the actual boxing more than the publicity. While George and Ray swapped words with the press, Wiley was busy planning, studying, and getting an overall strategy organized for their next bout.



His knowledge and dedication spread through the camps of many other fighters as well. And Wiley could, and did, work with many types of fighters and styles including: Henry Armstrong, Baby Joe Gans, Lou Ambers, Canada Lee, Muhammad Ali, and many others. Angelo Dundee, who would end

up training Ali, called Wiley one of the three greatest trainers he ever knew. In fact, it was Wiley whom Muhammad Ali wanted as a trainer at the beginning of his career, but Harry was unavailable at the time. Fortunately for Sylvester Jones, Wiley was available to train him for what would be the biggest win of his career. While Ray Robinson was in his temporary retirement in 1953, Wiley got Jones into fighting form for a four-round bout against the undefeated (28-0) knockout artist, Cleveland Williams. Jones was no world beater and had a less than intimidating record of seven wins and three losses and had been stopped once before. He was also said to have only had seven amateur bouts. This motivated some of the press to refer to it as "a lamb being led to slaughter." But under Wiley's watch, the overmatched Jones battered Williams around the ring and dropped him twice in the process. When the four rounds had ended, Jones was the clear winner and Williams was groggy when the final bell rang. The bout was one of the undercards for the Rocky Marciano vs Roland LaStarza rematch and had originally been scheduled for six rounds but was cut short due to time restraints. Many at ringside believed that if Jones had those extra rounds that night he would have knocked out Williams.

Training and working the corners for fighters was not all Wiley did, however. He also managed to find time to work as a matchmaker throughout different times of his career with Rockland Palace and the Golden Gate Arena. During World War II and while serving his country, he even helped set up some of Joe Louis' exhibitions. Harry also helped promote events and fights for the Royal Air Force in England. Wiley's efforts during wartime and his work with the European Theater of Operations caught high praise from General Dwight Eisenhower. Although receiving kind words from a future president is a special moment for anyone, it was not what Wiley considered his proudest and most accomplishing feat in his career.

It was not the fact that he trained one of the greatest fighters of all time in Ray Robinson either. And it was not his gym where men like Archie Moore, Oscar Bonavena, Rocky Castellani, Gil Turner, and many others had trained. His proudest moment came in 1941 when he secured the Abyssinian Church Boys Club their AAU license and he was appointed as delegate and representative to the club by future Congressman, Adam Clayton Powell. It was because of that license that thousands of young men were able to box and train at the club. With this single action, Wiley was able to give many young men the opportunity that they needed to get off the cold streets and to learn some discipline. He was able to give them the same chance that he had as a young boy - he was able to give thousands of young men hope.

Wiley passed away on February 8, 1972, but he left an undeniable impact on the sport of boxing and is without a doubt one of the greatest trainers in the sport's history.



Harry Wiley

The late Harry Wiley who worked with Sugar Ray Robinson and Muhammad Ali, is shown making plans to promote boxing in Puerto Rico with Rosita Arrastia, vice-president of the Lace Glove Corp. Wiley died in Montclair, N.J., Feb. 8 and was buried in the National Cemetery in Farmingdale, L.I.