

Bill Miley

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Janesville, Wisconsin

'Jed' Black nearly put city on map during boxing's golden age

By John McPoland
Gazette Staff

Gerald "Jed" Black was a contender.

Some fighters might be chumps or tomato cans or bumbling palookas. But Black, 70, who died in his sleep Monday morning, nearly put Janesville on the fight map during the golden days of boxing—a time when millions of television viewers were glued to their sets to watch Gillette's "Friday Night Fights."

A time when boxing had just eight weight classes and most fans could rattle off the names of all eight world champions.

Black, a classic 145-pound welterweight, nearly punched his way to a world title fight before deciding it was time to settle down and raise five children with his wife, Dorothy.

"He had to decide for himself when it was the right time to retire," Dorothy said. "I never put

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pressure on him. I knew how much it meant to him. If it hadn't been for that stint in the Army..."

Black certainly appeared to be on track for ring fame and possibly fortune.

Born in Janesville on March 23, 1929, Black might have been slight of stature—just 5-foot-7—but he certainly didn't lack for grit or athletic talent. He played football, basketball and ran track at Janesville High.

Classmates called him "The Spark Plug."

He also showed enough potential in amateur boxing matches to earn a scholarship from Michigan State. Black didn't let the Spartans down.

He lettered in 1951 and '52. On April 7, 1951, in front of a raucous home crowd at East Lansing's Jennison Field House, Black hammered South Carolina's Emmett Gurney to win the NCAA's welterweight title. The Spartans also won the team championship.

"I was disappointed when he went to Michigan State," Dorothy said. "But he had no choice. Wisconsin didn't offer him a scholarship. We kind of had a long-distance relationship."

Dorothy also is convinced Wisconsin helped put a premature end to Jed's collegiate career.

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Jed apparently received a jacket or some other nominal item for fighting on a boxing card in Delavan—a violation of NCAA rules. Some have suggested that coaches connected to the UW boxing program, one of the nation's best at the time, reported the infraction to the NCAA.

Stripped of his amateur eligibility, Black made his pro debut on Jan. 1, 1952. He knocked out Joe Sussex in the second round of a bout in Chicago.

By the end of 1953, Black would have 27 bouts under his belt. After losing his third career fight, Black reeled off 25 wins in a row before a draw with Chico Vejar on Feb. 10, 1954. Black scored



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the fight's only knockdown. Dorothy said the draw left Jed perturbed.

Black fought several times while finishing his education at Michigan State. He had 10 career bouts in Detroit, seven in Chicago and one in New York City.

Black's biggest victory came on Nov. 9, 1953, when he scored a 10-round decision over Ike Williams. It was Black's 23rd straight win and came in his first 10-round fight. Williams, who had just turned 40, held the lightweight title from 1947 until 1951. Williams, a member of the Boxing Hall of Fame, finished his career with a record of 124-24-5.

But Williams, trying to make a comeback as a welterweight, fought just three more times after losing to Black.

A two-year hitch in the Army put the brakes on a budding career, which saw Black climb as high as No. 7 in the world rankings.

"They didn't want officers to fight," Dorothy said.

So Black, a lieutenant, fought just one bout between May 1954 and October 1955.

"When he got out of the service, he didn't have a world ranking anymore," Dorothy said. "Nobody wanted to fight him. He didn't have a 'name' anymore."

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In Black's only fight after his discharge, he lost to Cuban Isaac Logart in a unanimous 10-round decision. Logart, a highly regarded welterweight, cut Black around both eyes but couldn't score a knockout.

That fight was enough to convince Black to hang up his boxing gloves and to put his degree in business administration to use.

He finished with a professional record of 29-3-1 with 15 knockouts.

"I was pregnant with our third child," Dorothy said. "Jed thought it was time to do something more reliable."

Janesville's Gary Pliner, a local boxing trainer and promoter, remembers Black as a technical

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fighter.

"He was a skilled boxer," Pliner said. "I know he fought on TV many times."

Dorothy said her husband was dedicated to the sport.

"He trained so hard and worked out every day," she said. "He was careful about the food he ate. He was always in top shape."

And he liked to brag about having never been knocked out or cut—until his bout with Logart.

"Jed always said, 'They'll have to put razor blades in their gloves to cut me,'" Dorothy said.

She attended just one of her husband's fights.

In fact, a reporter once asked Black why his wife didn't come to the bouts.

"Do you take your wife to work?" Black asked.

Black, who didn't get rich in the ring, did earn enough to buy a Chevy Bel Air with his winnings.

After retiring from the ring, Black made a successful transition to business. He owned and operated Jed Black Insurance Agency for 40 years, winning numerous awards and honors for his salesmanship.

"His name helped him a lot," Dorothy said. "People in Janesville knew him. He was born and raised here. They trusted him."

In the last year, Black fell in love with ESPN Classic, a cable channel that devotes a large chunk of programming to old boxing footage.

"He just really enjoyed that," Dorothy said. "He'd watch those old fights. He'd ask 'Can you imagine anybody doing that to make a living?'"

Obituaries

Black, Gerald D. "Jed"

JANESVILLE—Gerald D. "Jed" Black, age 70, of 2121 N. Sumac Dr., died Mon., June 7, 1999, at his home. He was born in Janesville on March 23, 1929, the son of Vern and Marie (Hare) Black, was a 1949 graduate of Janesville High School and a 1953 graduate of Michigan State University, where he was the NCAA champion boxer in the Welterweight Division. Jed married Dorothy Wirth on Dec. 27, 1952, in Janesville. He was a lieutenant in the U.S. Army from 1954 to 1956. He fought his first professional fight on Sept. 1, 1952 and his last on July 26, 1956, at which point he was ranked 7th in the world. He owned and operated Jed Black Insurance Agency for 40 years, was a member of New Life Assembly of God Church, the Chamber of Commerce, Goodwill Ambassadors, Forward Janesville, and was a former board member of YMCA, Lions Club, and Beginnings Group Home.



He is survived by his wife, Dorothy of Janesville; 5 children: Michael (Mary) Black of Mendota Heights, MN, Mary (John) Kelly of Scottsdale, AZ, John (Mary Jo) Black of Lake Mills, WI, Joseph Black of Bloomington, MN, William (Beth) Black of Denver, CO; 3 grandchildren: Andy, Lindsay, and Nathan Black; a brother, Donald (Joan) Black of Laguna Beach, CA; many nieces and nephews. He was preceded in death by his parents; and 2 brothers, Robert and Dean Black.

Funeral services will be held at 10:00 a.m. on Thurs., June 10, 1999, at NEW LIFE ASSEMBLY OF GOD CHURCH, with Pastor Tom Zillman officiating. Burial will be in Oak Hill Cemetery. Friends may call at SCHNEIDER FUNERAL HOME on Wednesday from 5:00 until 8:00 p.m.

JED BLACK - CHUCK SPISER - CHUCK DAVEY WERE
TEAM MATE'S ON MICHIGAN STATES BOXING TEAM.
Bill M.