

LARRY (BUCK) LITTLE, Jr. – 1936-2022

By John Ochs

When Larry Little's dad taught him to box in the makeshift ring behind the family farmhouse near Grainger, WA, Larry's toughest sparring partner was his sister, Hope.

"She and I used to have a lot of knockdown, drag-out fights," recalled the Shelton, WA resident. "She kept me in line doing chores around the house and helped me out of a lot of scrapes. She would come ripping and tearing with those pigtailed blowing in the wind, and the other kids wouldn't stick around. She could more than hold her own with any of them."



Those backyard sessions served their purpose because Little, fighting as Larry Buck, became a top-rated light-heavyweight contender in the late 1960s. Little chose his ring name as a tribute to his father who fought professionally in the 1930s under the name Buck Little. "At the time, my dad wanted to fight middleweight champion Freddie Steele from Tacoma," Little said. "But when he learned that mobster Frank Carbo controlled the middleweight division, he lost interest. He'd heard about people who had been tied in with the mob, and he wanted no part of that."

Little passed away peacefully at Capitol Medical Center in Olympia, WA on August 9, 2022. Diagnosed with dementia in 2012, he was able to remain at his home throughout his illness until just before his death by virtue of the tender care of his loving wife Jan.

When Little was born on June 27, 1936, his parents lived at Electric City in Grant County, WA where his father was working on the Grand Coulee Dam. "My father was a 'powder monkey'," Little said. "He took a course with the Bureau of Mines and set the blasting caps that shoot out the side of the mountains. I can remember coming through Wenatchee with him years later. He recalled when that land had been nothing but sand, "cheat" grass, and sagebrush, and had been available for 50 cents an acre. The Grand Coulee Dam made that area bloom and become some of the richest farmland in the world."

When the Grand Coulee project ended, Buck Little and his wife, Thelma, began farming below Grainger near the Yakama Indian Reservation. “Boy, farming was tough, that’s when he really had to fight,” Little said. “They started by renting 40 acres. The money my dad put away from boxing went into farming. They bought some land and put it into corn, hay, and pasture to raise Hereford cattle.”

Fall harvest and spring planting left only winter for the teenager to turn out for Toppenish High School athletics. Not finding basketball to his liking after his freshman year, Little turned out for the boxing team as a sophomore. “Mom didn’t want me to box in high school,” Little remembered. “One day she came to pick me up after practice, and when she couldn’t find me on the basketball floor she asked one of the kids where I was. He told her that I was upstairs. She found me and asked, ‘Since when do you wear hand wrappings to play basketball?’ She could see I really wanted to box, though, and after that she and dad became my biggest fans.”

Little’s dad continued to teach him at home while coaches Clayton Goit and Phil Mirosh guided him at school meets. In 1955, he won the state high-school middleweight championship by defeating Prosser’s Marcus Collins, the same boxer who had outpointed him for the title the prior year. “I was promised a full scholarship to Washington State College by varsity boxing coach Ike Dieder if I won the championship, but the next year they de-emphasized the sport and dropped scholarships,” Little recalled. “High-school boxing was discontinued at the same time, so I guess you could say I *still am* the state high-school middleweight champ.”

As a youngster, Larry followed the careers of Yakima-area boxers Dick Wagner and Pete Rademacher, both of whom had risen to fistic prominence. Wagner, from Toppenish, was a world-class light-heavyweight contender in 1940s and ‘50s. Rademacher, raised in the Yakima Valley, won the Gold Medal as a heavyweight in the 1956 Olympic Games and then fought Floyd Patterson for world’s professional title a year later. With local heroes like Wagner and Rademacher serving as role models, Larry’s connection to boxing was set in stone early on.

After graduation, Little enrolled at Yakima Junior College while continuing to box as an amateur for the Yakima YMCA. A year later, he left school to marry and set up shop as a hairstylist in Seattle. He was out of boxing for two years until June 1958 when he entered the Army. “The first thing I wanted was to get on the Army boxing team,” said Little. “I was stationed at Fort Carson in Colorado

and won a tournament with the 60th Infantry Division 'Go Devils.' In 1959, I won the Army and Inter-Service Tournaments as a 165-lb. middleweight as well as the Honolulu AAU Invitational Tournament in the 156-lb. Division."

Honorably discharged from the Army in 1961, Little returned to hair styling for three years when, after watching his ex-Army stablemate Andy Heilman box on television, he decided to give boxing another chance. "Andy was going strong, holding his own with champions and world-rated fighters like Emile Griffith, Florentino Fernandez, and Ferd Hernandez," Little said. "Even though in the Army he had been one weight class heavier than me, I had always been able to handle him easily in the gym. I figured I could give the fight game a try and make some money. I talked it over with my wife, and she said she would give me a year. I went downtown to the Cherry Street Gym, and that's when I met George."

George Chemeres owned the gym in Seattle where he trained fighters and managed leading light-heavyweight contender Eddie Cotton. Little trained under Chemeres' experienced eye while working in the ring with Cotton. Due to a series of injuries, Little did not have his first pro fight until 1966 when he was 30, an age when most fighters were ending their careers.

Because he thought his fighter's late start in the pro game might hinder Larry's career, the ever resourceful Chemeres exercised a kind of poetic license with his fighter's age. "When I first met George in 1964, I was on the long end of 27," related Little. "From that time until I retired, I was the only fighter in history who never aged. I just stayed 27 until my last fight in 1972."

Larry first attracted worldwide attention in 1969 when he and then third-ranked Andy Kendall fought a 10-round draw which sportswriter Vince O'Keefe termed "one of the meanest fights" ever seen in a Seattle ring. This fight earned him the status as the seventh-ranked contender for the world light-heavyweight title. Additional fights with Kendall, Bill Schellhas, Roger Rouse, and Pat O'Connor kept Little in the fistic limelight until October 1972 when he lost a decision to Pierre Fourie in his last fight at Johannesburg, South Africa.



Afterward, Little worked as a metal fabricator for a Seattle firm. It was while fabricating lumber sorters and de-barking equipment for Simpson Timber Co. in the mid-1970s that he became familiar with the Shelton area. "I enjoyed coming down here, getting out in the country and away from city traffic. My wife Jan's father and two sisters own and operate a Christmas tree farm near Shelton. So, we purchased a home at Fawn Lake and moved here."

Larry believed boxing still could benefit young people today: "I think we are short changing kids by not having boxing available either in schools or youth centers. Boxing is a good sport for boys not big enough to play football or basketball. A certain number of kids have a desire to punch out other students, teachers, principals, and even police officers. If these kids were offered boxing, they wouldn't be so apt to carry guns or get into drugs. Usually, they either like the sport and get more involved or else drop out of being tough after trying it awhile. Boxing develops self discipline. Team members police each other and often straighten themselves out."

Larry was preceded in death by his parents Lawrence C. and Thelma May Little, sister Robyn Hope Cameron, and daughter Lori Marie Jersey. He is survived by his wife Janice, son Lawrence C. Little III of Anchorage, AL, stepdaughter Shawna Wright of Remington, VA, stepson William F. Schaidt III of Shelton, WA, eight grandchildren and five great-grandchildren. A service to celebrate Larry is planned for October at Capitol Christian Center in Olympia. Donations to Forgotten Children's Fund, Freeland, WA.

John Ochs is the author of 'The One is Jack Hurley', the acclaimed 3 volume bio-history of the Golden Age of US boxing, from Jack Dempsey in the 1910's to George Foreman in 1970, as filtered through the life of the renowned boxing manager and promoter Jack Hurley.