

Sooner Nation

BY TOM KERTSCHER

From Hemingway to Ali, boxing analyst Larry Merchant rubbed shoulders with the greats

IN THE BACKGROUND OF ONE OF THE MOST ICONIC PHOTOGRAPHS IN THE HISTORY OF FOOTBALL FOR BUD WILKINSON, TOOK HEAT FOR RUNNING ARTICLES IN *THE OKLAHOMA DAILY* ABOUT THE STATE'S "LOYALTY OATH" AND, AT AGE 80, VERBALLY KO'D BOXING CHAMPION FLOYD MAYWEATHER JR. AFTER A CONTROVERSIAL WIN OVER VICTOR ORTIZ.

The presence of 1951 OU alumnus Larry Merchant in the 1965 photo, which featured a scowling Muhammad Ali standing over a vanquished Sonny Liston, is emblematic of how Merchant, as a journalist and broadcaster, became a legend of the sport.

Now 85, the New York City native isn't sure how he ended up in Norman. But it's clear that some of the lessons Merchant learned as an OU journalism student helped turn him into one of the nation's leading sports writers and editors who became one of the most enduring and important TV commentators in boxing.

"If you're going to do your job in journalism," Merchant says, reflecting on his time at OU, "not all the local people are going to love you; it's not a popularity contest."

Merchant was a fullback on an undefeated football team during his senior year at Lafayette High School in Brooklyn, which played some of its games at Ebbets Field. He was bright enough to have skipped a couple of grades and decided that the best college education should include a change of scenery.

Merchant applied to a number of out-of-state schools before enrolling at OU in 1947, where he spent his first semester living in Naval barracks and trying out for the freshman football team. Merchant recalls that he was only 16, while many other players were starting college late after serving in the military.

"They were men; I was a kid," Merchant says. "It was an interesting time. I was more or less unconscious and just went out and played ball."

Merchant made varsity as a 17-year-old sophomore and was on the bench for the Sooners' 35-0 win over LSU in the 1950 Sugar Bowl. "I say I took thousands of snaps," Merchant

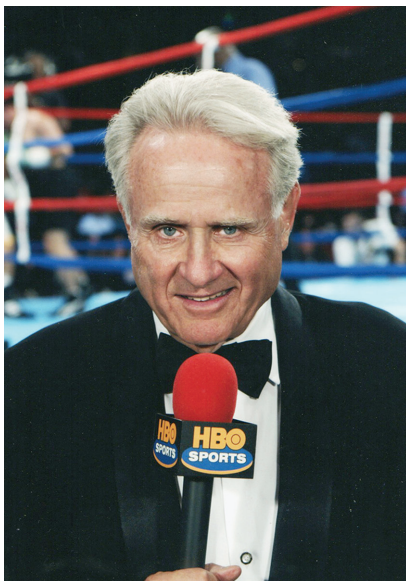
jokes, "but they all were in practice."

Wilkinson once called him into his office and said: "You're going to play a lot of football for Oklahoma." But a shoulder separation in Merchant's sophomore year ended his playing days — and turned his attention to journalism.

For *The Daily*, Merchant covered sports, but also wrote features and hard news. He did a series on Central State Hospital, where he witnessed patients receiving shock therapy. As editor his senior year, he ran stories about protests to an anti-communist law passed in 1950 by the Oklahoma Legislature that required all local and state employees to take a loyalty oath swearing they were not Communists.

"I had thought that being a journalist was not being a local cheerleader. It was showing the community and your readers who we are, and sometimes that's nothing to be proud of," says Merchant, who in 1997 was awarded the JayMac Distinguished Alumni Award by the Gaylord College of Journalism and Mass Communication.

After college, Merchant worked as a sports writer, columnist and editor, notably in Philadelphia and New York City. He covered all sports, including major events such as the World Series, but was drawn to boxing when the sport was in its prime. Sitting across the ring from him at



Larry Merchant

the first big boxing match he covered — Sugar Ray Robinson vs. Carmen Basilio at Yankee Stadium in 1957 — were Ernest Hemingway and Joe DiMaggio. "I thought, 'OK, I'm in the right place here,'" Merchant says.

Boxing had a special allure to a writer, he says. "The human element in the ring, where a fighter can't hide from who he is, and the hustlers and rustlers around the ring, trying to sell whatever they could sell and maybe steal whatever they could steal."

But eventually Merchant sensed he was facing burnout as a writer and opted to try television, first with NBC, and then for 35 years with HBO, where he became a mainstay of boxing before retiring in 2012. Over the years, he developed close, personal relationships with some of the biggest names in boxing.

Merchant shared private moments with Ali — if there ever were such a thing. Being with the late heavyweight champion,



■ Seen to the right of the man with glasses, a young Larry Merchant covered the most famous moment of Muhammad Ali's boxing career – the 1965 knockout of Sonny Liston.

says Merchant, “was like being in a parade, a parade that never stopped. It was a parade for you, whether there was one person or thousands. He wanted to perform for you.” Merchant recalls the widespread concern for Ali's health before Ali reclaimed his title from George Foreman in “The Rumble in the Jungle,” in 1974. Ali revealed rare unease over lunch one day, asking Merchant before the fight: “Do you think I'll be able to retire?”

Merchant's career also included writing part of a “Rocky” script and appearing with Sylvester Stallone in “Rocky Balboa.” When mixed martial arts eclipsed boxing in popularity, the seasoned announcer did not go along.

Says Merchant of MMA, “It's organized street fighting. And if you're walking down the street and saw two guys fighting, you'd probably stop and watch.”

But boxing still commands worldwide attention when the card is headed by superstars such as Mayweather. Merchant's

memorable encounter with him occurred in 2011, live on HBO, after Mayweather won a fight over Victor Ortiz with what Merchant considered to be a cheap shot. The interview turned testy, with Mayweather cursing at Merchant. Merchant's response: “I wish I was 50 years younger and I'd kick your ass!”

“I spontaneously counter punched with the line heard round the world,” Merchant says. “It's not the thing that stands out in my mind as the best thing I ever did in my life, but it was kind of dramatic. You don't often see that on television, and for a lot of people it represents standing up to a bully and putting the anti-hero in his place.”

Tom Kertscher is a PolitiFact Wisconsin reporter for the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel. He started his career as a news reporter at the Tulsa World.