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|| ERNIE TERRELL | 1939-2014

Boxing champ went 15 rounds with Ali

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Staff Reporter

Former heavyweight champion Ernie Terrell of Chicago survived 15 punishing rounds in a ferocious 1967 fight with Muhammad Ali.

An irate Ali wreaked havoc on Mr. Terrell, who had called him Cassius Clay instead of addressing him by his then-new Muslim name. Ali danced around Mr. Terrell and repeatedly jabbed him in the match, shouting, "What's my name?!"

A towering 6-foot-6 with an 82-inch reach, Mr. Terrell, a longtime Roseland resident, "at the time was the tallest heavyweight champion in history," said Mike Joyce, boxing coach at Leo High School and a son-in-law of Ali.

After his boxing career, Mr. Terrell worked as a fight promoter, ran twice for 34th ward alderman, losing both times, and founded a janitorial company that employed 100 people, according to Joyce and James Kitchen, a former boxing champ with Chicago's Catholic Youth Organization.

"Ernie was just a pure Chicago guy," said former Illinois Boxing Commissioner Sean Curtin.

"People called him 'champ' all the time," said Mr. Terrell's wife, Maxine.

Mr. Terrell, 75, who lived for decades near 111th and Halsted, died Tuesday at Little Company of Mary

Hospital, his wife said. He was 75.

The champ was also a strong singer. His group, Ernie Terrell and the Heavyweights, played Las Vegas and Johnny Carson's Tonight Show. " 'Johnny B. Goode' was his best," said Curtin.

"Ernie actually made more money in the music business himself than he did in the boxing business," Joyce said.

Singing ran in the family. His sister, Jean, replaced Diana Ross in the Supremes when Ross embarked on a solo career. During the "Jean Terrell years" of 1970-1973, the Supremes racked up hits including "Floy Joy," "Up the Ladder to the Roof" and "Stoned Love."

The son of sharecroppers with 10 kids, Mr. Terrell was born in Benzoni, Mississippi. He came north and attended Farragut High School. He was a teenager when he turned pro as a boxer in 1957.

"He had one of the best left jabs of all time," Curtin said.

The 1967 Ali-Terrell fight took place at the Houston Astrodome. At a publicity appearance beforehand, Ali read a poem that included lines like, "At the sound of the bell, Terrell will catch hell!"

Mr. Terrell called him Cassius Clay, which riled Ali and seemed to amuse sportscaster Howard Cosell, who stood between them. "Why you wanna say Cassius Clay when



Ernie Terrell holds his Heavyweight championship belt in his Chicago home in 2009. | BRIAN JACKSON/CHICAGO SUN-TIMES

Howard Cosell and everybody is calling me Muhammad Ali?" Ali told him.

Picking up steam, Ali said, "You just act just like an old Uncle Tom. . . I'm gonna punish you."

And he did. Ali rained down blows on Mr. Terrell, who spent most of the fight holding up his gloves to protect his head. Later, Mr. Terrell said that Ali jabbed him in the eyeball and made him see double.

Mr. Terrell told the story of the battle in the book "Muhammad Ali: Through the Eyes of the World."

"I had a great chance to win that fight," he said in the book. "I was bigger than Ali at that point. But during the second round of the fight, we got caught in a headlock, and he took his thumb, and he poked it in my eye." After that, "It looked like I was fighting two Alis."

Refusing to call him Ali was just a way to psych out his opponent, Mr. Terrell said later. "We were doing whatever we thought we'd have to do to win," he said. "If . . . calling him Cassius Clay upset him and get

him out of his rhythm, then he were Cassius Clay. That's the way I saw it."

"After that fight was over, there was absolutely no bad blood between him and Ali," said Joyce, whom Mr. Terrell promoted when Joyce was a fighter. "Muhammad and Ernie were lifelong friends."

In a 2009 interview with the Chicago Sun-Times, though, Mr. Terrell said he hadn't forgotten Ali's actions. "He grabbed me around the neck and stuck me in the face with his thumb," he said. "I never forgave him."

Some boxing aficionados might have looked at Mr. Terrell as a pretender to the throne. The World Boxing Association had stripped Ali of his 1964 championship because of a contract dispute involving his plans for a rematch with Sonny Liston. Mr. Terrell defeated Eddie Machen in 1965 to win the WBA title. He beat George Chuvalo and Doug Jones before going up against Ali, said Curtin, author of the books "Chicago Boxing" and "Chicago Amateur Boxing."

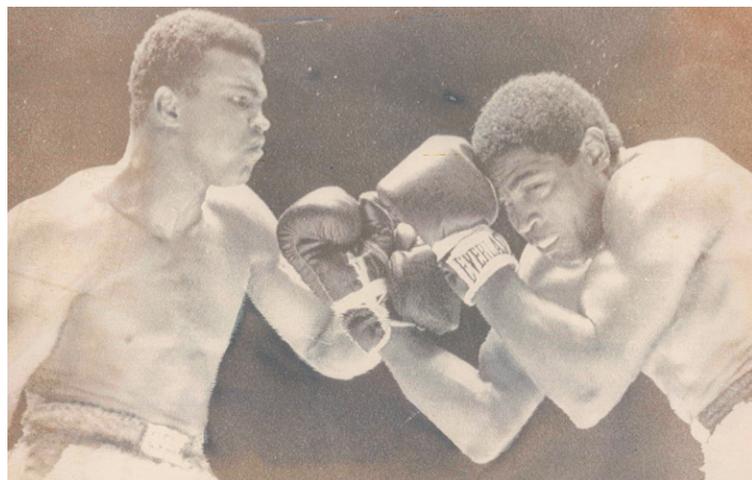
He lost fights with Manuel Ramos and Thad Spencer and announced his retirement in 1967. He returned to fighting in 1970 and had a string of wins before losing two matches in 1973, the last to Jeff Merritt, according to Curtin. Once again, he retired.

"He had a lot of heart," Joyce said. "Obviously, he took some beatings. He was just a strong, nice person."

A wake is planned for 4 p.m. to 9 p.m. Dec. 26 at Calvary Baptist Church, 8247 S. Jeffery. The wake will resume at 10 a.m. Dec. 27 until an 11 a.m. funeral service. Burial will be at Mount Hope Cemetery in Chicago.

In addition to his wife and sister Jean, Mr. Terrell is survived by a daughter, Deborah Anderson; a son, David Anderson; sisters Geniver Hines and Lovie Mickens; brothers J.C., Julius, Jimmy and Leonard Terrell; and two grandchildren.

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Ernie Terrell lost to Muhammad Ali in a 1967 match in Houston. | SUN-TIMES LIBRARY