

One Punch from the Promised Land: Leon Spinks, Michael Spinks, and the Myth of the Heavyweight Title

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This inside look into the lives of two heavyweight champions offers a candid insight into a sport with a sordid history.

In *One Punch from the Promised Land*, John Florio and Ouisie Shapiro vividly recount the tumultuous boxing careers of Leon and Michael Spinks, brothers who both won Olympic boxing gold medals and later became world heavyweight champions. The Spinks' rise from poverty, their opposite paths to big paydays and national fame, and their tragic post-championship years, provide insight into the dreams that many inner city boys will also pursue. Florio and Shapiro give a well-researched and honest account of the shady characters and tough life awaiting the dreamers.

Growing up in the notorious Pruitt-Igoe housing project in North St. Louis, Leon and Michael honed their boxing skills at the DeSoto Rec Center, and quickly established their fighting reputations. Leon was known as a fearless opponent whose brawling style perfectly suited his personality. In 1973, nineteen-year-old Leon enlisted in the Marines, and it became quickly evident that his rebellious attitude clashed with the military training lifestyle. But he was so impressive in the tryouts for the All-Star Marine boxing team, that he won a spot and became known as "The Wild Bull of Camp Lejeune."

Meanwhile, Michael quit high school and began taking day-labor jobs to help support his mother. But he continued training and decided to try to qualify for the 1976 Olympic boxing team. Leon also qualified through his Marine boxing. At the Olympics, they became the first brothers to earn gold medals in the same Olympic Games.

Leon gained international fame by accomplishing what was considered the impossible—he defeated Muhammad Ali for the world championship in 1978 at the height of Ali's career. Although Ali reclaimed the crown from him only seven months later, Leon was reviled by many fans. Leon, however, had developed the routine of poorly training for his fights, preferring instead to spend most nights out drinking, doing drugs, and chasing women.

Michael had held the light-heavyweight title, but decided to move up to the heavyweight class and fight champion Larry Holmes. On September 21, 1985, Michael won a unanimous decision over Holmes. The victory gave the Spinks the distinction of being the only brothers to have both been heavyweight champions. Although he successfully defended the title twice, he lost the title to Mike Tyson in 1988.

Michael retired to a luxurious lifestyle, while Leon had squandered all his money and returned to St. Louis as a has-been boxer battling drugs and a shattered life. Florio and Shapiro present a candid, eye-opening look into a sport that has always had a shady reputation and sordid history, and their research and interviews with dozens of boxers and insiders provides a very readable, and at times very unsettling, view of the world of boxing.

JEFF FRIEND (Fall 2013)

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