

# Spencer Making Comeback In Life As Promoter



Thad walks to corner after kayoing Alvin Carter in the fifth at the Moulin Rouge in Los Angeles. In center background is his manager, Walter Minskoff.

by Jerry Garner

Thad Spencer, Jr., is making a comeback in life, and in boxing, as a promoter. Spencer was the number one heavyweight contender in the world in 1967. He had signed a contract to fight Muhammad Ali for the heavyweight title. However, Spencer never got to fight the legendary Ali. Ali was drafted into the Army but refused induction. Later he was stripped of his heavyweight championship.

"That was something," Spencer recall. "Just when it looked like I finally was gonna get my shot, the guy I'm chasing isn't there anymore. It might have been the worst day of my life."

After this, Spencer's life and boxing career began to disintegrate.

In 1967, Spencer defeated Ernie Terrell, who was then the top heavyweight contender involved in the tournament to select a replacement for Ali. The victory over Terrell would be Spencer's last one as a professional fighter. In the second round of the elimination tournament, Spencer was upset by Jerry Quarry.

After losing to Quarry, Spencer would fight eight more times. He lost seven of those bouts, four by knockouts and one draw. Thad Spencer, Jr., whom former heavyweight champion Joe Louis once called a "better" all-around fighter than Cassius Clay, was finished as a boxer.

Spencer blames his decline as a heavyweight contender on his lifestyle and drugs. "I was heavy into drugs," he recalls. "The fast life, the fast women. That's all that mattered." At first, Spencer kept telling people he was in training for another fight. "I was in my twenties. I could have kept going."

Instead, Spencer started pimping along using cocaine. He said he would go to bed high and wake up thinking about getting high again. For the next 13 years, Spencer kept using drugs and lived a life in the fast lanes. In between, he was shot seven times and ran over by a car twice.

Spencer realized his life had hit the bottom one rainy night in Los Angeles back in 1982. "I was walking with my son, Mister," he recalls. "I heard a sloshing sound. I looked down and there were holes in my shoes. They had no bottoms left, so did my son's shoes. I knew I had to change my life."

Spencer moved back to Portland in 1982, to live with his parents in the house he had purchased from them years earlier. Spencer stopped using drugs and decided to get back into boxing as a promoter. "Boxing saved me from the streets when I was a kid," and he hoped it would do it again.

Thad Spencer, Jr., was born March 28, 1943, in Birmingham, Alabama, the third of 12 children; 7 boys and 5 girls. The family moved to Portland when Spencer was an infant. He took an interest in boxing at age 14 and started working out in a gym.

He met the late Eddie Machen and began working out with him. At the time, Machen was a top professional heavyweight contender. Machen and Spencer became close friends.

Spencer became a top amateur fighter. He won the Pacific Northwest Golden titles. Spencer made the 1960 U.S. Olympics as a heavyweight. Muhammad Ali made the team as a light-heavyweight. However, Spencer didn't go to the Olympics; instead he turned professional. Spencer said he decided not to attend the Rome Olympics on the advice of Machen. "Eddie asked me what did I want with another trophy?" For turning pro, Spencer received \$2,000 in \$5 bills and a '56 Mercury.

Spencer moved quickly in the heavyweight ranks. Spencer's goal was to fight Muhammad Ali. Although he was the number 2 contender, Ali fought No. 3 contender, Zora Folley, in Madison Garden on March 22, 1967. "I should have fought Ali before Folley," recalled Spencer. "I was ranked higher than him." The rest is history: Ali stripped of his title for refusing induction into the Army. Spencer's dream of fighting Ali for the world heavyweight title wouldn't be.

Once Spencer decided to go into promoting boxing matches, he found it was a difficult business to break into. His first boxing card, which was held in Vancouver, Washington, was nearly a disaster. The day before the card, he pulled out and only 150 people attended the event. "I had to go through with the card. If I didn't, the boxing commission could have revoked my license, and my credibility would have been ruined," said Spencer. Thanks to a friend, who gave him last minute financial support, Spencer's first card wasn't a disaster.

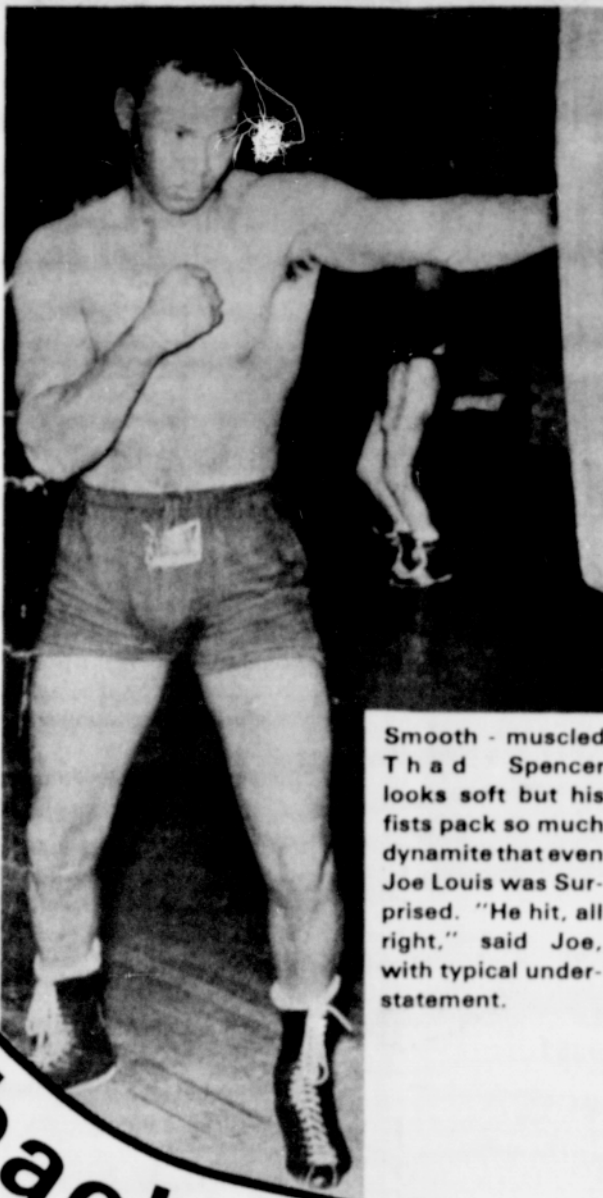
In 1984, Spencer moved to Bakersfield, California, to promote fights in that city. His first card featured former lightweight champion Art Frias and Kelvin Lampkin. Although Spencer's first card in Bakersfield was a success, he was somewhat disappointed after the card. "I was planning on bringing Frias back into the top of the lightweight division. Lampkin stopped Frias in the eighth round. It was an upset," said Spencer.

To date, Spencer has promoted fights of Olympic medalists, and now the N.A.B.F. champion of the world, Paul Gonzales, and former heavyweight champion "Big John" Tate.

These days, Spencer travels the West Coast as a businessman, trying to promote fights through his promotion company, Thad Spencer Promotions. He is in Portland trying to find a sponsor for a boxing tournament he's trying to put together.

"Three years ago, I had a conversation with Jerry Buss (Buss is the owner of the Los Angeles Lakers). He promotes the Stroh's Beer Championship Tournament. In my discussion with Mr. Buss, I expressed my desire to hold a similar tournament in the Northwest."

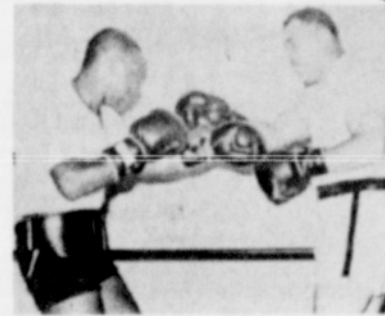
Spencer said in order to hold such a tournament, he needed a beer company to serve as a sponsor. At the moment he is negotiating with a Northwest beer company. Spencer said once he secures a sponsor, a tourna-



Smooth - muscled Thad Spencer looks soft but his fists pack so much dynamite that even Joe Louis was Surprised. "He hit, all right," said Joe, with typical understatement.



Spencer (L) defeated Ernie Terrell, but wasted his opportunity to seize the heavyweight title.



After sparring briefly with Spencer, Joe Lewis (R) said: "He's a real good boy. If I was a young fighter again, I wouldn't mind bein' this one. He'll be knocking on the champion's door within a year."

ment will be held involving a series of elimination fights to be held in the Northwest. The winners will compete with the winner of the Stroh's Tournament held in the Southwest, for the grand title of West Coast Champion.

Besides trying to find a backer for his boxing tournament, Spencer is working with Don Chargin, of Top Rank, to promote close circuit coverage of the upcoming match between Marvin Hagler and Sugar Ray Leonard to air at the Red Lion Hotels in Oregon, Idaho, and Washington State.

Spencer is also promoting the fights of middleweight and former Olympic team member Charles "Machine Gunn" Carter. Spencer and Sandy Barr had scheduled to host a boxing card at the Starry Night Club last month featuring Carter, but the show failed to materialize.

"On December 1, 1986, Bob Weizel, the secretary of the boxing commis-

## A talented young heaveyweight was a rare prize in those days, and 20-year-old Thad Spencer, whom Joe Louis calls a better all-around fighter than Cassius Clay, had real championship potential.

sion, informed Sandy Barr that the commission will meet on Dec. 5 to sanction the fight or to vote on it. "Weizel later informed Barr that the boxing commission won't meet at all during the month of December, so the fight was off," recalls Spencer. He said despite the set back, he plans to promote a card featuring Carter in February.

Spencer is the first Black person to attain a promotor's license in Portland; he has yet to promote a fight in his hometown. He said he was disappointed by the cancellation. "I had put in about three hundred working hours alone on the show."

Spencer was asked why it is so difficult for him to promote a fight in his home town. He replied, "I don't know why. At first I thought it was due to my past problems with substance abuse. I have come to the conclusion that the boxing commission doesn't think big enough. They don't realize the caliber of boxers I'm capable of bringing into Portland."

## A Heavyweight Contender's Comeback From Cocaine

This message courtesy of

**Fred Meyer**



Spencer, who spent 13 years on drugs, worked with youngsters in Bakersfield, Calif. "I don't want to see that happening to anyone else's kids."

Talking with Spencer, you get the feeling that he is sincere about his profession. He proudly showed me a letter from Bakersfield Mayor Thomas A. Payne, congratulating him for bringing boxing back to that city. However, his eyes glow as he and I watched a video of himself and Ali receiving the key to the city from Mayor Payne of Bakersfield, CA.

Spencer appears to be in fairly good health, considering his past life. When he first met former heavyweight champion Joe Louis, he carried 200 pounds on his six-foot frame. Today, that frame is carrying forty-three extra pounds.

Spencer was asked, if he could relive his past, what would he have done differently. He replied, "I wouldn't have gotten involved in drugs and the fast life. I wouldn't have turned pro; instead I would have gone to the 1960 Olympics."