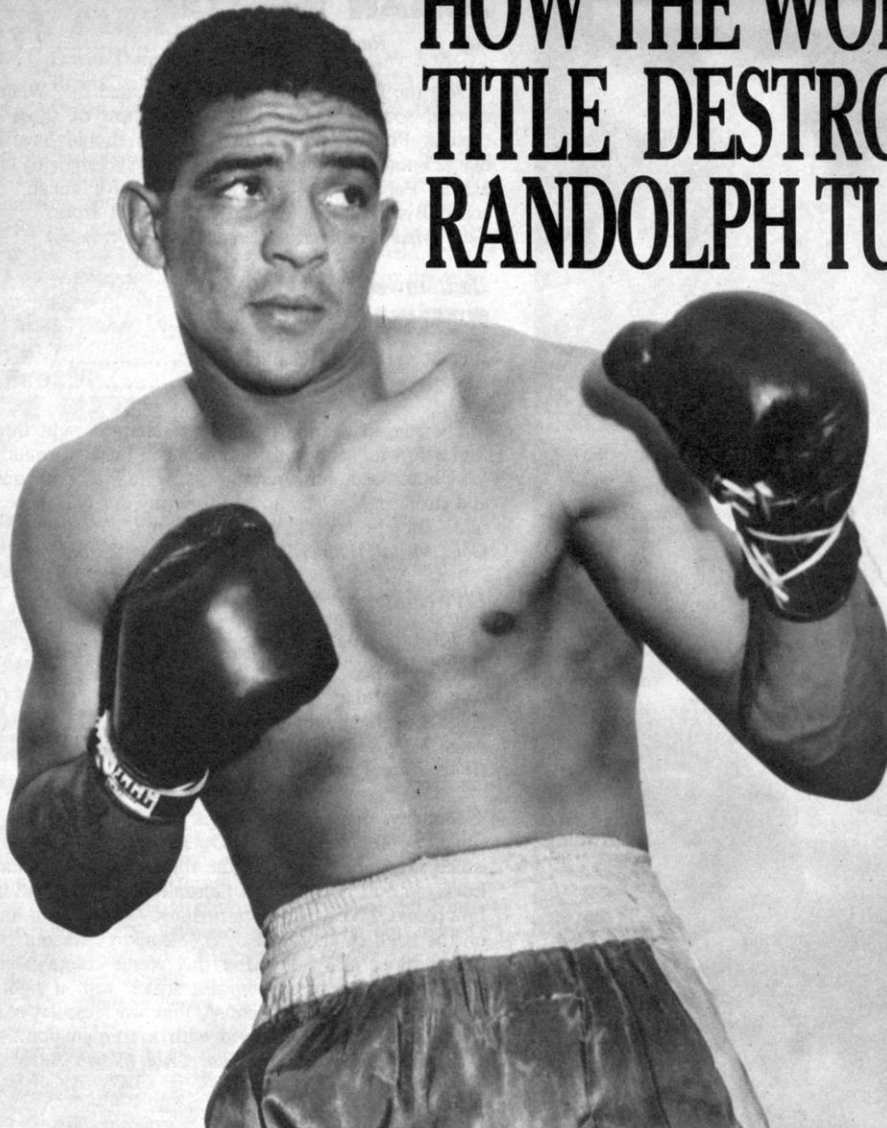


HOW THE WORLD TITLE DESTROYED RANDOLPH TURPIN



By Patrick Myler

Gwen Turpin didn't notice anything unusual about her husband's mood that morning. While she had busied herself around the run-down café they ran in the English midlands town of Leamington Spa, Randolph had spent most of the morning writing a letter.

She presumed he was writing to his mother, who was on vacation at Woking, in Surrey. Little did she realize that what her depressed spouse was scribbling was a suicide note.

Gwen served a couple of truck drivers their usual order of tea and toast and told them, in reply to their polite

query, that Randolph was "just fine."

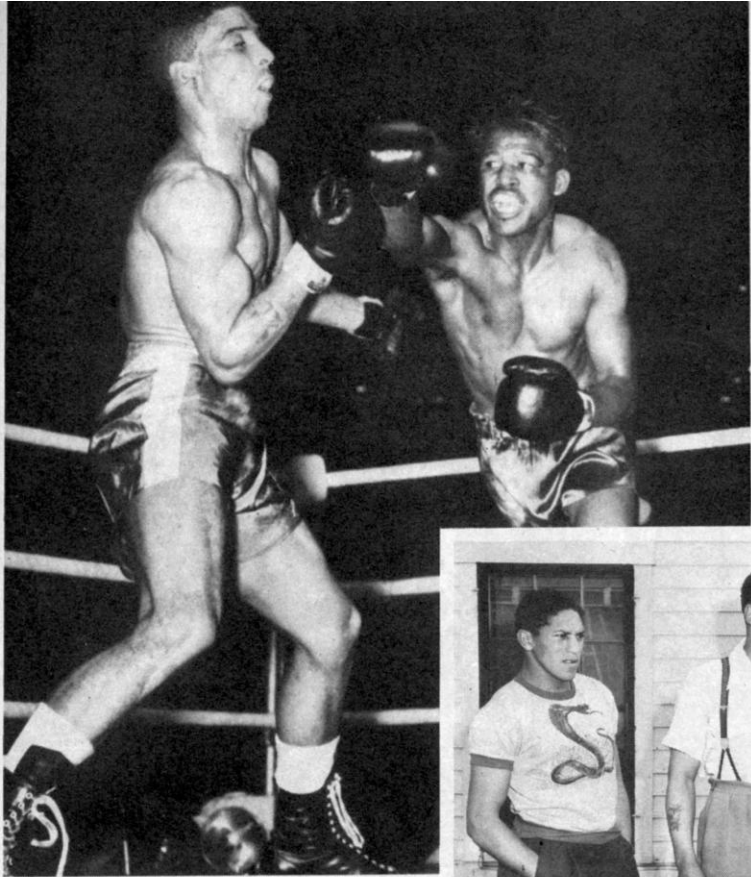
Turpin would often enjoy a chat with regular customers in between cooking mixed grills in the back kitchen, but they knew better than to talk about boxing, in particular about his own career. To Randolph, that was a closed book. There were the glad memories, to be sure, but they were clouded by too many bitter episodes in what should have been a more rewarding fighting life.

Randolph kissed his daughters Gwyneth and Annette goodbye as they left for school after lunch, calling them back to repeat his warning: "Always watch how you cross the roads."

Around 2:30 on that afternoon of May 17, 1966, Mrs. Turpin felt a strange unease. She checked to make sure that another of her girls, Charmaine, who was home from school with a heavy cold, was asleep in bed, then climbed to the attic bedroom to be met with a shocking scene.

The youngest of their four daughters, 17-month-old Carmen, was sitting on the bed crying, her face covered in blood. Randolph was slumped alongside the bed. Gwen screamed: "What have you done to her?" She then picked up her badly injured child and ran all the way to the local hospital.

It was only when she arrived home

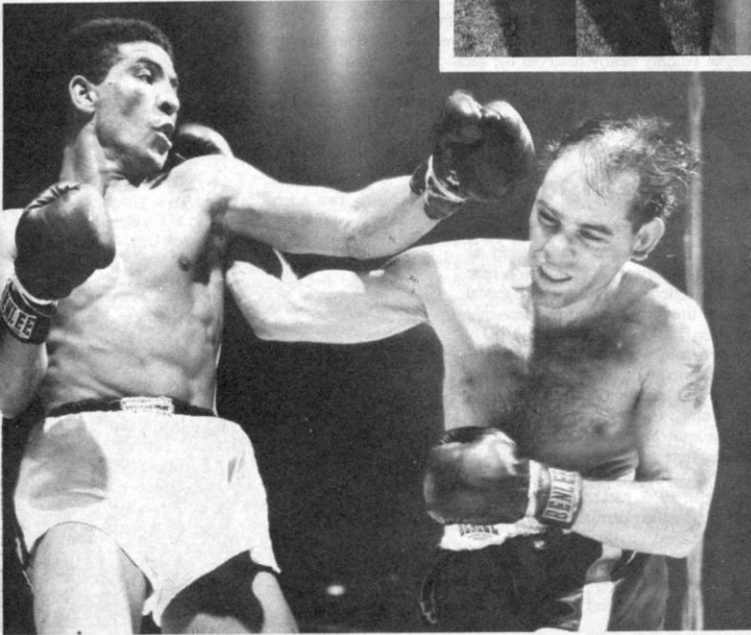


In his first bout vs. Sugar Ray Robinson, Turpin took the champion's best, then took the middleweight title.

After Robinson's retirement, Turpin was expected to capture the vacant crown. But he was ill-prepared for his showdown with Bobo Olson, and suffered a unanimous decision loss.



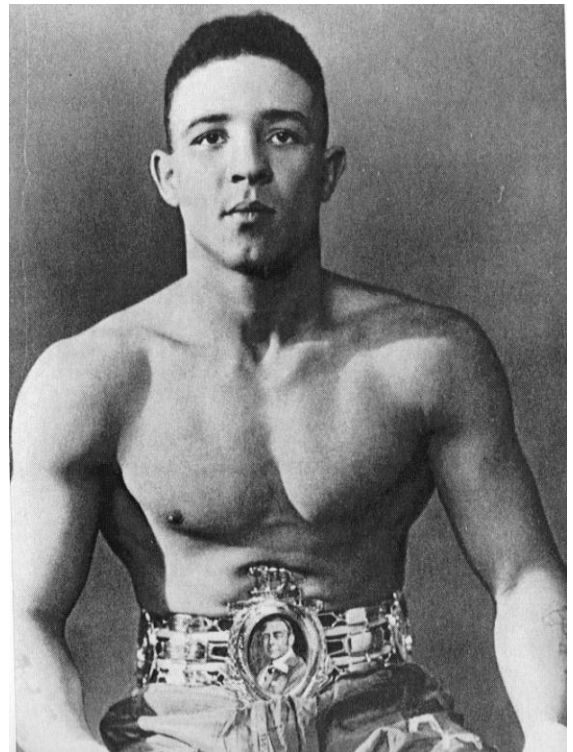
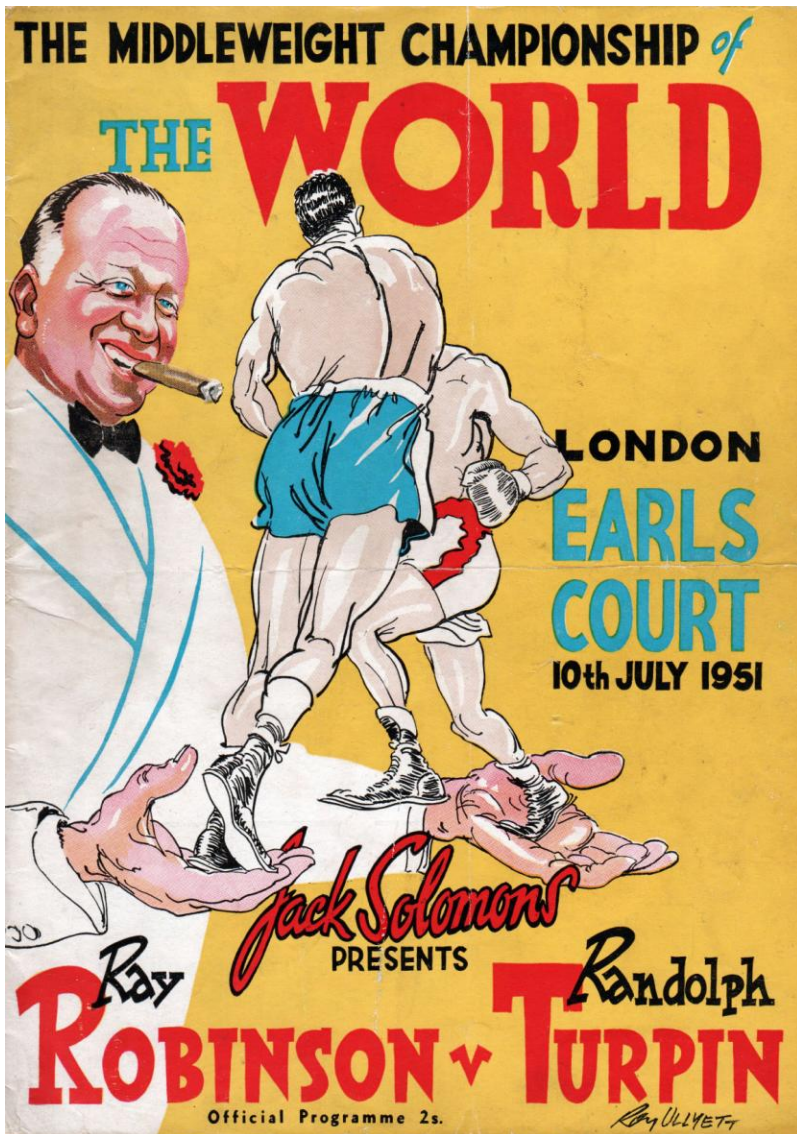
The fighting Turpin brothers. The photo was taken in September 1951, when Randolph, second from the right, was training for his rematch with Robinson.



that she learned that her 38-year-old husband was dead from a gunshot. On the bedroom door had been pinned a letter—the suicide message he had been writing that morning.

Young Carmen miraculously survived. She had been shot twice, one bullet lodging near her brain and the other piercing her lung after narrowly missing her heart. She recovered sufficiently to return home 18 days after the tragedy. It was never discovered why the former world middleweight champion had tried to take his daughter's life along with his own. It was suggested that Carmen was not really

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his child, but this was strenuously denied by Mrs. Turpin.

In another letter discovered after his death, written two years earlier, Turpin had written bitterly of his vain attempts to get back money he had loaned, and how he had endured 74 amateur bouts, 73 professional fights, countless exhibitions and fairground ring appearances, and thousands of rounds of sparring—"all for 64 days of glory."

Sixty-four days was, indeed, the du-

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ration of Randolph Turpin's reign as world champion—from July 10 to September 12, 1951. It remains the shortest middleweight title tenure on record. But the brevity of his stay should not detract from the brawny Englishman's feat of pulling off one of boxing history's mightiest shocks.

Upsets were nothing new in the fight game. Ever since master craftsman James J. Corbett had clinically taken apart an overindulgent, undertrained John L. Sullivan in the first world heavyweight title fight back in 1892, heavily backed favorites had fallen more often than a novice gymnast trying to master the parallel bars. But this was the upheaval to top the lot. Sugar Ray Robinson, the one who had earned the tag "greatest pound-for-pound fighter of them all," had lost the world middleweight crown to Turpin before 18,000 ecstatic English fans at London's Earls Court.

This was the days before live television. The initial sports flash transmitted by the newspaper wire services was greeted by sports editors with incredulity. But there was no misprint.

The 30-year-old Robinson, beaten only once before in 132 fights, had been convincingly outfought and, yes, outsmarted by the 23-year-old challenger. British referee Eugene Henderson was the sole arbiter, but this was no robbery or hometown verdict. Turpin had taken the decision fairly.

Turpin, a heavy puncher who had notched 29 knockouts in his 43 fights, had been accorded a remote chance of catching the champion with a payoff punch. Moreover, Robinson's durability was as remarkable as his other great talents. Certainly, no one had suspected Randolph could take the title on points.

It was Turpin's use of a ramrod jab, and his superior strength at close quarters, that enabled him to bustle and bully the gifted American, who was further inconvenienced by a badly cut left eye suffered in a seventh-round clash of heads.

Robinson blamed his setback on a hectic European schedule; he had fought six non-title contests in six weeks, the last only nine days before his defense against Turpin. He also admitted he had underrated the ambitious, super-fit Englishman. There would be no mistake next time, he promised.

And there wasn't. The return was held at New York's Polo Grounds, two months after the London encounter. Robinson, though again cut over the

left eye and still finding it difficult to fathom Turpin's awkwardly effective style, turned possible defeat into victory with a fierce 10th-round blitz.

Turpin, downed by a scything right to the chin, tried to fend off the relentless former champion by lolling on the ropes, ducking and swaying as he sought to regain his dulled senses. But Sugar Ray was not going to let it slip this time. He rained punches on the trapped Turpin, and although many of them missed, enough got through to convince referee Ruby Goldstein that serious damage could be caused if he let Randolph take any more. He was not to know that only eight seconds of the round were left when he jumped in to wrap his arms around the still-upright, but bewildered, Britisher. Inevitably, there were arguments that Goldstein acted too hastily.

Had he allowed Turpin the benefit of those last eight seconds, it was suggested, the titleholder might have recovered in the interval and gone on to repeat his victory over the damaged and tiring Robinson.

But most observers acknowledged that the referee had acted correctly, with Turpin's safety uppermost in his mind. A few days earlier, another fighter, George Flores, had died shortly after being knocked out at Madison Square Garden. To some, it was the ghost of Flores that guided Goldstein's action.

The British, once they had gotten over the disappointment, felt their man would regain the title if he got another crack at the aging Robinson. It was not to be. Sugar Ray defended against Bobo Olson and Rocky Graziano, then unsuccessfully tried for Joey Maxim's light heavyweight crown, before announcing his retirement in December 1952.

The way seemed clear for Turpin to reestablish himself as the world's top middleweight. He was the heaviest hitter in the division, and his unorthodox skills, combined with his strength, enabled him to have made an excursion into the light heavyweight ranks, where he captured the British and Empire titles from Don Cockell by 11th-round knockout.

With Robinson out of the way, no one could deny Turpin's right to the number-one contender spot for the vacant world middleweight crown. It was his for the taking. Who would have suspected that he was to throw it all away and jump aboard the slippery

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TURPIN

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slope to poverty and premature death at his own hand?

1953 was the year it all went wrong for the 25-year-old "Leamington Licker." After taking the European Boxing Union version of the world crown by clearly outpointing tough Frenchman Charles Humez in London, he traveled to New York to meet Olson for the undisputed championship. It soon became clear that the Englishman had no real heart for the upcoming job, though it would have brought him the title, as well as financial security.

British reporters who traveled over for the fight were amazed at Turpin's training methods, or, more precisely, his lack of preparation. Always noted as a diligent trainer, he would now frequently stop sparring and quit camp for the day.

Against all the best advice, Turpin insisted on being his own boss at his Catskill Mountains headquarters. Ameri-

can coach Jimmy August had been brought into the camp, but Randolph preferred the advice of his longtime pal Frank Algar. (The British Boxing Board of Control was later to forbid the unlicensed Algar from working Turpin's corner.)

Turpin also rowed with his elder brother Dick, who had been the first black boxer to win a British title, and spurned the British pressmen because they had criticized his lackadaisical training methods. It took former British fighting hero Tommy Farr, who once took the great Joe Louis 15 rounds in a gallant title bid, and who was now writing a boxing column for the *London Sunday Pictorial*, to reveal the true cause of Randolph's odd behavior: He was in love!

It was true. He was pining for the girl he left at home, a Welsh farmer girl, Gwen Price. They had met while Turpin was still married to his first wife, although divorce proceedings had since begun. Before he left the States, an American woman was to have Turpin's name sensationally switched from the sports pages to the news pages when she accused him of rape and assault.

But first there was the title fight with

Olson. For the first three rounds it looked as if the critics had been wrong, as the British boxer stormed into the attack, forcing Olson to cover up under a barrage of hefty rights to the head and dynamic left hooks. But it was a desperate gamble by a man who knew if he couldn't get the job done quickly, he didn't have the energy to win a lengthy battle.

From the fourth round on, it was nearly all Olson. He dominated the exchanges, cutting the Englishman's left eye in the fifth, knocking him down in the ninth and 10th, and weathering the few feeble counterattacks from the weary Turpin. Given his condition, it was a miracle that Randolph survived for 15 rounds. But there could be no doubting the decision. All three judges gave it to Olson by wide margins.

Worse was to follow for the disgraced Britisher. The day before he was due to sail back home on the Queen Mary, he was arrested by New York police and was charged with assaulting 24-year-old Adele Daniels. She claimed he had assaulted her at her apartment in a "vicious, bestial, cruel manner."

The charge was later withdrawn unconditionally, but Miss Daniels sued for

\$35,000 in damages, twice what Turpin had earned for the Olson fight. (She eventually settled for \$2,500.)

Whatever talents Turpin might have shown as a ringman, he had no head for business. A hotel venture flopped. He had installed his brother-in-law, a former brick carrier, as the hotel's manager, and lost more than \$20,000 on the deal.

There were countless stories of how the man who grew up in poverty squandered his hard-earned cash. What he didn't spend on worthless business deals, he threw away on women and so-called friends who borrowed money with no intention of ever paying him back.

His boxing career hit bottom in 1954, when he was sensationally knocked out in the first round by Tiberio Mitri in a European title fight in Rome. Turpin later complained of double-vision, but an examination by the British Boxing Board's doctor passed him as being in excellent health and fit to resume his career.

He fought 17 more times, with just three defeats, but it was plain for all to see that the fire was gone, and there was worrying evidence that he could no longer take a decent wallop on the chin. This was proven conclusively when Trinidad's Yolande Pompey sent him sprawling for the count in September 1958. It was Turpin's last legitimate contest.

Bankrupted for a tax debt of \$34,000, he turned to that most degrading occupation of washed-up fighters—professional wrestling. He was paid around \$50 a bout, a far cry from the \$68,000 he had earned for the second Robinson fight.

On May 14, 1966, an official-looking letter dropped through the Turpin mailbox. It was a final demand from the Inland Revenue for a settlement on his wrestling earnings. On top of this worry, the Leamington Spa Council wanted to demolish his cafe to install a garage.

It was the realization of what he had let slip through his fingers, compounded by news of the huge figures bandied about for the heavyweight title fight that month in London between Henry Cooper and Muhammad Ali, that proved to his disturbed mind that there was only one way out.

Turpin's cynicism toward the sport that had brought him fame and despair was summed up in a poem he penned called "The Longest Road." The last lines read:

*So we leave this game
Which was hard and cruel
And down at the show
On a ringside stool
We'll watch the next man
Just one more fool ■*

Patrick Myler is a veteran boxing writer based in Dublin.