

Boxing Ringside With Bobby Franklin

Cassius Vs. Sonny - Banks That Is Clay Hits the Canvas for the First Time Banks' Life Ends In Tragedy

Cassius Clay was making quite the name for himself by the time 1962 had rolled around. He had a stellar amateur career behind him culminating in an Olympic Gold medal, and was undefeated in ten professional fights when he signed to fight Sonny Banks in Madison Square Garden on February 10 of the year.

Clay had already defeated some very respectable heavyweights, and this, coupled along with his self-promotion had drawn a lot of attention to the young man from Louisville, Kentucky. He had wins over the likes of Willi Besmanoff, Alex Miteff, LaMar Clark, and Alonzo Johnson. All were decent opponents.

Sonny Banks had a different career arc. He had not had any amateur bouts, and in his 12 fights leading up to his match with Cassius, he had won 12 and lost 2. He had been kayoed by Joe Shelton and lost a decision to Chuck Garrett. He avenged the loss to Shelton with a knockout victory. His level of opposition was nowhere near the level of Clay's, but he was known for having a solid punch. They had one common opponent, Tunney Hunsaker, whom Clay had beaten by decision in his first pro fight. Banks stopped him in two rounds. Hunsaker was the best Sonny had fought.

On fight night Clay was a five to one favorite. The bout didn't attract a very big crowd but was on national television. It was a replacement fight for a match between Eddie Machen and Cleveland Williams, which had been postponed.

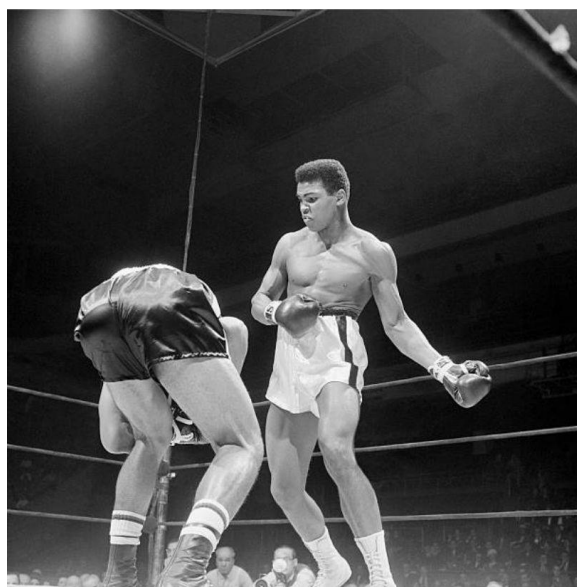
Clay was not expected to have any problem defeating Banks. He had much more experience, was faster, and was riding high at this early stage of his career. Banks was still getting his footing in the game. However, this was boxing and anything can happen in a fight. Cassius Clay was briefly tested in

the early moments of the fight, and how he reacted gave some great insight into what he was made of.

In the first round of the fight, Clay came out dancing and self-assured. He was taking control early and moving on his feet a lot. Banks was following after him. At one point Cassius backed Sonny into a corner and appeared to have him trapped when suddenly, Banks unleashed a vicious left hook that caught Clay flush on the jaw. The former Olympian went down hard. I have seen this referred to as a flash knockdown, and Clay did get up fast, but make no mistake about it; he was tagged hard and appeared to have lost consciousness right after being hit.



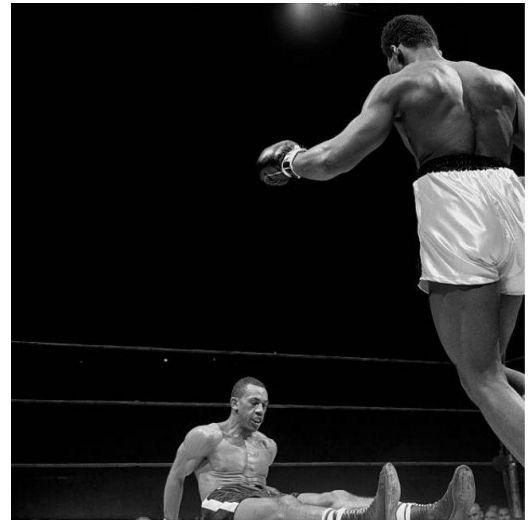
As hard as he was hit, Clay regained his feet very fast. He was sent to a neutral corner by referee Ruby Goldstein while receiving an eight count. Another sign he was hurt was the fact that he put both hands on the ropes while in the neutral corner. Goldstein pulled his arms off the strands and sent him back into action.



Cassius recovered very quickly and was almost immediately on the attack. It was the first time he had been decked as a professional and he was not happy it happened.

Clay now stopped moving as much on his feet and focused on laser focused shots to the head. His hand speed was phenomenal, and he had precision accuracy. Banks began taking a frightful beating. This was quite a first round.

In round two, Clay came out ready to end it. He battered Banks around the ring and dropped him near the end of the round. In the third round, the attack continued, and while Clay was not able to drop Banks again, he gave him a terrible going over. It was getting so bad that the referee called the doctor in to examine Sonny between rounds. The doctor told Ruby to keep a careful eye on the fighter and not hesitate to stop the fight.



As the fourth round opened, Clay continued his relentless assault. Referee Goldstein mercifully stopped the carnage after just 26 seconds. Other than the knockdown scored by Banks, this fight was as one sided as they come. However, it did tell us quite a bit about the potential of a young Cassius Clay. It also was the beginning of another tragedy in boxing. This one involving Banks.

Clay showed he could take a really hard punch, could be on the verge of being knocked out, and come roaring back. The fact that he rose from such a serious punch so quickly showed he was made of championship material. Cassius also displayed a killer instinct. Once he perceived Banks to be a threat, he went to work, taking him apart mercilessly. He didn't waste any motion, a fault he had throughout his career, and made every move count. He could be a brutal puncher when he put his mind to it. He had power, but more importantly, he had accuracy.



Poor Sonny Banks would end up one of boxing's victims after the fight. He should never have been in with Clay to begin with. Even though they had similar professional records, Sonny had nowhere near the experience. He had

no amateur career behind him and had not been in with the same caliber of opposition. I believe he was called in late to the fight as the promoters were looking to fill in the spot left open when the Machen/Williams bout fell through. Because of this, Banks gained notoriety by ending up on television and also because he had decked Clay. It was the worse thing that could have happened to him.

He was definitely seriously hurt by Clay, and worse, he was now a salable commodity. He would now be elevated to a level that was beyond where he would have been had he not fought Clay and had been brought along at a normal pace for a young prospect. In his very next fight he was matched with Young Jack Johnson. Johnson was a top ten heavyweight and vastly more experience than Banks, having stopped Zora Folley and beaten Willi Besmanoff, Ezzard Charles, and Marty Marshall. He had fought 41 times when he faced Banks. Johnson kayoed Sonny in the fifth round.

After the Johnson loss, Banks went back to facing opposition more on his level and put together a number of wins over the next year and a half. He had not shown much improvement but still was a known name. In 1964 he was put in with Cleveland Williams. Williams had over 60 wins at the time with most coming via knockout. He gave Sonny a terrible beating stopping him in the 6th round.

This should have been it for Sonny Banks, but it wasn't. Eleven months later he was put in with top prospect Leotis Martin. At this point Sonny had already taken at least three serious beatings. Boxing was not a profession he should have been pursuing, but he had a name because of the Clay fight.

Unfortunately, that notoriety cost him his life. In the Martin fight, Sonny was knocked out in the ninth round and died three days later. It is said Sonny Banks died from injuries incurred in the Martin fight, but the circumstances leading up to his death began three years earlier in Madison Square Garden when he had his moment of glory against Cassius Clay. His fame made him marketable for promoters, but he never made anything himself and was killed at the age of 24. A story not unusual in the fight game.