

Name: John H Stracey
Career Record: [click](#)
Nationality: British
Hometown: Bethnal Green, London, United Kingdom
Born: 1950-09-22
Division: Welterweight
Manager: [Terry Lawless](#)

Amateur Achievements

1969 ABA light welterweight champion 1968 British Olympian in lightweight class

Olympic games results

1968 (as a lightweight)

Defeated [Marvin Arneson](#) (Canada) 3-2

Lost to [Ronnie Harris](#) (United States) 1-4

<http://www.johnhstracey.co.uk/>

John H Stracey



John Henry Stracey was born in Dagenham, Essex, on 22 September 1950, and was one of four brothers who grew up in council flats in Bethnal Green, close to the Whitechapel Road. This was the austere 1950s, and the East End of London was fighting country. Years earlier, the same close-knit, teeming streets had spawned world champions like Ted 'Kid' Lewis and Jack Berg, as well as thousands of less talented, but equally tough battlers. John's father, Dave, was a boxing fanatic and, although the youngster enjoyed swimming and by his teens was a good enough footballer to have trials with Millwall, boxing was his first love. Dave Stracey, who was a cabinet maker by trade, encouraged John with a devotion that bordered on obsession. And he believed in style as well as substance – before a bout, he would even iron his son's bootlaces!

The young Stracey first boxed at the age of nine, and over the next 10 years represented four East End amateur clubs: Repton, Berner, Robert Browning and St George's. Stracey was a wiry, pale lad who took time in filling out, but by 14 he was a National Schoolboy champion at 94lb. The following year he won a National Boys Clubs title and became the Amateur Boxing

Association junior champ for the first time. By now he was 105lb, and when he added another Junior title in 1967, in the 126lb division, it was clear British boxing had a star in the making.

WATT A BLOW

In 1968, his first senior season, Stracey caused a sensation by outpointing reigning ABA champion, Terry Waller, in the London finals. However, as the experts gathered at the national semis to witness the arrival of a new star, Stracey was knocked out by a single right hand in just 45 seconds.

The punch, which was witnessed by millions on BBC television, was thrown by the future world lightweight champion Jim Watt. It was something that the Scot has never forgotten. 'When I arrived in Manchester, I saw a lad who I took to be Stracey's younger brother,' recalls Watt. 'I couldn't believe it when somebody pointed him out as my opponent. I couldn't help thinking he looked like a boy on a man's errand. I don't think I've ever hit anybody harder or with sweeter timing.'

Watt went on to win the ABA final, and was a formality for the Olympic Games in Mexico City...until he pulled out, citing weight problems. Stracey was called up as a late substitute, but any thoughts he had of winning a medal were ruined in his second contest, against Ronnie Harris of the USA who outpointed him by a 4-1 majority on the way to collecting gold. A decade later, Harris beat Alan Minter and fought Hugo Corro for the world middleweight title.

LAWLESS IN CONTROL

Stracey was still so young that he decided to wait another year before moving out of the amateur game. He won the ABA light-welterweight crown, in 1969, and then turned pro five days before his 19th birthday. He marked his debut with a second-round knockout of Nigerian-born welterweight Santos Martins, cheered on by his home fans at the atmospheric York Hall arena in Bethnal Green. A month later, in the same ring, Ronnie Clifford from Pudsey, Yorkshire, also went out in round two.

Stracey's third professional fight saw his first scare when a Guyanan journeyman named Ray Opoku, who brought into the ring the unglamorous record of two wins in 10 fights, scored a shock first-round knockdown. Stracey sorted himself out, floored Opoku twice in the third and forced the stoppage.

Manager Terry Lawless took Stracey to the far grander setting of the Royal Albert Hall in London's West End for fight number four, a sixth-round stoppage of Bryn Lewis, the Welsh lightweight champion from Porthcawl. Lawless had watched many of Stracey's amateur bouts and knew his potential. 'His reflexes were fantastic,' he said. 'He avoided punches, taking them on his arms and shoulders by slight movements of his body, just like the old scientific boxers used to do, men like Len Harvey and Nel Tarleton.'

Stracey continued his steady rise for the next couple of years as his management team gave him time to learn the business thoroughly.

There were eight wins out of eight in 1970 as Stracey boxed mostly at the Royal Albert Hall, with additional appearances at Bethnal Green, Shoreditch Town Hall and the major boxing venue of the day, Wembley Pool. The Wembley appearance, in May 1970, brought his first experience of the full eight-round distance, a lop-sided points win over the tough Frenchman David Pesenti.

Stracey was promoted to the main event for the first time, at Bethnal Green, in his 10th outing when he battered Billy Seasman of Liverpool for five rounds before Seasman was pulled out with blood pouring from his nose and mouth. But, for major shows at this stage, he was strictly an undercard protégé behind bigger names like Joe Bugner and 1968 Olympic gold medallist Chris Finnegan. Nevertheless, the British Boxing Writers' Club voted Stracey their Young Boxer of the Year in 1972.

TITLE SHOT IN SIGHT

The first minor bldt on Stracey's record came in October 1971, when American Frankie Lewis held him to a draw at the Royal Albert Hall. His first defeat was another eight-round learning experience, against Marshall Butler of Canada, also at the Royal Albert Hall, in April 1972.

In the long run, both fights were of little significance. By then, Stracey was close to a British title fight, thanks to wins over Bernie Terrell, Des Rea and Ricky Porter. The final hurdle to his shot at the British welterweight crown was cleared in emphatic style, in October 1972, when he demolished Les Pearson, the Central Area champion, from Pontefract, Yorkshire, in two rounds.

Victory was so complete, and Stracey had taken so little out of himself, that when the chance came to fight for the vacant British championship three weeks later, there seemed no reason why he should not take it.

Stracey was matched with Bobby Arthur, of Coventry, who had won a medal at the Commonwealth Games in Jamaica, in 1966, and built a solid reputation as a neat, organized boxer. Nevertheless, the young Londoner was a substantial pre-fight favourite because of his extra power and the scarcely definable star quality that separates the truly great fighters from the merely competent.

Yet, when it came to the fight, Stracey suffered one of the most frustrating nights of his career. Ahead on points and apparently on his way to victory, he landed a punch on the break and Arthur went down. Twice, referee James Brimmell motioned Arthur to his feet, before accepting that he was seriously incapacitated...and under the rules, disqualified Stracey for a foul.

Stracey's East End fans were furious and rushed to the ringside to protest, tossing programmes and general debris into the ring. The official announcement was drowned by boos, and only one press photographer wanted a picture of Arthur with his new belt around his waist. The rest were only interested in Stracey as he stood in forlorn despair in his own corner. It was a bizarre situation, which could only be sorted out by a rematch.

Arthur insisted on the six months' grace he was allowed as new champion, which left Stracey to kick his heels in the kind of stay-busy, non-title bouts that helped a man keep ring rust at bay, but

only brought in modest paydays.

He won five times, including a 10-round decision over Danny McAloon, in Las Vegas, in February 1973, on the undercard of Joe Bugner's first fight with Muhammad Ali. It was precious experience. The rematch with Arthur came in June 1973, and this time Stracey made no mistake, knocking him out with a right to the chin in round four.

new British welterweight champion was on his way.

Having been crowned British welterweight champion, Stracey was in no rush to defend his title. He was happy to settle for a string of non-title fights, which included a surprise cut-eye defeat by Cubby 'Top Cat' Jackson, in December 1973. However, the number one priority for manager Lawless was to manoeuvre Stracey up the rankings in order to set up a big money title challenge.

At the time, British boxing was virtually controlled by the promotional force of Mickey Duff, Mike Barrett and Harry Levene. Lawless worked closely with all three, which allowed his fighters the biggest exposure as Duff, Barrett and Levene had a close working relationship with the BBC.

This meant fighters under Duff's promotional banner could have their bouts staged in Britain with guaranteed TV backing. In turn, Duff could buy in overseas opponents and move his fighters up the ratings ladder with as little risk as possible. As a result, by the start of 1974, Stracey was ranked number six by Ring magazine.

After fourth-round victories over the American pair Jack Tillman and Vernon Mason, Lawless accepted what seemed a huge risk – a challenge to European title holder Roger Menetrey, in Paris, in May 1974. The Frenchman had gone 15 rounds with world champion Jose Napoles the previous year and was ranked number four by Ring.

On the same bill, British middleweight Chris Finnegan challenged Jean-Claude Bouttier, and nobody held out too much hope for the British pair. Yet they scored a stunning double with Finnegan outpointing Bouttier and Stracey stopping Menetrey in the eighth. A crowd of 8,000 packed the centre court of the Roland Garros tennis stadium and both fights were screened live in eight London cinemas.

THE TURNING POINT

Stracey had proved his world class by dominating the game Frenchman. Afterwards, a delighted Lawless said: 'The last 12 months I've seen a vast improvement in John. He's developed polish. He's got stronger and he's more confident.' Promoter Mike Barrett added: 'This was the turning point in John's career. It was the night he became a man. His greatest assets are his determination, his self-confidence and his ability.'

A third-round win over run-of-the-mill Tony Garcia set up another significant fight to round off 1974, against Ernie 'Indian Red' Lopez, whose younger brother Danny would later be world featherweight champion. Ernie had twice boxed Napoles for the welterweight world title and,

although he had not boxed for a year, he was accepted as a man of proven ability.

Although Lopez was over the hill, he still had enough experience to give Stracey a worthy test. When he cut the Londoner over the right eye in round four, it seemed as if he might pull off an upset. But by the seventh, Lopez was also cut, could no longer see properly and was tired. When he began to take too many shots, it was stopped.

The cut, and then an appendix operation, kept Stracey out of the ring for six months, but by then Lawless, Duff, Barrett and Levene knew they only had to keep him unbeaten for a world title fight to happen. They were also becoming increasingly convinced that WBC champion Jose Napoles was ripe for the taking.

In April 1975, at the Royal Albert Hall, Stracey forced Max Heibesen of Switzerland to retire after six rounds of a European title defence. Then he formally gave up the British and European belts in order to wait for a fight with Napoles to be made. After two unimpressive displays, against limited imports Ruben Vasquez and Keith Averett, Stracey's moment of truth finally arrived.

On a cool December evening, in 1975, in an open-air bullring in Monumental Plaza, Mexico City, he stepped into the ring to challenge the 35-year-old Napoles.

DOWN MEXICO WAY

In Britain, even allowing for the advanced years of the champion, few gave Stracey a prayer, especially as he was boxing in the thin air of Mexico City and in front of a partisan crowd. The BBC agreed to take the fight on delay, but only a couple of British newspapers felt it worthwhile to send reporters to ringside.

During the build-up in Mexico, Stracey had stomach pains, a minor cut around the eye and a painful ankle, and only a fierce protest by Lawless saved them from staying in what Stracey described as a shack'. Lawless's outburst, following the long flight from London, persuaded the Mexicans to move the British party to a top-class hotel. Stracey remembered years later, in a conversation with British writer Ken Gorman, that Lawless had told him: 'If we're gonna be screwed, we're gonna be screwed in style!' there were rumours that Napoles was plagued by weight-making problems, but not much was made of that, even when the champion needed two attempts to make 10st 7lb (147lb) at the weigh-in on the day itself.

Legendary American trainer Angelo Dundee said to British boxing writer Frank McGhee: 'Your kid has three chances. A dog's chance, no chance and half a chance!'

Napoles was equally scathing. 'Stracey is a naughty baby who has climbed out of his cot,' he said. 'I will smack his bottom and put him back.'

None of that bothered Stracey, who was buoyed by the arrival of his father, Dave, from London, a few days before the fight. 'When I saw him I just knew the title was mine,' Stracey said of his father. 'I didn't give a damn what the rest of the world might think. He had so much faith in me

that it just rubbed off on me.'

The fight, which is featured in Video Action, started in the worst possible way for Stracey, who was put down by a crunching left hook in the opening round. 'I didn't see it or feel it, I just heard the referee count three,' he said. But where so many might have panicked, the challenger turned on one knee to his corner and, like the polished pro he had become, gave himself a few precious seconds to recover before regaining his feet.

Under fierce fire, he stuck out his jab, tucked in his chin and fought hard. Napoles was repeatedly beaten to the punch and driven back. By the sixth, the champion had nothing left, and stood propped against the ropes like an old bull, his legs spread and refusing to fall.

After a barrage of 25 blows, referee Octavio Meyran stepped in and pushed Stracey away. At 25 years and three months, he was the new welterweight champion of the world. He had also become only the fourth British-born boxer to win a world title abroad – behind Bob Fitzsimmons, Ted 'Kid' Lewis and Ken Buchanan.

FEET ON THE GROUND

When Stracey arrived home he was given a champagne breakfast at the Sportsman's Club in London, and then driven through the streets of London's East End where thousands stood to cheer him. At the time, he still lived with his mother and father in their council flat.

There was a civic reception at Bethnal Green, lunches in his honour, appearances at awards dinners and boxing promotions. Yet there was little chance of all this going to Stracey's head. His mother, Betty, who had a job as a social worker as well as her four sons and seven grandchildren to keep her occupied, said: 'I didn't want him to be a boxer. I wanted him to become a film star or a singer.'

Stracey's first defence of the world title was against Hedgemon Lewis of California, at Wembley, in March 1976. Lewis had been a perfect choice for the homecoming celebration: talented, stylish, but with his best years behind him and his speed and reflexes beginning to go. Nevertheless, Stracey did his job to perfection, outboxing and outpunching him until the American had nothing left. Referee Harry Gibbs stopped it in the 10th.

EMPIRE COLLAPSE

There was talk of Stracey unifying the title with a match against the man recognized by the WBA, Angel Espada of Puerto Rico. (The WM had stripped Napoles the previous June and recognized Espada following a win over Clyde Gray of Canada.) Gray was also mentioned as a possible opponent, along with Carlos Palomino and veteran former light-welterweight champion Bruno Arcari from Italy.

Eventually, they settled on the Mexican-born Palomino. He had lost once in 22 fights – a 10-round decision to the respected Andy 'The Hawk' Price – but a draw the previous November against Hedgemon Lewis probably made him seem a fairly safe choice.

But, after a reign of just seven months and 16 days, everything fell apart for Stracey. Palomino was far better than British critics had given him credit for, while the Londoner seemed jaded and ill at ease.

As featured in Video Action, on a sweltering June night at Wembley's Empire Pool, Palomino had an answer to whatever the Englishman tried, and in round 12 Stracey was led to his corner by referee Sid Nathan after being floored twice. The ex-champion was distraught.

Unable to hold back the tears, Stracey took the ring microphone and told the fans: 'I am very disappointed. Winning the championship abroad and losing it in front of my own people...you don't know how I feel inside.'

There was talk of a rematch, but the defeat had been so conclusive it would have to be earned. And behind him in the welterweight queue was Dave 'Boy' Green, managed by Andy Smith, out of the Fenlands in the east of England, but also promoted by Duff, Levene and Barrett.

Stracey and Green were matched in March 1977, the winner to fight Palomino for the title, but from the opening round it all went horribly wrong for Stracey. Head clashes and overhand rights left Stracey with an ugly swelling over his left eye. By the 10th, it was completely shut. Referee Harry Gibbs stopped the fight, and a career that had reached such a magnificent peak was left to peter out.

LEAVING HOME

Stracey parted acrimoniously from Lawless, and said he no longer wanted to be promoted by Duff and his partners. In May 1978, he beat Georges Warusfel of France, on a ninth-round stoppage, and never boxed again. He was only 27, but his career had fallen apart.

Stracey never mended the friendships with those who had controlled his career and he even left his beloved East End. After businesses and personal relationships failed, he settled in the north-west, where he rebuilt his life, earning a living in cabaret and on the after-dinner speaking circuit.