

## **Corey Joseph Montague** *When Detroit Had Had the Superbad!*

In the 70s, 80s, and 90s. When Detroit had the World Boxing Association (WBA) on LOCKDOWN! We had profoundly talented prize fighters at Kronk's Gym like Steve McCrory, Donald Curry, Caveman Lee, Ricky Womack, Kevin Whaley—Qué El—and Thomas “Hitman” Hearn, just to name a few. Detroit had some super Baddddd Boys! But the game would be remiss if it didn't at least pay homage to a local fallen star. One whose light shined brightly, but ever so briefly. Minus the glitz and glamour of this boxer's alcoholic life. This is the sad but very true story of Arthur Bernard “Superbad” Mays, 1960-1994.

Superbad was born to Victoria Mays and Prince Milton. In the late 70s, Warren Avenue was the boulevard of iniquities. As a teen on the Numbers Streets of Detroit's Southwest side, he survived off government cheese, low poverty, and high crime. Replete with gang violence, drug-infested neighborhoods, pimps, whores slamming Cadillac doors, stuck-up kids and con artists selling slim jewelry. The black culture is still used to phases like “Gimme some skin” or “Gimme five on the black hand side,” “Jive turkey,” and “Sho' you right!” Where the latest styles were Afro hairdos, bell-bottom pants, and platform shoes, and screaming, “Black Power!”

A pubescent Bernard and his friends Eric Williams and Collier Blunt would skip school to stand in front of a liquor store, panhandling customers for loose change while catcalling at neighborhood young girls on their way to school. The boys drank malt liquor beer and Wild Irish Rose wine. They'd drunkenly sing on the side of the liquor store in an awkward attempt at harmonization, totally butchering the Temptations' “My Girl.” Eric Williams recalled, “Bernard and I had been drinking and smoking since we were 14.”

The super-bad pugilist, a young man who could've been a contender, missed his shot at a successful future. From the doorsteps of life, he battled his greatest foe of them all deep within himself: his alcoholism. Mays took to the sweet science like a shark took to two rows of razor sharp teeth! He has cold-blooded timing with knockout power in both fists inside the ring. Superbad was as elusive as a shadow and quicker than a scalded dog.

“Speed is power” so sayeth John John about Mays, “The punch you can't see is the one that knocks your ass out!”

Superbad danced, flicking wicked pistol-shot jabs, bobbing and weaving, slipping punches, throwing uppercuts, combinations, left or right hooks, and overhand rights with the impact of plastic explosives.

At home, Bernard didn't get along well with his alcoholic father, Prince Milton. So in between bouts with him, Bernard bounced around Detroit's west side living off and on with his childhood friend, Collier Blunt, who was also a talented boxer like Bernard. Collier's beloved mother, Mrs. Lucille Blunt, loved Bernard like a son. She'd welcome him into her Ohio Street home off Grand River. Many nights, he'd crash on her couch, snoring off drunkenness, only to awaken to a serious hangover and hot breakfast served with a smile. However, back at the Mays homestead, testosterone levels between father and son ran high. At 14, Prince Milton abandoned Bernard's mother and sister, Esther. One day, Bernard's second cousin, Charles "Big Tuna" Jordan, a journeyman heavyweight fighter, suggested, "Bernard, you be on the streets fightin' and knockin' dudes our fo' free. Why not learn how to get paid fo' yo' knuckle game?"

Big Tuna introduced Bernard to International Boxing Hall of Fame inductee and legendary trainer Emanuel Steward. Steward was the mastermind of 50 amateur champions and Olympic Gold medalists. He won 40 World Championships, 120 titles, and more than \$150 million in purse monies at Kronk Boxers Club. When Steward saw Mays spar, needless to say he was impressed. Soon Bernard earned the moniker, Superbad.

Emanuel Steward says, "Superbad won 200 straight amatuer bouts, lost only one amatuer fight and one pro fight."

While sparring with him, Thomas "Hitman" Hearns complained about Bernard Mays. "I could smell liquor on his breath. Hell, when we sparred, he was usually drunk most of the time off Colt .45 malt liquor. But the boy was badd. No... I meant Superbad!" Hearns continued, "He almost made me quit fighting. Cuz, when I went to the gym, I knew Emanuel would pair us. I knew it was always gonna be ah' battle."

Bernard was cursed with a genetic predisposition to alcohol. He couldn't control his urges. Drinking was his form of spiritual escape. Briefly, alcohol had the opposite effect on him, whereas other alcoholics couldn't function intoxicated. Bernard became aggressive and physically excelled. His reflexes seemed to become enhanced. He'd carouse and do a 24 close bars and then hit the after-hours joints with older ladies. He'd dance all night like Fred Astaire and spend money on the ladies like a millionaire. He loved older, more seasoned women. Psychologists called his erogenous stimulation an Oedipus complex. Women his own age gave him heartburn. After an all-nighter of hard core drinking and toxic sex, he'd pop up in the gym and beat sparks off the asses of anyone Emanuel placed in the ring.

In 1977, Jimmy Paul, former lightweight champ, intimated, "That guy was at the National Ohio State Fair Tournament. Bernard would

be out with the ladies drinking all night long, then come into the ring and totally destroy his opponents.” Also in ‘77, Bernard went across the pond to London, England. Not only had he beaten the European amateur champion, but he had also knocked his ass out cold! Bernard was a tournament winner at 14 and 106 pounds, and in the National Junior Olympic Tournament, he won again in the 130-pound division. He was the greatest fighter there ever was. He was like Sugar Ray Robinson—he had it all. Emanuel noted, “He started disappearing before workouts. Personally aloof, he’d get moody and stop coming to the gym regularly. By 16, he was an alcoholic off Colt .45.”

In 1978, disgruntled with Emanuel Steward, Mays hired prominent attorney, Elbert Hatchett. Bernard soon left Steward. Superbad turned pro under Chuck Davis. Davis, a disciple of Emanuel Steward, was an international drug smuggler. He shipped drugs across the pond using Bernard and other fighters as unwitting drug mules. He was later indicted by the FBI. Davis had a gym in the Herman Gardens Projects. Bernard trained there and signed his first contract, receiving a whopping \$100 for his first fight at Northwest Activity Center. The house was packed.

In 1979, he fought at Cobo Hall and Joe Louis Arena.

### [Mays v Bobby Howard]

Managers and bookmakers were seated in the first, second, and third rows. They had paid good money to see Superbad perform, and he didn’t disappoint. He demolished Howard despite Chuck’s gangster street credentials. When it came to taming Bernard Mays, however, Chuck had his hands full when Bernard wanted malt liquor. He usually got malt liquor. Davis would resort to some extreme measures to prevent him from drinking. Sometimes Davis locked doors and windows and physically restrained him. Rumor has it, Davis literally tied Bernard to a bed. Meanwhile, another rumor floated, that he’d handcuffed him naked to a radiator, forcing him into cold turkey withdrawal. Whatever the case, Bernard Mays was an extraordinary talent. As a pro, he’d been a winner, but in California, his winning streak came to an abrupt end, as did his spectacular career. As fate dictates to reality, a hard liver shot in the third round caused him to spit blood. When the fight was over, Bernard needed help to get out of the ring. Attorney Elbert Hatchett had him hospitalized and paid for his travel expenses home. Bernard Superbad Mays had reached his bitter endgame. For him to re-lace his gloves would mean death.

Near the end of his life, Bernard convalesced at his mother’s home. He lived off of \$550 Social Security a month, \$200 food stamps, and

Medicare. With his mother's passing, Superbad was unable to care for himself. Heartbroken and a sickly diabetic, he was forced to move into New Light Nursing Home at Grand River and Chicago. His health continued to deteriorate. Chronic malabsorption syndrome was among his ailments. On good days, sometimes he was able to roam the nursing home hallways with his IV in tow, flirting with nurses and visitors. But on bad days, Superbad was a shell of his former self. His belly swelled to the size of a brown medicine ball, his skin became chalky, and his hair dry and lifeless. Yet his sharp mind remained alert. He knew his friends and kept them animated whenever they cared enough to visit. Bernard put on a brave face knowing he was nearing the final bell of his last round.

Bernard Superbad Mays left this world to enter eternity a contender on March 1, 1994. His remains are located at Mt. Hazel Cemetery. If you visit his gravesite, it would break any real boxing-lover's heart. He's lying in an unkempt grave—on Detroit's west side. Oh, and by the way, Bernard can be found in a sorrowfully dilapidated unmarked grave, surrounded by thick overgrowth. Section 4, row 18, grave No. 36. An ignominious fate for such a helluva pugilist. For boxing lovers around the world—we salute the Superbad!