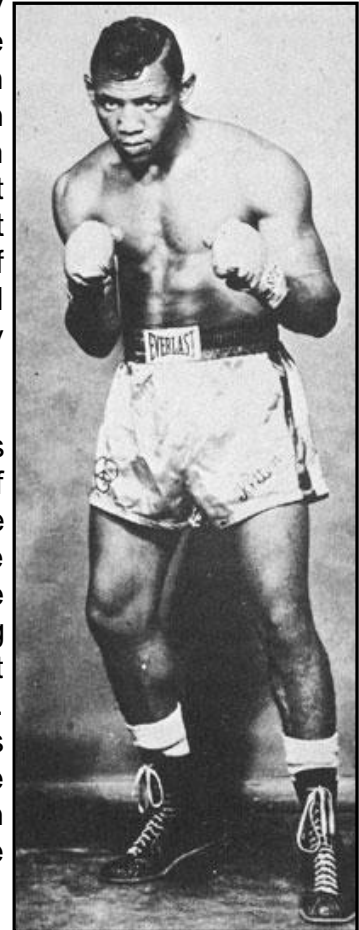


PHILLY LEGEND KITTEN HAYWARD PASSES

Obituary by John DiSanto / PhillyBoxingHistory.com

When I received the sad news on Tuesday evening that Stanley “Kitten” Hayward had died earlier that day, it was a shock, despite knowing for months that such a call could come at any time. Kitten had suffered a stroke late in 2020, and his health had been declining ever since. Later that same evening, I received a call from his wife of thirty plus years, Vernell (Washington), confirming that it was official - Stanley Cornelius Hayward, one of Philly’s greatest and most colorful ring warriors, was dead at age 82. Regardless of his recent failing health and advanced age, the news was still unreal. Kitten Hayward was always larger than life and perpetually full of life every day of the nearly 20 years that I knew him.



Hayward was known for being an impeccable dresser, a notorious lady’s man, a lover of both horse racing and fancy cars, a proud, if slightly vain, man about town, and one of Philadelphia’s all-time best pugilists. No other former Philly fighter seemed to enjoy life more than Kitten did. Where most boxers find themselves lost the moment their fighting days end, Hayward thrived in his post-boxing days. In fact, one of the most striking things about the Hayward that I knew was that he never wanted to be defined by his boxing life. Despite fighting and beating fine fighters like Emile Griffith, Curtis Cokes, Bennie Briscoe, and Dick Turner, Hayward was far more proud of his white collar career, first with Ballantine Beer and then with the Philadelphia Court System. He considered himself more than a fighter, and he certainly was.

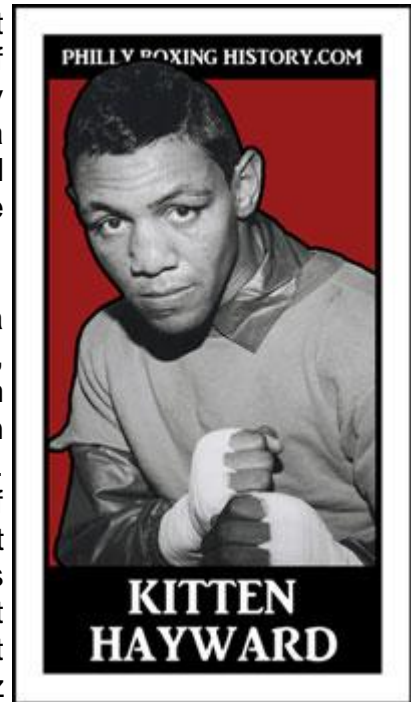
“I’ve had two jobs that were college-level jobs,” Hayward once told me. To Kitten, his ability to live and earn a living beyond the ring placed him in a different class than many of his peers. He was proud of the fact that unlike many of his fellow-boxers, he was able to put his boxing life behind him and become something else.

Before he retired from his job at the Courts, he rose every morning, slid into one of his sharp suits, complete with a crisp, white dress shirt that was custom embroidered with “Mr. Kitten” on each cuff, and went to work. There he met the public, worked side by side with judges and mingled with important people. He loved it. He felt that it kept him in the public eye and demonstrated that he was capable of doing more than throwing and taking punches. When he retired for good several years ago, he missed this daily routine greatly.

Of course to most of us, Hayward’s legacy will always be as a fighter. And what a fighter he was! If he was in the ring during this era, with all of his charisma, good looks, sense of humor, boxing skills, and blood-and-guts mentality, one can only imagine how many belts and how many dollars he would have earned – and how famous he would have been. And boy, would he have loved that.

Hayward was born in North Philly on May 26, 1939, but relocated and fought out of West Philly. He only had a couple of amateur bouts because he could never understand why someone would box for free. "What am I going to do with a watch," he once quipped about the extent of his potential earnings as an amateur. So, onto the professional ranks he went.

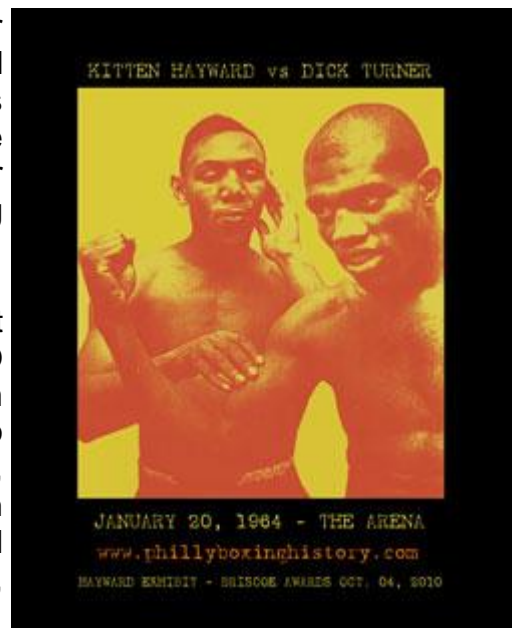
Kitten turned pro on June 10, 1959 in Scranton, PA, winning a four-round decision over Tommy Holmes. Three months later, he made his Philly debut (and the first bout he's credited with on BoxRec) with a first round knockout of New Yorker Jim Johnson at South Philly's Alhambra Athletic Club on September 24th. The venue was an early home base for Hayward, fighting six of his first seven bouts at the converted movie theater located at 12th and Morris. Before the end of 1959, Hayward had a points win over future boxing trainer Don Turner and a management contract with George Katz, the Philadelphia fight manager that had guided the likes of Gil Turner, Toothpick Brown, Cortez Jackson, and a number of other prominent boxers.



Hayward's nickname of "Kitten" came through his association with Katz. "His (Katz') girlfriend gave me that name," Kitten once said. "She said most fighters are tough and ugly, but you're more like a kitten." Hayward loved the comparison and the name stuck, even though inside the ring he was far closer to a tiger.

He won his first eight bouts, including two victories over Ike White in 1960. Hayward lost for the first time to local Bruce Gibson by decision, but avenged the defeat with his own eight round decision in his next bout. In 1961, he racked up three more wins, including a decision over experienced Philadelphian Carl Hubbard, and kept moving forward.

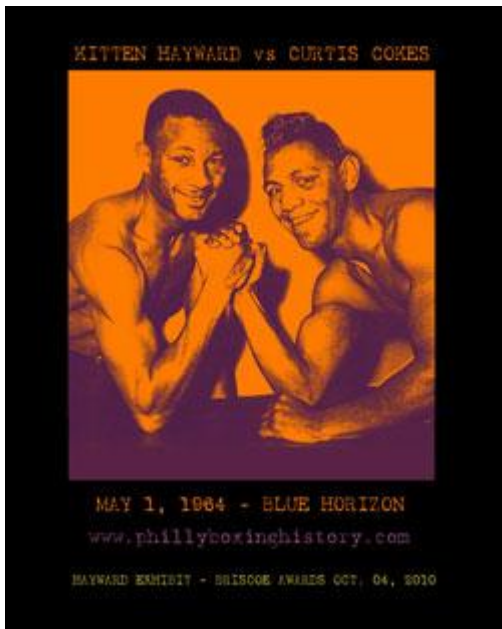
Hayward landed a spot on a Charley Scott undercard at Madison Square Garden and won by fourth round TKO over 40-bout vet Andy Figaro. It was Hayward's sixteenth fight. A hit at the Garden, Hayward returned in 1963 to defeat Henry White over eight rounds. Six months later, he was called back to the Garden for a fight with contender Jose Stable, who had previously defeated Kenny Lane, Chico Velez, Charley Scott, Curtis Cokes, Billy Collins, Sweet Pea Adams, and C.L. Lewis.



Hayward lost a ten round decision to Stable, but blamed the defeat on his own arrogance. "I thought I was a big shot, fighting a big name in New York City," Hayward told me. "I drove up there in a convertible and caught a cold."

Whether or not it was the brisk fall air that caused the defeat, his fight with Stable seemed to focus Hayward and helped him bounce back from his second loss with perhaps the sweet spot of his fighting prime.

One month after Stable, Hayward stopped South Philadelphian Percy Manning on September 30, 1963 at the Arena. He followed with a close win over Southwest Philly welterweight prospect Dick Turner, also at the Arena. Hayward's next bout was a scheduled ten rounder against Texas contender Curtis Cokes at the Blue Horizon.



In what many believe to be the greatest fight ever held at the legendary North Philly venue, Hayward came off the floor to stop Cokes in four rounds. Two years later Cokes would become world welterweight champion. It was the type of gritty and entertaining performance that Hayward was becoming known for. He had the ability to transform himself from the fun-loving Kitten into a vicious warrior. He did this thanks to his alter ego, a nasty guy named Cornelius (his middle name).

“Out of the ring, I’m nice. I’m the Kitten,” he said. “But during the fight, when things get rough, I turn into Cornelius. That’s not Stanley hitting those guys, knocking all those guys out. That’s Cornelius.”

Next up for Hayward was a second round TKO of Vince Shomo at Philly’s Convention Hall on June 25, 1965. Two months after that, Hayward defeated Tito Marshall by ten round decision, before closing 1965 with a showdown with rising Philly welterweight Bennie Briscoe. Hayward, 21-2-2, and Briscoe, 17-2, met at the Arena on December 6, 1965 in a memorable war.

Despite his recent rise in the rankings, Hayward was not the most dedicated trainer. He was extremely vulnerable to the many distractions that came his way as a young fighter with a rising profile. As the fight approached, perhaps his biggest – or favorite – distraction threatened to derail the fight. With just a few weeks before fight night, one of Hayward’s girlfriends returned from a semester in Paris, and despite the bad timing, Kitten just couldn’t resist welcoming her home. Kitten broke training camp the moment she returned to Philly and the pair disappeared for an entire week. Hayward resurfaced with two weeks to go. He thought that was plenty of time to get serious about the fight. Incensed, manager Katz and trainer Quenzell McCall locked Kitten up in a hotel and watched him like a hawk for the final two weeks.

Incredibly, when the bell sounded, Hayward looked terrific. He jumped out to an early lead against Briscoe. He moved and boxed well, piling up points and all but securing the victory by round six or seven. However, with local bragging rights on the line, Bennie Briscoe began applying pressure and Kitten started to tire. Always a dangerous puncher, Briscoe began landing his deadly shots and Kitten felt every one of them.



The fight became a race against the clock. Would Briscoe have enough time to catch up with Hayward, or would Kitten manage to run out the clock with his dwindling lead intact?

Briscoe battered Hayward over the last two rounds, but the battle-tested Kitten lasted the full limit. The decision was close, but in Hayward's favor. The win capped a fine six-bout winning streak and established Hayward as a contender. However, after the fight, Kitten became disoriented in his dressing room and had to spend the night in the hospital. He was exhausted and dehydrated, but not seriously injured.

"He gets the decision and has to go to the hospital," Briscoe commented to the newspaper. "I lose it and just catch a cab and go home."

Although very proud to have beaten Briscoe, the incident always embarrassed the proud Hayward. He enjoyed reminiscing about the fight, but hated to talk about the aftermath.

Hayward didn't fight for nearly one year after the fight, but it wasn't his health or the Briscoe fight that sidelined him. Gaps in his career and an increasing distaste for training began to slow his progress. His next fight came in October of 1966. By that time, his old rival Curtis Cokes was world welterweight champion and Hayward definitely felt that a rematch with the belt on the line was in his near future. However, instead of demanding a title fight, George Katz instead arranged another Philly vs. Philly showdown for Hayward at the Arena.



Gypsy Joe Harris was a rising star, hugely popular with local boxing fans, with an awkward style, a flair for entertaining, but just fourteen bouts to his credit. Katz saw Harris as easy pickings for Hayward, but Kitten did not like the match.

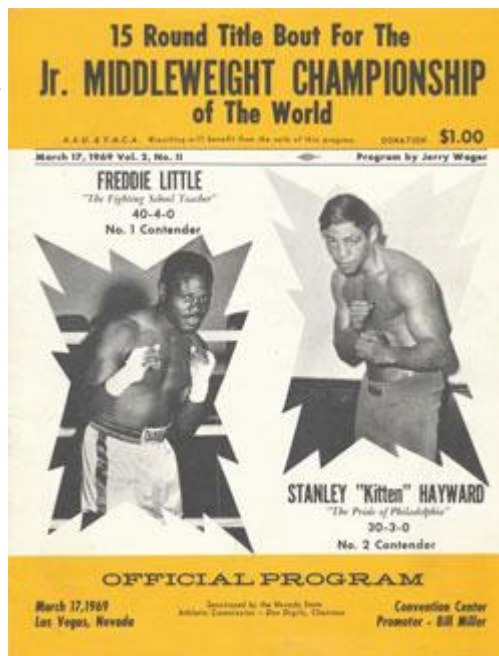
"I hadn't fought in a year, and Gypsy never liked to fight," Hayward said. "He liked to run around the ring and clown around."

Hayward told Katz that he didn't want the fight, but then Katz asked him why he was scared of the kid. That was all Hayward had to hear. He wasn't afraid of any fighter, and agreed to take the fight. However, Kitten's instincts were correct. Although Hayward dropped Harris early in the fight, Gypsy Joe got up and fought back. The tide turned when Kitten suffered a bad cut from a Harris head butt. Kitten retaliated, but wound up a bloody mess by round six. The fight was stopped in that round and Kitten's expected title crack at Cokes, was out the window.

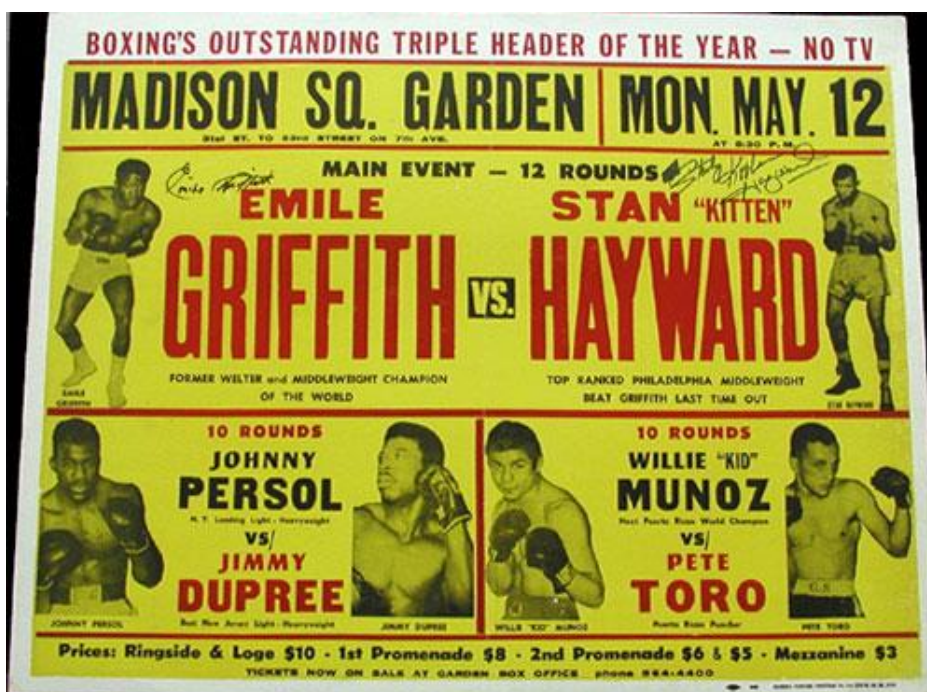
After the fight, Hayward split with Katz, embittered that his manager had pushed him into a fight that was bad for him and one he didn't want. Decades later, Kitten still bristled over the result of this fight. He held no grudge with Gypsy Joe, and his anger with Katz had eased, but the whole incident still bothered him greatly.

The loss seemed to take a lot out of Hayward and ended the best streak of his career. Seven months passed before Hayward fought again. Now managed by former heavyweight contender Dan Bucceroni and trained by Adolph Ritacco, Hayward resumed his career with wins over Fate Davis and Pete Toro in 1967. In November 1967, Hayward traveled to Paris for a draw with Jean Josselin at the Palais des Sports. The fight didn't turn out as he wanted, but Hayward loved being in Europe. In time he would return.

After three more fights, Hayward was matched with former champion Emile Griffith at the Spectrum. Griffith was heavily favored, yet Hayward squeaked out a split decision over the all-time great. The victory propelled Hayward into a fight with school teacher Freddie Little for the vacant world junior middleweight championship. Hayward was badly cut and Little won the crown by unanimous decision in Las Vegas.



However, it was never hard for Kitten to find the bright side in any situation. What he remembered most about his only trip to Vegas was how all the celebrities in town came to watch the fight and of course, loved him. Of all the stars he met on the trip, Diana Ross made the biggest impression. She said he was her favorite fighter. Or so the story goes.



A twelve round rematch with Griffith at Madison Square Garden followed. Emile clearly won the decision this time out, and Hayward took another ten months off before returning for a series of bouts in Europe. The lure of traveling abroad again was all the incentive he needed to return to the ring. Hayward fought in Paris three times (going 1-1-1), and Rome once (0-1). All of these bouts occurred in 1970.

At this point, Hayward's career took another pause. He claimed that after this run of fights, he began making movies in Europe. Hayward told me that he appeared in a western with Yul Brynner and a blue film in Denmark. Although Kitten's details were always sketchy, Brynner did make a western, *Adios, Sabata*, in Italy around this time. I've never seen the film, but it is available for rent on Amazon Prime. Hayward's erotic film may be harder to find. One Hayward film role that I can confirm is his appearance in 1993's *Philadelphia*, starring Tom Hanks and Denzel Washington. Although just a bit part, Hayward is clearly featured in one of the hospital scenes, chatting up an RN at the nurse's station.



After hob-knobbing with Brynner and making other high-profile celebrity friends, Hayward returned to the ring. In his second fight back, an ill-prepared Hayward took on murderous punching Cyclone Hart in another Philly vs. Philly battle in 1971 at the Arena. The fight only lasted 60 seconds. Although this was clearly the beginning of his decline, Hayward still had some victories in his future.

At the Spectrum, he stopped Jose Anglada and Perry Abney (Lil' Abner) in his next two bouts. But a bigger match with Willie "The Worm" Monroe in a 1974 Spectrum showdown ended with a bloody Hayward losing by TKO. He bounced back with a knockout of Steven Smith (Flasher Ishibashi) back at the Blue Horizon, but then lost a rematch by decision to Bennie Briscoe at the Spectrum. The fight was competitive, but Bennie's win was unanimous.

Hayward returned to the Arena for the final win of his career, an eighth round TKO of Luis Vinales on September 23, 1975, but returned for one more fight in 1977 against Larry Davis at the Goodwill House Fire Hall in Bristol, PA. Hayward was stopped in four rounds and never fought again. In fact, he said that he never again put on a pair of boxing gloves. He never fought an exhibition, trained in a boxing gym, or by his account, gave much thought to the fine boxing career he left behind him. Onward and upward.

However, the rest of us remember well what he accomplished in the boxing ring. Hayward posted an overall professional record of 32-12-4, with 18 KOs. He was inducted into the Pennsylvania Boxing Hall of Fame in 1986 and the Pennsylvania Sports Hall of Fame in 2012. Hayward also received an honorary Briscoe Award in 2019, where we celebrated his great career as well as his 80th birthday.



Kitten was also the subject of the “Kitten Hayward Exhibit” at the Briscoe Awards in 2010, where memorabilia, artwork, and photos were put on display to open up the Awards ceremony. As we prepared for the exhibit, Hayward allowed me to make a cast of his fist (IBHOF-style) and also donated one of his suits and “Mr. Kitten” shirts. However, Kitten floored me when he also dug out his classic blue and gold boxing robe and gave it to me. I offered to pay him for it, but he refused. He said, “I don’t have a son to give this to, so I want you to have it.” That was Kitten.

Hayward was the first former boxer I ever tracked down when I started the PhillyBoxingHistory.com website. There was just something about him – the name, the look, and the legend. I knew I had to meet him. He was a classic Philly fighter, but as he taught me over and over again, Stanley “Kitten” Hayward was much more than that. And he was truly one of a kind.



Over the years, we talked often and met for lunch regularly. We sat together at fights, banquets, and bars.

He took me to the track a number of times – both in person and to various OTB locations. He showed me his system for handicapping races, introduced me to everyone, and told me incredible stories from his amazing life. At first, I only wanted to talk about boxing, but I soon learned that his fighting days, as great as they were, paled in comparison with everything else he’d experienced. Kitten always asked about my wife, and every time we talked, told me to tell her that he said “Hello”. Every moment spent with him was precious to me and I never saw any sign of Cornelius. The Stanley I knew was always the Kitten.

Hayward is survived by his wife Vernell, his daughter Margot, and friends and fans. Funeral arrangements have not yet been announced.