

## A PLACE TO FIGHT

“The first couple of nights the fights started at 7 p.m. and were over by a quarter to eight,” said Art Lurie, who judged more than 200 title fights and served four terms on the Nevada Athletic Commission. “There were four knock-outs and the fans weren’t happy at all.”

One night, Big Train Lincoln and Jimmy Fletcher, both Top 10 heavyweight contenders, met in what couldn’t have been more than a 16-foot ring on the showroom stage at the Castaways.

Lincoln and Fletcher were both around 6-foot-5 and 250 pounds, big heavyweights for their day. They looked even bigger in the tiny ring, where the ropes barely reached up to the middle of their backs.

Longtime fight publicist Bill Caplan watched nervously.

“It was a hell of a fight, they went right at each other,” Caplan said. “But the ring was shaking and the fear was they were going to flip over the ropes and fall on the people at ringside. You felt like you were watching these two big guys fight in homemade rings in your garage.”

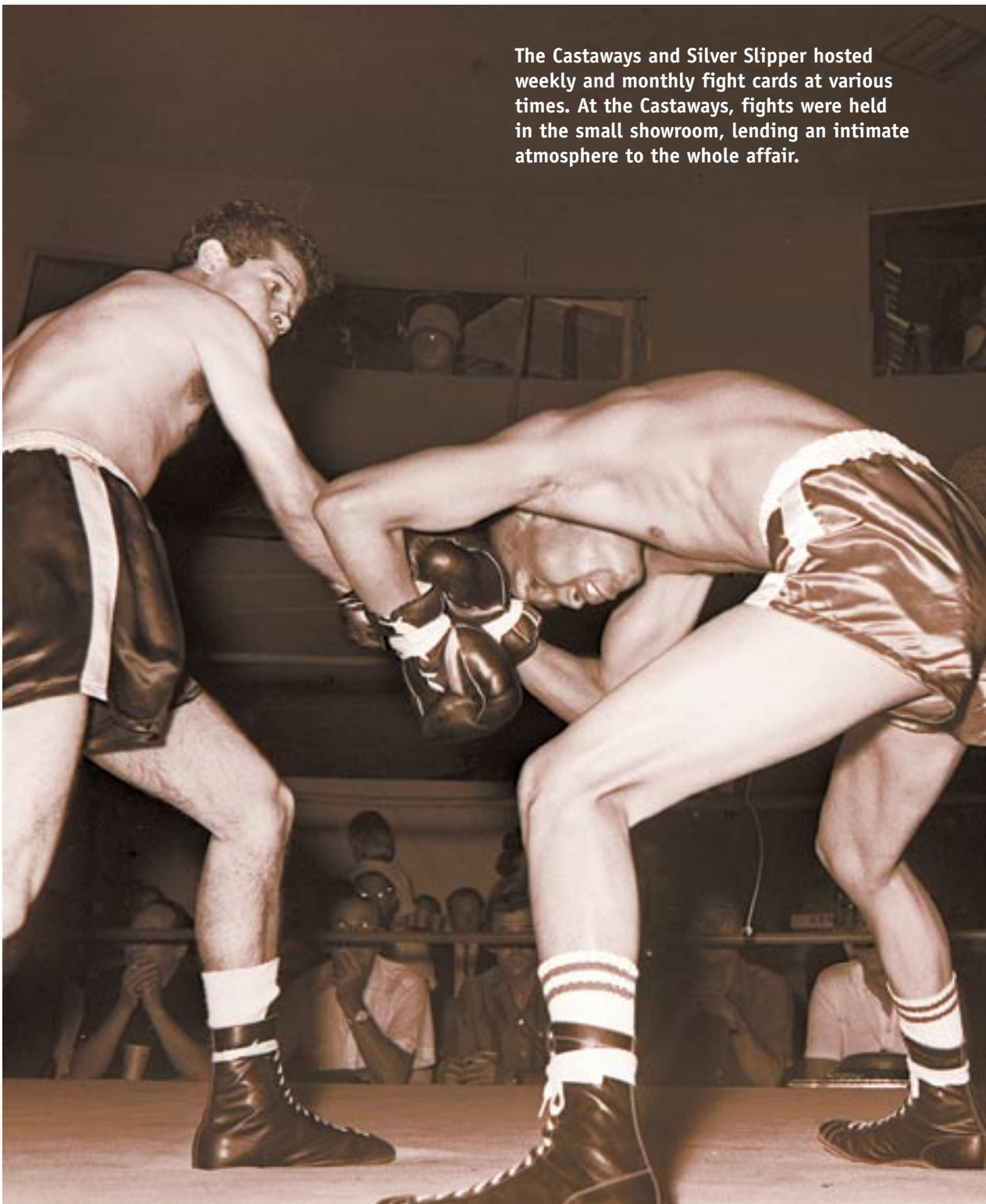
Miller eventually moved his weekly Wednesday night fights to the Silver Slipper, where Lurie was working as a food and beverage executive. Lurie couldn’t get off to go see the fights at the Castaways, so he talked Miller into moving them to the Silver Slipper.

Casino executives weren’t so sure they wanted the fight crowd around, but Lurie persisted and eventually they agreed to one fight card on a trial basis. It was such a success the nightly fights lasted 15 years.

“They would get 700 people and we had the same 700 people every week,” Lurie said. “They all had the same seats. Someone had to die before you got their seat.”

The first big-name fight in Las Vegas history wasn’t held near any casino. It took place May 2, 1955, on the infield at the old Cashman Field just north of downtown, where the city’s semipro baseball team played.

In that day it wasn’t unusual for ballparks to host fights. Yankee Stadium, the Polo Grounds and Comiskey Park all held title fights on a regular basis. Archie Moore was trying to get



The Castaways and Silver Slipper hosted weekly and monthly fight cards at various times. At the Castaways, fights were held in the small showroom, lending an intimate atmosphere to the whole affair.



George Foreman fights Ron Lyle in the first fight ever held in the Caesars Palace pavilion.

## ON THE VERGE OF DISASTER

The first big heavyweight fight at a Strip hotel turned out to be a smashing success. It came close, though, to being a memorable disaster. George Foreman was fighting Ron Lyle, Foreman’s first fight since losing to Muhammad Ali 15 months earlier in Zaire, and Caesars Palace wanted the fight badly.

Hotel executives came up with a plan to stage it in the hotel’s new tennis pavilion. A crowd of nearly 5,000 filled the pavilion on January 24, 1976, joined by a national television audience eager to see if Foreman could recover from his shocking loss in Zaire. Ali had become a fearsome force in the heavyweight division once again.

The undercard went smoothly enough, up until the last preliminary fight. It was then that the hotel’s chief engineer came running up to Caesars Palace publicity director Ron Amos and Jim Deskin of the state’s athletic commission at ringside. A main beam holding the ring up on the side of Foreman’s corner had cracked, and the engineer wasn’t sure it would hold up for another fight. It was too late to find another ring. But canceling the fight wasn’t an option, either. ABC was televising the fight and the nation was waiting to watch.

At ringside, they came up with a plan. The final preliminary fight was cut short by a few rounds while three workers crawled under the ring with floor jacks. They stayed under there for the main event, bracing the ring while praying it didn’t collapse on top of them.

Lyle soon came into the ring and was jumping up

and down in his corner. Then Foreman climbed into the ring and started jumping up and down in his corner. Foreman’s trainer, Gil Clancy, looked over at Amos and yelled out, “The fucking corner is going to collapse. What’s wrong with it?”

“Nothing,” Amos assured him.

Foreman would go on to stop Lyle in a slugfest still regarded as one of the best back-and-forth heavyweight fights of all time. Foreman was knocked down twice in the fourth round only to drop Lyle in the same round. Through it all, the ring held up, but barely.

“We were just praying the whole time,” Amos recalled “When the fight ended, curly, the pavilion engineer, came running up to me and said, ‘Thank God. One more round and that ring would have folded up like an accordion.’”





All the hotels got into the act one way or another. Here, Floyd Patterson works out at the Dunes for his title fight against Muhammad Ali. Later, the Dunes would promote fights itself featuring such names as Larry Holmes and Roberto Duran.

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a fight for the heavyweight title and he came to Las Vegas a month early to train for his fight with Nino Valdes.

When big-time boxing returned to Las Vegas in 1960 with Benny Paret and Don Jordan, they had moved indoors to the rotunda of the new Las Vegas Convention Center, which seated about 7,500 for fights.

The Convention Center was host to most of the fights of the '60s, including the first appearance of Cassius Clay in 1961 against a large Hawaiian named Duke Sabedong. Ali would later defend the heavyweight title against Floyd Patterson in the same arena.

The Strip hotels wanted to host the fights but had to settle for sponsoring them because they didn't have a place to put them. The idea of building temporary arenas for big events hadn't yet germinated.

It wasn't until Caesars Palace hosted the first USA-USSR amateur dual meet in its showroom in October 1969 that some events began moving to the Strip. A month later, the old International Hotel—now the Las Vegas Hilton—put on a fight between Sonny Liston and Leotis Martin in its showroom.

The fight was on ABC's Wide World of Sports and Howard Cosell was at ringside. On the undercard was a young heavyweight named George Foreman.

Fans sat in old-style red showroom booths watching the fights unfold on the stage where Elvis usually played.

Martin knocked an aging and fading Liston out in the ninth round, while Foreman scored a first-round knockout. The fights were a hit, but it would be nearly a decade before the Hilton would get back in the boxing game.

Meanwhile, the Silver Slipper and Silver Nugget held regular fight cards, and there was even a night of fights held at the old La Vista Supper Club across from what is now the Hard Rock Hotel, where the ring was set up over the pool and would bounce up and down above the water.

Almost every major Las Vegas hotel hosted a fight at one time or another, with some 40-odd fight sites coming and going over the years. There were fights in the showroom of the old Hacienda, fights in a tent at the Tropicana, fights at the Stratosphere and Showboat and fights at The Mirage. The Marina held fights, as did the Imperial Palace, New Frontier and Arizona Charlies.

For a time in the mid-1980s, the Riviera Hotel fancied itself as a fight center, with a series of bouts that culminated with Spinks becoming

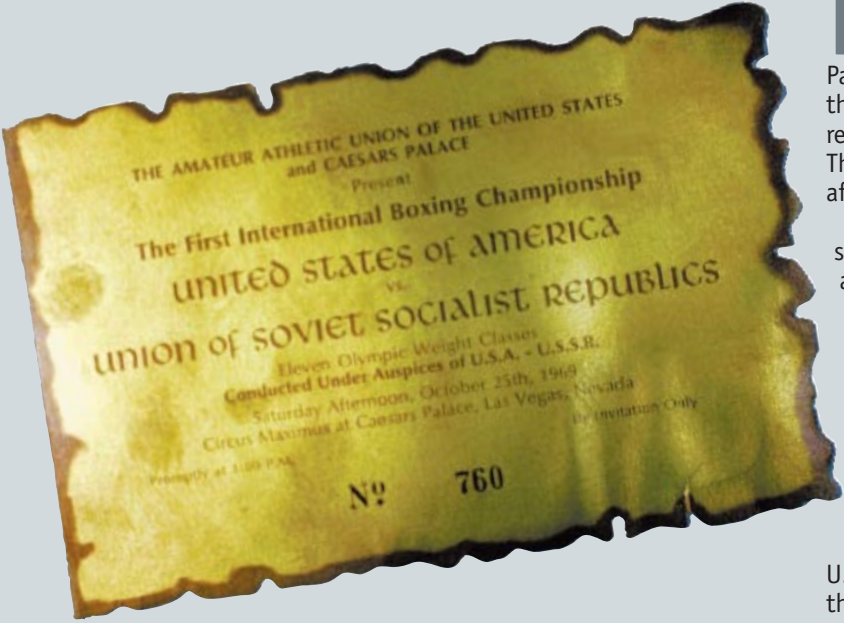
ROMAN BOXING EMPIRE

Ron Amos spent a lot of time in the late 1960s trying to figure out how to follow Evel Knievel's motorcycle jump over the fountains at Caesars Palace with another big event. The jump helped put the young Strip resort on the map, and it gave a reputation as a place where things were happening. The trouble was, that there wasn't much happening after that.

The fights at the Las Vegas Convention Center seemed to be petering out, with Dick Tiger's fight against Roger Rouse in November 1967 fading into memory. No hotel, just yet, had figured out how to host a boxing card on property.

Amos was running publicity at Caesars Palace and was a big follower of amateur athletics. At the time, the United States and the Soviet Union were in the Cold War, and he correctly figured a series of fights between the country's amateur teams would be a hot ticket. "It was huge at the time because the Soviets had great fighters, and the U.S. boasted an Olympics where George Foreman won the heavyweight gold medal," Amos said.

The showroom seated only 1,000 or so, and it was a



tough ticket. Caesars Palace sent out specially printed Roman-themed invitations to its best gamblers, and ABC was on hand to televise it to the country on *Wide World of Sports*. "We even invited Anatoly Dobrynin, the Russian ambassador, and he came," Amos recalled.

It was the first time ABC had devoted all 90 minutes of its *Wide World of Sports* to one sport. The matches were broadcast live across the United States, Europe, and the Soviet Union, reaching 250 million people. The fights drew the highest rating for a boxing event ever on ABC to date. The Soviets won 7-5, but Caesars Palace had learned something new about promoting big events. "That convinced the owners we should be doing this stuff, and it would work," Amos said. "It was really the kickoff that launched this thing."

That's what happened for the Muhammad Ali-Jerry Quarry fight in 1972, where Ali trained daily to sold out crowds in a ring set up in the hotel's showroom. "It was second only to Sinatra. He was funny, magnetic," Amos said.

Seven years after Caesars Palace brought the amateurs to the showroom, George Foreman fought Ron Lyle in the first pro fight in the hotel's tennis pavilion. More than a quarter century later, Caesars Palace is still solidly entrenched in the boxing business.



## A WAGER OR TWO

In the world of sports betting, inside information means everything. And no one over the years knew more about what was going on behind the Las Vegas boxing scene than Lem Banker.

The longtime Las Vegas gambler was Sonny Liston’s friend, and also one of his pallbearers. He was close to Joe Louis and Rocky Marciano, counts Mike Tyson among his acquaintances, and knows people who know people.

That paid off handsomely for Banker when Tommy Hearn and Marvelous Marvin Hagler fought for the middleweight title April 16, 1985, at Caesars Palace.

A few days before the fight, a doctor friend of Banker called him with the news that his partner had gone to Caesars Palace to put some stitches on a cut on the inside of Hearn’s mouth.

“He said not to say anything but as soon as I hung up I called Hagler’s attorney in Boston,” Banker recalled. “I told him Hearn was cut inside the mouth and nobody’s supposed to know about it. I said tell the Petronelli brothers (Hagler’s trainers) to tell him to go after the face.”

Hagler probably didn’t need the information, but he did go right after Hearn, who responded by bloodying Hagler’s face in one of the greatest first rounds ever in boxing.

“Hagler would end up knocking Hearn out in the third round, and Banker had a winner.

“I put a big bet on that fight,” he said.

A few years earlier, Banker was a winner in another fight.

Larry Holmes was favored to beat Muhammad Ali, but the odds were closing as the fight drew near and it looked like the 38-year-old Ali had gotten himself into great shape.

“Caesars had just opened the sports book in the round gazebo outside and I was with Gabe Kaplan the comedian, who asked me if I liked Holmes,” Banker said. “I said it’s probably the best investment of the last 10 years. I knew Ali was taking water pills to get the weight off.”

Banker made his way to his ringside seat, where he saw former Kentucky Gov. John Brown sitting with his wife, Phyllis George. They wanted to know whom he liked, and he blurted out, Holmes, before realizing there was a tall black woman standing next to the Browns.

“I look up and realize it’s Veronica, Ali’s wife at the time,” Banker said. “She gives me a dirty look, so I said ‘I’m only joking. I love Ali.’”

Banker won a big bet when Holmes stopped Ali in the mismatch, but he wasn’t celebrating.

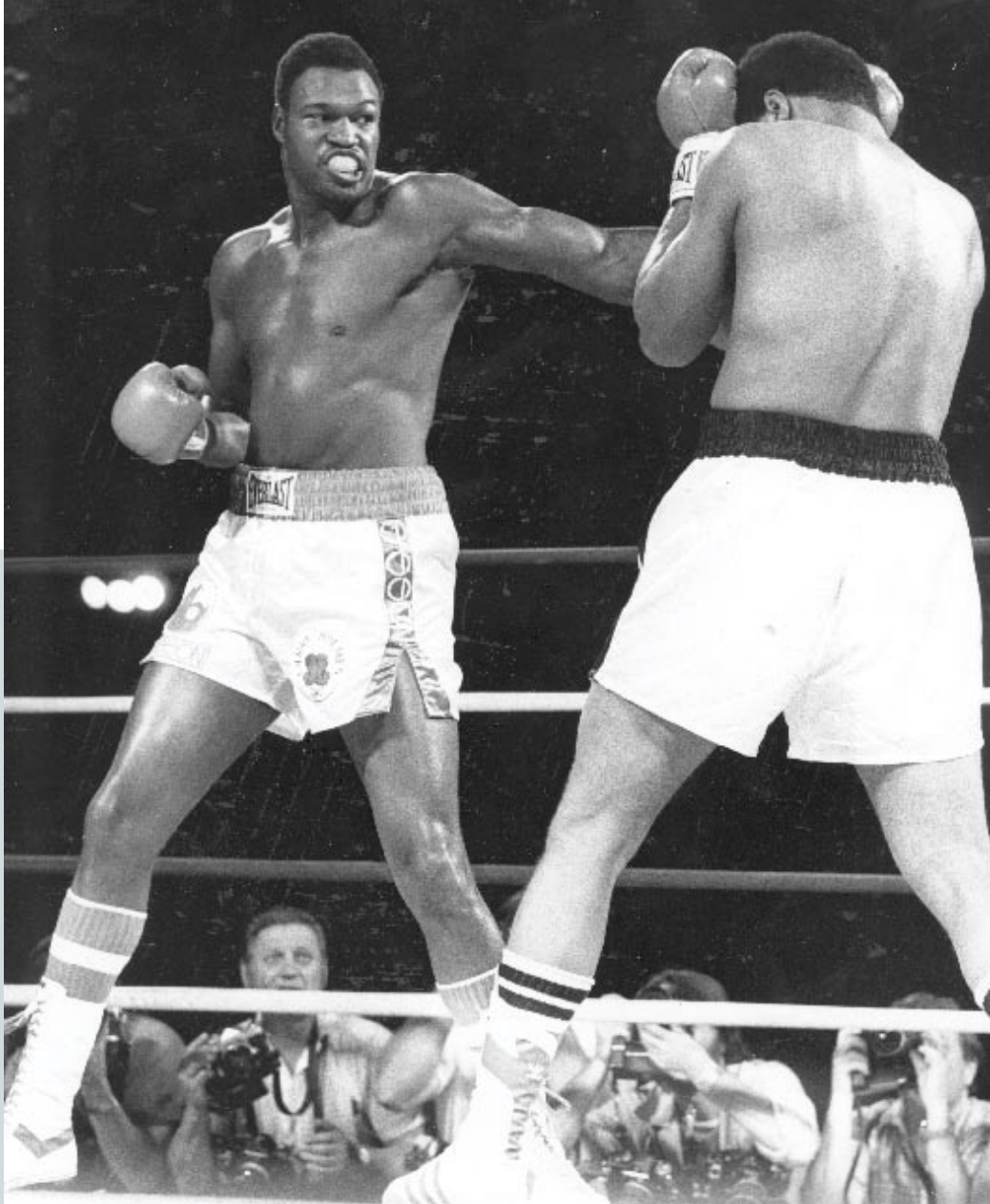
“It ruined the whole thing,” he said. “I should have kept my mouth shut.”

Banker’s inside information didn’t always pay off.

Ali was fighting Patterson in 1965, and Banker figured Ali would win easily. He didn’t want to put money on the champion, though, because the price was too high.

The day of the fight, a member of Ali’s entourage was in Banker’s Sahara Health Club talking to his attendant, Sid Washington. He told Banker he was nervous about the fight and had a feeling something bad was going to happen.

“I’m listening, so I pick up the phone and bet 10 grand on Patterson with mixed



emotions,” Banker said.

On a rainy night, Banker went to the fight at the Convention Center. Ali toyed with Patterson for 12 rounds before stopping him in a dominating performance.

“I thought maybe he knew something,” Banker said. “I guess he didn’t.”

The worst bets weren’t always made on big fights.

One night, Jimmy “The Greek” Snyder was at the monthly Silver Slipper card, where publicist Ron Amos was moonlighting as a judge for a fight for the state lightweight championship.

Snyder and Amos had plans to go to dinner after the fight, on which The Greek had put \$1,000.

The fight was a close one, and when the decision was announced it was split. The referee favored one fighter, while one judge had the other winning. Amos was the third judge and he voted against The Greek’s fighter.

“He was bitching and moaning all the rest of the night,” Amos said. “He couldn’t believe I had voted for the other guy.”

Former heavyweight champion Joe Louis won a lot of money for bettors, but wasn’t particularly astute himself when it came to making bets.

Banker remembers a big gambler, who was one of Louis’ friends, seeing the fighter in the casino one Saturday morning and telling him he was going to bet \$10,000 for him on the Southern California-Notre Dame football game that day.

The bet was free to Louis. All he had to do was collect the money if he won.

“Who do we have?” Louis asked the gambler.

“Notre Dame,” he replied.

“Forget it,” Louis said. “I like the other side.”

Ali managed to shorten the odds, but Holmes made it a long night for the former champion.



Former light heavyweight champion Archie Moore shares a laugh with George Foreman as they hold up a poster for one of Moore’s last fights, a 1962 bout with Willie Pastrano at the Los Angeles Sports Arena. Moore helped put Las Vegas on the map when he fought the city’s first big fight with Nino Valdes at the old Cashman Field in May 1955.

the first light heavyweight champion to win the heavyweight title when he beat Holmes in 1985.

The owner of the Riviera at the time was Meshulim Riklis, whose young wife, Pia Zadora, was an aspiring singer and actress. She was eight months pregnant the night of the Holmes-Spinks fight, all the more obvious dressed completely in stretch leather, when she did a bad lip synch that didn’t synch to the national anthem – especially when the record stuck!

That wasn’t nearly as bad as a fight card promoted in the 1960s at the old Ice Palace skating rink in the Commercial Center.

Boards were put over the ice, and folding chairs placed on top, and the ring was set up in the middle of the rink. During the preliminaries, the ring collapsed and had to be put back together again.

Casino host Ash Resnick’s wife, Marilyn, sang the national anthem and forgot the words, just part of an evening in which nothing went right.

“It was like something out of a Mel Brooks comedy,” said gambler Lem Banker.

Today, temporary fight arenas are mostly a thing of the past. Caesars built a small one for the David Reid-Felix Trinidad fight in 2000, but just as quickly took it down.

The Caesars pavilion is also history, torn down to make room for hotel expansion, leaving Caesars to either host small fights in its ballrooms or rent the Thomas & Mack Center at UNLV as it did with the Roy Jones Jr.-John Ruiz heavyweight title fight on March 1, 2003.

The Dunes, Hacienda and Silver Slipper are no longer, while hotels like the Riviera long ago quit chasing high-rolling gamblers and began offering cheap shows to lure coupon-happy slot players.

Fights have moved indoors, first at the Thomas & Mack Center and then at the MGM Grand and Mandalay Bay arenas.

The Thomas & Mack was built to house the Runnin’ Rebels basketball team, but over the

years it has had its share of big fights. Casinos would shuttle their big gamblers in by limo, hoist a tent for them to party in outside and then bring them in for the fight before quickly getting them back to the casino to gamble.

It was at the Thomas & Mack in November 1992 that Evander Holyfield and Riddick Bowe staged an epic war in their first heavyweight title fight before a crowd of nearly 14,000. A few months earlier, Julio Cesar Chavez and Hector Camacho inaugurated the arena’s first boxing card with a fight that drew 18,361 fans and was trumpeted as the fastest sellout in boxing history with all tickets gone in 36 hours.





Las Vegas fights soon began to attract more than just gamblers and big bettors. Former heavyweight champion Max Schmeling doffs his hat as he gets off a plane at McCarran International Airport.



There were ring girls, and then there were ring girls at Caesars Palace. The same cocktail waitresses who plied their trade inside the hotel were also used to carry ring cards between rounds. This woman is unidentified, but she can claim a footnote in history. She was the first ring girl ever at Caesars Palace, getting her chance after the first round of the George Foreman-Ron Lyle heavyweight fight in 1976.