

R.I.P. Former Heavyweight Champ Gerrie Coetzee, a South African Sporting Icon (TSS, January 12, 2023)

BY Arne K. Lang



Gerrie Coetzee's conquest of defending world heavyweight champion Michael Dokes on Sept. 9, 1983, was one of the biggest upsets of the 1980s. Coetzee had failed in two previous stabs at the title and his triumph over Dokes would rank among the greatest moments in South Africa's sporting history.

The Gerrie Coetzee saga begs for a big screen biopic and, indeed, a film about his life is now in production. Unfortunately, he won't be around to see it. Coetzee passed away today (Thursday, Jan. 12) at age 67 surrounded by his family at his home in Cape Town barely a week after being diagnosed with an aggressive form of lung cancer.

Coetzee fought Dokes at the Richfield Coliseum, home of the Cleveland Cavaliers and not quite 20 miles from Dokes' hometown of Akron. Dokes held the WBA version of the title, was

undefeated 26-0-2 (15 KOs), and was then widely considered the most talented heavyweight on the planet, superior to WBC title-holder Larry Holmes whose narrow win over Tim Witherspoon four months earlier was taken as a sign the “Easton Assassin” had passed his prime.

The bout ended with Dokes’ planted face down on the canvas, unable to beat the count of referee Tony Perez who properly kept counting after the bell had rung to signal the end of round 10. The official time was 3:08. By then, Dokes, who was knocked down in the fifth, was well-beaten.

Gerrie Coetzee came to the fore in June of 1979 when he knocked out Leon Spinks in the opening round at Monte Carlo. At the time, Neon Leon was 7-1-1, the lone setback coming in his rematch with Muhammad Ali, and no one could foresee that his career would submarine so deep. Coetzee vs. Spinks was televised live in the U.S. on NBC with Dick Enberg behind the mike.

This was Coetzee’s first fight outside South Africa where he had developed a keen rivalry with Johannesburg’s rugged Mike Schutte. Coetzee won both of their encounters in bouts billed for the South African Heavyweight Title but emerged from their second meeting with three broken bones in his right hand leading to multiple surgeries.

Coetzee’s 123-second blast-out of Leon Spinks boosted him into a match with former U.S. Olympian Big John Tate. At stake was the WBA belt vacated by Ali.

Coetzee and Tate, both undefeated, fought before 80,000-plus (reportedly 81,000 paid) on Oct. 20, 1979, at a big open-air stadium in Pretoria. Blacks were seated alongside whites at this formerly whites-only venue and the event would be hailed as South Africa’s sporting event of the century.



Coetzee made history as the first fighter from the African continent to compete for the world heavyweight title, but he fell short, losing a 15-round unanimous decision.

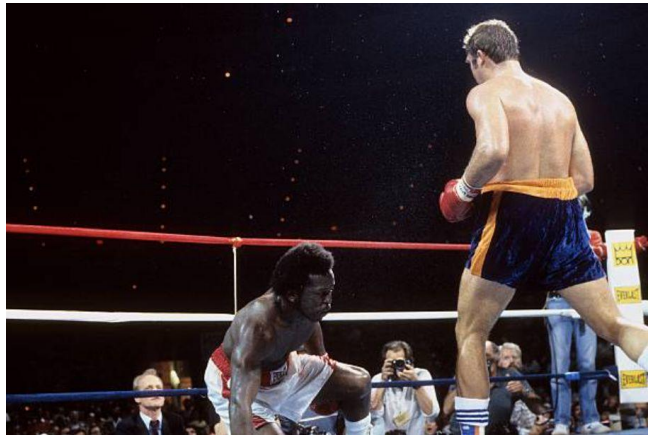
Coetzee’s second stab at the title came against Mike Weaver who had unseated Big John Tate in Tate’s hometown of Knoxville, Tennessee, knocking Tate out with one big punch in the 15th round of a match that Tate was handily winning. Coetzee and Weaver fought at a stadium erected on the grounds of Sun City, a gambling resort in the ostensibly independent South African district of Bophuthatswana.

Coetzee staggered Weaver in the eighth round with a succession of right hands but then ran out of steam. In Round 13, Weaver tagged Coetzee with a crushing left. Coetzee went down hard and was counted out.

“South African Gerrie Coetzee has had two chances to win the heavyweight boxing title and failed both times. Is his career now doomed to oblivion?” This question formed the lead paragraph of the Associated Press post-fight report. But the Afrikaaner wasn’t done chasing

his dream. He was 5-1-1 over his next seven fights (the blemishes were a loss by split decision to undefeated Renaldo Snipes, a future world title challenger and a draw with undefeated Pinklon Thomas, a future title-holder) and that set him up for yet another crack at the coveted title.

Don King controlled Michael Dokes who had taken the title from Mike Weaver. Dokes vs. Coetzee, a homecoming fight for Michael Dokes, was a Don King hustle. Gerrie Coetzee was the mark, but Coetzee turned the tables on “His Hairness” (with an assist, to be perfectly frank, from the reckless, undertrained Dokes who purportedly had cocaine in his system when he entered the ring).



Coetzee’s reign didn’t last long in this era of revolving-door heavyweight title-holders. He lost the belt to Greg Page in his first defense and retired 16 months later with a record of 30-5-1. He was only 30, young for a world-class heavyweight, but had lost his enthusiasm for boxing after getting stopped in the opening round by Frank Bruno at Wembley Stadium in London. An ill-advised comeback seven years after leaving the sport brought his final record to 33-6-1 (21 KOs).

Coetzee’s two title fights in South Africa were suffused in controversy. Apartheid wasn’t formally abolished in South Africa until the early 1990s. The International Olympic Committee banned South Africa from participating in the 1964 Games and the ban wasn’t lifted until 1992. Promoter Bob Arum was under considerable pressure from American civil rights leaders to find a different locale for Coetzee’s fights with John Tate and Mike Weaver. Demonstrators picketed the NBC headquarters in New York while these fights were in progress.

Gerrie Coetzee was an outspoken foe of apartheid, which took courage, and he did more than just talk the talk; he walked the walk. He had black sparring partners and made certain to include them when he went to a swanky restaurant. By all accounts, he was also a very nice chap. “He loved us so much, he was a family man through and through,” said his sobbing daughter Lana Coetzee to South Africa’s IOL Sport.

Her father made history as the first man from Africa to win a version of the heavyweight title, but that fact alone doesn’t do him justice. May he rest in peace.

Arne K. Lang is the editor-in-chief of “The Sweet Science” online boxing magazine. A recognized authority on the history of American sports gambling and a serious boxing history buff, he is the author of five books, the most recent of which, titled “George Dixon, Terry McGovern and the Culture of Boxing in America, 1890-1910,” was released in September. The book can be ordered directly from the publisher (<https://mcfarlandbooks.com/product/clash-of-the-little-giants>) or via Amazon.