

Jeffra Rose From Humble Beginnings To Ring Prominence

By Angelo Prospero

In the pre-alphabet (WBC-IBF-WBA) days when boxing had only eight coveted titles, it was an honor to capture one of these crowns, especially in an era where talent abounded in each division.

Only a handful of boxers has ever won two titles in different divisions. Harry Jeffra was one of these select few, gaining both bantamweight and featherweight championships of the world.

Born Ignacius Pasquali Guiffi on November 30, 1914 in Baltimore, Maryland, Harry Jeffra was the pride of that city and the leading citizen of its East Side, a predominantly Italian District. He had an early love affair with boxing, buying newspapers and making scrapbooks of his favorite fighters.

At age fifteen, Jeffra began hanging out at local gyms and impressed enough to enter amateur tournaments. He became state champion and won 46 out of 48 bouts in his semipro career utilizing speed, a long reach and ring generalship.

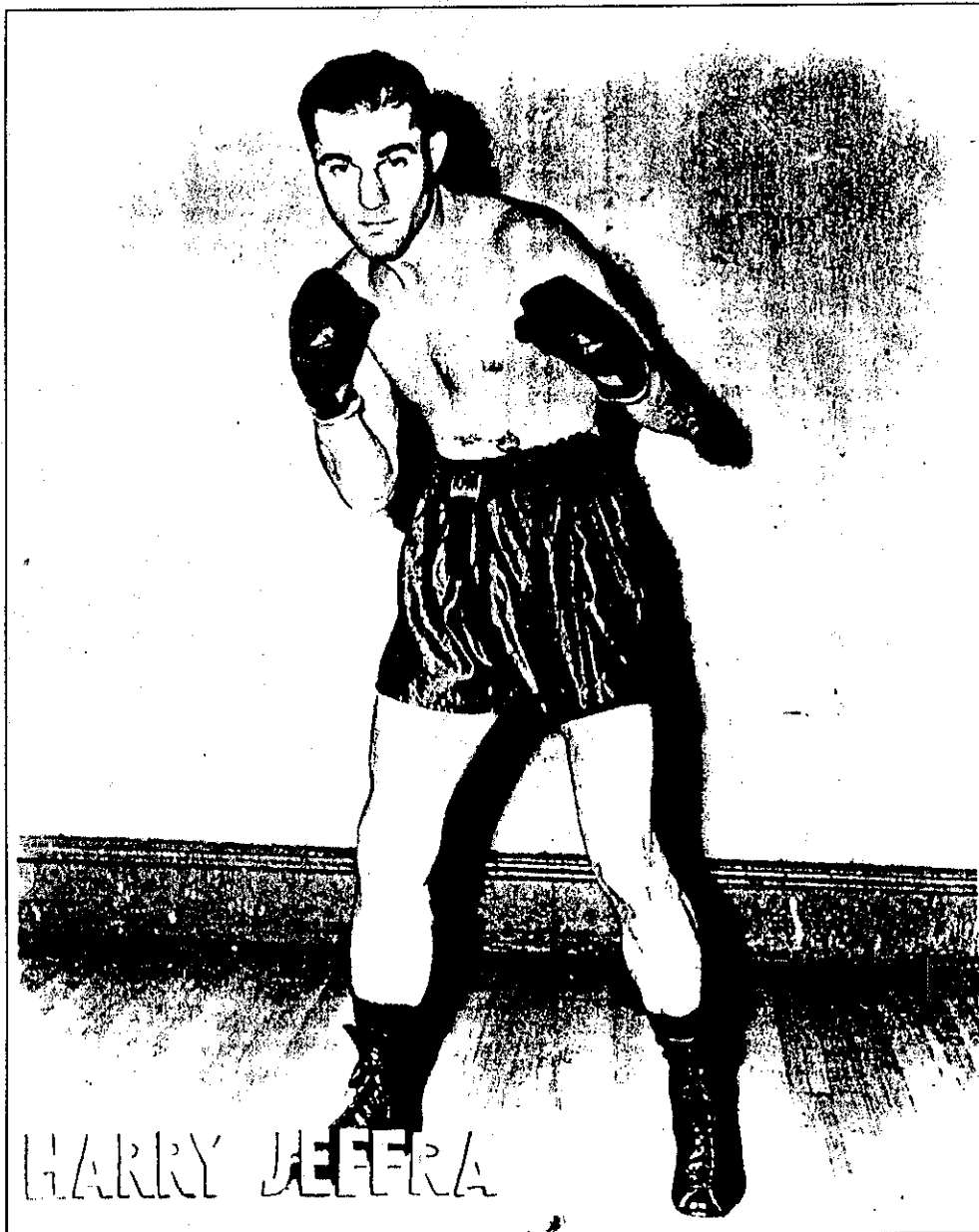
The Depression had hit the U.S. in the early 1930's and the Jeffra household was no exception. Papa Jeffra had a job with the local Transit Company but his meager earnings of \$12.00 a week was hardly enough to feed and clothe Harry and his two brothers. On Sunday, the boys would have to attend different Masses because they shared one pair of good trousers.

So, on September 21, 1933, Harry Jeffra turned pro, won a four round decision over Angelo Brocato and pocketed \$12.50. More than his father made in a week. He became an immediate sensation around his native Baltimore, attracted legions of adoring fans from his East Side neighborhood and reeled off twenty-six consecutive wins including eleven knockouts.

Ethnic rivalries were the rage of boxing at the time and also the dream of any enterprising matchmaker. Another Baltimore favorite was a hard punching Jewish lad, Danny London, who was far more experienced than Jeffra. The two were matched on October 21, 1935 and before a packed house battled furiously for four rounds. For the first time in his career, Jeffra was decked and also was cut severely. In the fifth round, his eye lacerations were so severe, the contest was stopped, only one of two times in his illustrious career that Jeffra was halted. (He was never counted out.)

He rebounded six weeks later by besting another local favorite, Tin Can Romanelli. Harry closed out 1935 by losing a close split decision to clever Victor Valle who was the trainer of Gerry Cooney.

In less than 21/2 years of professional fighting, Harry Jeffra had matured into a smooth functioning ring mechanic, a brilliant ring general who could box, punch and defend. The year 1936, under the guidance of managers Max Waxman and Heinie Blaustein, was to take him to the top of his profession. He quickly reeled off six consecutive wins and then beat his



first top ten ranked opponent, Reds Transparenti.

The champion of the bantamweight division at this time was Sixto Escobar, one of Puerto Rico's idols, who won the NBA version of the title from Lou Salica in 1935 and the unified world title from Tony Marino on August 31, 1936.

In this era, champions participated in many non-title fights to pick up some extra purses and on October 5, 1936, Escobar journeyed to Baltimore to meet unranked hometown favorite, Harry Jeffra. The champion was a prohibitive 4-1 favorite, based on his championship win, his experience and the caliber of his opposition.

However, to his surprise and to the delight of the screaming hometown fans Jeffra outboxed him easily to win a ten round decision. In the second round, Jeffra landed a solid right hand and the champion, looking bewildered took a nine count. He did not desire to slug with the harder hitting Jeffra the rest of the fight. The

crowd gave Jeffra a standing ovation when the decision was announced, one of the top ten loudest cheers in Baltimore ring history.

The 22 year old Baltimore boxer crashed the top ten rankings of boxing's Bible, Ring Magazine. New York fight people, especially those along famed Jacobs Beach in New York City were in disbelief at Escobar's loss and wanted to see more of Harry Jeffra. After 39 fights in the Baltimore area, the new sensation finally was invited to the Mecca of Boxing, New York City to headline a card at the Hippodrome Arena. His opponent, the same Sixto Escobar, in another ten round non-title bout.

It was a different arena, but the result was the same. Writing in Ring Magazine in the February 1937 issue, famed writer Eddie Borden said, "Favored Sixto Escobar was soundly beaten by underdog Harry Jeffra in an overweight match at the Hippodrome. This was the second defeat suffered at the hands of Jeffra,

but this time it was more convincing than the first. Harry's surprising victory and the fact that he is a legitimate bantamweight gives him top ranking for the month."



BANTAMWEIGHTS RATINGS:

World Champion-Sixto Escobar

1. Harry Jeffra
2. Frankie Martin
3. Lou Salica
4. Baltasar Sangchili
5. Tonv Marino

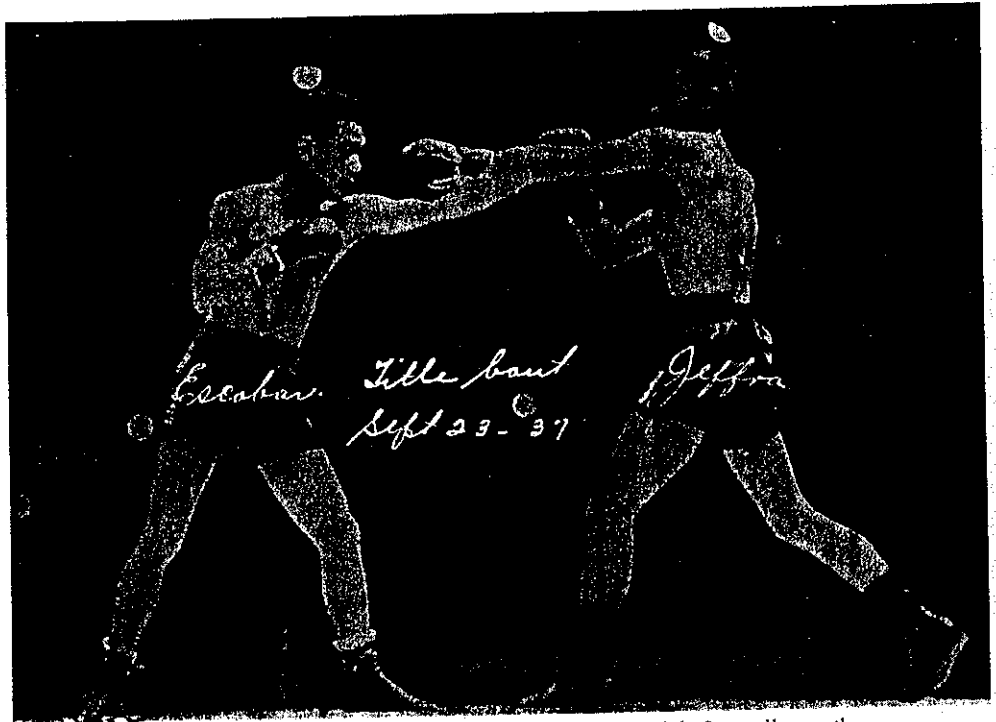
Harry Jeffra had made it to number one contender. The second Escobar fight also gave him his biggest purse so far \$3500.00 Not much by today's boxing standards of million dollar purses. But this was during the depths of the Depression and was three times more than the average American was making in an entire year.

Harry immediately purchased a home for his parents, who were his biggest boosters and never missed a fight. Mama Jeffra was only 4' 11", but always chastised those rooting against her son, sometimes with a black umbrella she always carried.

The year 1937 was Harry Jeffra's finest. At his peak of fighting ability, he finally garnered his life long ambition—a world championship. He started off with a two round knock-out of Jackie Cocoran in January and followed with a ten round decision over Lawrence Gunn in February and a one round stoppage of Al Gillette in March. He took April off but fought twice within four days in May knocking Out Jimmy Martin in seven on May 10 and stopping George Holmes in two on May 14. In July, he traveled to Philadelphia to knock-out local favorite Ruby Bradley in four. All six opponents, tough opposition, were outclassed.

At this time, famed boxing impressano, Mike Jacobs, promoter of Joe Louis, was thinking of a fistic extravaganza. He was planning four fifteen round championship fights, unheard of in fistic circles at this time. Never had there been two championships on one card before. In fact, this even was unmatched for over 40 years until Las Vegas attempted a similar feat.

The four titular battles, called the Carnival of Champions, were to pit lightweight Ambers vs.



Pedro Martinez, middleweights Fred Apostoli vs. Marcel Thil, welterweights Barney Ross vs. Ceferino Garcia and leading off bantamweights Harry Jeffra vs. Sixto Escobar. The Kid from Baltimore had made it. He was accepted as among the best in the world.

And he didn't disappoint the 33,000 fans at the Polo Grounds that brisk autumn night on September 23, 1937 who paid a whopping \$233,000 gate. He completely baffled the champion (again a 2-1 favorite despite the two previous losses) for fifteen rounds. Escobar kept waiting to land a big punch but Jeffra continually beat him to the punch and displayed flashy combinations to win eleven of the fifteen rounds. The cycle was complete, from a four round prelim fighter to champion of the world. His purse of \$ 10,000 was the biggest of his career. His picture appeared on the cover of Ring Magazine. Jeffra continued his onslaught through the bantamweight division in 1937 beating Biff Lemieux in Dayton, Jackie Carter in St. Louis, highly regarded contender Indian Quintana in Baltimore and Armanda Sicilia in Washington.

When Nat Fleischer came out with his annual ratings in January 1938, he put Harry Jeffra in the top category of the 118 pounders. "He stands alone," said Fleischer. "All others are in class two."

However, experts noticed that Jeffra's last four fights in 1937 were fought at 123 lbs. well above the bantamweight limit and figured he couldn't successfully get down to the 118 lb. limit without weakening himself. Harry worried about it, too.

So it was with much apprehension when managers Blaustein and Waxman hustled him off to San Juan, Puerto Rico to meet his old antagonist, Escobar in a title defense. It was the first time out of the country and Jeffra treasured every moment of it, except the weight situation. He was treated as a hero and thousands gathered daily at the local ballpark to see the opponent's train. The day of the fight was a Mardi Gras

setting. Officials from all over the Commonwealth were in attendance.



Sixto Escobar

The morning of the fight, Jeffra was a pound over the limit. Water and a sauna finally got him to the 118 lb. mark. Harry was a prohibitive favorite based on the three previous meetings. However, this time it was not meant to be. It was a battle in which courage to the highest degree was displayed by both victor and vanquished, a fight in which terrific hitting and scientific boxing by Sixto turned the tide.

In round three, a right hand by the challenger landed flush on the jaw and Jeffra went down for only the second time in his career. His jaw was broken in two places. He got up and was floored twice more in the fight but never gave up, despite taking a terrible battering and winning only three rounds. Jeffra even took the attacking to Escobar, staggering him in round fourteen, winning the respect of the crowd who marveled at his courage.

Nat Fleischer, invited by Puerto Rico to cover the fight, said this of Jeffra in his Ring Magazine write-up:

It was a battle that can be described only in superlatives, even though it was rather one-sided after the midway point and had been passed. On the one hand, there was little Sixto the cheers of his people urging him on and on the other, there was one of the gamest kids I have seen in action in many moons. Beaten beyond hope, dropped three times for counts of nine, his face badly puffed, his side bruised and

eye cut, and suffering from a double dislocation of the jaw, gave Harry Jeffra went down to defeat like a real fighting champion. It was no disgrace to lose in the manner he did. He struggled against great odds, weakened by body punishment and weight reducing, but wouldn't yield. No one would have blamed him and he fought as such to the final bell."

Harry Jeffra, deprived of his title, went back to Baltimore to recover. Many thought he was finished as a potent force in boxing but didn't figure on the determination of this plucky dynamo. He realized he must now fight as a featherweight. Resuming training he realized he had lost none of his needed speed and had actually gained punching power. His goal was now the featherweight championship. Six months after the Escobar loss, he was back in the ring kayoing contenders Nick Jerome and John Mirabella. He started 1939 by besting nemesis Danny London and knocking out ranked Lou Transparenti. He followed with decisive wins over Marcus Pitts, Al Mancini, Johnny Marcelline, Joe Marciente and Canadian champ Baby Yack to become number one contender for Joey Archibald's featherweight title.

They met on September 28, ~1939 in Washington in a fifteen round championship fight. Everyone at the fight, including Nat Fleischer and Eddie Borden of Ring, had Jeffra the victor and excited fans gathered at ringside for the expected verdict. The judges split on the verdict but guest referee Benny Leonard voted for Archibald causing a melee in the auditorium. The decision brought about a ban on guest referees in Washington.

After three more wins, public opinion brought Jeffra a return match with Archibald and this time there was no doubt. On May 20, 1940, Jeffra punched out a unanimous fifteen round decision at the Baltimore Coliseum in the first title bout staged in that City in twenty-five years. Jeffra was the aggressor throughout and floored Archibald three times. He had become a champion in two divisions.

After beating ex-champion Jackie Wilson and losing a split decision to Billy Speary in Wilkes-Barre, Jeffra met his arch-rival Sixto Escobar as featherweights. With no weight problem, Harry easily defeated Sixto. To open 1941, Jeffra reversed his loss to Speary on a twelve round decision, beat Tony Iocavacci and knocked out Al Brown and then met Archibald in the rubber title bout.

This time it was Archibald's turn to win the decision and Harry Jeffra's tenure as a champion was over. He still was a world contender and even defeated Archibald easily in a ten rounder after Joey had lost his title to Chalky Wright. This gave Jeffra another title chance but he was stopped by Wright in June of 1942, cut badly and battered for ten rounds,

Jeffra considers Chalky Wright the best fighter he ever faced and certainly the hardest puncher. Wright, who eventually lost his crown to Willie Pep, won 102 fights including 45 knockouts.

Harry Jeffra continued fighting as a journeyman until 1950. He was still proficient enough to beat ex-champions Phil Terranova

and Lou Salica and win ten in a row in 1943 and 1944. He fought as a lightweight in 1945, 1946 and 1947, losing as often as he won as the reflexes that once characterized his brilliance began to fade. After laying off in 1948 and 1949, he returned in 1950, accepting pay days in New Orleans and Wichita before retiring for good.

In all, Harry Jeffra had 120 fights, winning 93 with 7 draws. He was stopped only twice and had a stout chin, being floored in only three of his 120 bouts. He was always highly respected by his peers in the fight game and in 1982 was elected to the Boxing Hall of Fame. He was also honored at the first induction ceremony of the Italian-American Boxing Hall of Fame in 1979.

After his fighting career ended Jeffra started another career with the horses. Born in the shadow of Pimlico Race Track, Harry has had a life long love affair with the ponies. He became a jockey's agent and then accepted a post as stable manager with a Maryland Race Track, which he remained until his retirement.

Jeffra was also an ardent golfer but no ordinary duffer. As a teenager he had rounds of 68 and 69 to win a caddy's tournament. He might have been the best golfing boxer who ever lived.