

Rebirth in the ring: Highsmith's boxing bridge

Packers scout, former NFL running back savors memories of 30 professional fights between football careers

By Michael Cohen, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

In their fourth attempt to resuscitate boxing in Green Bay, this one in the spring of 1997, a quartet of local promoters pegged their hopes of revival to the brawny chest of a heavyweight attraction: former football star Alonzo Highsmith.

Though he kicked around the National Football League through 1992, Highsmith's career as a running back had ended in earnest on a surgical table three years earlier. Highsmith, who was drafted No. 3 overall by the Houston Oilers in 1987, contracted an infection following routine knee surgery and was hospitalized for the better part of a month. His leg withered as he lost nearly 30 pounds.

"Put it this way: I was just a shell of myself after that," said Highsmith, who rushed for 1,195 yards and seven touchdowns with the Oilers, Cowboys and Buccaneers.

But boxing offered an unexpected rebirth, and in May of 1997 Highsmith flew to Green Bay with an unblemished record of 20 wins, no losses, one draw. He was becoming, according to a Sports Illustrated article the month before, "a genuine challenger in the heavyweight division," and his job at Stadium View Sports Bar and Grill was to headline a card filled with local fighters.

Now 52, Highsmith unspools the story from a black leather chair inside Lambeau Field, his current place of employment as a senior personnel executive for the Green Bay Packers. This is, in effect, his third career since winning a national championship at the University of Miami, with Highsmith the football player maturing into Highsmith the scout, hired by former Packers general manager Ron Wolf in 1999 to comb the Southwest region.

But in between Highsmith bridged the gap with boxing, a sport he avidly watched as a child but one he didn't attempt until his late 20s. He wandered into Main Street Gym in Houston as a means of staying in shape post-football. He wandered out five years later with a professional record of 27-1-2 with 23 wins by knockout.

"I started sparring with a lot of people and holding my own," Highsmith said. "They asked me, 'Why don't you have a pro fight?' I said I would do just one pro fight and that will be the end of it. Just do one.

"One fight led to (30)."

The bout at Stadium View was held May 15, 1997, and Highsmith scored a technical knockout of journeyman Jim Wisniewski. More than 500 fans were in attendance to watch the third-round stoppage.

By that point Highsmith was approaching the end of a career that spanned 11 states, three countries and three continents. He had trained alongside former heavyweight champion Evander Holyfield and fought on the same cards as George Foreman and Oscar De La Hoya. He had graced the canvas at Caesars Palace in Las Vegas and knocked out multiple opponents on national television. He spent time with artists, actors and politicians.

It was a remarkable second act given his inexperience, and 20 year later Highsmith cherishes the memories of a sport that speckled his life from an early age.

“I just met so many fascinating people in boxing, and it was fun,” Highsmith said. “All these people I met who were dignitaries in boxing and they were at matches. It was fascinating to me. It was fascinating.”

From the upper level of the Olympic Stadium in Montreal, Walter Highsmith scanned the arena with binoculars. He and his son were in the building to watch Sugar Ray Leonard fight Roberto Duran on June 20, 1980, but they had come to the bout with different people.

Leonard was one of Alonzo’s favorite fighters, so he and a friend prowled the neighborhood collecting bottles to be recycled for cash. At the age of 15, they raised \$120 in the span of a week and bought two tickets for \$50 each. Their fortunes improved when a man outside the stadium doled out passes for ringside seats, purchased by another party but left unclaimed at the gate.

“We were six rows from the front,” Highsmith said. “We sold the other two, \$50 apiece, we got face value. My dad is up there in the rafters. He’s looking with binoculars in the crowd. He sees me and my buddy, ‘How in the hell did they get down there?’”

Highsmith was born to a football family but nearly pursued boxing. His father played 10 years as an offensive lineman in the NFL and the Canadian Football League before coaching at various levels. Yet Walter Highsmith fancied his son a boxer, and were it not for the distance between their house in Montreal and the nearest boxing gym, that’s what Alonzo might have been.

When the Oilers drafted Highsmith in the late 1980s, Houston was an incubator of boxing talent. Highsmith and his teammates frequented matches around the city and crossed paths with the fighters in their free time. Walter Highsmith, who was coaching at Texas Southern University, visited Main Street Gym just to watch the professionals train.

“When I retired I had nothing to do one day and I always thought boxers looked like they were in good shape,” Alonzo Highsmith said. “I wanted to go to the gym. ... I said you know what, I’m gonna go box.”

So Highsmith strode through the door at Main Street Gym and attached himself to Al Boulden, better known by his nickname, Potato Pie. As the story goes, Boulden tested Highsmith with a brutal workout during his first session. When Highsmith showed up the next day, a relationship began to form.

He trained seven days a week in a gym that reached 115 degrees in the summer. Boulden taught Highsmith the basics of fighting and then walked across the room to mentor legitimate champions. During the course of Highsmith’s five-year boxing career, from 1993-'98, he shared a gym with the likes of Holyfield, Lou Savarese, Frank Tate, Andrew Golota, Henry Akinwande, David Tua and Michael Grant — all of whom won or challenged for world titles.

“It was a place where all the hitters came to, bro,” Grant said. “... It was a gym that was basically recognized for its quality of fighters. You definitely got tested there.”

At 6-foot-1 and 232 pounds, Highsmith looked the part upon arrival. He was leaner than his football weight of 245 and muscles rippled from every limb. He could, as his manager Bob Spagnola put it, stand alongside any heavyweight in the world and pass the eye test. His fellow fighters described him as a “physical specimen” and “an Adonis.”

But it was his maniacal work ethic that impressed the pros around him. Highsmith and his wife, Denise, had purchased property in the rural town of Weimar, Texas, some 88 miles west of Houston. Highsmith commuted to Main Street every day for a year at the start of his career.

He would work out at the gym and then run six miles. He would finish drills with the champs and then train more on his own. He would spar with anyone and everyone, regardless of ability, and he took plenty of beatings doing it.

“Alonzo and I, we had one sparring session, and I think it probably went about three rounds,” said Grant, who fought Lennox Lewis for the undisputed heavyweight title. “I touched him up with the jab a little bit, setting him up and everything, and then I stuck a big right hand. The right hand shook his whole world up. I think he spit his mouthpiece out. If he tells the story, he’ll tell you he spit the mouthpiece out into my face and it got in my eyes. ... Sparring was not intense; sparring was life and death.”

Golota, who fought for a handful of world heavyweight titles, was more succinct: “You put the gloves on and discover what you had.”

Eighteen months after lacing up the gloves, Highsmith made his professional debut Feb. 23, 1995, in Houston. He was three days shy of his 30th birthday with zero amateur fights to his name.

“Honestly,” Denise Highsmith said, “I really didn’t realize how serious it was until I got there. The week and the days before, I didn’t really think about it like that. When I got there and I saw some of the preliminary fights, I was like, ‘Oh my gosh!’ Especially the (smaller) guys, you know? They get beaten to a pulp and blood is everywhere.

“His mom was so scared. She like broke out in hives the only two matches she ever came to.”

Highsmith entered the ring for a four-round bout with Marcos Gonzalez, a Mexican fighter whose 14-2-1 record was built largely against unheralded debutants south of the border. If Highsmith won, his purse would be \$5,000.

Within minutes Highsmith toppled to one knee, shaken by a rabbit punch to the back of his head. He had wondered what it would feel like to absorb a blow without the protective headgear used for sparring, and when it happened the best way Highsmith could describe it was “weird.”

But he rose to his feet and finished the round. When the final bell tolled, Highsmith had won on points. He was 1-0.

“I’ve played football games in front of 100,000 people, 80,000 people and never felt the pressure of 5,000 people or 2,500 people staring at you in a ring,” Highsmith said. “... I think some of the bravest people in the world are people who are scared as [bleep]. But they just went out and did it anyway.”

The win cemented Highsmith’s newest obsession, and by the end of the year he was 8-0 with six wins by knockout. He traveled to Tulsa for a fight at Brady Theater; flew to Des Moines for a fight at the Marriott hotel. In Florida, where he fought at the War Memorial Auditorium, Highsmith encountered his first southpaw in the form of a late-notice replacement. Despite frenetic instructions from Boulden, his trainer, Highsmith walked directly into a straight left hand that floored him.

Still, Highsmith came from behind to win the fight. What he lacked in polish was offset by resolve.

“He was very green, still green because there were certain things that he didn’t have in his computer that he can’t execute,” Grant said. “You have to think from a trainer’s perspective: His trainer, Al Boulden, was actually training some elite fighters. Then he has to come off the ladder and train the green fighter as well.”

Boulden’s sessions were designed to accentuate the green fighter’s jab, which developed quickly thanks to a measure of ambidexterity. Highsmith wrote with his left hand but

swung baseball bats and golf clubs with his right. He experimented with orthodox and southpaw stances before settling in as a right-handed fighter, meaning he jabbed with his left and threw power with his right.

With his dominant left hand out front, Highsmith was viewed as a converted southpaw whose jab carried alarming venom. The punch most often used to score points and maintain distance accounted for nearly half of his 23 knockouts, according to Spagnola. And in the confines of Main Street Gym, even championship fighters saw its quality.

“His jab was really good,” said Savarese, who fought Holyfield and Mike Tyson. “He had almost a world-class jab in a pretty short period of time.”

“He had the biggest set of soup bones of any fighter,” Spagnola said. “Everybody has certain genetic abnormalities, and Alonzo had just incredible bone structure with big, big hands. ... His jab was like a poleax.”

With a perfect record and growing mystique, Highsmith flew to Las Vegas to appear on the undercard of a fight between Oscar De La Hoya and Darryl Tyson on Feb. 9, 1996. De La Hoya, who went on to become an undisputed world champion, stopped by Highsmith’s dressing room before the fight to wish him good luck. Highsmith disposed of Gary Butler in the second round.

At 9-0, Highsmith had become something of a novelty fighter whose football stardom attracted viewers on both sides of the boxing bubble. He had enough clout to headline smaller shows and enough pull to heighten television ratings of larger ones. He fought on ESPN, ESPN2 and USA Network, among others. High-end promoters arranged their cards with Highsmith fighting closer and closer to the main event.

It all translated to increased control for Spagnola, who leveraged his client’s fame and desirability to handpick beatable opponents. Counting his debut, Highsmith fought only 12 men with winning records in 30 career bouts. His tomato-can phase was perpetual.

“I was digging up graves,” Spagnola said. “I was protecting the hell out of him because he needed to be protected because he was so green. You don’t just go out there and do this at a top level.”

So Highsmith traveled the world pummeling fighters he was, for the most part, expected to pummel: from the Prairie Meadows Casino and Hotel in Altoona, Iowa, where he knocked out Ed Strickland (0-24), to the Ho-Chunk Casino in Baraboo, Wis., where he stopped Jim Wisniewski (2-24), and seemingly everywhere in between.

In Kansas City, Mo., he finished Scott Lindecker (8-7-1), who owned a recycling company and moonlighted as a professional boxer. Said Lindecker: “He probably had a 34-inch waist and a 46-inch chest. He looked like he was chiseled out of marble. ... He

didn't try to do any showmanship, badass, tough-guy (stuff). He seemed like a gentleman.”

In Buenos Aires, Argentina, he dismantled Jimmy Haynes (10-6-1), whose previous fight was a knockout loss to future heavyweight champion Vitali Klitschko. Said Haynes: “(Alonzo) was a real nice, gentlemanly guy. He was a real gentleman. He was one of the hardest punchers I've ever fought in my whole career. ... Ain't nobody got power like that guy had.”

In Long Beach, Calif., he fought Jim Mullen (7-4-1), who won a world title as an amateur kickboxer before focusing on his fists. Said Mullen: “Please give him my respects and regards and tell him I hope he does well in life. Tell him I hope the best for him and his family.”

Highsmith's unbeaten streak reached 16 fights as his cult-like following grew. His purses, once a few thousand dollars, approached \$40,000 per bout. He fought on television more regularly. His only non-victory was a technical draw in which a cut on his eyelid forced a doctor stoppage.

“To me,” Savarese said, “what he did was nothing short of amazing. In such a short period of time he was able to handle his own.”

It became clear that the fight to make was Highsmith against Mark Gastineau, another former football player trying his hands in the ring. Gastineau made five Pro Bowls as a defensive end for the New York Jets, and his bad-boy reputation off the field meshed seamlessly with the fight game. His personal record included separate convictions for assault and drug possession; at one point he was sentenced to 18 months at Rikers Island.

The fight was booked for Nov. 3, 1996, at Tokyo Bay NK Hall in Japan as part of the undercard for George Foreman vs. Crawford Grimsley.

“When I first went there I got off the plane and walked around the airport,” Highsmith said. “People were going, ‘Shaquille O’Neal!’ I’m like a foot-and-a-half shorter and 100 pounds lighter. People followed you all around because all the boxers flew together. Some boxers were 6-5, big guys, so (the local people) were like, ‘Oh my god! Basketball!’ It was fun. It was interesting.”

But Highsmith's demeanor quickly soured. Boxing purists had grown irritated by converts from other sports chasing paydays with minimal effort. Their farcical bouts were viewed with disdain, and Highsmith battled that stigma from the moment he walked into Main Street Gym three years prior. Gastineau was everything he never wanted to be.

Their fight ended less than a minute into the second round. Gastineau, whose 15-1 record raised eyebrows around the sport, had swung wildly without technique as Highsmith ducked and jabbed. When Highsmith connected, Gastineau turned his back to avoid

punishment. A combination from Highsmith left Gastineau hanging over the ropes, and the referee stopped the fight.

“That was the one fight where, you know, there was a lot said about Mark Gastineau: He was a fraud, he was this, he was that,” Highsmith said. “And I wasn’t going to let this guy beat me.

“Once I knocked him down and saw that look in his eye, he didn’t want to fight no more. A lot of people were like, ‘I’m glad you exposed him. You’re real because you’re taking this serious.’ And that was what I appreciated.”

Spagnola, his manager, called it the most enjoyable night of Highsmith’s career.

On Sept. 25, 1998, the Los Angeles Times ran a brief preview for an upcoming boxing card at the Reseda Country Club. Highsmith and former world bantamweight champion Orlando Canizales were the main attractions.

Highsmith, who played at the University of Miami and for the Dallas Cowboys and Houston Oilers, is 27-0 with 23 knockouts. He will fight Carl Chancellor of Odessa, Texas, who is 7 feet 2 and 425 pounds.

But Chancellor disappeared from the card at some point between the promotion in late September and the fight in late October. Highsmith’s new opponent was Terry Verners, an unimpressive fighter who had lost twice as many bouts as he’d won.

The change, seemingly insignificant, marked the beginning of the end of Highsmith’s career.

“The whole five days leading up to the fight were bad,” Highsmith said, “and I didn’t know how to react to it. I was training, I was doing everything, but I got sick.”

Highsmith endured a prolonged allergy attack that ultimately triggered a sinus infection. He was unable to sleep for two days, and during that time he developed a crick in his neck. Highsmith considered pulling out of a bout for the first time in his career.

But when the day arrived he decided to fight, and early in the first round Highsmith felt a twinge on his left side after locking arms with Verners. When the referee separated the fighters, Highsmith could barely lift his left arm. He had torn his biceps and lost his jab, the best weapon in his arsenal.

“That was my moneymaker,” Highsmith said. “I was having trouble just holding it up. It started throbbing. ... Me without my jab is like I’m naked.”

Though he survived the first round, Highsmith's sinus infection terrorized his breathing patterns. He absorbed a punch early in the second and struggled to regain his breath. Seconds later, the fight was over. Verners had knocked him out.

"It was the weirdest feeling in the world for me in sports," Highsmith said. "I had never felt that before."

Highsmith returned to Houston with the first loss of his career (27-1-1) and an arm that wouldn't function. He was unable to brush his teeth, unable to throw a punch, and his injured biceps appeared to have been attacked by a melon baller.

Nonetheless, Highsmith accepted another fight six weeks later when hubris trumped health. With his arm unfixed — it has never been repaired — Highsmith knew the bout with Reggie Miller in New York would be the last of his career. All he wanted was one more chance to leave the ring with a win.

"Pride," Highsmith said. "That's all. There was nothing else."

But the fight ended in a lifeless draw. Highsmith walked away from boxing for good.

"I was completely relieved," said Spagnola, his manager. "He did something. He came in, he did it, and I didn't want him to push the envelope because he had been protected and nurtured, and he should have been."

Within eight weeks, Highsmith returned to the NFL.

He had written letters to every team in the league inquiring about openings in personnel departments. The only person who wrote back was Dan Reeves, coach of the Atlanta Falcons, and he informed Highsmith there was nothing available.

But one of Highsmith's former teammates with the Oilers had finished his career with the Packers in 1996. Sean Jones, a defensive end, maintained ties to the organization after his departure and knew general manager Ron Wolf was looking for a scout. Jones recommended Highsmith without gauging his interest.

"Just from being around each other and being friends, I didn't think there was anybody that had a passion and understanding for football (like him)," Jones said. "There's no mind like his to this day in the NFL. There's no one like him."

Highsmith walked away from boxing on Dec. 8, 1998, and Wolf hired him 55 days later. He has been with the Packers ever since, plying his trade as an area scout before earning a promotion to senior personnel executive in 2012. At this point, according to sources, Highsmith is a potential candidate for general manager positions around the league.

But every so often his inner boxer returns, and Highsmith has been known to hit the heavy bag during the offseason. Football may define his past and present, but he will never forget the five years in between.

“I was having fun,” Highsmith said. “It wasn’t work. People think you get in it because you want to stay in the limelight. I didn’t get into it to do that.

“It was like swimming across a river. You start swimming — swimming, swimming, swimming, swimming — and then you look back and I’ve gone too far. So let me take this the rest of the way.”