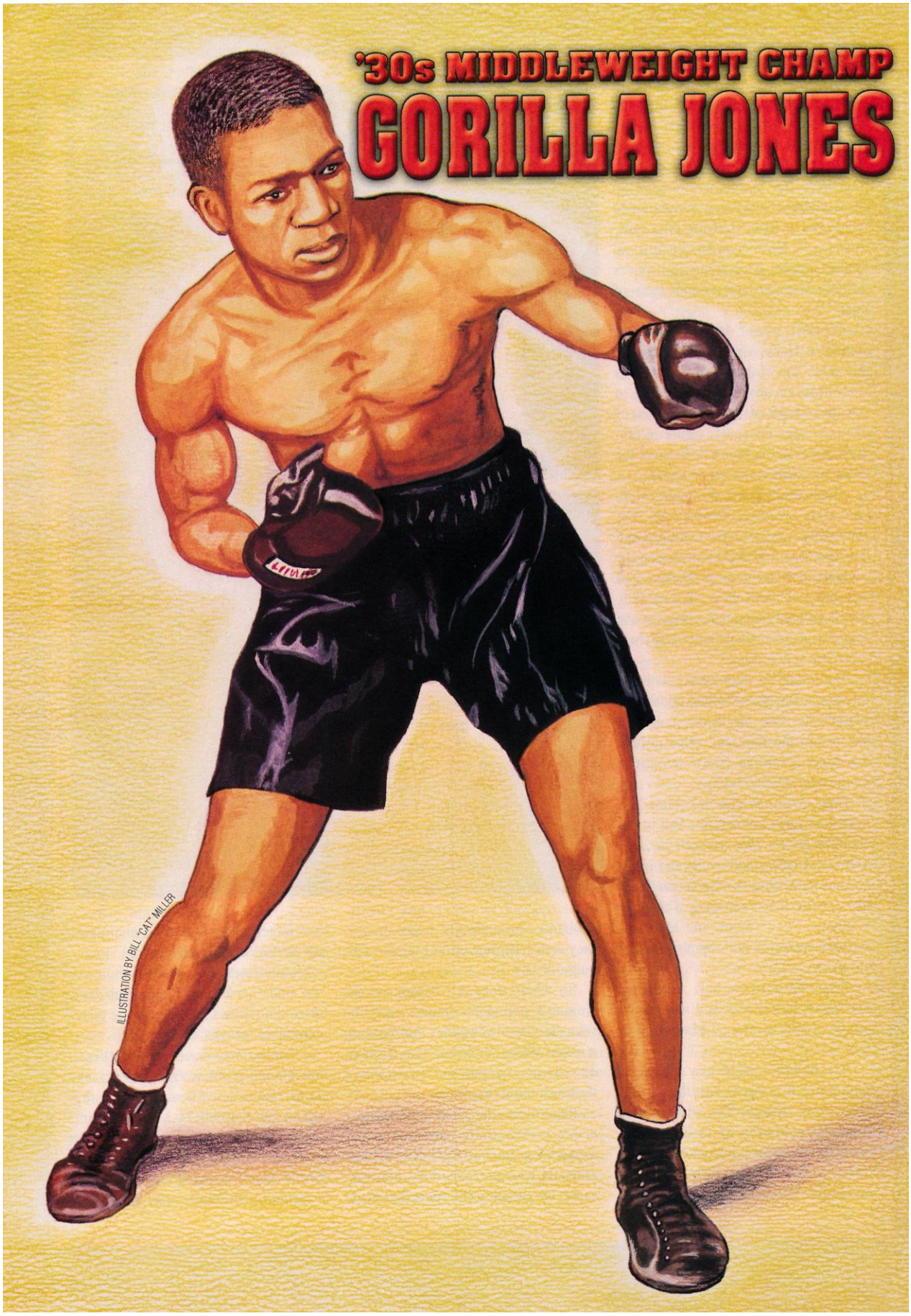

'30s MIDDLEWEIGHT CHAMP
GORILLA JONES
ILLUSTRATION BY BILL "CAT" MILLER

"Making White Boys Look Good" Was His Burden

By Pete Ehrmann

"Outside of Joe Louis and Barney Ross, there ain't any good fighters. You can throw the rest of 'em in the ocean."

When William Jones made that bold pronouncement in 1936, he was an unquestioned authority on boxing excellence as well as an expert when it came to going in the water.

But when Jones got wet it wasn't greed or his own deviousness that caused the splash, but rather the fact that, as *Milwaukee Journal* sports editor R.G. Lynch wrote a year earlier, Jones was "handcuffed, boxing under orders to make the white boys look good, holding up mediocre fighters that he could have put away."

It may be the instances of that dotting Jones' record are why the 1930s middleweight champion is largely remembered today more for being a consort of movie siren Mae West than for his astonishing talent. That's a legacy as unfortunate and demeaning as the nickname by which the classy ring stylist was known.

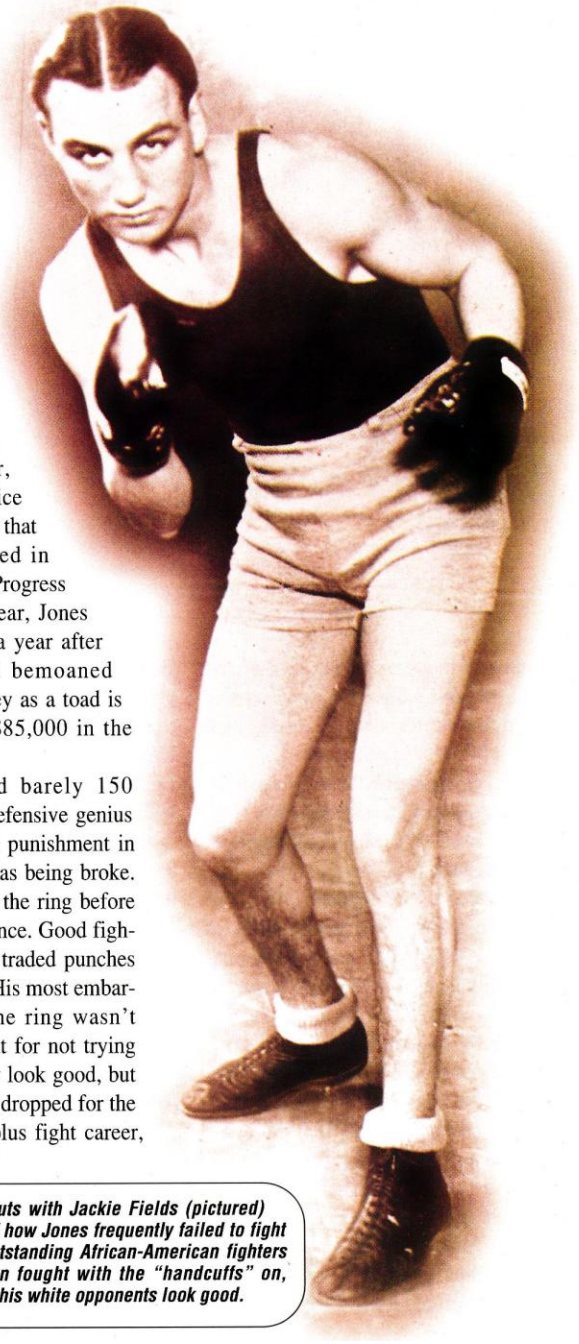
One old newspaper account said it was "Gorilla" Jones' "jungle dance in the ring that won him the nickname." Another claimed it was because of his unusually long arms. More likely, Jones himself lifted it off another Gorilla Jones, a black welterweight who had boxed in his native Memphis, Tennessee, when the young Jones went to Akron, Ohio, to fight on a card promoted by Suey Welch in 1927.

It wasn't fighting that kept Jones in Akron, but gambling. Even more passionate about shooting craps than jabs, Jones lost his first purse in a dice game, and went right back to Welch for another fight. This happened several more times, and Welch ended up taking a personal as well as financial interest in the young boxer.

"I was just a punk when I came to Akron, and he took hold of me," Jones recalled later. "I lived at his house. His folks were like mother and father to me. They brought me up and schooled me."

While Welch taught him between the ropes, the manager's father, who was Akron's police chief, put out the word that Jones was not allowed in local gambling dens. Progress was swift. Within a year, Jones was a headliner, and a year after that the man who'd bemoaned being "as free of money as a toad is of feathers" earned $85,000 in the ring.

Just 5'6" tall and barely 150 pounds, Jones was a defensive genius who considered taking punishment in a fight as mortal a sin as being broke. "I'll get thrown out of the ring before I'll get hurt," he said once. Good fighters, Jones said, never traded punches with the other fellow. His most embarrassing moment in the ring wasn't when he got tossed out for not trying or letting the other guy look good, but rather when Jones was dropped for the only time in his 100-plus fight career,



Jones' two 1929 bouts with Jackie Fields (pictured) were good examples of how Jones frequently failed to fight hard. Like so many outstanding African-American fighters of the era, Jones often fought with the "handcuffs" on, under orders to make his white opponents look good.

Jones is presented the NBA middleweight championship belt by former champion Mickey Walker (on Jones' right), who had relinquished the title to go after the heavyweight crown. Jones won the NBA tournament to find a new champ, stopping Italian Oddone Piazza in the sixth round.

by Freddie Steele. A right hand did it, and although he finished the fight, Jones was mortified to have touched the canvas with something besides his shoes.

"Ain't no reason in the world why a good fighter should ever get hit by a right hand," he said. "I've been ashamed of myself ever since."

For a proud, self-assured man like Jones, such a lapse was even harder to countenance than the ethical ones he and other talented black fighters of that era willingly suffered to survive in boxing.

"I've done some business in fights," Jones admitted in 1936. "But things were different when I broke in than now. A colored boy had hard going. If I wanted a match with a good white boy, I had to say 'yes.' I had to live—and sometimes I said 'yes.' And I always kept my word."

Some of Jones' performances were real eyebrow-raisers. When he and welterweight champion Jackie Fields met on October 21, 1929, in San Francisco, they pecked away at one another for 10 dreary rounds, and the decision went to Fields. On December 13 that year, a rematch at Boston Garden made their first encounter seem almost apocalyptic. The 10,000-plus spectators howled in disgust after the second round, and in the seventh, after both men had been warned several times to start fighting, referee Joe O'Connor declared it a no-contest.

Contemporary accounts, including that of Doc Almy in THE RING, fingered Jones as the more culpable party.

Black fighters got so few chances at world titles then that they created their own. Thus, Jones became the "colored middleweight champion" in 1929 by winning a decision over Jack McVey.

A year later, world middleweight champion Mickey Walker decided to go after the heavyweight title and gave up his 160-pound belt. To determine his successor, the National Boxing Association, which governed the sport in 36 states and a foreign country or two, put its imprimatur on a tournament held in Milwaukee. The plan was to invite "some 30 or 40 of the best middleweights" to compete for the NBA belt.

But the New York boxing commission decided to go its own way, and most top-ranked contenders accordingly sat back to see how things shook out. In the end, 14 boxers entered the NBA meet, including Jones, whose credentials were approved, warts and all, by respected Milwaukee boxing writer Sam Levy.

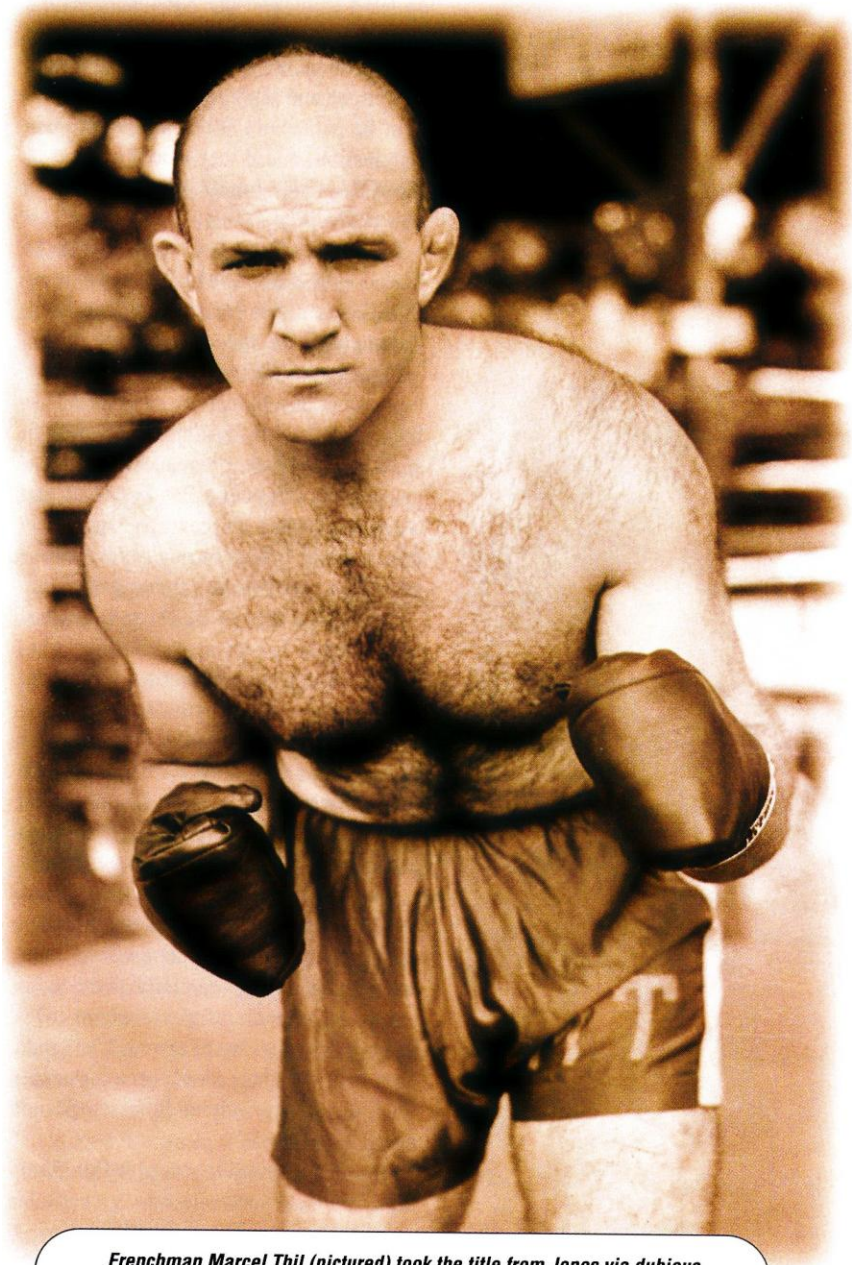
"He has never been knocked out. His record is studded with knockout victories. Several times he and his opponents have been chased from the ring, referees charging the boys with stalling. That's because Jones' style does not meet with the fancy of some officials and commissions. Then, too, there have been times, many times,

when Jones has gone into the ring handcuffed. By this I mean he has been unable to open fire because he was under orders not to. If he violated such an agreement, he was threatened with boycott.

"Such conditions, fortunately, don't exist in the NBA tournament. It's a case of every man for himself. And the Gorilla is quite capable of handling matters, don't forget that."

But Jones' opening match on August 25, 1931, was no picnic, and after 10 rounds, one of the three officials voted for his opponent, Tiger Thomas, another talented black fighter. (Their bout was reported as being for Jones' "colored" title, which may explain why some record books mistakenly call it a world title match.)

Next, Jones cut up Clyde Chastain badly in their September 17 elimination match. "I don't want to hurt this boy, Mr. Referee," said Jones to the third man. "Why don't you stop the fight?" In the sixth, he did.



Frenchman Marcel Thil (pictured) took the title from Jones via dubious disqualification. Jones claims he was warned not to bet on himself because the fix was in. Many historians agree that this was indeed the case.

Like several other tournament entries, George Nichols of Buffalo, New York, was actually a light heavyweight who'd sweated down to 160 in hopes of picking up the NBA belt. Jones sent him back where he belonged with an easy decision win on November 3. (The following March, Nichols won the NBA 175-pound title in a tournament held to pick a successor to the stripped Maxie Rosenbloom.)

Sixteen days later, Jones whipped Frankie O'Brien in what was supposed to be his semifinal match. But in the other semi, Henry Firpo and Italy's Oddone Piazza fought to a bloody draw. While Piazza nursed his wounds, Jones took on Firpo and won a split decision.

In the January 25, 1932, title match, Piazza, a former amateur star with just 16 pro bouts, was totally outclassed and stopped in six rounds. Mickey Walker himself helped present the title belt to Jones, whose overriding concern was that he'd been too hard on the runner-up.

"Such a beating doesn't do a fighter any good," Jones said. "I had to do the same thing to Al Mello in Boston some time back, and he was ruined by the whipping. Before the fight, he was an intelligent fellow. Since then, he has broken down physically and mentally."

Apparently the new champion didn't want to take that chance in his next fight. In a rematch with O'Brien at Holyoke, Massachusetts, Jones was disqualified for "not trying" in a non-title bout.

On June 11, 1932, Jones lost the belt to France's Marcel Thil before 70,000 fans in Paris, when the referee disqualified him in the 11th round for hitting in the clinches. But the odor in that fight, Jones contended, came strictly from the other corner.

Before the fight, when he and Welch went to bet their purse money on a win for him, Jones said, they were warned not to because the fight was in the bag for the Frenchman.

"The night of the fight a Spanish fellow was referee," Jones said. "We were instructed that the first foul blow would bring a warning, and the second would lose the fight. I had Thil beat when all of a sudden in the 11th he grabbed his belly. The ref swung around and jabbered something at me in Spanish. I didn't even know what he said, but the fight was over and I lost on a foul."

Siding with the Yankee Doodle Dandy, the NBA refused to recognize Thil, and instead gave Jones another crack at its belt by matching him against Sammy Slaughter in Cleveland on January 30, 1933. Jones won in seven, and in the co-feature Ben Jeby of New York stopped Paul Pirrone.

Jeby was recognized as 160-pound champion by the Gotham commission, and when he and Jones met on April 19 in Cleveland, it was hoped their non-title bout would "clear up a great deal of controversy as to which of the two fighters has the best claim to the title."

But instead it only created a whole new firestorm. It was such a putrid exhibition, with neither man showing any aggression, that after the referee declared no-contest in round six, a police riot squad was needed to get Jeby and Jones to their dressing rooms.

An Akron sportswriter said Jones' behavior was caused by fear of New York "gangsters." But Nat Fleischer, editor of THE RING, reported that a secret deal had been struck for a sham contest so a more profitable unification fight between Jeby and Jones could be staged later. Jones' only public statement fit either scenario.

"I know I will be blamed for this affair," he said. "I expect to be punished. I know that my many friends don't want to see me, nor do I want to see them right now. But while I have to stand the blame, I'm sure some people will understand that I am only a boxer and under contract to a manager, and that I must fight just as I am told."

On May 13, the NBA took back its belt on the grounds that Jones and Jeby "entirely disregarded the ethics of sportsmanship and permitted themselves to become parties to an act which, if continued, will assuredly deal a death blow to boxing." Both were suspended, but Jeby just returned to New York, where NBA edicts meant nothing, and lost his slice of the title to Lou Brouillard, who lost it to Vince Dundee, who lost it to Teddy Yarosz, who lost it to Babe Risko, who, in 1936, lost it to Freddie Steele—who signed a contract in December of that year to defend the title in Milwaukee on New Year's Day, 1937, against … Gorilla Jones.

Jones slips a left and counters with a hook of his own against Freddie Steele during Jones' last major fight, which he lost via 10-round decision. Like so many of his bouts, a lot of people question whether or not Jones really tried to win.

Jones had stayed active over the preceding three years on the West Coast, out of the NBA's official reach. He cut as dashing a figure outside the ring as in, especially when walking the pet lion cub admirers gave him as a mascot. But Wisconsin was an NBA state, and the NBA notified the boxing commission there that Jones was still under indefinite suspension from the Jeby fight and demanded that the Steele bout be cancelled. When the Wisconsin commissioners said they would pull out of the NBA first, Jones' suspension was reluctantly lifted.

But worries about Jones continued to be fanned by the media, which saw the aging Gorilla as a "bad risk." Wrote Dick Collum in the *Minneapolis Journal*:

"Experts in boxing who judge Jones by form rather than by the record agree he has been the only truly brilliant middleweight since Mickey Walker renounced the championship. He has been a flawless boxer and a terrific puncher. His courage is not questioned and he is high in ring generalship—all in all, a nearly perfect fighting machine.

"Yet he has seldom fought up to his true ability and he has always been regarded as a safe man for any well-known white middleweight to meet, a most considerate fellow who could be trusted. Through the many years in which he has been the world's best middleweight, he has fought below his best in most of his important engagements.

"Now, along toward the end of his career, he is matched with a smartly managed champion whose interests are being safeguarded quite as carefully as the interests of other leading fighters whom Jones has not double-crossed, although he could have done so. There hasn't been a champion since Walker whom Jones could not have knocked out."

The Gorilla himself vowed with a flashing smile that everybody was "going to be surprised on New Year's Day."

True enough. People were surprised at how easily Steele handled him, and at that seventh-round knockdown that embar-

rassed Jones so much. It had been a contest for the first two rounds, but after that, wrote Sam Levy, "occasionally [Jones] engaged in a mild flurry of punching, but most of the time was content to protect himself."

In the ninth, Jones maneuvered the champion against the ropes on the side of the ring where the photographers were huddled with their cameras poised. "Put them cameras down, boys," he called out. "I'm not gonna get knocked down again." The decision for Steele was unanimous, but a few wondered if Gorilla had been up to his old monkey business.

Why, it was asked, after Jones caught Steele with a straight right in the second round that stunned the champion, did the challenger only throw roundhouse rights that sailed harmlessly over Steele's shoulder? And how come he seemed to let Steele pound him to the body when, as the *Journal's* Lynch wrote, "he could have put an end to it very easily with the shoulder block, a rudimentary defense known to all experienced boxers and used by Jones in every bout he has fought here?"

But when the Gorilla quickly sought redemption by taking on local favorite Frankie Battaglia in Milwaukee on January 29, he was welcomed back with loud huzzahs. "Jones' past has been forgotten, and even skeptics displeased with Gorilla's performance against Freddie Steele will be among those present," wrote Levy. "With the 'handcuffs' removed, Jones can be expected to play havoc with anybody his size."

Somebody should have been watching the referee. Although Jones dominated Battaglia throughout the 10-rounder, and even though third man Jim Keefe's scorecard read 52-48 for the ex-champion, the referee took it upon himself to punish Jones for what he considered a less-than-stellar effort by declaring the fight a draw.

Then came the really delicious part, at least for fans of irony. Because Jones didn't report that he had a fever going into the fight, the same commissioners who defied the NBA when it tried to stop Jones vs. Steele slapped the Gorilla with a six-month suspension to be honored by all NBA states.

So it was back to the West Coast for Jones, where his career gradually petered out. When he was done boxing, he became, according to whichever Mae West biography you care to believe, the sultry screen legend's bodyguard, chauffer, and/or bed partner. Jones himself never deigned to say which was the case. He lived rent-free in a cottage owned by West, above whose address plate in front there perched a little rubber gorilla, until death came at age 75 on January 4, 1982.

"Why don't ya come up and see me some time." Apparently Jones took movie star Mae West up on her famous invitation and became her bodyguard/chauffer/lover.

In 1994, Jones, 96-20-13 (54) with 9 no-decisions and 2 no-contests, was inducted into the World Boxing Hall of Fame. Moralists might argue that some of the Gorilla's performances make him a poor Hall of Famer. But serious historians know better, and, like the man said, the rest you can throw in the ocean. ■

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