

“I’m the Greatest”

Cassius Clay Wins Bragging Rights from Sonny Liston



MIAMI, FLA., February 25, 1964

CASSIUS MARCELLUS CLAY fought his way out of the horde that swarmed and leaped and shouted in the ring, climbed like a squirrel onto the red velvet ropes and brandished his still-gloved hand aloft.

“Eat your words,” he howled to the working press rows. “Eat your words.”

Nobody ever had a better right. In a mouth still dry from the excitement of the most astounding upset in many roaring years, the words don’t taste good, but they taste better than they read. The words, written here and practically everywhere else until the impossible became unbelievable truth, said Sonny Liston would squash Cassius Clay like a bug when the boy braggart challenged for the heavyweight championship of the world.

The boy braggart is the new champion, and not only because Liston quit in his corner after the sixth round. This incredible kid of twenty-two, only nineteen fights away from the amateurs and altogether untested on boxing’s topmost level, was winning going away when Liston gave up with what appeared to be a dislocated shoulder.

He might have been nailed if the bout had continued, but on the evidence of eighteen frenzied minutes, Cassius was entitled to crow, as he did at the top of his voice before Liston retired: “I’m the greatest. I’m gonna upset the world.”

“That’s right,” his camp followers howled. “That’s what you’re doin’.” And he was.

On this score, Clay won four of the six rounds, and in one of the

two he lost he was blinded. Apart from the unforeseen ending, that was perhaps the most extraordinary part of the whole wild evening. It started between the fourth and fifth rounds. "Floating like a butterfly and stinging like a bee" as he and his stooges had predicted, Cassius had made Liston look like a bull moose plodding through a swamp.

Dancing, running, jabbing, ducking, stopping now and then to pepper the champion's head with potshots in swift combinations, he had won the first, third, and fourth rounds and opened an angry cut under Liston's left eye.

Handlers were swabbing his face in the corner when suddenly he broke into an excited jabber, pushed the sponge away, and pawed at his eyes. As the bell rang he sprang up waving a glove aloft as though forgetting that a man can't call a time-out in a prize fight. In the corner, frantic seconds sniffed the sponge suspiciously.

Cassius couldn't fight at all in the fifth, but he could and did show a quality he had never before been asked for. He showed he could take the sternest hooks and heaviest rights Liston could throw—or at least this Liston, whose corner said later that the shoulder had slipped in the first round.

Just pawing feebly at the oncoming champion, Clay rocked under smacking hooks, ducked, rolled, grabbed, and caught one brutal right in the throat. He rode it out, though, and at the end of the round he had ceased to blink.

"You eyes okay, champ," they were screaming from his corner as the round drew to a close. "Everything okay."

He didn't confirm that until the bell rang for the sixth. Then, getting up from his stool, he looked across the ring, nodded with assurance, and went out to enjoy one of his best rounds, pumping both hands to the head, circling, dancing.

"Get mad, baby," his corner pleaded. "He's retreatin', champ."

It was at the end of this heat that he came back crowing about upsetting the world. Yet he couldn't have known how quickly his words would be confirmed.

Just before the bell for the seventh, Cassius sprang up and waved

both hands overhead in a showoff salute to the crowd. He took a step or so forward, as the gong clanged, then leaped high in a war dance of unconfined glee. He had seen what scarcely anybody else in Convention Hall had noticed.

Liston wasn't getting up. Willie Reddish, Sonny's trainer, had his hands spread palms up in a gesture of helplessness. Jack Nilon, the manager, swung his arm in a horizontal sweep, palm down. The fight was over, the championship gone.

Dr. Robert C. Bennett of Detroit, who has treated Liston in the past, hastened into the ring and taped Liston's shoulder. The former champion told him he had felt the shoulder go midway in the first round and the left hand had grown progressively number from then on.

They'll fight again to answer the prodding question of what might have been, and it will be a big one. Although return-bout clauses are frowned upon these days, Bob and Jimmy Nilon, Jack's brothers, have an independent contract with Clay entitling them to name the time, place, and opponent for his first defense.

As Bob Nilon explained this, Clay rode the ropes. "Eat your words," he bawled.