

# How To Ruin A Fighter And A Life

## Management Of Johnny Coiley Is A Textbook Case

**By Bobby Franklin**

For anyone following the Boston boxing scene in the late 1960s and 1970s the name Johnny Coiley will certainly ring a bell. John was an outstanding amateur fighter who turned pro in 1969. He was a slick boxer with a decent punch who went on to win the New England Middleweight Championship.

John was never in a dull fight, using his rapier like left jab to keep his opponents at bay and also as a way to set up his solid right hand. Sixteen of his 24 wins came via stoppage.

Fighting most often at the Boston Arena he also made stops in Taunton, MA; Portland, Maine; and the Boston Garden. His biggest win was over veteran Mike Pusateri for the New England title. The two had fought to a draw in their first encounter, and Johnny pulled out the win in their rematch. Things were looking good for the Cambridge middleweight as he had developed a loyal following of fans.

Meanwhile, in New Orleans another young prospect was making a career for himself. Tony Licata, trained by the legendary Bill Gore and managed by Lou Viscusi, was also compiling an impressive record. Licata was also a smart boxer/puncher whose lightening fast combinations earned him the moniker "Machine Gun Tony." Licata began his pro career a little ahead of Coiley and was facing stiffer competition than the New England Champ.

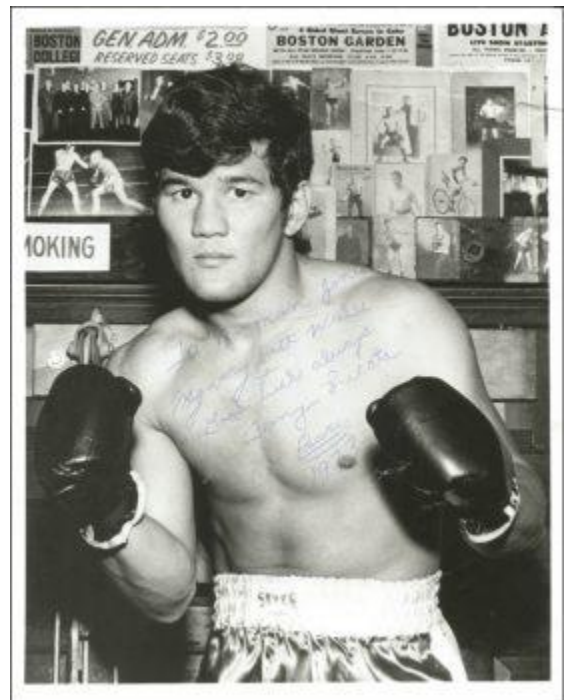
In 1971 John Coiley's manager agreed to have his young prospect travel to New Orleans, Licata's hometown, to face Machine Gun Tony. The wisdom of taking this fight could be questioned. While both fighters had identical records when it came to the numbers, with Licata undefeated in 24 fights with 1 ending in a draw, and Coiley with 24 fights, no losses, and one draw, their level of competition was vastly different.

Out of the opponents Coiley faced only two had winning records. By far his biggest and most impressive win was over Mike Pusateri, and that was a major victory for him. Licata had also defeated Pusateri.

Out of Licata's 24 opponents, only five had losing records and these were fighters he faced early in his career. By the time he was signed to fight Coiley he had wins of such solid fighters as Gene Wells, Walter Opshinsky, Danny McAloon, Luis Vinales, Dave



*John Coiley*



*Tony Licata*

Adkins, and a knockout victory over Lowell's very tough Larry Carney.



*Machine Gun Tony Licata and John Coiley before their rematch*

Despite this vast difference in the quality of their opposition, Johnny's manager still agreed to the fight with Licata, and on October 27, 1971 they fought over ten rounds with Tony winning a one sided decision. John was cut under his left eye in the fight.

Soon after returning to Boston, Coiley's manager was offered a return fight with Licata by promoter Sam Silverman. The fight would be held at the Hynes Auditorium in Boston. The Coiley team immediately accepted the fight, despite the fact that Johnny was still cut under his eye. The fight would take place just six weeks after the New Orleans battle,

hardly enough time for the cut to fully heal so that he could train in earnest for the fight. The wound prevented Coiley from sparring in preparation for the fight for fear it might worsen the injury. The only ring work he got was 3 rounds with a heavyweight a week before the contest. In contrast, Licata put in 70 rounds and was injury free.

Why on earth would Johnny's manager agree to the rematch so soon after their first bout and under these conditions? The answer is he shouldn't have. This was gross mismanagement, the kind that results in bad things happening to young fighters. It is boxing malpractice. John was clearly out of his league when he fought Licata the first time. He was given a boxing lesson in New Orleans where Machine Gun Tony's superior experience showed. There was no shame in losing to a fighter of Licata's talent in his hometown, Coiley needed to reset and work his way up facing the type of opponents Licata did with his career. Instead, he was back in on short notice with the man who was his better.



*John Coiley with his manager in 1970*

At the time, I spoke with people who were close with Licata's management team. They told me Tony had actually carried Coiley for the ten rounds in their first match. Their strategy was to get a rematch in Boston where they felt Licata would get more exposure and be able to advance his career. His trainer Bill Gore had trained Willie Pep and had connections in the Northeast. It was a smart move on their part abetted by the horrible decision by Coiley's manager.

As for the rematch, it was sad to watch. Licata gave it his all this time. That, combined with the fact that Johnny was poorly trained for the fight and still injured from the first fight, led to a blowout. Tony gave Coiley a beating for seven rounds. In the eighth he dropped him with a

left hook, that knockdown caused a bone separation in John's lower back. In the ninth John would once again hit the canvas. In serious trouble he would now be saved by referee Jimmy McCarron who stopped the fight.

Coiley was shattered by the loss both physically and emotionally. He was back in the ring less than four months later stopping Danny Perez in Boston. That would be the last time his hand would be raised in victory. He had six more bouts after that, being kyoed five times with one fight ending in a draw. I saw him kyoed in Waltham, MA by Stan Johnson. It was an even more brutal beating than the one he got from Licata. This punishment took a severe toll on him that would last for the rest of his life.

Think about it, in less than four years John Coiley was knocked out five times. That's like having been in five auto accidents resulting in brain trauma. The difference here is the fact that these injuries were not the result of accidents but of a manager who never put the health and safety of his fighter first.



*John Coiley squares off with old rival Mike Pusateri*

The rematch with Licata was tragic enough, and perhaps it could be chalked up to stupidity, but to continue throwing John in the ring when he was no longer able to properly defend himself was criminal. And for what, a few bucks?

Boxing is different than other sports. Mismanagement in baseball or golf results in losing and embarrassment. In boxing it results in brain injuries and even death. Put a baseball player in over his head and he will look bad and then be sent back to the minor leagues. In boxing fighters get thrown in again for another beating.

There is no excuse for what was done to a handsome and intelligent twenty-one year old middleweight from Cambridge, MA in 1971. Unfortunately, since it is boxing this scene has been and will continue to be repeated over and over again.

---

*Bobby Franklin's Boxing over Broadway*  
*January 23, 2021*