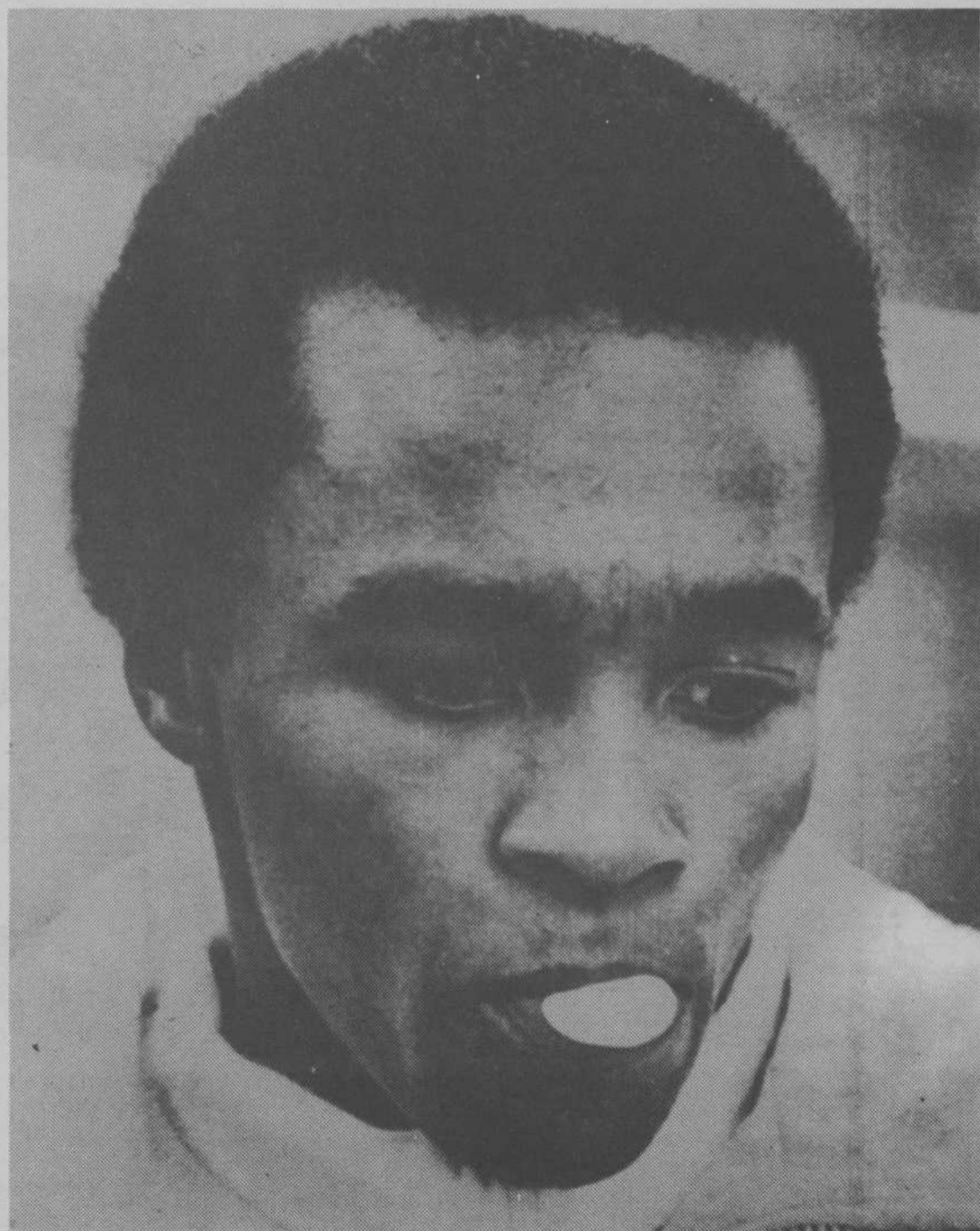


SPORTS

SUGAR
RAY!

By Ed Brown



"Ray was a funny sort of kid," his father says. "He never gave us a bit of trouble, in or out of school. He was always kind of hanging back. It used to worry me some. All my other three sons, and even my three daughters, were always getting into some sort of mischief, but Ray didn't like doing anything physical. He was always kind of peaceable."

"How old were you when you were born?" asked a little girl in the rear of the assembly hall at the Dodge Park Elementary School in Washington, D.C.

"About 10," said the boy wonder Sugar Ray Leonard breaking into a grin that has captivated audiences across the country.

Leonard, World Boxing Council Welterweight Champion, had just delivered an inspirational speech to that young audience and had solicited questions which brought on the customary ones such as how it felt to win an Olympic gold medal in boxing, what it was like to be rich and famous and what kind of announcer was Howard Cosell?

The man, who has been called the miniature Muhammad Ali, came from a lower middle-class family in suburban Washington, D.C., and is now a certified millionaire at the age of 23. He is void of false bravado and braggadocio but is adequately equipped with the same indefinable charisma and star quality that sets him apart from the daily run of the mill fighters of today.

However, the similarity to the style of Ali prevails. He can "float like a butterfly and sting like a bee" - and put packed houses of fans into seats for all of his encounters. He is magnetism. He's a spoonful of Americana.

It's a quick success story that his family still finds hard to accept. Neither parent ever thought he would one day parlay his athletic ability into wealth.

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His mother thought that one day he might become a popular blues singer in the style of Ray Charles, for whom he is named. "Ray was singing in the church until he was 14," she remembers. "I just figured that's what he was going to do the rest of his life."

They were both shocked when Ray announced one night that he planned to be a fighter. "I didn't believe him," his father said. "And I didn't believe it until I saw him fight for the first time. I still can hardly believe it, you know."

It was his present trainer, owl-faced, handsome Dave Jacobs who discovered Sugar Ray Leonard. "When he walked into my gym, he was close to 14 and real scrawny looking - maybe 100 pounds soaking wet. I asked him to strike a fighting pose and he carried his hands high like one of those old pictures of John L. Sullivan.

He was real shy at the start, almost bashful. He couldn't look me right in the eye. But in a few days in the gym, you could see he had boxing in his blood.

(see Sugar Ray, page 18)