

Las Vegas: A Fighter's Kind of Town >> By George Foreman

Boxing and Las Vegas just seem to go together. I've fought around the world, even in the jungle of Africa, but my best memories are of the times I was in Las Vegas. I sparred with Sonny Liston and got free tickets to the Silver Slipper buffet when I first came to Las Vegas. All the lights, the food, the celebrities were really something. It was all so exciting to me.

I became the oldest heavyweight champion ever when I knocked out Michael Moorer in 1994 at the MGM Grand Hotel to win the title. The impossible dream came true for me on the Yellow Brick Road in the Emerald City. But I remember coming to Las Vegas as an amateur when no one paid any attention to me, and knowing that one day I would make it big there. When you went to New York City, Madison Square Garden was king of them all, but Las Vegas was on its way to becoming the king of boxing.

After I won the gold medal in the 1968 Olympics and turned pro, one of my early fights was in Las Vegas. It was on the undercard of the Sonny Liston-Leotis Martin fight in the showroom at the International Hotel, which is now the Las Vegas Hilton. It was on *Wide World of Sports*, and Howard Cosell was there. I think I knocked my guy out in the first round.

I got a chance to see the stars and celebrities go by. The play *Hair* was in the showroom, and all the music people were there, and they were all kind of odd. James Brown was making his first appearance there and I got a chance to meet him and get my picture taken with him. I was star struck. And I didn't have to leave my hotel room to get a sandwich. This was the happening of my life at the time. I kept writing postcards home telling people what a great place it was.

Sonny Liston and I were stablemates, so I would spar with him. I went to Sonny's home and I'd never seen a home with a big closet like that and a pool. The best kept secret in the world was Las Vegas.

I came to Las Vegas after that, but it wasn't until after I lost the title that I fought there again. I stayed at Caesars Palace, and I'll never forget training everyday and seeing the stars walk by.

I was fighting Ron Lyle in the first fight in the Caesars pavillion and a few nights before the match we went and saw Frank Sinatra perform. I was sitting in the audience and he said, "I'd like you to say hello to a friend of mine," and had me stand up. Later, we went backstage and Frank's mom was there and she was so nice.

I've got all the photos of when I was there, pictures of my name on the marquee. So many people kid me and say Joe Louis was the host

at Caesars Palace, but whenever I go to hotels there I act like I'm a host. I stand near doorways and walk around rooms, and the security people ask if people are bothering me. I'm always nice to people because if you come to Las Vegas, you deserve to see a Joe Louis or a George Foreman and have your picture taken with them.

I lost my title in Africa and it was dreary. If I had lost it in Las Vegas, I probably wouldn't have been half as bitter as I was. All the buffets, people patting you on the shoulder. . . .

When I came back to fight again after my retirement, I stayed away from Las Vegas at first. I wanted to prove myself before I fought there. You gotta be right in Vegas. You gotta be in shape. No one gives you an easy fight there.

What a wonderful moment it was for me to win the title in Las Vegas. It was great not only because it happened, but because it happened in a city of dreams for boxers.

I still come to Las Vegas all the time, and about the only time I'm happy traveling is when I have a chance to go there. Whenever someone in my family or a friend does me a favor, the first thing I give them is a trip to Las Vegas. For boxers, it's like heaven. The best thing that ever happens to an athlete is being invited to Las Vegas to box. That's what Las Vegas is, and that's why it is so great for boxing. It truly is the Fight Town.