Zora Folley

Contributed by Rob Snell
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Name: Zora Folley
Career Record: click
Alias: Bell
Nationality: US American
Birthplace: Dallas, TX
Hometown: Chandler, Arizona, USA
Born: 1931-05-27
Died: 1972-07-07
Age at Death: 41
Stance: Orthodox
Height: 6â€² 1â€³
Trainer: Cal Woods (circa 1955), Johnny Hart
Manager: Al Fenn

Died hitting his head near a swimming pool.
Zora Folley (27 May 1932â€“July 9, 1972) was an African-American heavyweight boxer.

Born in Dallas, Texas, he moved with his family to Chandler, Arizona in 1942, where he grew up playing baseball. Upon joining the U.S. Army in 1948, he entered the boxing ring, and won the 6th Army championship within a year, eventually earning the All-Army and All-Service titles. He fought in the Korean War, earning five battle stars, and was discharged in 1953.

He then signed a professional boxing contract, winning his first pro fight against Jimmy Ingram, then after a draw, won seventeen straight victories until losing to Johnny Summerlin. Despite being considered a top contender, Folley never faced heavyweight champion Floyd Patterson. This was partly due to his loss by decision to Henry Cooper in September 1958 (which was avenged in December 1961). Folley beat such contenders as Eddie Machen, George Chuvalo, Bob Cleroux, Oscar Bonavena, and Doug Jones. He also had draws with Karl Mildenberger and Eddie Machen (their first fight). Between 1960 and 1962 Folley was knocked out by Sonny Liston, Alejandro Lavorante, and Doug Jones (the rematch).

It wasn't until March 22, 1967, that he faced the world heavyweight champion, who at this point was Muhammad Ali. Folley was knocked out in the 7th round. Folley fought for three more years afterward before being knocked out by Mac Foster in 1970.

Folley served as a member of the Chandler City Council, and raising a family of nine children with his wife Joella. Before their fight, Ali joked that Folley was such a nice man that it posed a real problem because he couldn't possibly get mad at him. Folley was one of the first to call the controversial champion by his Muslim name instead of Cassius Clay.

Under mysterious circumstances, Folley suffered severe head injuries in a motel swimming pool while visiting a friend in Tucson, Arizona on July 8, 1972, and died at a Tucson hospital within hours. The death was officially ruled to be accidental, but conspiracy theories regarding his death persist.

The city of Chandler dedicated Zora Folley Memorial Park in his honor.

Zora Folley's final career statistics were 79 wins, 11 losses, and 6 draws, with 43 wins by knockout. Â Rise and Fall of Zora Folley By Pete Ehrmann (This article is co-authored by Marshall Terrill) In the town where citizens donâ€™t come more solid than Zora Folley are a park and a swimming pool named after the longtime heavyweight contender who is still the most famous resident to come out of Chandler, Arizona. What there isnâ€™t after 30-plus years is a clear explanation for the circumstances of Folleyâ€™s violent death that continue to perplex the family and friends of the man whose innate decency stood out in the often slimy world of professional boxing like lipstick on a frog. â€œIâ€™ve never felt comfortable with the facts surrounding his death, and I still feel uncomfortable,â€• says Lowell Huggins, a friend of the late boxer, a former Chandler policeman and currently the vice-mayor of the city of 200,000 residents just south of Phoenix. Zora Folley was 10 when he moved there from Dallas, Texas, with his mother and two sisters in 1942. Longtime Chandler residents recall him as a diminutive kid who was picked on until a sudden growth spurt made Folley 6â€™1â€• and a solid 180 pounds as a teenager. Baseball was his sport of choice until Folley, claiming to be two years older than his 16 years, joined the U.S. Army in 1948. His platoon sergeant at Fort Ord, California, was scheduled to risk his post heavyweight title against a serviceman named Lucius Tate, but at the last minute suffered an injury and asked for a volunteer to take his place in the fight. Although he had scant prior experience in the ring, Folley raised his hand. It was Tateâ€™s hand that was raised after their bout in which Folley was knocked down in each of the three rounds. But just like in the old Charles Atlas ads in

which puny â€œMacâ€• comes back to whip the bully who kicked sand in his face, within a year Folley was good enough to beat Tate for the 6th Army championship. The All-Army and All-Service titles followed. But the fiercest fighting Folley did as a soldier wasnâ€™t in the ring. He won five battle stars in the Korean War, and always said that after experiencing the horrors of war, fighting in the ring held no fear for him. Discharged in 1953, Folley signed a 10-year pro contract with Phoenix manager Al Fenn. The contract included a morals clause, but Folley didnâ€™t drink or smoke, and his idea of a big time was being with his family. Few boxers have been upheld as role models, but the Chandler man fit the bill. â€œWe used Zora Folley as an example for youth and what they could accomplish if they worked hard and lived their lives right,â€• says Tom Carlson, a former teacher and coach at Westwood High School in nearby Mesa. After winning a decision over Jimmy Ingram in his first pro fight, and then fighting a draw, Folley won 17 straight before contender Johnny Summerlin stopped him. But the Arizona manâ€™s slick if unexciting boxing skills made Folley a top contender for the title held by Floyd Patterson in the late1950s and early â€˜60s. However, manager Cus Dâ€™Amato steered his champion clear of Folley and other qualified challengers in favor of lesser ones, and it wasnâ€™t until March 22, 1967, when he was 34 and had been in the rankings for over a decade, that Folley got in the ring with the heavyweight champion. Unfortunately, it wasnâ€™t Patterson wearing the belt then but a prime Muhammad Ali, whose biggest problem with Folley was the latterâ€™s refusal to be drawn into the rasslinâ€™-style type of ballyhoo the preening Ali enjoyed. â€œThat Folleyâ€™s such a nice, sweet old man little kids, calls me Muhammad Ali, thanks me all the time for giving him a chance,â€• Ali complained to Robert Lipsyte of the New York Times. â€œHowâ€™m I ever gonna get mad at him and build up this fight?â€• After knocking Folley out in the seven round at Madison Square Garden, in a contest that was probably harder than any of the championâ€™s previous title defenses, Ali himself admitted that â€œthings might have been different had we met 10 years ago.â€• For the next three years, Folley fought sporadically until contender Mac Foster stopped him in the first round and closed out the Arizona fighterâ€™s career at 79-11-6 (43 KOs). If heâ€™d been the stereotypical down-and-out ex-pug, the circumstances surrounding Folleyâ€™s death probably wouldnâ€™t have raised many eyebrows. But in fact, Folley actually gilded his stature as one of Chandlerâ€™s top citizens after his retirement from boxing. Always dapper and well-spoken, he became a salesman for Rudolph Chevrolet, and when the city fathers were looking for someone to fill a vacancy on the City Council, Folley was an easy choice. The happily married father of eight was the picture of the kind of post-boxing success that eluded so many former fighters. But that picture blurred for good on July 8, 1972. For one thing, nobody yet knows what Folley was doing at a motel in Tucson, two hours south of Chandler, with a man named Artis Broom, Broomâ€™s wife Dorothy, and a Mesa woman named Ann Young. Brown is recalled in Chandler as a typical celebrity â€œhanger-onâ€• whose friendship with Folley puzzled those who knew the ex-contender. Broom had moved to Tucson, and Folley was visiting him at the Sands Motel. It was around midnight, and according to Tucson police, Folley and Broom were engaging in horseplay when an accident occurred. â€œHe and Brown were trying to see who was going to throw who in the water with his clothes on,â€• according to Sgt. Lyle Murphy of the Tucson Police Department. Folley ended up in the water, and one of the women ran to the motel office and reported that he was badly hurt. An ambulance was called, and the former heavyweight contender was taken to a nearby hospital. At 1 a.m., 40-year-old Zora Folley died from his injuries. They included, according to a statement given by the motel clerk to a Phoenix newspaper, a large bump on the forehead, a hole on top of Folleyâ€™s head, and another wound in the back on his head â€“ pretty extensive damage for someone who ostensibly just hit his head falling into a swimming pool. When he heard what happened to his friend, Lowell Huggins immediately drove to Tucson to check out the scene at the motel. But Tucson police would not allow him on the premises, which was not unusual since he was a Chandler policeman and out of his jurisdiction. The autopsy report on Folley and the police report on what was officially ruled his accidental death are not available for examination today. The autopsy report was probably destroyed â€“ standard procedure after the passage of so much time â€“ and the police report, if it still even exists, canâ€™t be accessed without the report number contained on the autopsy report. Over the years, various dark theories and versions of what happened that night have circulated. A â€œmobâ€• connection has been suggested by some; Jet magazine reported that when Folley died, two â€œsuspiciousâ€• men were seen lurking around the motel. Others say that the Tucson police werenâ€™t over concerned about the death of a black man. Joella Folley, Zoraâ€™s 71-year-old widow and still a Chandler resident, has never spoken publicly about what happened to her husband. Other family members and friends just shake their heads and prefer to remember how the cityâ€™s most famous resident lived, rather than how he died. â€œZora was a very honorable and soft-spoken man,â€• says Chandler grocer Eddie Busha. â€œHe was a very prominent citizen and did more to put Chandler on the map than anyone else I know. He brought only fame and repute to this community.â€• Â