

Bobby Franklin's Boxing over Broadway

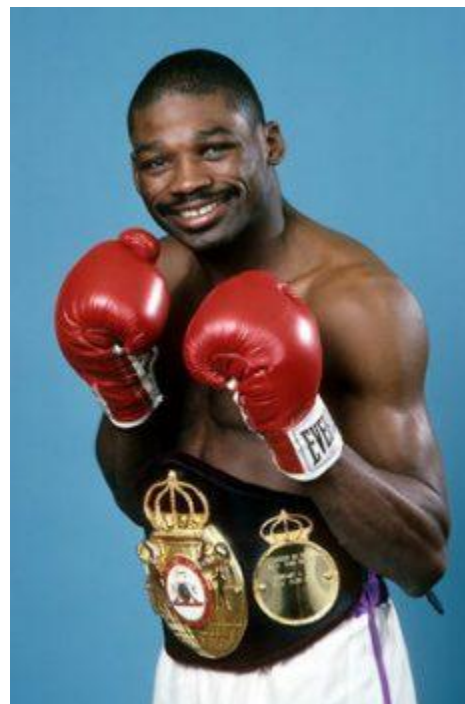
THE MAGIC MAN TALKS BOXING: MY INTERVIEW WITH MARLON STARLING

Marlon Starling Interviewed by Mike Silver

Former welterweight champion Marlon Starling was the fifth boxer from Connecticut to win a world title. Louis “Kid” Kaplan, Pinky Silverberg, Batt Battalino and Willie Pep all won their titles during the golden age of Connecticut boxing from the 1920s to the 1940s. During that time the “Nutmeg State” was home to many other outstanding boxers including Lou Bogash, Ted Lowry, Chico Vejar, Julie Kogon, Johnny Cesario, Vic Cardell, Larry Boardman and Bernie Reynolds.

Marlon Starling is far removed from that era, nevertheless he could accurately be described as “old school”. There were few soft touches during his ascent to the title. He accomplished his goal the old fashioned way—he earned it. Along the way he became one of the top professional boxers of the 1980s.

Before turning pro Marlon reportedly won 97 of 110 amateur bouts. His professional career spanned 11 years (1979-1990). He lost only 5 of 52 professional fights and stopped 27 opponents. Only one of his five career losses (all by decision) resulted in a unanimous verdict. He drew in two other bouts.



In an era of tough welterweight competition Marlon Starling stood out among his peers.

Marlon won his first 25 fights before losing a split 12 round decision to future welterweight champion Donald Curry in 1982. He defeated his next six opponents (flattening four of them) and looked very impressive stopping hard punching Jose Baret and outpointing Kevin Howard over 12 rounds.

The rematch with Curry for the world title resulted in another decision loss for Starling. The Dallas hotshot seemed to have Marlon’s number. But showing the patience and persistence that was the hallmark of his stolid fighting style Marlon got back on track with wins over Lupe Aquino, Floyd Mayweather, Sr., Simon Brown and Pedro Vilella.

In 1987 he defeated Mark Breland in a torrid battle for the WBA welterweight title, stopping the former Olympic champion in the 11th round. Less than a year later he won the WBC welterweight belt with a 9th round TKO of England’s Lloyd Honeyghan.

Moving up in weight Marlon challenged IBF middleweight champion Michael Nunn but lost a majority 12 round decision. Four months later, on August 19th, 1990, in the final fight of his career, Marlon lost the welterweight title to Maurice Blocker via another majority decision.

In an era of tough welterweight competition Marlon Starling stood out among his peers. Let's read what he has to say about his career.

Interview:

Mike: Marlon, let's start by talking about some of your most important fights. In 1982 you lost a split 12 round decision for the North American welterweight title to Donald Curry. It was your first loss in 26 professional fights. A year later you lost a 15 round unanimous decision to Curry, this time for the world title. Was he your most difficult opponent?

Marlon: Not *difficult*. Donald Curry was my most *challenging* opponent. That's because Donald was a boxer like me. He did nothing great, but everything good. That was the kind of fighter I was. It was like fighting a mirror image of me. I mean he wasn't a dynamite puncher. He didn't have a great hook, didn't have a great left jab, but everything was good.

Mike: Often when boxers have similar styles it doesn't make for an exciting fight. In fact, the New York Times reporter called it a "dull" fight.

Marlon: I believe I won that first fight. I mean I didn't get the decision but I know in my heart I won that first fight. But at the time Don Curry was a big Bob Arum fighter so he got the decision. The second fight was a different story. I lost that second fight more than he won it. Curry prepared himself better than I did for the second fight, even though I was prepared. He won a very close 15 round decision. My trainer kept saying 'back him up, back him up'. But the problem was I couldn't back him up. He was a little stronger than me in that fight. So he retained the title. I got out of the ring that day and for the first time in my career, maybe after 30 fights, said to myself 'Wow, that guy beat me!' And that was something that was tough for me to cough up."

Mike: You didn't let that defeat slow you down. Over the next two and a half years you won 10 of 12 fights culminating in your 11th round TKO victory over Mark Breland on August 22, 1987 for the welterweight championship. Before turning pro in 1984 Mark Breland had won every amateur title including an unprecedented five New York Golden Gloves championships and an Olympic gold medal.

Marlon: I knocked him out but I still got the worst ass whippin' I ever took. His jab hurt like most guys right hand, and he was hitting me with that jab. His jab broke my nose. I should have boxed the man, worked my way in, feint the man, and do all this, but at the time I wanted that world championship. I got it, but I had to pay to get in. My strategy was to wear him down with body punches. Once I got inside I was banging that body. I didn't like to pay the price but I had to.

Mike: You also had a huge edge in professional experience—45 pro fights and 287 rounds to his 18 fights and 76 rounds. And you had fought tougher competition.

Marlon: Yes, my experience was a factor but also my professionalism, my conditioning and my willingness not to quit. But you know what? Mark Breland became one of my best friends. We talk every other week. He is a good man. I respect him to the utmost.

Mike: You fought a rematch with Breland eight months later that ended in a 12 round draw. Most observers thought you deserved the decision.

Marlon: Mark was a bit better in the second fight. I was better too and got hit less this time. I deserved to win that fight but he was an Arum fighter and they didn't want him to lose.

Mike: Your victory over Breland won you partial recognition as welterweight champion. England's Lloyd Honeyghan had defeated your nemesis Donald Curry two years earlier and was

recognized as champion by a rival sanctioning group. In early 1989 you and Honeyghan met to unify the title. You stopped him in the 9th round. Tell me about that fight:

Marlon: Now Lloyd Honeyghan was a whole different ball game. I knew I was going to beat him up.

Mike: I recently watched a tape of the Honeyghan fight and you weren't doing much for the first 3 or 4 rounds. Was that part of your strategy?

Marlon: The first two rounds I was just getting his technique...see what he's doing...getting his timing down...getting his moves down. Lloyd was a good puncher but what good is a puncher if he ain't gonna hit you? It's all about hit and don't get hit. I didn't want to get careless. One time I did get careless and he hit me on top of the head and buckled my feet a little bit. Lloyd was a southpaw and every time he threw that right jab I'd counter with a right cross. If I showed him a feint and he put that left hand out I countered with the right. By the 5th or 6th round if I said jump he'd jump. He was actually waiting for it to happen. I mean by the 5th round I had this guy scared to punch. I was not what you'd call a knock out fighter but I'd get your attention with everything I'd throw.

Mike: Honeyghan had a big reputation coming into that fight, running up a string of impressive victories including a TKO of Donald Curry. Do you consider the Honeyghan fight your greatest career accomplishment?

Marlon: Most fans would think that but Lloyd Honeyghan was one of my easiest fights ever as a professional. I mean he played right into my hands. Maybe I was just so eager and wanted to get him so bad. I was sharp that night. I would rather get knocked out than take a beating like he did. Nobody needs to take a beating like that. I know he wore that fight for a long time."

Mike: About a year after your victory over Honeyghan you put on 10 pounds and challenged middleweight champion Michael Nunn. You lost a 12 round decision. That was the only time you ever fought as a middleweight.

Marlon: I was at the point where I said to myself there is nobody else in the world that can beat me at welterweight so I moved up a weight class to fight Nunn. What did I have to lose? He wasn't a big puncher and I believed I could beat this guy even though he was undefeated and a southpaw. But he was a little quicker than I thought and a lot taller. That's not an excuse why I lost that fight. In the middle of the third or fourth round I had him in the corner and I took my gloves and I like dug them into his face and he said to me, 'c'mon man fight fair'. I decided to just get in there and box him. I turned the fight into a sparring session. I didn't go get him like I should have. That particular day he was a little sharper than I was. He won that fight because he worked harder. But you know what? After the fight we went out and had dinner together.

Mike: Who trained you?

Marlon: My first trainer was Johnny Duke. He trained me as an amateur and in my early years as a pro. For a little while Eddie Futch trained me but we had a falling out and I let Eddie go. After that Freddie Roach, who worked with Eddie, became my trainer. But for most of my career my trainer was Marlon Starling. They just had to keep me in line with the training regimen. Whatever happened in my career happened for a reason. When I got with Freddie I finished with Freddie. He didn't have to do a lot to get me ready—just sharpen me up. We were friends.

Mike: What do you think of today's top fighters? Do any of them stand out?

Marlon: I watch the fights on TV now and then but I couldn't tell you. There are too many champions. If one of them walked by me I would ask 'who was that?' I mean when I was fighting I knew everybody in the top ten. Now I don't know who they are. That doesn't mean I'm trying to

degrade anybody. I just don't know. But from what I see when I do watch the fights a lot is missing. They have a title but they don't have the skills.

Mike: What is missing?

Marlon: I don't see things that they should have been taught to do years ago. Listen, you can win a title with a three punch combination— left jab, right cross, left hook. You don't see too many people throwing that combination. You don't even see a double jab. If you throw a punch you have to bring it back from where you threw it, because if you don't I'm going to make you pay for it. If you throw that right hand out you've got to bring it right back to your face. A lot of times I see a fighter throw the right and it comes back to his chest. I will counter punch you all day if you do that. You'll be afraid to throw punches if I was in the ring with you. If all you know is "fight" I can beat you. I'm not going to fight you. I'm going to box you and win. Most of the guys when under pressure all they know is "fight". They don't know the professionalism of being a good boxer. Anybody could fight. Dogs fight. You've got to outthink the other fighter. What I mean by outthink is that sometimes you have to outfight your opponent. I'm not fighting with a guy that punches like hell. I'm going to box you, until you get tired, and then I'm going to fight you. I was a thinking fighter. I didn't fight the fighters and I didn't box the boxers.

"Today's boxers have more toughness than knowledge. You can be tough. I love to fight the tough guys because they don't have the knowledge. A good right hand, a good jab, and a good left hook. You have those three punches you can go places. If you don't have a great jab it's like training with one arm. Everything works off the jab, at least as far as I've been taught."

Mike: I noticed in reviewing your fights that you rarely got trapped on the ropes or in the corner.

Marlon: Ring generalship. Like I told people – 'this is my house (the ring)'. I live here. I know that square. I got radar in back of me telling me 'you're coming close to the ropes, you're coming close to the corner.' You had to know these things."

Mike: You were very strong at 147 pounds. You had huge shoulders and a powerful physique. Many fighters today lift weights to increase strength. Did you ever lift weights as part of your training routine?

Marlon: No, never. You know lifting weights tighten you up. I got most of my strength and power from punching the bag and training."

Mike: You were sometimes criticized for showboating during a fight. In fact, your occasional clowning may have cost you the first Curry fight. Did you do it to play to the audience or confuse your opponent?

Marlon: I don't showboat. It's all right if you do a move and knock the guy out— then it's all right. But if something doesn't happen then you're accused of showboatin'. Sometimes it's just in your rhythm. You couldn't tell me 'Oh Marlon do the *Starling Stomp*.' I mean it wasn't planned. I was just in the moment. Emotions come with this sport. I wasn't trying to showboat. I was just trying to be me trying to get what I can get out of this guy.

Mike: In 1980, in only your sixth pro fight, you had the misfortune of fatally injuring your opponent Charley Newell. He never recovered from the brain injury and passed away nine days later. In spite of this tragedy you made the decision to continue with your career.

Marlon: I had previously fought him in an amateur fight when he was in prison. Charley Newell was a bully on the street but to me he wasn't a bad person. We fought at the Civic Center in Hartford. I think it was January 9th. I hit him with a combo and knocked him out. I was working a job at that time and I went to work the next morning and I got a call that Charley Newell had passed away and that really bothered me. My parents always worried about what's going to

happen to me. I never worried about it. I came back for his funeral and his parents came up to me. His mother said to me 'my son passed away doing something that he loved to do, don't ever stop what you want to do.' What she told me gave me the confidence to continue with my career.

Mike: Tommy Hearns was welterweight champion while you were an up and coming prospect. You weren't ready to take him on but you did spar with him while he was preparing for the Sugar Ray Leonard fight in 1981. What did you learn from that experience?

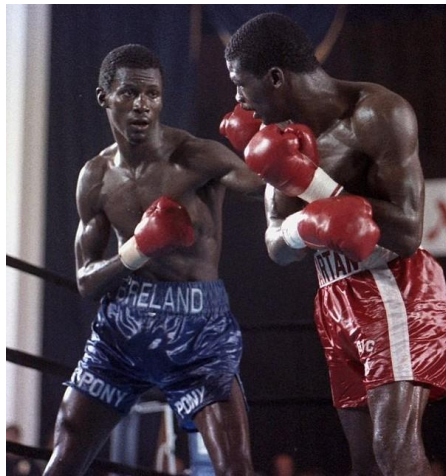
Marlon: I got an offer to go to Vegas to work as a sparring partner and help Hearns get ready for Leonard. It was an opportunity for me to see what I could do with the 'big boys' out there. I sparred with Tommy and he broke my jaw but they knew I got the better of that sparring session. How do I know? They kept Milton McCrory far away from me after that. (*Author's Note: Milton McCrory, a future champion, was Hearns's stablemate and a rising star in the welterweight division*).

Mike: A few years after that sparring session you were ready to challenge Hearns or Leonard but you never fought them. Why not?

Marlon: Marlon Starling fought everyone out there. The reason why I didn't fight Leonard or Hearns is because my name wasn't that big. I trained with Tommy but they just didn't want to take a chance and give up something they had. That's why they didn't fight me...they couldn't make a lot of money fighting me.

Mike: Marlon, you lost the welterweight title to Maurice Blocker in your very last bout on August 19, 1990. The 12 round majority decision was very close and could have gone either way. You were only 30 years old and still a top rated welterweight. Why did you decide to retire?

Marlon: I don't think he won but it wasn't one of my best fights. I quit the ring because the promoters and managers were making more money than me and they weren't taking the punches.



Mark Breland vs Marlon Starling

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