

Waban 'Tugboat' Thomas Still A Heavyweight Champ At Heart

BY RAHN ADAMS

Charlotte, the Queen City, claims former heavyweight boxing champion Waban Thomas as its own. But the 60-year-old Calabash resident simply calls himself a "country boy" from Brunswick County who had a good left hook.

Thomas, who lived in Charlotte throughout most of his boxing career in the 1950s and 1960s, will be inducted into the Carolinas Boxing Hall of Fame next month. Inductions are April 21 at Charlotte Motor Speedway.

The 5-foot-10-inch, 192-pound heavyweight—known to Charlotte fight fans as "Tugboat" Thomas—was a three-time Carolinas Golden Gloves champion, winning all but 15 of his more than 200 amateur fights, and a five-time Southern heavyweight titleholder with a 43-9 professional record, he said.

He was selected for the Hall of Fame due to his "popularity, boxing record and contributions to boxing, representing (his) brilliant amateur and professional boxing career," according to the letter he recently received announcing his upcoming induction.

"It's a big honor," Thomas said in an interview last week at his Riverview Street home. "It brings back a lot of memories." His eyes grew misty as he turned through a scrapbook chock-full of clippings that had appeared in sports pages from Charlotte to New York City.

Those memories begin in 1949 when Thomas—the son of C.F. and Evie Beck Thomas—was a senior at Shallotte High School, where he was president of his class and captain of the school football team. Outside school, he helped his father in the fishing industry. Other family members still run two seafood restaurants in Calabash.

That year he entered and won his first Golden Gloves tournament in Wilmington. In his first match, he knocked out his opponent in the opening round. After a hitch in the U.S. Army in the early 1950s, he returned to the ring and won his Carolinas Golden Gloves crowns. Those wins carried him to higher competitions in New York City, where he was less successful but still drew raves from sportswriters there.

"I was a gentleman in the ring," Thomas said. "I would fight a man and not try to kill him." As proof, the old fighter pointed to a clipping that shows him holding a knockout victim in his arms, easing the man to the canvas.

Thomas said his boxing style was similar to that of former world heavyweight champion Rocky Marciano. Thomas said quicker men could dance around him until he caught them with a solid blow. "My left hook and that was it," he said.

A highlight of his amateur career came in 1956 when he defeated Army champion John Johnson of Fort

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—Waban Thomas
Hall of Fame Inductee

Jackson, S.C., in what one writer called the "greatest Golden Gloves fight." Thomas won on a third-round technical knockout.

Thomas turned professional in 1957 and went on to fight in arenas across the country that included the Charlotte Coliseum, New York's Madison Square Garden and the Houston Astrodome. In his first eight pro fights, he scored eight knockouts.

He said his top opponents included Charlie Norkus, the fourth-ranked heavyweight in the world; Buster Mathis, who had fought Muhammad Ali; South American champion Roberta Devila; and Charlotte rival Neil Wallace, another former Carolinas Golden Gloves and Southern heavyweight champion who will be inducted into the Hall of Fame next month.

Thomas and Wallace met in the ring twice in the late 1950s, with Thomas winning both matches. Marciano was referee for their second meeting in 1957, which was described as the greatest fight ever held in Charlotte. Twenty years later, Wallace won a 1977 "rematch" that was Thomas' last fight.

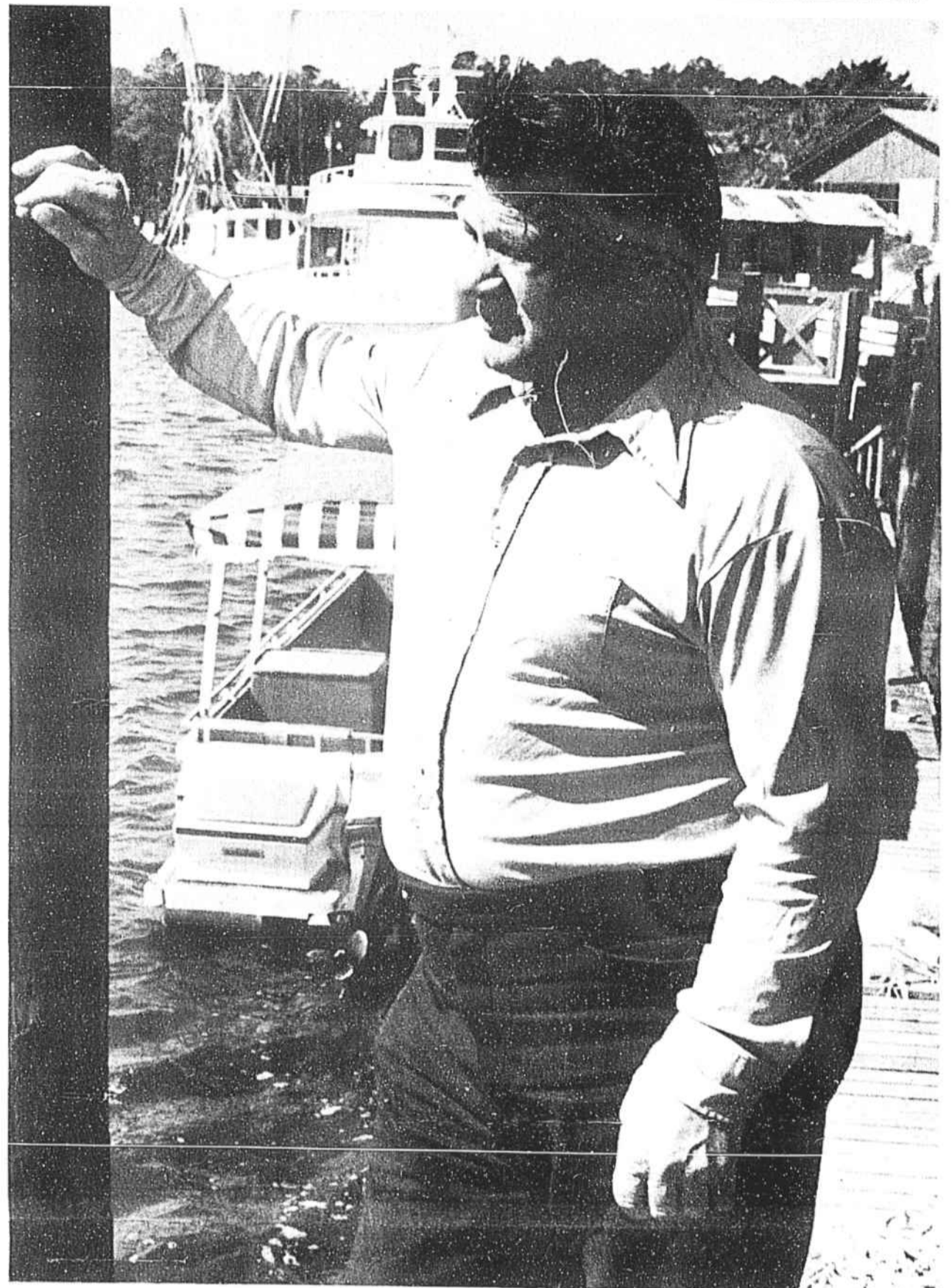
Looking back on his career, Thomas said his biggest mistake was that he kept his amateur status too long. When he finally turned pro, his reputation as a "spoiler" kept the top heavyweights—such as former world champ Ezzard Charles—from fighting him, he said.

"I believe I could have been the heavyweight champion of the world if I'd fought him (Charles)," Thomas said. "but you never know those things. Fights are won in the ring, not on the outside."

On the "outside" during his boxing years, Thomas ran a service station and also worked as a bouncer in a Charlotte nightclub, where "most of the time people respected me, knowing who I was," he said. Later, he worked for Johnson Motor Lines for 20 years before returning to Calabash in 1965.

His decision to move back home was influenced by the loss of his wife, Doris, who died of cancer that same year. Their 24-year-old daughter, Treva Dawn Thomas, still lives in Charlotte.

Thomas now spends most of his time fishing and entertaining old friends who come to Calabash to visit its most famous "Tugboat."



STAFF PHOTO BY RAHN ADAMS

CALABASH RESIDENT Waban Thomas visits the former life as a heavyweight boxer in Charlotte is his Calabash docks, where the only connection to his nickname, "Tugboat."



PHOTO CONTRIBUTED

WABAN "TUGBOAT" THOMAS tangles with fellow heavyweight Thomas Myrie in Charlotte.



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REFEREE DOUG DEAL counts out Oscar Pharo in a Charlotte bout as victor Waban Thomas waits in the corner of the ring.

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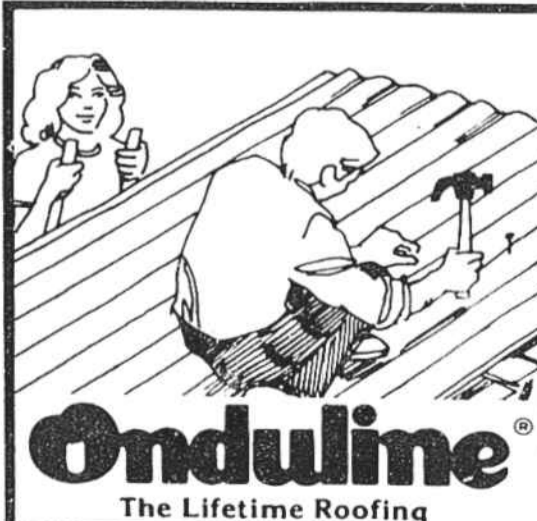
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