

Johnny Cooke

Contributed by Rob Snell
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Johnny Cooke Johnny is the former president of the Merseyside Association (Harry Scott took over in 2005) and former chair of the Northern Ex Boxers Association. After a highly successful career where he lost only 26 of 368 contests. He turned pro at the relatively late age of 26 but this was no handicap and he went on to win the British and Empire welterweight titles as well as challenging for the European crown. He won Army Championships in 1953-55 and a Northern Counties title in 1957 which he held for the next 4 years.

In 1958 he lost to Dick McTaggart in the ABA final but made up for it with a bronze in the Empire Games in Cardiff. He defeated his cousin Dave Coventry for the Central Area welterweight title in 1962 and took the vacant British title with a thrilling win over Brian McCaffrey in 1967. The following information is taken from an article by Syd Dye which was published in the Liverpool Echo in 1976. He wouldn't have won many medals for punching ability, but when it came to sheer skill, allied to true professional fitness and dedication, Bootle's Johnny Cooke was virtually in a class of his own among Britain's professionals from 1960-71. His incredible record speaks for itself. It all started for him as a kid at Roberts Modern Secondary School whom he represented as a schoolboy. From there he graduated to the Ned Thomas Gym in Marsh Street, Kirkdale then onto St. Monica's in Bootle under Johnny Driscoll and finally with another Bootle outfit, Maple leaf, where under Dave Rent, he was to pick up honours galore. Although titles did not come in the early years, eventually he cleaned up in the army championships during 1953-55 and competed in Army teams which included both George and Henry Cooper. In 1957, with St. Monica's, he won his first Northern Counties but was to lose to the Scott, Dave Higgins, in the quarter finals. The following year he lost to Dick McTaggart in the ABA final in Wembley but picked up a bronze in the Cardiff Empire games. He met McTaggart 6 times, winning two. In 1959 he had a fantastic run to win through to Wembley for the second successive year. Johnny boxed for England against France, East Germany, Hungary, Ireland and Scotland (3 times), but became embittered when in the 1960 ABA quarter finals in Glasgow, the year of the Rome Olympics, he floored McTaggart but still lost on points. "I then decided to turn pro, but had one more outing for my club, Maple Leaf, before signing for Birkenhead's Johnny Campbell". Johnny was 26 and many people felt he had left it too late but we was to prove them wrong by becoming the British and Empire welter champion and one of the most travelled and successful professionals. It took him nearly eight years of tough campaigning to finally land the title by beating fellow Liverpoolian Brian McCaffrey in one of the greatest and bloodiest title fights of all time at Bell Vue in 1967. Before this he had beaten his cousin, Dave Coventry, for the Central Area title, lost to Maurice Cullen in a final eliminator at lightweight and beaten Jimmy McGrail in a final welter eliminator. The defeat of McGrail gave him a title date with the Welshman Brian Curvis but a first round clash of head on eye left Johnny with a huge swelling on his left eye followed in the second round with a cut over his right eye. His chance had gone. As a welter Johnny Cooke defied tradition by beating middleweights such as Jim Swords and Jackie Harwood, while between 1969 and 1970 he had seven successive fights abroad against Roger Menetrey (Paris), Lennox Beckles (in Georgetown, where he had his trousers stolen with all his cash), Robert Gallois (Rhiems), Fighting Mack (Rotterdam), Tony Ortis (Madrid), Marcel Cerdan (Lyons) and Donato Paduano (Montreal). He was also very popular in Italy where he beat Guilio Nervino in Milan and Aldo Battista in Rome. After beating McCaffery for the title he was to outscore Shaun Doyle , putting a second notch on his Lonsdale belt, beat Lennox Beckles in defence of his Empire title, then lost both championships on points to Ralph Charles. "A decision I'll never believe if I live to be a 100". He also tilted for the European Title in 1967, being stopped in 12 by Carmelo Bossi in San Remo. It still annoys Johnny that he didn't get the opportunity of another British title fight and with it the chance to make the Lonsdale Belt his own property. With his record he deserved the chance but it was 4 years after his defeat by Charles before he got back into the eliminators. This was in November 1971, and Johnny then 37 was outscored by Les Pearson. He decided on one last fling - a big payday against Gieli Buitendag in Johannesburg. He was determined to go out on a winning note but despite Buitendag being a local favourite the crowd tore the hall apart in disgust when the referee scored a draw. "I was offered £5000 to come back for a return but my manager Johnny Campbell refused. He said to Johnny "We have had more good times than bad, lets get out now before we have more bad times than good";