

Leonard, Sugar Ray ^[1]

Sugar Ray Leonard

by Steven Case and Kelly Agan, NC Government & Heritage Library, 2010, 2014

17 May 1956 -



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^[2]Ray Charles Leonard, known as the boxing champion "Sugar Ray" Leonard (after the champion boxer Sugar Ray Robinson), was born on May 17, 1956 in Wilmington, North Carolina to Getha Leonard and Cicero Leonard, who boxed in the Navy. Named after Ray Charles, Leonard's parents reportedly wanted him to become a singer, although as young boy he preferred comic books to sports or music.

On his way to earning a Gold Medal in boxing in the 1976 Olympics in Montreal at the age of twenty, Sugar Ray Leonard developed rapidly after joining a Wilmington boxing club in the early 1970s at the age of fourteen. Although he would go on to win an astonishing five titles in five different weight divisions facing such well known opponents as Wilfred Benitez, Roberto Duran, Thomas Hearns, Donny Lalonde, and Marvin Hagler, he began as a lightweight and won a Golden Gloves Award in 1972. By the mid-70's he had a place on the U.S. team after losing his first bid in 1972.

After his 1976 win in Montreal, Leonard maintained a busy competitive schedule and began to amass a sizeable fortune, winning prizes of more than a million dollars a fight. Common to many professional fighters, his successes rose and fell for a variety of reasons, including drug and alcohol addiction and severe injuries such as a detached retina, and he went in and out of retirement a number of times into the 1980s and 1990s. In one famous episode in 1987, he came out of retirement to fight Marvin Hagler as a middleweight. Sugar Ray Leonard won the title in a split decision in the match and then retired. He came out of retirement again a year later to fight Danny Lalonde as a heavyweight for the World Boxing Council title and in an attempt to win his fourth and fifth class titles to beat Hearns to that distinction. Leonard ultimately won in both classes, but behind Hearns who won his fifth title first.

He had a remarkable career of 36 titles, including 25 knockouts, leading to his induction in the [International Boxing Hall of Fame](#) ^[3] in 1997. He is second only to Mike Tyson in prize earnings. Following final retirement from boxing, Leonard accumulated a number of film and TV credits as both an actor and producer. He acted in an episode of the TV series *Half & Half*, a number of episodes of *L.A. Heat*, an episode of *Tales from the Crypt*, among others, and he was featured on *Dancing with the Stars* in 2011. He was cast in a number of films including the action thriller *Riot*, and produced a number of shows including the TV series *Sports Center: The Century's Greatest Athletes*. Leonard has also appeared as a fight commentator and motivational speaker. In 2011 he published an autobiography with Michael Arkush *The Big Fight: My Life in and Out of the Ring* (Viking Books).

Leonard was one of seven children. In 1980 he married Juanita Wilkinson, with whom he had his first child in 1973. They divorced in 1990 after having two children. He married Bernadette Robi, a model, in 1993.

Weight divisions and winning championships:

Welterweight
Light Middleweight
Middleweight

Super Middleweight
Light Heavyweight

Titles:

- 1972 Golden Gloves Lightweight Championship (defeated Hilmerly Kenty)
- 1973 National AAU Light Welterweight Championship runner-up (lost to Randy Shields)
- 1974 National Golden Gloves Light Welterweight Champion (defeated Jeff Lemeir)
- 1974 North American Championship Gold Medal (defeated Robert Proulx)
- 1975 National AAU Light Welterweight Champion Gold Medal (defeated Milton Seward)
- 1975 North American Championship Gold Medal (defeated Michel Briere)
- 1975 Pan-Am Games Light Welterweight Gold Medal (defeated Victor Corona)
- 1976 Summer Olympic Games, Montreal: Gold Medal, Men's Light-Welterweight (Team USA) (defeated Andes Aldama)
- 1979 North American Boxing Federation Championship (defeated Pete Ranzany)
- 1979 World Boxing Council, Welterweight Champion (defeated Wilfred Benitez)
- 1980 World Boxing Council, Welterweight Champion
- 1981 World Boxing Council Light Middleweight Champion (defeated Larry Bonds)
- 1981 World Boxing Council Light Middleweight Champion (defeated Ayub Kalule)
- 1981 World Boxing Council Welterweight Champion (defeating Thomas Hearns)
- 1988 World Boxing Council Light Heavyweight Champion (defeated Donny Lalonde)
- 1989 World Boxing Council Super Middleweight Champion (defeated Roberto Duran)

Awards:

- 1976 Boxing Writers Association of America Fighter of the Year (shared)
- 1979 Boxing Writers Association of America Fighter of the Year
- 1979 The Ring Fighter of the Year
- 1980-1989 Mark Grossinger Etes Award for "Boxer of the Decade"
- 1981 Boxing Writers Association of America Fighter of the Year
- 1981 *Sports Illustrated* Sportsman of the Year
- 1981 The Ring Fighter of the Year (shared award)
- 1981 *Sports Illustrated* Sportsman of the Year
- 1981 Wide World of Sports Athlete of the Year
- 1997 Inducted into the International Boxing Hall of Fame

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