

SMOKIN' BERT COOPER

By Rich Pagano

In June of 2018, I got the opportunity to talk with Bert Cooper at the International Boxing Hall of Fame inductions in Canastota, New York. With a 28-year professional boxing career behind him, the Sharon Hill, Pennsylvania, native looked good and sounded even better.

Cooper played fullback on the Collingdale High School (located southwest of the city of Philadelphia) football team in 1981, but school was not for him, and he quickly moved on to the sport of boxing.

"I did not like school," remembered Cooper. "When I was 16, my Mom took me out of school, and I quickly found myself training at the Upper Darby Police Athletic League (PAL) gym. I didn't even know how to hit the speed bag."

From Upper Darby, Cooper went to Joe Frazier's Gym where he sparred with some outstanding fighters as a teenager.

"I sparred with Pinklin Thomas when I was only 17," recalled Cooper, who had rooted for Frazier against Muhammad Ali as a kid.

"I showed up at Frazier's Gym with no socks and no boots,' explained Cooper. "Joe took me under his wing and gave me the name Smokin'. He told me I had something special, and that I was a bad dude. He saw that I could bang."

Frazier started Cooper on his amateur career, and the Delaware County native registered ten straight knockouts before losing his last amateur bout.

"In that fight I lost because I ran out of gas," explained cooper. "I wasn't doing my roadwork, and Joe told me you've got to be in shape."

At the age of 18, Cooper began his professional boxing career in 1984 with a first-round knockout of heavyweight Dennis Caldwell in Atlantic City. He added ten more wins, four by the knockout route, before meeting the 1984 Olympic Heavyweight gold-medalist Henry Tillman in Atlantic City for the NABF Cruiserweight title.

Tillman was the clear favorite to retain his belt against Cooper, but with the help of two knock-downs, Cooper grinded out a close unanimous decision.



Bert Cooper, who knocked down Evander Holyfield during a 1991 bout, is seen here on the left with this writer at the Pennsylvania Boxing Hall of Fame Inductions in 2017.

The Sharon Hill product defended his title twice, winning both bouts, but he was unable to secure a shot at the Cruiserweight World title, so he eventually decided to try his luck at the heavyweight division.

During this time, his relationship with Frazier began to fall apart. By the time he fought Carl “The Truth” Williams in June of 1987, the relationship had completely deteriorated.

Thad Moore wrote, “Cooper had challenged Frazier’s training methods, and the philosophical differences became too great.”

Moore explained further, “Frazier, in the past, disputed these accounts by saying that the split was largely due to Cooper’s drug use. In fact, leading up to the Williams fight, Frazier separated Cooper from distractions including his friends. Cooper had acknowledged that the company he kept during his career wasn’t helpful. ‘They gave me beer and drugs,’ said Cooper.”

After the Williams fight, Cooper felt that “The Big Boys” were not for him, and he returned to the Cruiserweight division.

Still the NABF champion, he defended his title five times before losing the belt to Nate Miller in February of 1989.

Disappointed, Cooper returned to the heavyweight division again hoping for a successful run. His first fight in June of 1989 was against George Foreman who stopped him in two rounds. Cooper failed to answer the bell in round three. The officials with the Arizona Boxing Commission held up Cooper’s purse because he showed no signs of injury, and after the fight, he tested positive for cocaine.

In 1990, having failed to secure a cruiserweight world title fight, Cooper moved to the heavyweight division permanently, knocking out top five ranked Orlin Norris and capturing the NABF title.

Unfortunately, he lost the title in his first defense, outpointed by undefeated Olympic gold medalist Ray Mercer in quite a brawl.

Later the same year, he was knocked out in the second round by Riddick Bowe and his career looked over.

However, he did bounce back in 1991, with four knockout victories which kept him relevant in the heavyweight division despite his erratic behavior and occasional poor performances.

Near the end of the year, Cooper would be involved in a fight that would make him a household name.

Evander Holyfield, the Undisputed Heavyweight Champion, was coming off a successful defense of his title after defeating 42-year old former Heavyweight Champion George Foreman. Meanwhile, Mike Tyson had twice defeated Donovan “Razor” Ruddock to become the number one contender to Holyfield’s titles.

However, the two sides had trouble working out a deal and both men's camps began to look into having their respective fighter instead face Foreman.

Ring Magazine explained, "In July 1991, it was reported that a Holyfield-Foreman rematch was agreed upon, but only a day later it was announced that Holyfield and Tyson's promoters, Dan Duva and Don King had agreed to a blockbuster deal that would see Holyfield and Tyson meet on November 8, 1991 at the MGM Grand Garden Arena in Las Vegas.

"In addition, Holyfield and Tyson were expected to split a then-record \$45 million purse with champion Holyfield reportedly to earn \$30 million, while the challenger Tyson would net \$15 million."

Unfortunately, a rib injury that Tyson suffered, as well as his arrest and conviction for the alleged rape of Desiree Washington shortly after led to the fight being postponed and eventually cancelled.

With Holyfield needing an opponent, former WBO Heavyweight champion Francesco Damiani was picked to fill Tyson's spot. However, only days before the bout, Damiani had to pull out of the fight because of a foot injury he received while training.

On short notice, it was announced that journeyman Bert Cooper would be Damiani's replacement.

Given little chance to defeat Holyfield, the fight would be the opportunity of a lifetime for the Sharon Hill native.

Evander "The Real Deal" Holyfield vs. Smokin' Bert Cooper was being billed as "The Homecoming". Since Atlanta was Holyfield's hometown, all the fight posters read, "The Home of the Braves Welcomes Home Its Heaviest Hitter". The date was set for November 23, 1991, and the venue was the Omni Coliseum in Atlanta, Georgia, in the champ's backyard.

Holyfield, with a record of 26-0, was recognized as the Undisputed Heavyweight Champion. He was recognized as the champ by the WBA, WBC, and IBF, thus the term undisputed.

Bert Cooper, the former Collingdale High School fullback, had a record of 26-7, and was ranked 12th in the world by the IBF.

Since Cooper was unranked by the WBC, that organization refused to sanction the bout, thus Holyfield's WBC title was not on the line, but the others were.

Though Cooper was given little chance to defeat Holyfield, he nevertheless put on a decent showing against the champion, and almost pulled off what would have been one of the biggest upsets in heavyweight boxing history.

"In the first round," reported Ring Magazine, "Holyfield used his speed to take advantage of Cooper, consistently hitting him with several quick combinations. A little past midway through

the round, Holyfield hit Cooper with a left hook to the body that dropped him to the canvas, though Cooper quickly got up and survived the rest of the round.”

The second round was solid for both fighters, but the champ came out really strong in the opening seconds of round three.

“Holyfield staggered Cooper with a left hook to the side of the head,” explained *The Ring*. “As the first minute of the round was coming to a close, Cooper landed a right hand to Holyfield’s head that staggered the champ. Cooper then got Holyfield against the ropes and landed a combination that included a right hand to the back of Holyfield’s head. Before Holyfield could fall to the canvas, he grabbed the top rope to keep himself up.”

At this point in the fight, it gets a little confusing for some people who witnessed the bout. Despite the fact that Holyfield never hit the canvas, referee Mills Lane still called it a knockdown, the first of the Champion’s professional career.

Cooper continued his attack on Holyfield, landing several powerful punches and nearly knocking him down again, but Holyfield held on to Cooper just as he was about to go down. The Champ convinced Lane that he could continue and managed to weather the storm.



Evander Holyfield and Bert Cooper title fight

In the second half of the round, Holyfield regained his form and landed some powerful combinations of his own. They both traded punches for the entire final minute of the round without any more knockdowns.

In round five, the Delaware County native was hurt again from a series of punches, but he kept on battling. Cut and bleeding, Cooper made it through the fifth and sixth round.

“Holyfield ended the fight late in round seven,” reported *The Ring*, the Bible of Boxing. “With 20 seconds to go in the round, ‘The Real Deal’ hit Cooper with a long combination. Though Cooper never went down, he could no longer defend himself, getting hit with 24 unanswered punches, causing Lane to stop the fight with two seconds left in the round and award Holyfield the victory via technical knockout.”

With his performance against Holyfield, Cooper would not have to wait long for his second shot at a world title. It came on May 15, 1992, against Michael Moorer (28-0) for the vacant WBO World Heavyweight crown.

The fight, held at the Taj Mahal Casino in Atlantic City, was an all-out brawl. Both fighters were down in the first round, before Cooper knocked Moorer down again in round three. The

Pride of Sharon Hill was floored a second time in round five, and the fight was stopped with Moorer winning by TKO. Many felt it was the 1992 Fight of the Year.

Over the next five years, Cooper beat fighters such as: David Jaaco, Rocky Pepeli, Mike Robinson, George Harris, and former European Champion Dereck Williams.

On his third try, Cooper finally captured a world title. On July 29, 1997, at Madison Square Garden, he knocked out previously unbeaten Richie Melito (18-0) in the first round to win the vacant WBF crown

Unfortunately, he lost his very first title defense to Anthony Green and was stripped of the WBF world title.

After seven more bouts, Cooper temporarily retired in 2002. However, almost eight years later he returned at the age of 44, and finally finished his career permanently in September 2012 after three straight losses.

As a professional, Bert Cooper finished with a record of 38-25, with 31 knockouts. He won NABF championships at the Cruiserweight and Heavyweight divisions and also captured a WBF World Heavyweight title. He also scored some very notable victories and fought several future Hall of Famers.

In 2018, he was honored by being inducted into the Pennsylvania Boxing Hall of Fame.

“Bert Cooper’s career was a combination of triumph and letdowns, accomplishments and disappointments,” wrote Thad Moore in *Boxing Insider*. “As much as he was able to achieve, we are all left to wonder, what could have been?”

In spite of the disappointments, we in Delaware County know what Bert Cooper did accomplish, and that was something no Delaware County boxer ever did, win a World Heavyweight Championship.

Sadly, Bert passed away on May 10, 2019, from pancreatic cancer. He was only 53.



Sharon Hill, Pennsylvania’s Bert Cooper, who knocked down Evander Holyfield for the first time during a 1991 bout, is the only heavyweight boxer from Delaware County to capture a world championship when he knocked out Richie Melito for the vacant WBF title in 1997.