

# '40s MIDDLEWEIGHT CHARLEY PARHAM

## The Slugging Liar

By Pete Ehrmann

It was Sir Winston Churchill who said, "Men occasionally stumble over the truth, then pick themselves up and hurry off as if nothing had happened." Charley Parham stumbled often, not only over the truth, but also in the act of launching the roundhouse punches that made the 1940s middleweight contender one of the most exciting fighters of his time. When the latter happened, Parham would haul himself up and resume firing, and more often than not eventually put the other guy out in spectacular fashion.

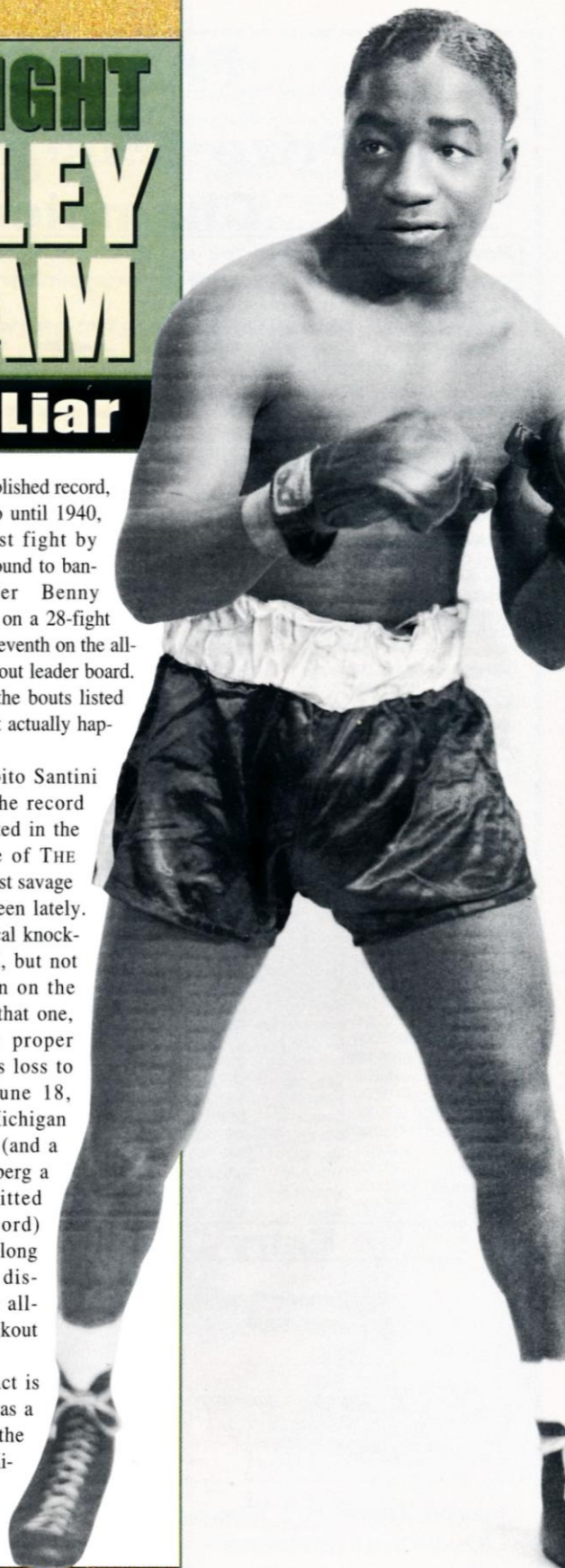
But Parham's tussles with the truth were even more riveting than his fights, because when the man known as "Chiller Charley" and "The Mayhem Man" stumbled in that regard, the resulting pratfall often registered on the Richter scale. In fact, Parham owns a unique place in the annals of boxing in that he may be the only figure in the history of the sport whose veracity was once put to the test of truth serum, in a headline-making episode concerning an alleged bribe attempt that left the criminal justice system as discombobulated as victims of Parham's trademark left hook.

Parham was already a veteran boxer when he moved to Milwaukee, Wisconsin, from his native Detroit around 1941. He had won a Michigan Golden Gloves championship and been named "Outstanding Boxer" of the tournament. Parham was a bantamweight then, just 118 pounds. After he turned pro in 1939, however, it wasn't skillful boxing that earned Parham glowing notices, but the big punch that ended most of his early fights.

According to his published record, Parham didn't turn pro until 1940, and then lost his first fight by knockout in the 10th round to bantamweight contender Benny Goldberg before going on a 28-fight kayo tear that put him seventh on the all-time consecutive knockout leader board. But in fact several of the bouts listed after the Goldberg fight actually happened *before* it.

His bout with Pepito Santini didn't make it into the record books, but was reported in the September '39 issue of *THE RING* as "one of the most savage bantamweight duels seen lately. Santini won by technical knockout in the fifth round, but not before both had been on the floor." Even without that one, when placed in its proper chronology, Parham's loss to Goldberg in their June 18, 1940, fight for the Michigan state 118-pound title (and a decision loss to Goldberg a month later also omitted from Parham's record) interrupted Parham's long knockout string and disqualify him from the all-time consecutive knockout pantheon.

For all that, the fact is that Charley Parham was a thrilling fighter with the kind of lay-'em-out ability feared by opponents and loved by fans. By 1942, correspondents



for THE RING were invariably putting “sensational” before his name in their accounts of his bouts, most of which Parham did win by knockout. By then, the 5’3” Parham was no longer a bantamweight. He was a chunky 140-pounder towered over by his opponents, who nevertheless had their hands full with the man who hit, according to THE RING’s Johnny Cox, “like a heavyweight.”

Milwaukee fans got their first look at him in September of that year. Parham had hooked up with Pete Bass, a local barber who managed fighters. In the early-’30s, “Pete The Barber,” as Bass was known, had brought another youngster from Detroit to Milwaukee and put him to work shining shoes in his barbershop between fights. But Holman Williams eventually left town and went on to boxing fame under new management. Bass figured to prevent that from happening with his new ace by signing Parham to a 10-year contract. Little did he know that, as Charley himself later confessed under the influence of the truth serum administered in regard to another matter, “I lie an awful lot. I lie habitually and profusely.”

Parham liked big words, and even used them more or less correctly, although the boxer, whose mother was only 13 years old when he was born, never graduated from high school. But it was his educated left hook that brought crowds to their feet as it swept opponents off theirs.

“Charley Parham, a little black bull, landed a leaping left hook on Billy Parsons’ chin for a knockout after 1:58 of the first round,” reported Russ Lynch in the *Milwaukee Journal*, writing of Parham’s first local outing. “[Parsons’] mouth fell open and he seemed to be speaking. Then he tried to get up and fell on his face.”

The now politically incorrect nickname was repeated ad nauseum as Parham bulled his way to a succession of exciting wins in both his new hometown and in Chicago, many of which came via hook while Parham was hopelessly behind on points. Often when the punch missed its target, its momentum would send Charley crashing head-first to the canvas himself.

Parham’s fights were as scientific as a Punch-and-Judy skit. Detroit’s O’Neill Bell was a top welterweight prospect in the mid-’40s. He knocked down Parham

six times in winning an eight-round decision at Chicago Stadium in November ’44, but “The Mayhem Man” got up every time and knocked Bell down once, and made it one of the most exciting fights seen in the Windy City that year.

Parham won the Wisconsin 147-pound title by belting out Savior Canadeo in three rounds in April ’45. One writeup called him the “singing slugger,” referring to Parham’s penchant for crooning in the gym and in amateur shows in nightclubs along Walnut Street, Milwaukee’s Harlem. Parham, who once bragged that he sang in “the key of Frank Sinatra,” even hoped to make a second career out of singing, and he must’ve at least been able to carry a tune because the night before he knocked out contender Bobby Richardson at the Auditorium on June 19, 1945, he was on stage at the Riverside Theater performing with no less than the world-famous Lionel Hampton Orchestra. A picture in the newspaper showed Parham, looking natty in a pinstriped, double-breasted suit, warbling into a microphone as Hampton, standing alongside him, conducted the orchestra.

But it wasn’t all nightclubs and knockouts for Milwaukee’s new idol, who, according to a profile in THE RING, was “so religious he’s never without the Bible,” and who always insisted, after getting into his boxing trunks for a fight, on placing the Good Book “in the right-hand pocket of his trousers” because “luck is with him when that’s done.”

Pete The Barber probably felt like taking that Bible and whacking Parham in the head with it after Charley deserted him for the Eddie Metrie stable. Bass sued for breach of contract and, according to Russ Lynch, “the dispute revealed Parham as a cheerful liar and a willing penman. He signed a plethora of contracts, counter-contracts, sworn statements, and foresworn statements.” Bass ended up getting \$1,750, and then got out of the managing business.

The National Boxing Associ-

ation listed Parham among its top welterweight contenders in its ratings for July 1945. The champion was Freddy “Red” Cochrane. “If [he] could be coaxed into the ring,” Lynch wrote, “Parham would be the champion.” But instead, contender Izzy Jannazzo came to town to meet Parham next. Jannazzo, 30, had been fighting for 12 years, and had met the best in the world. The bout sold out the Auditorium—proof, said Lynch, that “Charley The Chiller certainly has caught the fancy of Milwaukee. Not only boxing fans, but many who heretofore have shown little



*One of Parham’s first major fights was against crafty welterweight contender Izzy Jannazzo (pictured). Outboxed in the early going, the heavy-handed Parham came on strong in the late rounds, but still lost the decision.*

interest in fisticuffs are talking about The Mayhem Man's chances against Jannazzo."

Lynch figured the Brooklyn veteran would win unless he got careless. "Charley is such a bum, except for his wallop, that a good boxer finds him easy pickings in the early rounds, then is apt to get careless later."

That's about what happened, with Jannazzo, eight inches taller, staying clear of Parham's mighty swings in the first part of the scheduled 10-rounder, but then fad-

ing as Parham began to find the range. In the eighth, the clever Izzy probably saved himself from a knockout loss by pretending to be hurt by an inadvertently low punch as Parham was knocking him around but good. Parham held up, giving his foe time to regroup and last the round.

The decision went to Jannazzo, but the cheers belonged to Parham, and the same was true after a rematch in September at the Auditorium.

The back-to-back losses didn't detract at all from Parham's popularity. Jannazzo had been too smart to mix it up with him. That's all Parham's next opponent knew how to do in the ring. On paper, the December 3 match at Chicago Stadium was a real testosterone special, pitting two of the game's hardest-swinging bruisers in what shaped up, at least figuratively, as the grandest bull fight this side of Tijuana. In the corner opposite Milwaukee's "little black bull" that night was the "Bronx Bull" himself, later known through his print and film autobiographies of the same name as the "Raging Bull."

Jake LaMotta later became world middleweight champion and a member of the International Boxing Hall of Fame. Nothing Parham did in front of 9,000-plus fans that night put that future in the slightest jeopardy. In fact, it was one of LaMotta's easiest fights for the simple reason that Chiller Charley was nearly frozen with fear just occupying the same ring as the first man to defeat Sugar Ray Robinson.

"LaMotta didn't even work up a sweat to stop Parham in 0:59 of the sixth round," reported THE RING's Gene Engel. The Milwaukee man was knocked down in every round, and the *Milwaukee Journal* said Parham was "scared and bewildered" because "someone told the Walnut St. bulldog a lot of stories about LaMotta." Who knows? Maybe somebody just put his Bible in the wrong pocket.

Parham's shot at the big time may have been blown big time,

but more victories and greater controversy were still ahead for The Mayhem Man.

Art Brown was a middling welterweight from Chicago who'd been knocked out by Parham in June '45. In a rematch in Milwaukee on August 26 of the next year, Parham and Brown overshadowed the non-title featherweight match between champion Willie Pep and Doll Rafferty by slugging one another around for eight rounds. The verdict was a draw, and a third fight between them was set for just two weeks later, this time as the headline attraction at the Auditorium.

Parham won the unanimous 10-round decision after what the *Journal's* Sam Levy called "a typical Pier 9 brawl." But the big fireworks were ignited in the dressing room afterward when Parham told state boxing commission secretary Fred Saddy that he'd been offered \$1,000 to let Brown win the fight.

District Attorney William McCawley promptly issued an arrest warrant for tavern-keeper Harry Klein, whom Parham fingered as the one who'd visited him several times in the past week to dangle the bribe offer, which Parham said he rejected because his "reputation was at stake."

"You can always build your reputation up again," was Klein's reply, according to Parham.

In its September 19 edition, the *Journal* exposed the whole scheme in a front page story detailing how local gambling boss Oscar Plotkin had instigated the bribe attempt, and then, when Parham declined to go along, spread the word anyway that the fight was a sure thing for Brown, so that rival gambling boss Louis Simon would drop a bundle on the fight.

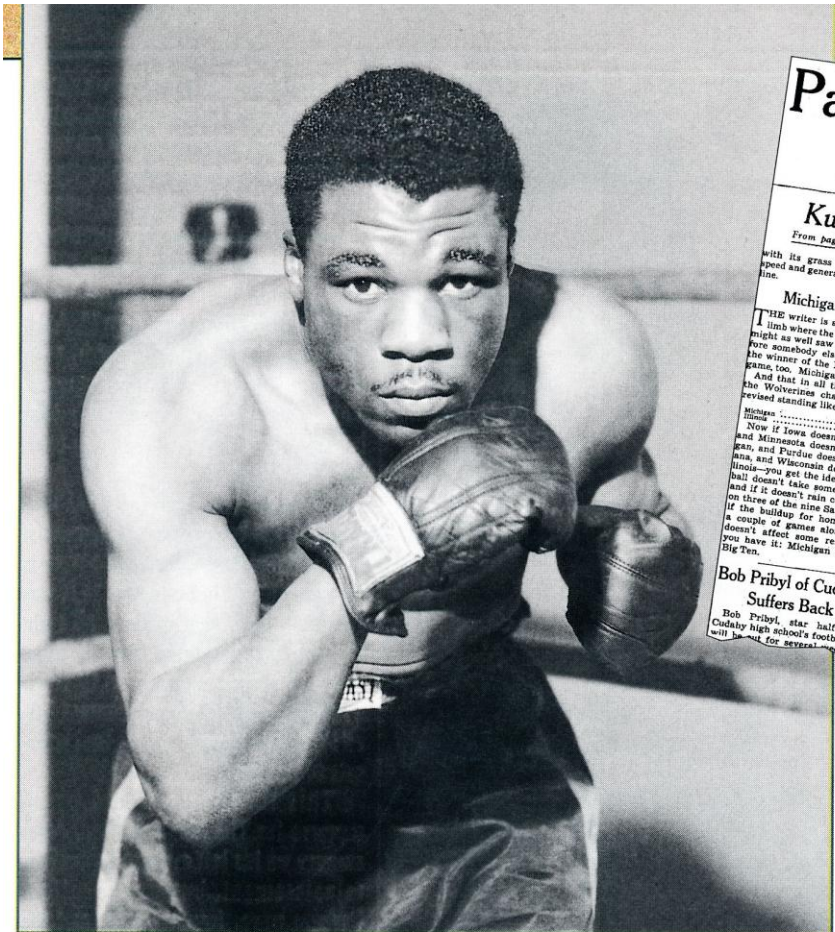
But an article that same day in the sports section reported that Parham was now denying everything. Klein hadn't offered a bribe, he said, but wanted only to buy his contract.

"I wanted publicity, that's why I lied," Parham told D.A. McCawley. "Today I'm telling the truth. The truth is the big thing in my life. I'm ready to go to jail if necessary for telling a lie yesterday. I'm all through as a fighter. I have plans of being a singer now."

McCawley slapped the boxer into protective custody, which obviously should've been done right after the fight, and, in an



In perhaps the worst showing of his career, Parham was knocked down in every round of his sixth-round TKO loss to future middleweight champion Jake LaMotta (pictured). Despite his defeats, "Chiller Charley" remained a fan favorite throughout his career.



# Parham Wins in 10; Reveals Bribe Offer

**Kuechle**  
From page 8, column 4

with its grass seneige backfield speed and generally solid if not deep line.

**Michigan to Win**  
THE writer is already out on the limb where the buds sprout, so he fore somebody else does, and picks the winner of the Illinois-Michigan game, too, Michigan.

And that in all this would make the Wolverines champions with a revised standing like this:

Michigan ..... W 5 T 1  
Illinois ..... L 1  
Now if Iowa doesn't beat Illinois, and Minnesota doesn't beat Michigan, and Wisconsin doesn't beat Illinois—you get the idea—and if the ball doesn't take some crazy hops, and if it doesn't rain cats and dogs on three of the nine Saturdays, and if the bulldogs for homecoming get a couple of games along the way that doesn't affect some results, there you have it: Michigan to win the Big Ten.

**Bob Pribyl of Cudahy Suffers Back Injury**  
Bob Pribyl, star halfback on Cudahy high school's football team, will be out for several weeks with a back injury.

**Refused Cash to Lose Scrap**  
District Attorney Gets Evidence; to Make an Investigation

**Fight Results Here**  
Charley Parham, 174, Milwaukee, defeated Art Brown, 146, Chicago (3). Charley Busalacchi, 164, Milwaukee, stopped Roy Lewis, Muncie, Ind. (1). Frank Gaudes, 135, Milwaukee, out-punished Willie Scott, 121, Chicago (6). Gene Joyce, 131, Gary, Ind., stopped Charley Pope, 164, Milwaukee (2). Tommy Tassell, 141, Gary, defeated Tommy Jones, 167, Chicago (8). Tommy Varas, 154, Milwaukee, knocked out Mickey Wilson, 154, Chicago (3).

By SAM LEVY  
Charley Parham won an "honorary" bout at the Auditorium Tuesday night when he defeated Art Brown, Chicago Negro, in 10 slashing rounds. It was the second victory for the Walnut at Bull over the Chicago Negro in three starts. One was a knockout; the other ended in a draw.

Parham collected about \$800 as his share of the \$4,000 (net) gate.

Julius Fidler scored the bout 7-3 for Parham; Judge Al Branok's card read 7-3. Judge Leo De Camara had 6-4; but it was not really that close.

It was a typical Pier 9 brawl. Brown weathered two stormy seasons, the fourth and tenth rounds. If he chose to meet the Walnut, it. Bull again. Brown should have his head examined.

**Lewis Gives Up in Second**  
Roy Lewis, a man looking south-paw from Muncie, Ind., who cannot fight, surrendered to Charley Busalacchi while seated in his corner at the end of the second round. Lewis was floored as the first round ended and stopped an illegal punch for good measure. He took a few more hard blows in the second heat and decided he had had enough for one night.

Frank Gaudes won a six round decision over Willie Scott, Chicago, left eye.

A newcomer, Gene Joyce, Gary (Ind.) lightweight, looked impressive in two rounds. Referee Earl Olson called a halt because of a deep cut over Pope's left eye. Before the stoppage, Joyce welterweight, defeated Tommy Jones, Chicago, in six seasons. Tommy Varas, Milwaukee, knocked out Mickey Wilson, Chicago, in 21 seconds of the third round.

Parham engaged Art Brown (pictured) in a series of knockdown-dragout fights, but after their third encounter, "The Mayhem Man" claimed that a local gambler had tried to bribe him to throw the fight. The ensuing investigation led to one of the most bizarre episodes in boxing history.

effort to find the truth, scheduled what was, even by boxing's usual goofy standards, one of the most bizarre events ever connected with the sport.

That same morning, the little bull-shooter was taken to County Hospital for Mental Diseases. Wearing slacks, a white shirt, and sweater vest, Parham laid down on a bed and was injected by Dr. Harry Landberg with sodium Amytal, popularly known as "truth serum." The drug put the boxer to sleep, and then, as the front-page story in the next day's *Journal* explained, "on the way back to full consciousness permitted him to talk without fear of the consequences."

The result was as breathtaking as one of The Chiller's fights. Things got off to a flying start before he even fell asleep, when Parham went back to his original story, claiming Klein had tried to induce him to go in the water against Brown and that he refused in order to protect "the honor and glory of Wisconsin," whose welterweight champion he was so proud to be.

But when coming out of the ether,

Parham returned to version number two, calling his bribe story "a dastardly and uncouth lie" that he had concocted "just for the fun of it" and because "it would look nice in the papers, which have lots of space to waste printing stories like that."

At one point in the interrogation, Parham said his life "wasn't worth a damn," and at another he whined, "I wanna go home to my momma."

"Under the influence of the drug," reported the *Journal*, "he described himself as sadly battered by his ring battles," and "mentioned his flattened nose and the ridges round his eyes."

Four times Parham denied having been offered a bribe, and when the drug wore off he cheerfully sang a tune. After spending another night in the county jail as a material witness, Parham was back in the D.A.'s office the next morning. Incredibly, he once more maintained that Klein had offered him a bribe. With that, the exasperated McCawley decided his time was better spent jousting with murderers, muggers, and other run-of-the-mill malefactors.

"Charles Parham was ordered released

today by me and the warrant against Harold Klein is withdrawn for the reason I have exhausted every means of arriving at the truth," he said. "I am satisfied Parham is in such a confused state of mind his word is not dependable and no conviction could result from any prosecution based upon Parham's conflicting stories."

A week later, the state boxing commission lifted Parham's license for six months on the ground that "his actions were detrimental and injurious to boxing in Wisconsin."

Oddly enough, the media, which had had a field day with what one paper called "L'Affaire Parham," was still bullish on the little bull in spite of his renowned unreliability. Under the column heading "Whipping Boy," Lynch wrote, "there seems to be little doubt that fear, probably threats, made Parham change his story. Charley fought the best he knew how against Brown. He has always fought his best here, except when badly overmatched. He is not a crooked fighter. He is the victim of circumstances—and of his penchant for lying."

Either the commission agreed, or, more likely, Parham was just too strong a draw-

ing card to be shelved for half-a-year. In just two months, the ring board relented, and The Chiller was back in action.

Any lingering residue from the bribery fiasco was spectacularly dispelled by what may have been the greatest, most exciting fight in the rich history of Milwaukee boxing, on June 18, 1947. Parham's opponent was William Johnson, another Chicagoan, who was the little bull's pugilistic clone, a free-swinging brawler who didn't mind picking himself off the canvas to get another whack at the other guy.

Johnson did it seven times that night, and Parham went down four times himself during what Lynch called "the wildest 10 rounds of battling" seen at the Auditorium.

The decision for Parham was unanimous, and in the dressing room afterward, as the fighters congratulated each other, Johnson counted his many bruises and hoped they wouldn't keep him from his next fight, scheduled for just one week later in Chicago.

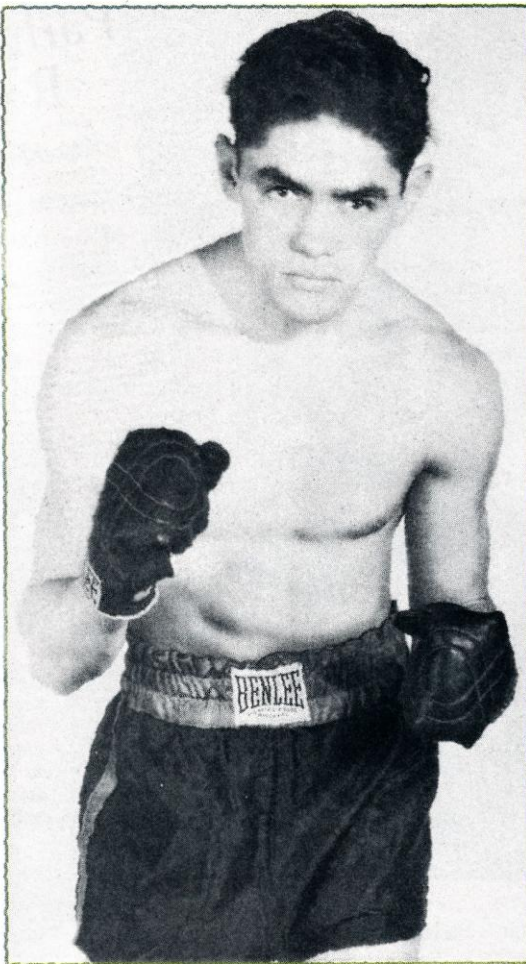
"Who're you fighting?" asked Parham.

"You," answered Johnson.

That's how it worked then. There was no three- or four-month interval filled with canned insults and phony hype. Fighters just fought. And the following week, at the Chicago Coliseum, Parham and Johnson picked right up where they'd left off. In the third round, Parham knocked Johnson down with a left hook. Johnson got up. But as The Chiller went in for the kill, he got caught with a straight right on the button that put him down for the count and then some. That had never happened before, and nobody was more incredulous than Parham.

"I still don't believe I was knocked out," he said. "It was a mistake, and if they give me another crack at Johnson, I'll stiffen him."

The rubber match was set for July 14 in Milwaukee. Come to think of it, it did seem like someone was in an unseemly hurry to milk the Parham-Johnson rivalry for all it was worth. The reason, it turned out, was that Parham was already half-



When Jimmy Doyle (pictured) died after his 1947 bout with Ray Robinson, the tragedy indirectly ended Parham's career. "The Chiller" had been partially blind for some time due to cataracts, and the boxing commission, wary of another calamity, yanked his license.

blind thanks to a cataract on his left eye. His condition had actually been a poorly kept secret for over a year, and a commission functionary had even showed up at the gym one day to hold up some fingers for the fighter to count. "I could distinguish them," Parham related later. "So he said, 'You're okay to fight.'"

But now there was a problem. On June 24, two days before Parham-Johnson II, welterweight champion Sugar Ray Robinson knocked out Jimmy Doyle in eight rounds in Cleveland. Doyle died of a brain injury afterward, and it was determined that he had entered the ring as already damaged goods, with head injuries suffered in a previous bout.

The media were up in arms, so when the commission met to approve the third

Parham-Johnson fight, it was suggested that The Chiller's visual acuity ought to be determined by means a little more rigorous than the finger test. The sudden concern wasn't unanimous. Among the comments recorded at the meeting were, "He's been fighting for five years, so why bring up his eyesight now?" And: "Fans want to see that rematch, even if Charley has to be led into the ring." This from the governing body that had punished Parham for being injurious to boxing.

Even after the cataract was discovered, the boxing board's specialist cutely stated that "Parham's vision is the same today in both eyes as it was June 24," as if that made it all right for him to fight again. But no dice. With the press scrutinizing their deliberations, the commissioners lifted Parham's license "in the best interests of boxing."

This time there would be no reprieve for The Mayhem Man. After surgery on his left eye, he applied for reinstatement, but was rebuffed. Parham never fought again, and the singing career didn't pan out, either. Never married, Parham ended up in a nursing home in 1970 after suffering a stroke. He got his picture in the paper again that year when a local promoter presented him with a donation of \$100.

A few months later, after another stroke, the man who, wrote *Milwaukee Sentinel* boxing writer Ray Grody, "bombed his way into the hearts of fight fans with his exciting punching," died at age 48.

It's almost a shame after all these years, and on top of all the other shameful things that happened to Parham, to yank off his fig leaf of boxing immortality by correcting the record regarding those 28 straight knockouts. But even without it, he stands worthy of respect and recognition as a true warrior and, despite his other transgressions, an honorable one when he could've profited from acting otherwise.

And that's no bull. ■

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