

JUNE 2001

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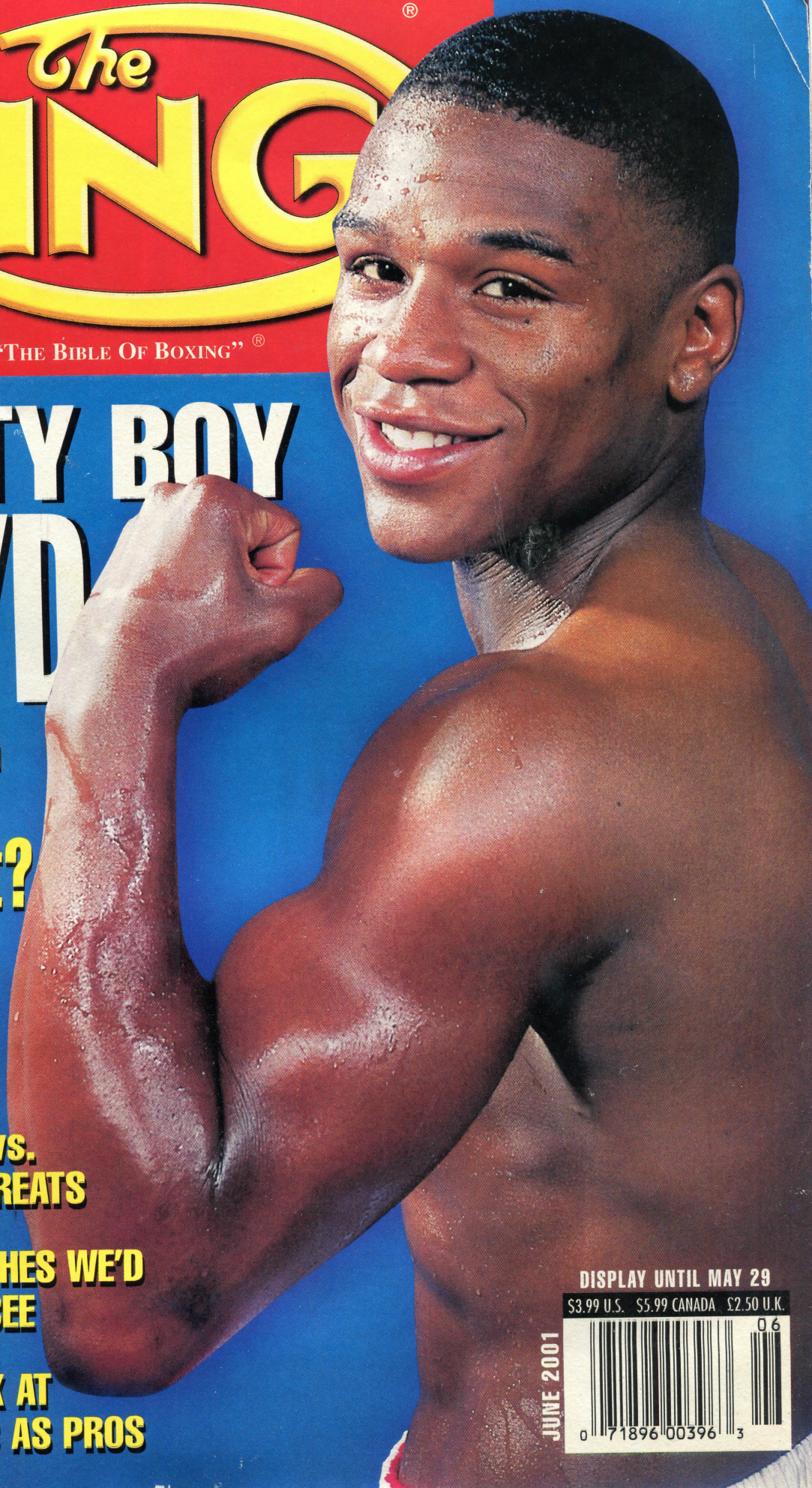
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'40s LIGHT HEAVY HENRY HALL

The Man Who Outsmarted Ancient Archie

By Pete Ehrmann

In William Hall's Milwaukee, Wisconsin, home there are no clues as to the man he was in a previous life. The walls have no photos of him with Archie Moore, Joe Louis, or Ezzard Charles. Hall doesn't even have a scrapbook that chronicles the almost 20-year career that made him, over a half-century ago, one of the best light heavyweight boxers of his time.

"I never was too crazy about saving all those scraps," said Hall, now 78. "I got into it just to travel. I knew if I did pretty good fighting, I'd get to travel."

Fighting as Henry Hall, he traveled far and in some fast company, getting ranked second in the world at 175 pounds, splitting two bouts with the legendary Moore, and fighting exhibitions with heavyweight champions Louis and Charles. But like too many other talented black fighters of his era, Hall fought all over the globe without ever getting an opportunity to rule it as champion.

"You had to pull a lot of tricks to beat me," he said, "and they wanted easier fights."

He was born in Napoleonville, Louisiana, and moved as a boy to New Orleans. Hall's father was a good street-fighter—"Most every man he hit went down"—but fighting wasn't for Hall until one day when he was 17 and headed for the Palace Theater to see a movie. On the way there, he passed the Rampart Street Gym, where some amateur bouts were going on.

"Instead of going to the Palace, I'll go

here for a little entertainment," Hall said he decided on the spur of the moment. One week later, he was the entertainment at the Rampart, knocking out his first ring opponent in two rounds.

After six amateur fights, he turned professional in 1942. That's when William Hall disappeared. His manager, former bantamweight star Johnny Fissie, convinced him to call himself Henry Hall because "it sounded more like a sporting name."

But even on the sporting scene in the South of that time, it was color that mattered most and determined what opportunities were available. And Hall was the wrong color. Black people not only had separate drinking fountains, bathrooms, and schools in New Orleans, but also separate boxing rings.

Black fighters were not allowed to box white fighters in the Crescent City when Hall knocked out Willie Butler in four rounds in his first pro bout. The cards were strictly segregated. While white boxers fought on promoter "Leapin' Lou" Messina's well-publicized and reported cards every Monday at the Coliseum Arena on Conti and North Roman Streets, the black fighters had their night at the Coliseum on Fridays. The races were strictly segregated on both sides of the

Then and now: Former light heavyweight contender Hall as he looked in the prime of his career and as he looks today, still an active, physically impressive figure at the age of 78.

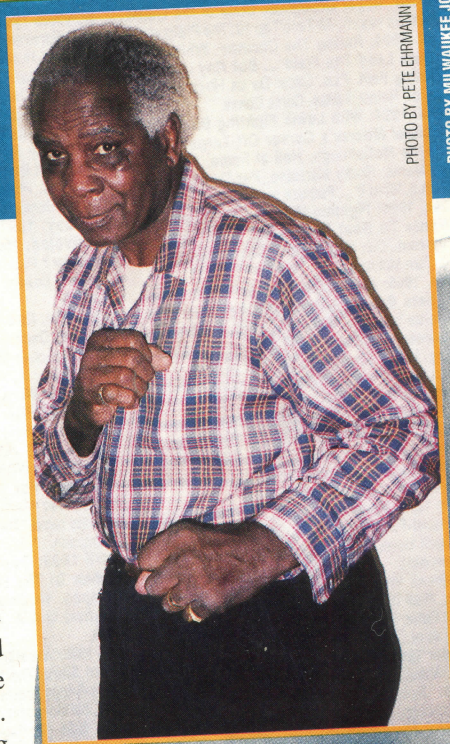
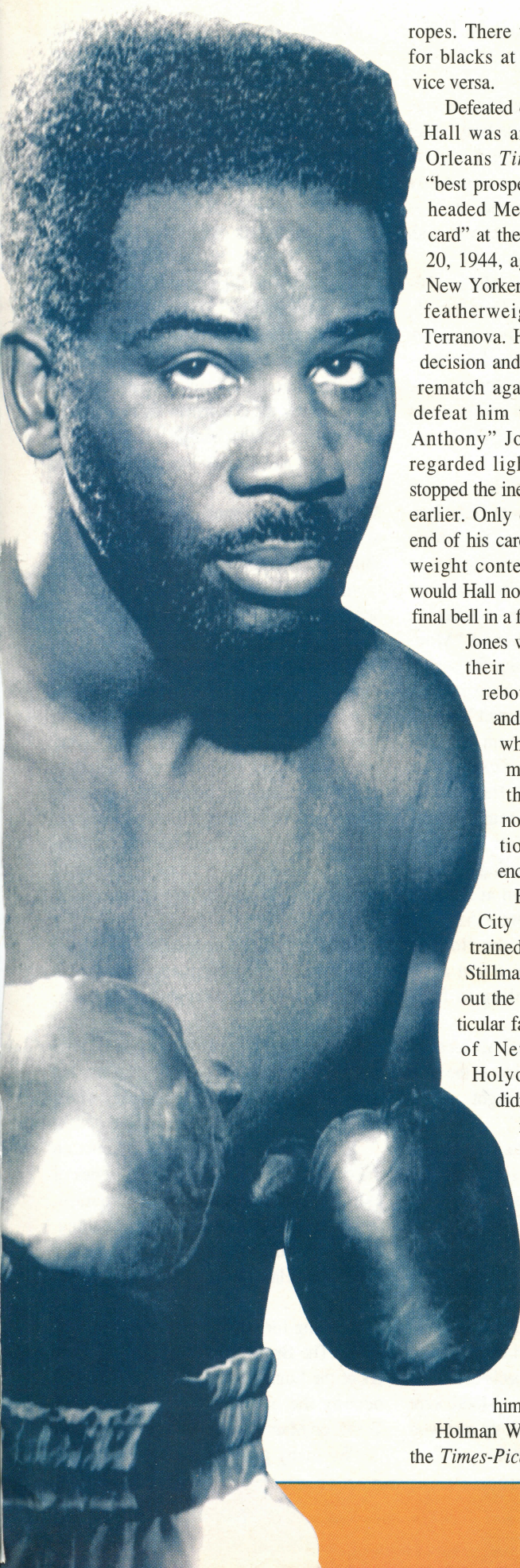


PHOTO BY PETE EHREMAN

PHOTO BY MILWAUKEE JOURNAL SENTINEL



ropes. There was a special section for blacks at the white cards, and vice versa.

Defeated only once in 16 fights, Hall was anointed by the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* as the "best prospect in years" when he headed Messina's "Negro fistic card" at the Coliseum on October 20, 1944, against Al Stephany, a New Yorker and stablemate of ex-featherweight champion Phil Terranova. Hall won the 10-round decision and was rewarded with a rematch against the only man to defeat him to that point. "Mad Anthony" Jones, another highly regarded light heavyweight, had stopped the inexperienced Hall a year earlier. Only one other time, at the end of his career and against heavy-weight contender Pat McMurry, would Hall not be around to hear the final bell in a fight.

Jones won a tight decision in their rematch, but Hall rebounded with five wins and a draw before the man who wanted to travel as much as fight finally hit the road and headed north, where the segregation wasn't quite as encompassing as in Dixie.

Headquartering in New York City in the summer of '46, Hall trained at the racial melting pot of Stillman's Gym and fought throughout the Northeast. He became a particular favorite in the boxing hotbeds of Newark, New Jersey, and Holyoke, Massachusetts. Hall didn't lose a fight that year, but in January '47, he dropped decisions to contenders Billy Grant and Bert Lytell. He beat Grant in a 12-round return match, and on March 14 returned home to New Orleans for a bout with another superb black fighter who was even better known in his hometown than Hall himself.

Holman Williams of Detroit was, even the *Times-Picayune* admitted, "one of the



The most memorable victory of Hall's career came over future Hall of Famer Archie Moore (pictured) in 1948. Hall outpointed Moore, renowned for his cleverness, with the help of one of boxing's oldest tricks.

most remarkable pugilists of the past 20 years." Twelve years earlier, Williams had come to New Orleans for the first time and trounced local star Wesley Farrell. Said the newspaper, "He has been the idol of the Negro boxing fans here ever since. A fighter, white or black, has to have ability and color to please the fans here in repeaters. Williams has fought 32 fights in New Orleans rings for a total of 333 rounds—a record for a visiting fighter."

His fight with Hall was played up in the press as teacher vs. pupil. Five years before, when Hall was just getting started, Williams "gave him a break ... and helped him on his way up from the preliminary ranks." But while acknowledging Hall as "the first local Negro to reach main bout class since Battling Owens and Harry Wills," more than a decade earlier, the press put the odds at 2-1 that Professor Williams would administer a flunking grade to the hometown fighter.



Another of Hall's famous opponents was Holman Williams, who was just as popular in Hall's hometown of New Orleans as Hall was. They fought a 10-round draw in their first bout, but Hall dropped a decision to the smooth-boxing Williams in the rematch.

The white and black spectators sitting in their segregated places at the Coliseum saw a terrific fight. The smooth, counter-punching Williams held sway for the first five rounds, but then Hall started to reach him repeatedly with right uppercuts. The decision after 10 rounds was a draw, which may have had less to do with any hometown bias on the part of the officials than "Leapin' Lou's" desire to wring an even bigger gate out of the rematch. When they fought the second time, two weeks later, school was back in session, with Williams utilizing his own right uppercut to win a unanimous decision.

"He was a slick, really good middleweight," said Hall. "Very smooth."

In his long career, Williams had been stopped only twice. Once by the great uncrowned champion, Charley Burley, and

the other time by Hall's next opponent in New Orleans.

"Archie Moore was just about the best," Hall said. "He could turn up the heat just about any time he wanted. He was just naturally clever, with all kinds of tricks."

But in their 10-rounder on October 15, 1948, it was a trick by Hall that started the then-fifth ranked Moore on his way to a startling upset defeat at the Coliseum Arena.

One of the cagiest practitioners in ring history, renowned for luring many a smart fighter to his doom, it is almost impossible to imagine boxing's famed "Mongoose" falling for such a thing, but here it is in print as reported by Jesse A. Linthicum in *The Baltimore Sun*: "In an early round, Hall stepped back and remarked to Archie: 'You better tie your shoe string!' Moore looked down at his feet, and Hall sent a crackling right from the floor to

Archie's jaw. Hall went on to win a 10-round decision, Moore failing to fully recover."

More than 52 years later, Hall recalled that punch with a smile as wide as the arch of the right hand he threw that night.

"It was bolo," he said.

That wasn't all there was to it, of course. Two rounds were taken away from the increasingly frustrated Moore late in the fight for punching low and butting. The future Hall of Famer, reported the *Times-Picayune*, "seemed content to wait for a pot-shot kayo punch to land on Hall, and never had the opportunity to connect solidly. Hall kept right on top of Moore throughout the 10 rounds to gain the decision."

A month later in Baltimore, Moore kept his eyes, punches, and head all up and won a unanimous verdict in a rematch.

Yet another outstanding black fighter in the '40s was Bert Lytell, who was called "The Chocolate Kid." His record included wins over Holman Williams, Cocoa Kid (Louis Cocoa), and even Burley. In '47, Lytell took all 10 rounds from Hall in their Holyoke fight. But in February '49, they fought a draw, and after that Hall won successive decisions over Lytell, and then snuffed feared bomb-thrower Bob Satterfield in four rounds to reach the number-two spot in the 175-pound rankings.

"The knockout, added to two impressive triumphs over Lytell, puts Hall in a strategic position nationally," said *The Milwaukee Journal* after the Satterfield fight. "He was ranked right behind champion Freddie Mills of England and his two leading contenders, the veteran Gus Lesnevich and Archie Moore, before he enhanced his ring record at Satterfield's expense. As a result, the shifty and sharp-hitting southern Negro left town looking for Moore, and willing to tackle any challenger standing between him and the title."

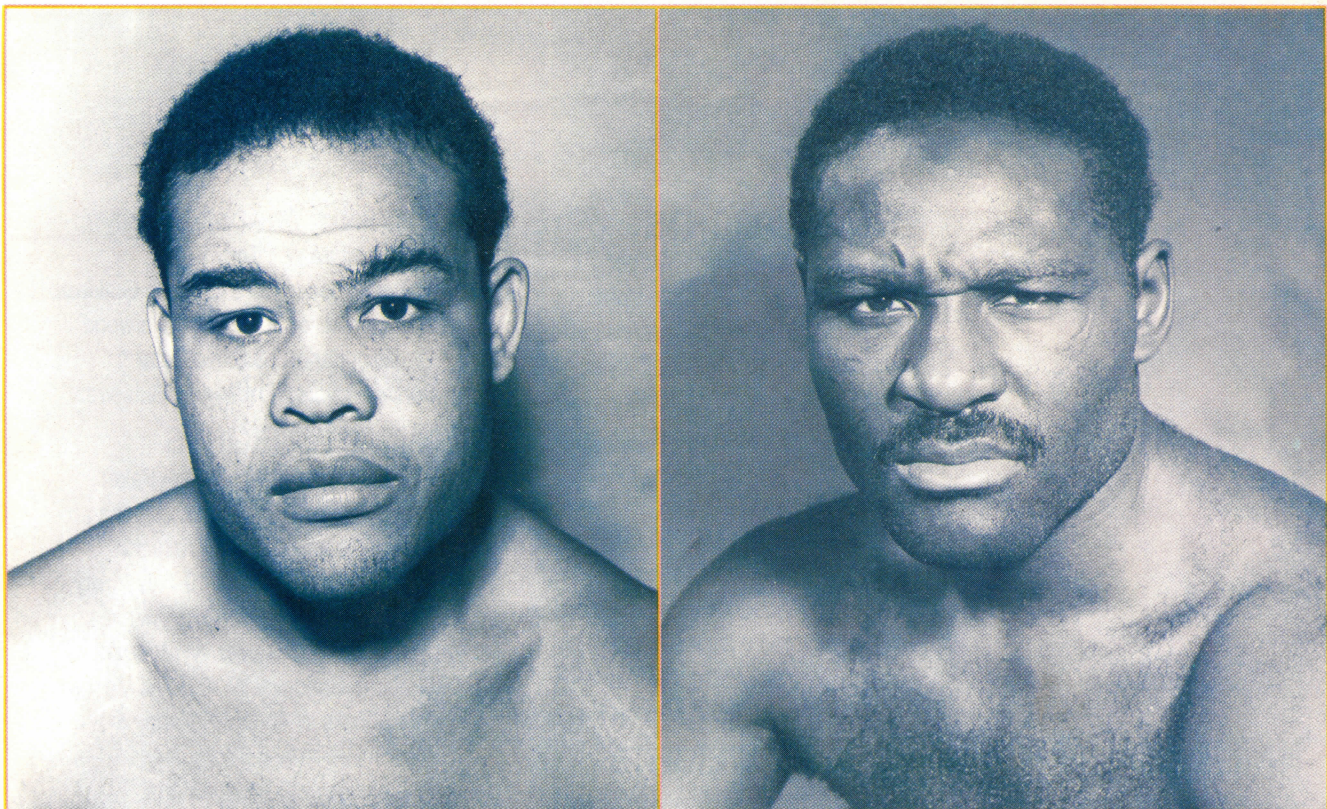
But all of a sudden, everything went south—as in purgatory, not New Orleans—in a hurry, and what happened in the ring was the least of it. Between June 3 and August 11 of '49, Hall dropped five straight decisions, including a pair of 10-rounders to future light heavyweight champion Harold Johnson. The contender who one sports-writer had said "moves around on a pair of winged feet" in the ring now appeared tired and ordinary.

It had nothing to do with boxing. Hall's wife, who'd enthusiastically encouraged and supported him throughout his career, was dying of cancer. His concentration and desire broken, Hall quit fighting to be with her. With one notable exception, he was out of the ring until 1951, following his wife's death.

Ex-heavyweight champion Joe Louis, on the comeback trail, was fighting a series of exhibition matches around the country. Only, "exhibitions didn't mean anything, because Louis liked to see you on the floor," said Hall. "That's the kind of fighter he was."

Looking for somebody who could stand up to "The Brown Bomber's" fire, promoters of the Louis tour prevailed upon Hall to occupy the opposite corner in Austin, Texas, on March 24, 1950.

"So many guys would get in the ring



Even though he was only a light heavyweight, Hall boxed exhibition bouts with heavyweight champions Joe Louis (left) and Ezzard Charles. Hall hung tough with Louis by recalling something Jack Johnson once observed about "The Brown Bomber."

with Louis afraid, and the first time they get hurt, they'd hit the canvas," Hall said. "He never hurt me. I remember that Jack Johnson mentioned once that Louis was easy to hit over his left shoulder."

Shooting right counters over the former champion's left jab, Hall not only lasted the distance, but looked so impressive doing it that when he got back into the ring a year later, it was for an exhibition against then-champion Ezzard Charles. Afterward, Charles told Hall: "You're slick and seem to know what's happening in the ring."

After two comeback fights, Hall went up against top heavyweight contender Rex Layne at the Kansas City Municipal Auditorium on June 21, 1961. Weighing 197 pounds, Layne, who'd beaten former champion Jersey Joe Walcott and had already signed to fight Rocky Marciano, had 19 pounds on Hall. Nevertheless, reported *THE RING*, "Hall used his superior speed and machine gun left to keep Layne off."

"They thought he was gonna knock me out, but he didn't come close to it," Hall recalled. "You could see his punches coming a mile away."

With Layne's big money fight against Marciano (who would knock him out)

already locked in, the decision against Hall was equally forecastable. The 6,000 fans booed it loudly.

In the mid-'50s, Hall made Milwaukee his home base, remarrying and raising a family there while continuing to take whatever opportunities came along to indulge his traveling jones. He beat good heavyweights like Rusty Payne and Johnny Holman, and signed on as Canadian heavyweight champion Earl Walls' chief sparring partner for a chance to work the Great White North circuit. In 1955, Hall made it to Germany for two bouts, drawing with national champion Heinz Neuhaus in one of them and impressing Teutonic fans with his skills. Except for one, who advised Hall he "should be glad Hitler wasn't still living."

A title shot somewhere along the way would have been nice, but to a black man who grew up confined by strict boundaries arbitrarily determined by the color of his skin, the chance to see the big, wide world made it all worthwhile. The traveling finally stopped around 1962, when he put away his boxing gloves and became William Hall again. A lot of fights never made it to the record book, which shows Hall at 50-22-6 (18) with 1 no-contest.

One of Hall's sons loved his dad too much to try to follow in his footsteps, in case he couldn't measure up.

"I didn't want to do boxing," said Tom Hall, "because if I did poorly, they'd say, 'There's Henry Hall's son,' and it would reflect badly on my dad."

So Tom went into kickboxing instead, and won the professional heavyweight title in the mid-'80s. His father contributed some tips on punching, but the old contender's counsel was limited.

"When that kicking stuff gets in there, that throws me off," said the senior Hall.

Now less than two years from his 80th birthday, the still physically impressive and dignified Hall still works hard laying cement when the weather is warm, and gets his traveling in as afternoon bus driver for the grade school in his neighborhood.

"You like to keep busy; that's the best thing," said the journeyman. "Keep movin', like in the ring. Keep movin'."

And, of course, keep your shoe strings tied. ■

Pete Ehrmann is a freelance writer living in West Allis, Wisconsin, and a regular contributor to this magazine.