

# Adam Gerbrecht

## Liston Beats Patterson Significance

I picked this topic because I love the story of an underdog. I love this story. The story of a man coming from nothing, being disrespected and cast aside, booed constantly, yet still, he changed the sport significantly. We still see fighters like this today. We love to hate them. We hate to watch them win yet are amazed at their excellence.

Charles "Sonny" Liston was an American professional boxer and heavyweight champion. A dominant contender in his era, he was particularly known for his toughness, formidable punching power, long reach, and intimidating appearance. Yet at the time of his career he was brushed off as a serious fighter in the heavyweight division and even pushed away from the title spotlight. Why? He was a troublemaker. An "unsavory character" that would set a bad example for youth. And he was a felon. He was the definition of a bad guy. When he signed his first professional contract ere close to underworld figures, and Liston supplemented his income by working for racketeers as an intimidator-enforcer. The connections to organized crime were an advantage early in his career, but were later used against him. Yet 9 years later, he was the heavyweight champion of the world. A bad guy on top of a mound of pretty boys. Ruling the sport. How did he get there? (THAT is what I find amazing about him. His story)

Liston was born at an unknown date in 1930 in Sand Slough, Arkansas. He was the 24th of 25 children his father had with 2 women. Liston had a tough childhood. He said that "The only thing my old man ever gave me was a beating," and this left scars that were seen still decades later when he fought for the world title. He started fighting at the age of 17 under the same Charles "Sailor" Liston. He later took the nickname "the Bear." Fitting for a man who was known for power, durability, and intimidation. Liston turned to crime and led a gang of thugs who committed muggings and armed robberies. He served a five year sentence at Missouri State Penitentiary, and there he was encouraged by the athletic doctor to try boxing. Using his rough upbringing and violent past for good. Near the end of his sentence, Alois Stevens, the athletic director, arranged a sparring session with a professional heavyweight named Thurman Wilson to showcase Liston's potential. After two rounds, Wilson had taken enough. "Better get me out of this ring," exclaimed Wilson, "he is going to kill me!" This was the beginning of a series of reactions that Liston inflicted in his career.

He began fighting professionally at 23. He didn't fight for fame or money, he saw it as just another job. "Whatever you tell me to do, I'll do." What he didn't realize he was doing was paving a path for small town boxers as well as ones that weren't always perfect characters in the media or the ring. He made his professional debut on September 2, 1953, knocking out Don Smith in the first round in St. Louis, where he fought his first five bouts.

Liston became the No. 1 contender in 1960, and in boxing this almost always calls for a fight with the champion. In this situation though, the champion Floyd Patterson and his team did not want him to fight Liston due to his rough past and antisocial behaviors. Prod for the sport. Civic leaders were also reluctant, worrying that Liston's unsavory character would set a bad example for youth. Also Liston at first did not back the civil rights movement, refusing to associate with protests or the movement. But, after the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing, Liston broke off a European boxing exhibition tour to return home and the antisocial athlete was quoted as saying he was "ashamed to be in America." Boxing legend Jack Dempsey was quoted as saying that Sonny Liston should not fight for the belt. Frustrated at media and boxing authorities, Liston called out Patterson for facing mostly white challengers since becoming champion, and was drawing the color line against his own race. After the quiet Liston's uncharacteristically bold statement. Patterson signed.

Ever painted as the "bad guy" Liston was a 8-5 betting favorite, yet still most reporters picked against him and *Sports Illustrated* predicted a Patterson victory. Liston knocked out Patterson wit a stiff left hook to the jaw in 2:06. Described by *Sports Illustrated* writer Gilbert Rogin; "that final left hook crashed into Patterson's cheek like a diesel rig going downhill, no brakes." Looking back today, there was more than just one humans strength behind that punch. There was a moment. Against the traditional boxing gentlemen, against the tidy, long winded, stamina reliant fighter. This was gritty, angry, fast, explosive power. After this sport changing win, Liston was ripped apart by the media an public. He was called a "gorilla" and "a jungle beast" in print. it was said that at his celebration parade "For confetti we can use torn-up arrest warrants." But there was some light of the world of boxing changing. To get behind the scrappy bad guy. A writer in the *Philadelphia Daily News* said "in a fair fight between good and evil, evil must win." He had won. And he won again. A rematch was arranged, and it looked a lot like the original. In 2:10 Liston put Patterson on the canvas. After the fight he was quoted saying "The public is not with me. I know it, But they'll have to swing along until somebody comes to beat me." He was right. Even though he was booed. The arena was packed. People watched. People wanted to see him.

To me that is as significant as it gets. When sport is more than two athletes competing to see who is the finest bred and trained sportsperson. Liston was a man who had everyone possible against him. From his father, all the way to major news paper writers. Yet he kept going. He inspired a new era of athletes. That didn't have to be media pretty boys, and perfect role models. They were the monster under the bed for those athletes to battle with. And for the public to like. That's significant. A man fighting from nothing. For everything. Changing everyone's perspective.

## **Product**

I would like to create a video speaking to how sport can be more than a competition. It can be a message for generations to come. How Liston's story was unthinkable at the time. Unforgettable now.