

Classic battle in old Arena

Levine-Robinson fight is called most exciting ever in Cleveland

By Bob Dolgan (Plain Dealer Reporter)

It was 50 years ago tonight, in the era when Cleveland was the No. 2 fight town in the nation behind New York and guys in big hats and suits sat at ringside with their girlfriends, that Sugar Ray Robinson and Artie Levine had their classic fight in the old Arena.

The late matchmaker Larry Atkins, impresario of Cleveland boxing then, always said that the Robinson-Levine bout on Nov. 6, 1946 was the best he ever staged.

Many veteran boxing fans say it was the most exciting fight seen in Cleveland. Levine, a 5-1 underdog, knocked down the brilliant Robinson in the fourth round, staggered him in the ninth, and then was stopped in the 10th.

Robinson, often called the finest fighter of all time, died in 1989 at age 67, but Levine is living in Matthews, N.C., a suburb of Charlotte.

"I was never the same after Sugar knocked me out," said Levine 71, in a phone conversation from his home. "Something went out of me that was there before. I just didn't believe it could happen."

The slugger from Brooklyn, NY lost six of his next 13 fights, then retired at age 24. He operated his own wholesale meat business in New York for 12 years, then became an auto salesman for 26 years.

.....Levine has fond memories of Cleveland, where he fought nine times and where he wound up his career. "It was like a hometown for me." He said. "Larry Atkins was a super guy and I had a tremendous amount of fans there. People treated me well."

Everybody likes a puncher and the clean-cut, friendly Levine was one of the best. Robinson, in his autobiography, called him the hardest hitter he ever fought.

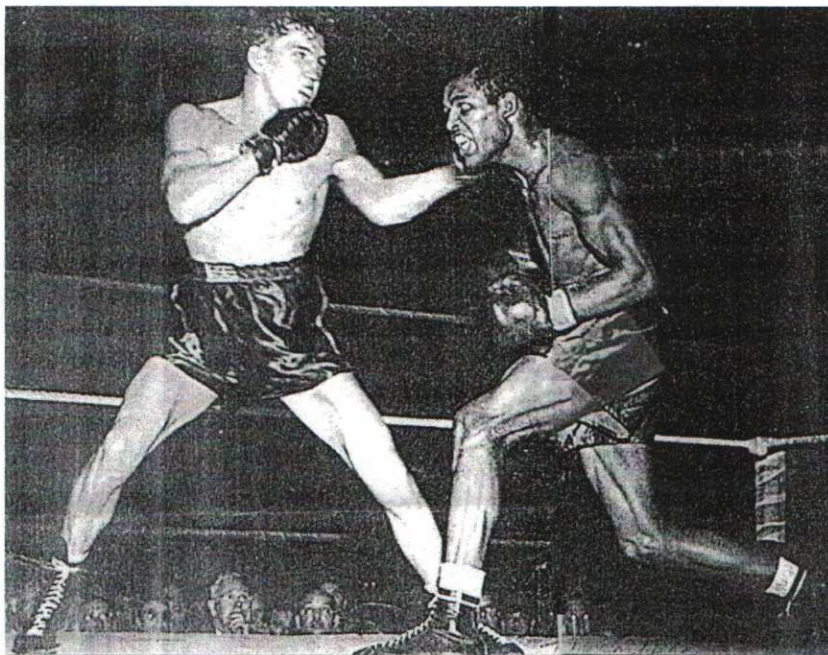
Starting in 1945, Levine a middleweight, knocked out five straight foes in Cleveland - Willie Watkins, Billie Walker, Charley Paladino (twice) and the tragic Jimmy Doyle.

Doyle, a welterweight who was almost as skilled as Robinson, was leading Levine by a big margin in the Arena on March 11, 1946. Then Levine landed a devastating left hook to knockout Doyle in the ninth round. Doyle lay unconscious on the ring floor for ten minutes, then was carried out on a stretcher.

"He almost died that night." Said Levine. "It was a terrible thing. A respirator was brought into the ring. It was a big upset. I thought Doyle would have been very difficult for Sugar Ray up to then. But he shouldn't have been allowed to fight him."

On June 24, 1947, still suffering the effects of the Levine punch, Doyle died after Sugar Ray decked him in a welterweight championship fight in the Arena. The back of Doyle's head hit the floor and he lapsed into a coma, dying the next day.

Robinson was considered almost unbeatable when he was matched against Levine. Sugar Ray went into the fight with a professional record of 71-1-1, with a loss and a draw to middleweights. As an amateur he had been undefeated in 89 fights.



Submitted by Mike Silver from an article that appeared on November 6, 1996 - The Plain Dealer Newspaper

He was known as the uncrowned welterweight king because champions Red Cochrane and Marty Servo avoided giving him a title bout. After the Levine fight Robinson would win 55 more bouts in a row and would go undefeated for another five years before finally losing to England's Randy Turpin in 1951. That was when Sugar was in the middle of a European tour that included as much partying as boxing. He knocked out Turpin in the return match to boost his record to 128-2-1.

The dazzling Robinson was 26 when he met Levine, 21. He would win the welter title in his next bout defeating Tommy Bell and would fight for another 19 years.

Levine had the weight advantage against him. Artie was a middleweight and came in at 159 1/4 pounds. Robinson was 150.

The flashy Sugar Ray stopped off in Detroit to knock out Cecil Hudson in six rounds five days before the Levine match. When he arrived in Cleveland in his perfectly-fitted topcoat, The Plain Dealer carried a picture of him and his charming wife.

Levine was a 4-1 and 5-1 underdog with the bookies, who openly took bets in the Arena, but columnist Ed Bang of the Cleveland News didn't think Robinson was in for an easy night. "Sugar carries his hands low and Levine has a terrific left hook. It will be the rapier of Robinson against the broadsword of Levine."

Bang wrote that few middleweights in history hit harder than Levine and compared his punch with that of Stanley Ketchel, the star of the early 1900s.

Levine recalled that he developed his left hook because he had to walk with a crutch under his left arm for a year after being hit by a car as a youth. "My left arm became very quick, agile and loose." He said.

A crowd of 12,202 packed the Arena for the fight. Tickets cost \$2.50, \$5, \$7.50, \$10 and \$15. Robinson was guaranteed \$15,000 or 27 1/2 percent of the gate, whichever was greater, and Levine got \$12,500 or 27 1/2 percent. The gate was \$83,171.

Robinson won the first three rounds. "He left-hooked Levine into second place." Wrote Howard Preston in the News.

"He was unbelievable," recalled Levine. "He was a very hard puncher. He was very sharp. He'd knock you off balance and slide off the ropes. He was businesslike and a good sport. He'd tell you what he was going to do. I learned more in that fight than I learned in any other fight."

With two minutes gone in the fourth, Levine struck. He floored Robinson with a left hook to the head, a right to the jaw, and six other blows. "Sugar Ray writhed on the floor as though he might not get up," wrote James E. Doyle in The Plain Dealer. "He made it, rather drunkenly."

A half century later, Levine insists he knocked out Robinson, and that he was victimized by a long count. "When he went down the referee (Jackie Davis) walked me across the ring to a neutral corner and then started the count at one," Levine said. "The fans went wild. There was a riot."

Robinson got up at the count of nine. Bang supported Levine's claim in the News. "I counted at least 12 seconds before Robinson got up," Bang wrote. He said many others agreed with him.

When the woozy Robinson got up, Levine attacked, excitedly throwing punches from every angle. "Move, baby, move," screamed Robinson's wife, who was at ringside.

Robinson weathered the assault and even stunned Levine with a right just before the bell.

Bang said that Levine would have knocked out Robinson if he had taken his time and made sure of his punches.



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The knockdown put Levine into ring history. "That was a great thing," said Levine. "He was like a prima donna. He beat everybody. Boxing fans constantly ask me about that knockdown to this day."

The elegant Sugar Ray regained control of the fight over the next four rounds, mostly with left hooks to the head and body, but in the ninth Levine staggered Robinson again with a left hook to the head. "Sugar looked ready to collapse," Doyle wrote. But Robinson again recovered.

Late in the 10th and final round the Sugar man administered the knockout drops with a flurry of punches. Levine went down, his arm hanging over one rope. He was counted out with 19 seconds left. Doyle wrote that Levine jumped up two seconds after the count of ten, looking fresh and ready to fight again.

In the post-mortem, Levine said, "I didn't know where he hit me or with what. I didn't feel anything. When I woke up and heard the referee count 10 and I thought, 'This guy must be counting by tens.' Aw, nuts. I had him in the fourth round and then I didn't have him. Gee, if I could only have put over that right cross. He's fast. He can play around with you, but he didn't hurt me. He isn't strong, but he's a master in the ring."

Said Robinson: "I don't know exactly what I hit him with. Things happened so fast you don't know. Every punch I threw I tried for a knockout. I was mad about being knocked down. My corner was yelling at me to be careful and not get KO'd. I don't think Artie is as rugged as Jake LaMotta or as fancy as Fritzie Zivic, but he's plenty tough."

They never had a rematch. "Ray didn't want to fight me again," said Levine.

It was the first time Levine was knocked out in 60 fights, but then he was stopped by Chuck Hunter and Blackjack Billy Fox. His last fight was on June 20, 1949, when he and Dick Wagner took turns flooring each other until Wagner finally KO'd him in the eighth heat in Cleveland.

Levine retired with a 51-16-5 record, a nice bankroll, and a place in ring legend.

Robinson fought until he was 44 and wound up with a 209-19-6 record, several welter and middleweight titles, and a place in the Boxing Hall of Fame. The man who once retired to become a night club dancer, and who appeared in movies and TV, lived his last years quietly, working with youths. He died of Alzheimer's disease.

Levine used to have a film of the Robinson fight, which he liked to watch, but over the years it disintegrated. He is hoping that another film exists. He would love to have a copy.

"Boxing was one of the best things I ever got into," Levine said. "I was very fortunate to do what I did. Boxing was something I lived and breathed."



Both Fighters as They Appeared in their Primes



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