

Liston's final battle ends in an overdose

By Howie Carr

Sonny Liston was a throwback. He was a living nightmare for sycophantic sportswriters who try to convert every athlete into a paragon of American virtues, whatever they may be.

What could they do with a man who had been arrested 19 times, who did a two-year stretch for armed robbery, who served nine months for assaulting a policeman, and whose idea of going straight was to become a labor union goon?

"Ever since I was born I've been fighting for my life," Liston once said. Sometime between Christmas and New Year's he finally lost his battle, probably to an overdose of heroin.

Liston isn't the first athlete to die by a drug overdose; that distinction belongs to Gene "Big Daddy" Lipscomb, an All-NFL defensive end who was found dead outside of a Baltimore hospital in 1963.

Everyone was willing to believe that Big Daddy was a smackhead, but they never could explain why the only three needlemarks on his arm were less than two hours old; why the trash was on his right arm when he himself was a righthander; why there was no money on his person although he had cashed a check for \$750 earlier in the day; why there were imprints left by icebags between his legs and behind his neck, suggesting that someone had tried to revive him; why the police never tried to track down the hoods he had been drinking with the night of his death.

You think about Big Daddy and you begin to wonder what really happened to Charles "Sonny" Liston.

Liston was one of 25 children born to a sharecropper in Pine Bluff, Ark.

"My father worked me hard and whipped me hard," Liston reminisced bitterly. "If he missed a day, I'd feel like saying: 'How come you didn't whip me today?'"

"You know what I often wonder about?" he would ask. "Where were all these people who work with kids when I was growing up?"

Liston split for St. Louis, and after he finished serving two years for holding up a cafe, he came under the watchful eye of great humanitarians like Frankie Carbo, Blinky Palermo, and John Vitale, all of whom were at one time or another indicted for Mafia crimes. They gave Liston his start in boxing, a trade that he hated in spite of the prosperity it brought him.

"Fightin' ain't fun," he explained. "It's like war. Either I'm gonna hurt him or he's gonna hurt me. That's why I don't give a smile in the ring. Why should I? If I could do something else, I would. I don't like earnin' my livin' gettin' hurt."

In his nine-year climb to the top, he lost only once, compiling a record of 33-1. He finally got a crack at the championship Sept. 25, 1962, against Floyd Patterson. The bout had originally been slated for New York, but the state boxing commission refused to give Liston a license because of his "underworld ties."

"Do they think Charles is so bad he can come in for just one night and turn the whole town rotten?" asked his wife Geraldine.

Boxing just a sport

"When I started boxing I never thought things like this could happen," said Liston of the ban. "To me, boxing was just a sport—like baseball. When a man steps up to the plate, he either hits the ball or he don't. That's what he's judged on, not who he is or where he came from. Seems there's more politics than sports in boxing now."

That was five years before Muhammad Ali had his license revoked. Where was Howard Cosell in 1962?

In spite of everything, Liston was optimistic before the fight that a victory would change his image.

"They tell me that once people thought Dempsey was a draft dodger, and little children booed him when he went down the street. Now he's a big man," Liston told Jimmy Breslin. "This fight's gonna be for my whole life. All them things people say and write they'll all be gone when I'm the champ. I'll show people what kind of fella I am. Be a champ, act like the champ."

Liston won the fight and the championship with a first-round knock-out, but people still hated him. After he defended his title successfully against Patterson the next year, he was moved to remark: "If the public ain't with me now, they'll just have to swing along till somebody else comes along to beat me."

"Somebody else" was Cassius Clay, who won the championship in 1964 when Liston failed to come out for the seventh round. Clay won a rematch on March 25, 1965, with a first-round knockout, and Liston was just another over-the-hill heavyweight.

Liston made a good comeback, winning his next 14 matches until December 14, 1969, when he went into the ring against an unknown named Leotis Martin. Liston was knocked out. He never fought again.

Liston became an obscure figure from the past in Las Vegas. He probably knew that the next time he'd make the headlines would be when they ran his obituary. He was right.

"Be a champ, act like a champ."
Sonny Liston, 1932-1970.

No comment on probation rumor

Aging Atlantic Coast Conference Commissioner Norvall Neve Thursday refused comment on reports he has placed seven basketball players—including Carolina's Bill Chamberlain—on probation for fighting.

Neve's decision, allegedly contained in secret letters to the schools involved, said the seven players would face suspension for the remainder of the present season if further offenses occurred.

The report was published in the Thursday morning edition of the Spartanburg, S.C., Herald and was carried later over UPI wire.

The six other players mentioned were

John Roche and John Ribock of South Carolina, Jay Flowers and Sparky Still of Maryland, Randy Denton of Duke and Bill Gerry of Virginia.

Carolina officials declined comment on the matter.

Jack Zane, Maryland sports information director, hinted the story of the probatory notices may be true. Zane said Maryland Coach Lefty Driesell told him one Maryland player was on probation and not two.

Asked about the story, Neve said: "I have no comment about this story or any other thing of that nature."

Asked how the story got out, Neve

said: "You might ask the guy who wrote the story."

Duke Coach Bucky Waters told newsmen the report of Denton's status was false. Virginia and South Carolina officials declined comment.

The action was reportedly taken to stem the increase in the number of fights at ACC games this season. A major brawl halted the South Carolina-Maryland game in Columbia Dec. 16 with 4:52 remaining and the second-ranked Gamecocks comfortably ahead 96-70.

The two teams will play a rematch at College Park, Md. Saturday night despite

protests of South Carolina officials and Coach Frank McGuire, who maintained the threat of retaliation by Maryland Coach Driesell made a second game a risk for Gamecock players and fans.

Neve ruled South Carolina would have to play the game or perhaps have its eligibility for post-season play taken away.

It was reported the reason for extreme secrecy in the matter of probationary status was to keep the other players in the league from picking fights with the seven named performers in an effort to have them declared ineligible.

McCauley plays in Senior Bowl

Dooley, four Heels in bowl games

by Mark Whicker
Sports Writer

Coach Bill Dooley and four Tar Heel all-stars hope the Deep South weather lives up to its promises this weekend.

Dooley, defensive tackle Flip Ray and offensive tackle Paul Hoolahan will participate in the American Bowl in Tampa Sunday, while Don McCauley and tight end Tony Blanchard will appear in the Senior Bowl game at Mobile.

In their last excursion to the sunny southland, the Tar Heels encountered snow, rain, 30-degree temperatures and a 48-26 Peach Bowl loss to Arizona State.

The Senior Bowl will be on national television and features many offensive stars, including the Duke quarterback-end combo of Leo Hart and Wes Chesson.

The South team, coached by New York Jets mentor Weeb Ewbank, has Hart and Alabama's Scott Hunter doing the passing. McCauley, the nation's all-time leading rusher, joins Tulane's Dave Abercrombie in the offensive backfield. Abercrombie played a key role in Tulane's 24-17 win over Carolina in October, and went on to lead the Green Wave in a Liberty Bowl victory.

Hart and Hunter will be passing to Chesson, Blanchard and Mississippi State's 170-pound receiver David Smith.

Arizona State's J.D. Hill, who caught a 67-yard touchdown pass in the Peach Bowl, is the North's leading receiver.

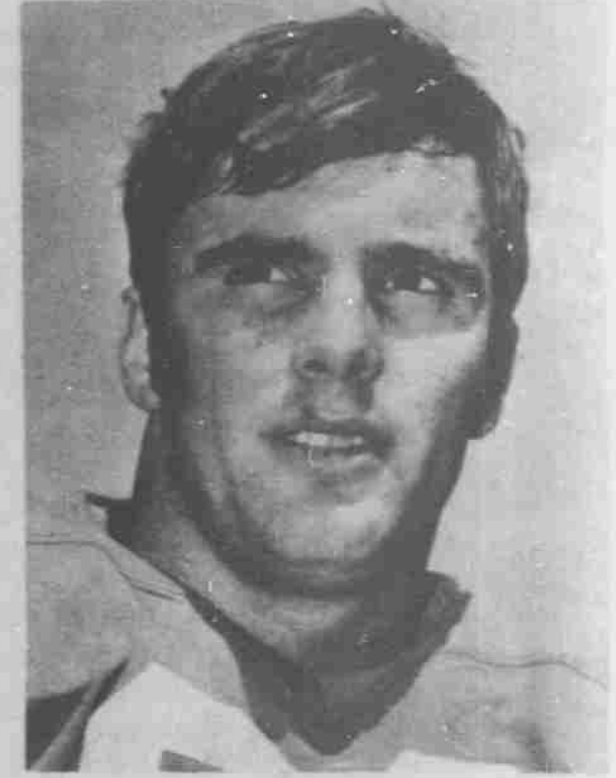
North Coach Lou Saban of the Denver Broncos has a couple of highly rated



Flip Ray



Coach Bill Dooley



Don McCauley

quarterbacks in Lynn Dickey (Kansas State) and Don Pastorini (Santa Clara).

Pastorini passed for 35 touchdowns in this season, but escaped national recognition until he was named the most outstanding player in the East-West game in Oakland last weekend.

Clarence Davis of Southern Cal will give Saban some running power, and his teammate, Sam Dickerson, is an accomplished receiver.

The North has been given the favorite's role, with its quarterbacking rated higher by pro scouts.

Duke adds grid coach

Larry Thompson, an assistant at the University of Northern Iowa, was hired Thursday to join the football coaching staff at Duke University.

Head Coach Mike McGee said, "I consider Larry one of the brightest and most industrious coaches in the country, and I know he'll be a real asset to Duke University."

Thompson, who served as offensive coordinator at Northern Iowa during the past season, will coach linebackers for the Blue Devils.

Thompson was a three-year letterman at Northern Iowa and was an All-Conference selection in 1962-63.

Prior to joining the staff at Northern Iowa, he was considered one of the top junior college coaches in the nation. He had a 31-5-1 record in four years at Elsworth Junior College in Iowa Falls, Iowa.

Recruiting and interviewing possible staff members are not the only items on McGee's agenda for the next few weeks. Next Monday he will travel to Houston for the annual NCAA Football Coaches Meeting.

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