

The OutField

Emile Griffith: Out for the Count

By Dan Woog

In 1962, Emile Griffith killed Benny “Kid” Paret. The occasion was a nationally televised fight, with boxing’s welterweight crown at stake.

If ever there were a non-gay event, a death in the boxing ring would seem to be it. But – as with so much else in life – there is far more to the story than meets the eye.

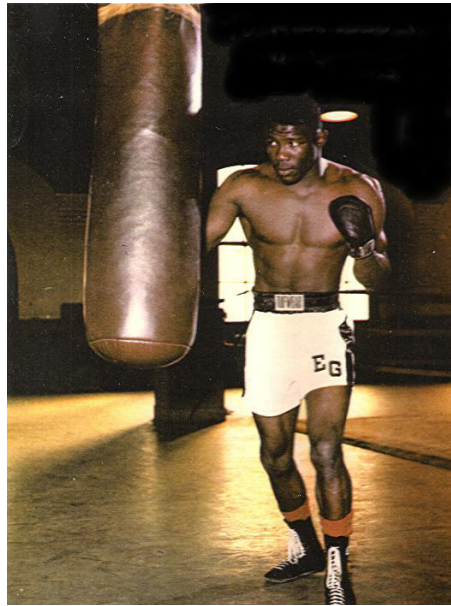
Griffith – the holder of six championship belts, a charter inductee in the International Boxing Hall of Fame and a fan favorite for both his exciting style and charming personality – did not reveal at the time what caused him to knock Paret unconscious in the 12th round, then pummel him a dozen more times as he stood propped against the ropes. Griffith was not a vicious man; entering the bout, his 28-3 record included just 10 knockouts.

Yet over the years, rumors filtered through the boxing world: Griffith’s rage had been ignited hours earlier, during the weigh-in, when Paret called him a “maricón” (Spanish for “faggot”). Griffith almost attacked him right there, the story went; later that night, his fists finished the job.

At the time, Griffith’s homosexuality was known to many sportswriters, but, following the standards of the times, no one mentioned it publicly. Though Griffith never hid who he was – he walked proudly through the front door of Times Square gay bars, rather than slinking in the back, someone noted – it took decades for him to actually say, “I am gay.”

Today there are no shades of gray. Griffith – who is suffering from the twin effects of pugilistic dementia and a vicious beating outside a gay bar several years ago – has allowed his story to be written. *Nine...Ten...And Out! The Two Worlds of Emile Griffith* is the first book to explore the life of a championship gay boxer.

And what may be most revealing of the difference between 1962 and 2009 is how little reaction the once-explosive revelation has generated.



Nine...Ten... is the work of Ron Ross, a veteran boxing writer and former pro boxer, fight promoter and manager. He is an unapologetic Griffith fan – and he understands the two worlds his subject long straddled.

“The ’50s and ’60s were a more homophobic time than today,” Ross says, “but Emile was still accepted for who he was. He was an upfront guy, and people in boxing respected him for that. Outside of the boxing world, though, most people didn’t know.”

Years ago, *New York Times* sports columnist Bob Herbert asked Griffith about the rumors. “I have been with men and women,” the boxer responded.

Not until the premiere of the movie “Ring of Fire” – a documentary that traveled the decades from the fatal fight to a heart-rending meeting between Griffith and Paret’s now-grown son – did the former boxer use the “g” word, and come fully out.

The film – which, to use a boxing analogy, pulled no punches – had an enormous effect on Griffith. “He told me, ‘I guess the whole world knows now,’” Ross says. “As he walked out of the

SAMPLE COLUMN

**Specifications: Bi-weekly, 800 words
(with photo when available)**

theater, people cheered him. That was a revelation to him. People still loved and accepted him. That opened a door for him to step through. And he did.”

But why a book about a gay welterweight now?

“The time is right,” Ross says. “Emile and Muhammad Ali were two of the all-star boxers of the ’60s. People have wanted to do something on Emile for a long time, but everyone wanted to focus on the lurid parts. When his manager and trainer, Gil Clancy, asked me if I’d be interested, I took a long time to decide. But they knew I’d be sensitive to his situation, so I said yes.”

There was another reason: Ross has a lesbian daughter.

“I wanted a book that portrayed Emile Griffith, the person,” Ross explains. “Not just a gay person, not just a fighter – but a human being. Something anyone – boxing fan or not, gay or straight – could relate to. I think I achieved that objective.”

Does Griffith leave a legacy?

“Definitely,” Ross says. “He stood up at a time when many people were in the closet. He carried himself honestly, without flaunting anything. His legacy is that an athlete can love himself completely. He sends the message that it’s OK to live your life openly, with sensitivity and compassion.”

Ross then recites his favorite line from the book: “I killed a man, and most people understand and forgive me,” Griffith said once. “However, I love a man, and to so many people this is an unforgivable sin; this makes men an evil person. So even though I never went to jail, I’ve been in prison almost all my life.”

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