

# THE CUBAN LEGEND

When we hear someone referred to as “the greatest,” we immediately conjure up images of boxing legend Muhammad Ali throwing lightning-quick jabs and taunting the camera, “I’m the greatest, the greatest of all time.” Ali’s famous self-appointed sobriquet, “The Greatest,” has been reserved for him, and him alone, for more than 40 years.

But for boxing insiders, there was another, lesser-known heavyweight champion who was considered as great as “The Greatest.” Although he, too, reigned as a heavyweight champion during the fabled “Ali era,” this boxer fought his entire career as an amateur, sacrificing big-money paydays for the prestige of his country and the perils of its political system. The heavyweight champion I’m referring to is the phenomenal, three-time Olympic gold-medalist from Cuba, Teofilo Stevenson.

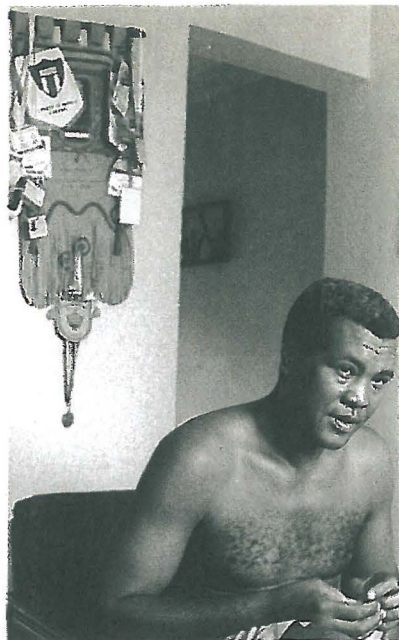
As a documentary filmmaker, I had the privilege of working with Muhammad Ali and other renowned boxing champions, but had never explored the life and career of the world’s greatest amateur champion of all time. Although I had befriended Stevenson many years ago in Havana, it wasn’t until

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champion, he strolls into the living room and seats himself in a large wicker chair.



recently that we sat down for an in-depth conversation about his life and career. This rare interview with the enigmatic fighter turned out to be a fascinating and insightful experience.

During his long reign as the Olympic heavyweight boxing champion, the name Teofilo Stevenson became synonymous with Cuba and with Fidel Castro's Communist revolution. Stevenson became one of Castro's propaganda tools, a global symbol of

the new Cuban regime. During the Cold War, athletes were the soldiers, and Olympic arenas were their battlegrounds. Stevenson has always been quick to credit Castro and the socialist system with creating him the ultimate Cold War fighting machine. During the 1970s and '80s, the success and esteem of the Cubans' international sports program rested firmly on the broad shoulders of Teofilo Stevenson.

Since Stevenson's personal relationship with Castro, as well as his accomplishments as an Olympian, have been well-documented, I set out to gain deeper insight into the man behind the myth. Did he have any regrets about not fighting as a professional? What happened to his proposed bout with Muhammad Ali in the 1970s? Could he have beaten Ali? Did he have an opinion about athletes defecting from Cuba in search of Yankee dollars?

Stevenson lives in a modest, two-story, brown and yellow home in the once-affluent Havana suburb of Reparto Nauticol, with his wife Fraymari, a petite, 27-year old attorney, and their five-year old son. Fight photos, plaques, and awards adorn the family-room walls, whose centerpiece is a photo showing a young and triumphant Stevenson, arm raised in victory by a smiling, cigar-chomping Fidel Castro.

Before our interview, Stevenson ambles about nonchalantly, wearing a pair of khaki shorts, sandals, and no shirt. His neatly groomed hair, now speckled with gray, fits perfectly atop his handsome, high-cheekboned face. With the air of a

Teofilo Stevenson was born on March 29, 1952 — the year in which the Olympics introduced the world to future world heavyweight champion Floyd Patterson. Born the first of five children, to Jamaican parents in the southern Cuban province of Las Tunas, Teofilo was big for his age and entered a Cuban sports school at the age of 12.

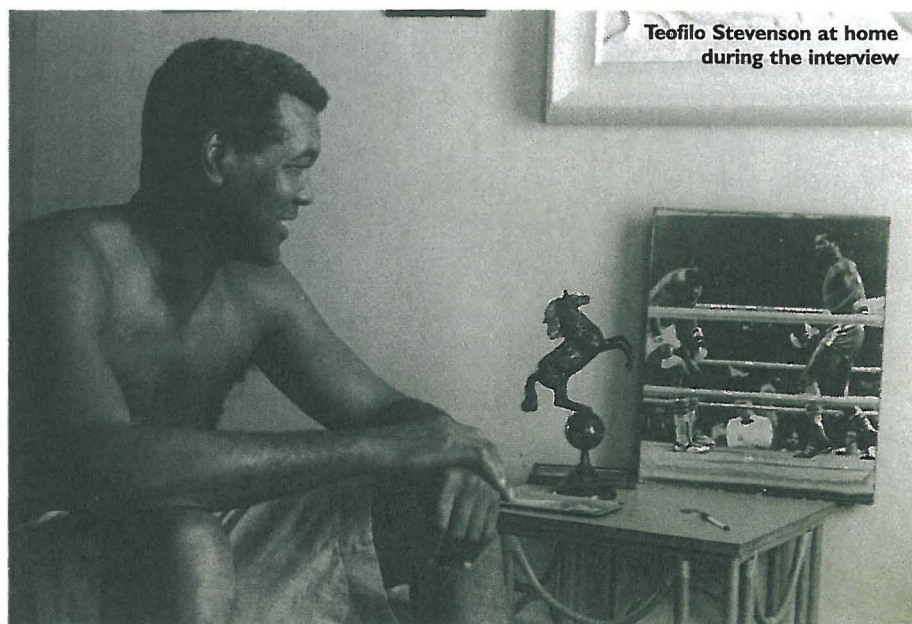
"I come from an athletic family," reveals Stevenson. "My father had boxed when he was young. My brother David played baseball, and one of my sisters played basketball. I tried baseball, basketball, and soccer before I found boxing."

He still believes that the socialist sports system does a good job of recognizing and nurturing young talent, be it intellectual, creative, or athletic. "It's a very good system, because they recognize talents and abilities early, when you're still very young," he says. "Everyone in Cuba has the right to attend sports school. Sports school is more than competition. It teaches children about the competi-



tion of life. This is where I learned to box."

Stevenson's first major boxing competition came at the 1971 Pan-American Games. In the finals, the 19-year-old was pitted against a



Teofilo Stevenson at home during the interview

tough and experienced American sailor, Duane Bobick. At this point in his career, Stevenson's main weapon was a long, punishing jab. Bobick's experience and ring savvy proved too much for the novice Cuban, who lost in a unanimous decision after three rounds.

Stevenson came away with the knowledge that he would need to develop his offensive arsenal if he wanted to pose a serious threat at the upcoming Olympic Games, in Munich, West Germany. At 6-feet-5, 215 pounds, he had been gifted with height and reach. All he lacked was a more effective offensive style that would leave his opponents off-balance and vulnerable to his strength. His fight plan worked.



The 1972 Olympics proved to be a career turning point. In the semi-finals, Stevenson squared off once again with the highly touted gold-medal favorite Duane Bobick. Bobick, still confident from his Pan-American victory, boldly predicted a knockout win over Stevenson. "All Stevenson's got is a decent jab," proclaimed Bobick, shortly before their match.

But Stevenson had a surprise for the cocky American. He came out fast and strong and dominated the first round, with relentless jabs and thunderous straight rights. Between rounds, Bobick sat bleeding and motionless on his stool. The mismatch continued, until the referee finally called a halt to the slaughter midway through the second round. For the first time in Olympic history, a gold medal was within reach for a Cuban fighter.

Stevenson smiles as he remembered his battles with Bobick. "Duane Bobick was a very good fighter. As a boxer, I needed more time to mature. When I fought Bobick at the Pan-American Games, it was a test for me. But I learned from my mistakes. After I beat him in Munich, I believed that I could be an Olympic champion."

Stevenson would not get the photo-finish victory he wanted. In the finals at Munich, Stevenson won the gold medal by default when his Romanian opponent, Ion Alexe, broke his thumb in a semi-final bout. Nevertheless, as the first Cuban ever to capture an Olympic gold medal in boxing, Teofilo Stevenson

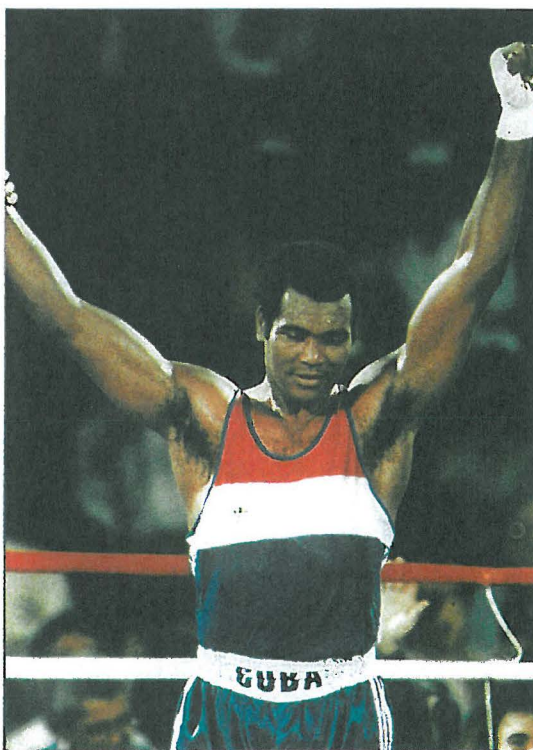
became a national hero. Shortly after his victory, he was approached by an American boxing promoter and offered \$1 million to defect and turn professional. He flatly refused.

"I would not leave my country for \$1 million, or [for] a lot more than that," he tells me. "What's a million dollars against 10 million people who love me?"

The Munich Games springboarded Stevenson into the international spotlight. After the Olympics, Stevenson continued to lead the Cuban national team, amassing a long string of victories in national and international competitions, including the 1974 World Championships, held in Havana, where he out-pointed the tough American fighter Marvin Stinson in the finals.

At the Pan-American Games of 1975, Stevenson was matched against another American hopeful named Michael Dokes. The fight was closely contested, with Stevenson pulling out a narrow win. He had finally captured the title that Duane Bobick had denied him in 1971. [Michael Dokes went on to capture the W.B.A. version of the heavyweight championship, by defeating Mike Weaver in 1982.]

As the defending gold medalist at the 1976 Games in Montreal, Stevenson breezed through the preliminary bouts with knockout wins. In the semi-finals, he faced another American hopeful, "Big John" Tate. He chopped down the future W.B.C. heavyweight champion with a series of strong combinations and moved on to the gold-medal round.



"I remember John Tate very well," says Stevenson. "I remember him because he was very big and strong. I was lucky to knock him out in the finals at Montreal. Tate won the bronze and I won the gold. I was sorry to hear that he was killed in an accident." Stevenson won his second consecutive gold medal when he beat Romanian Mercia Simon in the final.

After the Montreal Games, promoters floated the idea of a dream-match between the seemingly invincible Teofilo Stevenson and the newly recrowned heavyweight champion, Muhammad Ali. The brainchild of American boxing promoter Bob Arum,

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the Ali-Stevenson series would consist of five three-round bouts, held at various venues across the U.S.

A key contract clause stipulated that the bouts be fought under amateur rules, to ensure continuation of Stevenson's amateur status. [Professional sports had been banned in Cuba since the Communist takeover.] More importantly, if Stevenson lost his amateur standing, he would also lose his eligibility to compete in the Olympic Games. Under no circumstances would Castro risk losing his Olympic hero.

The Association of International Boxing of Amateurs approved of the series, provided, of course, that Stevenson did not get paid. Under Arum's plan, Ali would receive a purse of \$3 million, with

Stevenson's \$1.3 million going to the Cuban Boxing Federation. The series would begin at New York's Madison Square Garden and conclude at the Los Angeles Forum. Despite the best efforts of Bob Arum and the Cuban Boxing Federation, the series was canceled. Reportedly, at the last minute, Ali decided to pull out, claiming "he had nothing to gain and everything to lose by fighting an amateur." It was rumored that Ali offered Stevenson over \$100,000 as consolation, which Stevenson

refused. "I was training very hard for the fight," recalls Stevenson. "At the time, I believed that I could beat him. Although we agreed on the contract, Ali decided not to fight. I was very disappointed at the time. I believed that I had a very good chance of winning. Of course, I was young then and in the prime of my career. Today I am older and wiser," he says, smiling. "Today, I know there were only two ways I could have beaten Muhammad Ali: in my training and in my dreams. Since then, we have become good friends. I visited him in the U.S. and he has visited me in Havana."

After repeating his gold-medal performance at the 1978 World Championships in Belgrade, Yugoslavia, Stevenson was again the heavyweight favorite at the Moscow Olympics of 1980. The Moscow Games were boycotted by the United States in protest of the Soviet Union's invasion of neighboring Afghanistan. As expected, Stevenson won his third consecutive Olympic Games heavyweight championship, becoming the first boxer ever to receive three gold medals in the same weight division. This feat has remained unequaled in the 20 years since.



When Cuba boycotted the 1984 Games in Los Angeles, Stevenson was denied the opportunity of winning an unprecedented fourth consecutive gold medal. Does the 48-year-old Olympic legend believe that he would have captured another championship at the Los Angeles Games?

"Yes, I would have won the gold medal, because I had already beaten the man [Tyrell Biggs] who won the gold, at the '84 Olympics," says Stevenson. Gesturing a knock-out punch with his long arms, he adds, "My match was a one-sided victory. I defeated him by a knockout."

Like his Olympic predecessors who did win the heavyweight crown — Patterson, Ali, Frazier, Foreman, and Spinks — Stevenson

believes he would have succeeded them as a professional champion as well. "There were some great champions in my era, like Ali and George Foreman," he admits. "I had the opportunity to turn professional, and I chose not to. If I had become a professional boxer, I'm sure I would have become the heavyweight champion of the world."

Stevenson's swan-song came in 1986, when, at the age of 34, he capped off a magnificent career with a

super-heavyweight gold-medal win at the World Championships in Reno, Nevada.

When Cuba formally announced their decision to once again boycott the 1988 Seoul Olympics, Stevenson officially announced his retirement from competition. His record is a lasting testament to his greatness: 301 wins and 20 defeats; three Olympic gold medals; and a record of 38 -3 in major international competition. (His only losses in international competition came from Duane Bobick, Craig Payne, and Francesco Daminani.)

Stevenson is very supportive of fellow Cuban Felix Savon, who is currently moving closer to Stevenson's unprecedented record of three consecutive Olympic championships. "Savon could win his third gold medal at Sydney," says Stevenson. "He works very hard, and he's a very good fighter."

**A** large part of the Stevenson mystique stems from his shunning of untold millions in favor of Cuba's socialist cause. He claims that he never once considered leaving.



And no one had more to gain by adopting capitalism than Teofilo Stevenson. Blessed with handsome features, tremendous skills, and English-language proficiency, he had all of the ingredients of a commercial superstar. But what about Cuban athletes who choose to defect for American dollars?

"Well, I don't really think about it," he replies, in a disinterested tone. "Many athletes are lured away from Cuba with the promise of money; athletes who were raised and trained in the Cuban sports system. They leave behind their country, family, and friends; trade them for dollars. They become exploited in professional sports.

When their careers are finished, no one cares about them. But every individual needs to make their own decision about life and careers. If they think that leaving this country will be better for them, then it's their business."

In October 1999, Stevenson's name reappeared in headlines when he faced assault charges involving an incident at Miami International Airport, and later, an arrest warrant for failure to appear at his court hearing. If and when he attempts to return to the United States, the warrant will be enforced. During the course of our discussion he offers an explanation.

"I was waiting to board my plane for Cuba when a security man came up to me and said that I was in a restricted area. He began screaming at me, pushing me, and threatening me. He knew who I was, so he started making unkind remarks about our Cuban president. During the course of the argument I dropped my ticket. When I reached down to pick it up, I accidentally bumped heads with the airline agent. He called for police, and they arrested me.



They put me in tight handcuffs which cut into my wrists [shows me the scars] and took me to jail. They were very abusive with me. I paid my bail and they released me. That's it."

"Many countries try to discredit Cuba and their athletes," he continues. "They try to tarnish Cuba's image as a sporting power. Like the charges brought against our high-jumper, Javier Sotomayor. They say he tested positive for drugs. He's the world record-holder, and now he may not compete in the Sydney Olympics. I do not believe that [the allegations] were true."

Stevenson looks like he could easily box three rounds today. Keeping his weight around 215 pounds, he enjoys regular exercise and a healthy diet, although he admits to enjoying an occasional glass of Cuban rum and a fine cigar. "Yes, of course. I am Cuban. When someone visits and brings a cigar, I will smoke it. Usually on special occasions. I like Romeo y Julieta Churchills."

Teofilo Stevenson now enjoys a quiet family life as a retired national sports hero. He still travels the world as a Cuban sports ambassador, while serving as the vice president of the Cuban Boxing Federation and as a member of the National Institute of Sports & Physical Culture. He is also a deputy in Cuba's parliament.

For his longtime reputation for sportsmanship, Stevenson received UNESCO's *Pierre de Coubertin Fair Play prize*, in Paris, in 1989. Then in 1996, at the Atlanta Olympics, Teofilo Stevenson,

known as the "gentleman boxer," was the only Latin American among 25 athletes honored in ceremonies commemorating the centenary of the modern Olympics.

In the book *Boxing Greats/Legends of the Ring* by Steve Bunce, there's a chapter titled, "Days of Glory." In it, Teofilo Stevenson is described as the athlete who spearheaded the Cuban revolution in boxing by win-

ning Cuba's first gold medal in the sport in 1972. The captions under the three action-photos of Stevenson doing battle say it best: "A Cuban Hero." "A Perfect Ambassador." "A Perfect Gentleman."

The last photo depicts a youthful, exuberant Teofilo Stevenson prancing into the ring among the cheering crowds, arms raised, adorned in a bright red robe with CUBA and STEVENSON spelled out in white across the back. It reminds us of the glory and pride he brought to generations of his countryman, and of why he'll always remain a Cuban legend. S



STEVENSON INTERVIEW: HAVANA, CUBA

