

Boxing Ringside With Bobby Franklin

Rest In Peace, Marion Conner Former New England Heavyweight and Light Heavyweight Champion Passes at the Age of 81

Marion Conner had a magical smile. When you would see him flash it, it was hard to believe this man had a career in the most violent sport there is. Yet, there was a kindness to his face that belied his career as a professional prizefighter. On January 12, 2022 Marion Conner passed away. He had been suffering for a number of years from dementia brought on from his years in the ring.



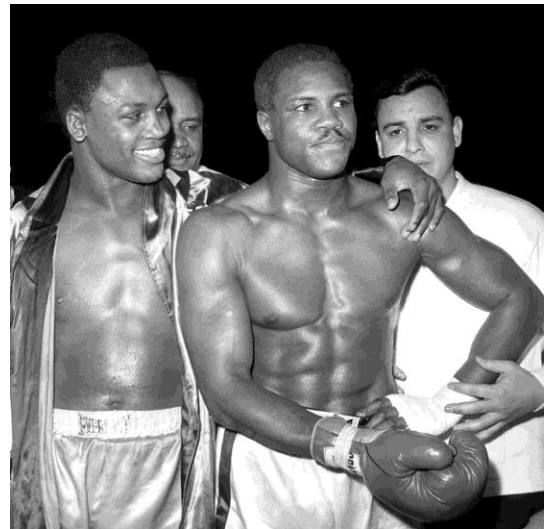
Marion was born in 1940 in Canton, Ohio. From an early age he was athletically gifted and participated in swimming, basketball, track, and football, but it was boxing that captured his imagination.

I first met Marion Conner in 1965. I was a ten-year-old boy, and my father had taken me to some sort of sporting show. At the time, I was a very shy kid, but for some reason loved to watch boxing on TV. When my father asked me if I would like to meet a real boxer in person, though a bit nervous, I jumped at the chance. He brought me over to this very handsome fellow with the friendliest smile. It was such a thrill for me to meet Marion Conner, and he made me feel like his friend. We squared off for a photo, and I never forgot that moment and the nice person who made me feel so important.



About two years later, I would attend my first professional boxing card. It was on December 18, 1967. My father brought me to the Boston Garden where we were seated a couple of rows behind former Governor Foster Furcolo. As I sat there, I saw my friend Marion Conner step into the ring with the number one heavyweight contender, Joe Frazier. I now had a personal connection right into that ring, and I was so proud of how my friend handled himself. Outweighed by thirty pounds and in with one of the all-time greats, Marion did not give an inch. He was not an opponent. He was in there to win and go on to become world champion.

Unfortunately, he had run into one of boxing's greatest fighting machines. Not only had Marion been decked, but the referee went down as well. When you look at a picture taken right after the fight, you can see the disappointment etched in Marion's face. He had come to win and felt he had let everyone down. Well, he hadn't let me down. He showed this now 12-year-old what courage and determination was all about. To me, he was a winner and a champion, and I was proud of him.



Forty-five years later I would meet Marion Conner once again when he came to Boston to receive an award. We got to have another picture taken, and you can still see that wonderful smile on his face. We talked about his boxing career and how it still pains him that he never became a world champion. How thrilled he was to have met such greats as Joe Louis, Ezzard Charles, and Jersey Joe Walcott. His time living in Roxbury and training at the New Garden Gym, a gym I would later work out at as I tried my hand at a boxing career. His friendship with New England Boxing Champ Larry Carney and how much he respected Larry.



When I asked him about his fighting style, he told me he was an aggressive body puncher with a very strong left hook to the head and wore his opponents down. As an amateur, he had competed as a southpaw and was turned around when he became a pro. In his first fight with Tom McNeeley, Marion credits a part of that win to switching to lefty midway through the bout. Boxing scribe Mike Marley remembers the bout that way as well. When our discussion turned to his fight with Joe Frazier I was surprised to learn from Marion that his handlers told him to trade left hooks with Joe Frazier. That wasn't very wise advice. I believe Marion's best chance would have been to use his speed and a sneak right hand.

On November 16, 1966, tragedy struck when Marion met rugged Greatest Crawford of Brooklyn, NY at the Canton Memorial Auditorium. He had an outstanding record of 30 fights, 23 wins, six losses, and one draw going into this fight. Crawford, who was 26 years old, was knocked out in the ninth round and was taken to a hospital after efforts to revive him failed. He underwent surgery to remove a blood clot in his brain but succumbed to the injury on November 17, 1966. The tragedy of that night took the fire out of Marion.

Marion's wife, Emma, told me he was never the same after that fight. He would now let up when he had an opponent hurt. In his rematch with Herschel Jacobs, Marion had Jacobs cut but then backed off out of fear of hurting him. His post-Crawford record of 7-17-1 shows just what an effect the sad outcome of that fight had on him.

During his career, Marion Conner fought many of the top names in an era when boxing was still a sport with many great fighters. Look at his record, and along with Joe Frazier, you will see many familiar names. Henry Hank, Herschel Jacobs, Tom McNeeley, Jimmy Dupree, Levan Roundtree, Mark Tessman, Billy Tisdale, Billy Douglas, and Ronnie Harris, to name just a few. It is also something to note that Joe Frazier had 37 bouts against 30 different opponents. Only two of them were light heavyweights, one being Bob Foster and the other Marion Conner. Quite an exclusive club to be in. It has been a long time since that ten year old boy first met the boxer with the warm smile, but he is still the man I remember so well from that day. When heard he had died I felt very sad. I know he is still smiling.

Marion and his lovely wife Emma had just celebrated their 69th Wedding Anniversary in November. Emma was his strength. In his later years Marion devoted much time at the Food Ministry at the Community Life Church Of God In Christ. He was a good man.

So long Champ, you will be missed.

