



The Name of the Game: Thad Spencer, Willie Ketchum and the Quest for the Heavyweight Championship of the World

Adam Heach

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Heavyweight Thad Spencer—he could have been the 1960 Olympic gold medalist. Instead he turned professional at 17 to be Eddie Machen’s sparring partner. Poor management, poor training habits and a love of nightlife slowed his progress until in 1964 he hooked up with Willie Ketchum, trainer and manager of fighters from boxing’s early days as a populist sport, controlled by underworld bosses. In his 30 years in the business, Willie had seen and done it all except manage and train a heavyweight of promise all the way to the Promised Land, the greatest prize in all of sports: the Heavyweight Championship of the World. In 1967, a superbly conditioned Thad Spencer was scheduled to fight heavyweight champion of the world Muhammad Ali, but Ketchum and Spencer lost their chance when Ali was stripped of the title for refusing induction into the United States Army. In the first round of the WBA elimination tournament to find a successor, Spencer pulled off a huge upset win over former WBA champion Ernie Terrell and suddenly Thad was favorite to win it all. By year’s end he was ranked number one heavyweight in the world. But fame and drugs ruined Spencer and by the end of 1968, he had completely disappeared from the ring rankings, and Willie Ketchum had left him to manage other fighters. Ketchum continued his search, but never came up with another heavyweight to equal Spencer. As a fighter, Spencer had it all. Admirers called him “another Joe Louis” for his cool, calculating demeanor in the ring and lightning fast hands. Along with Joe Frazier and Muhammad Ali, he should be remembered as one of the outstanding heavyweights of the 1960s and early 1970s. Instead, today, Thad Spencer is boxing’s all but forgotten fighter. The Name of the Game. This is the saddest story in all of heavyweight boxing.

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