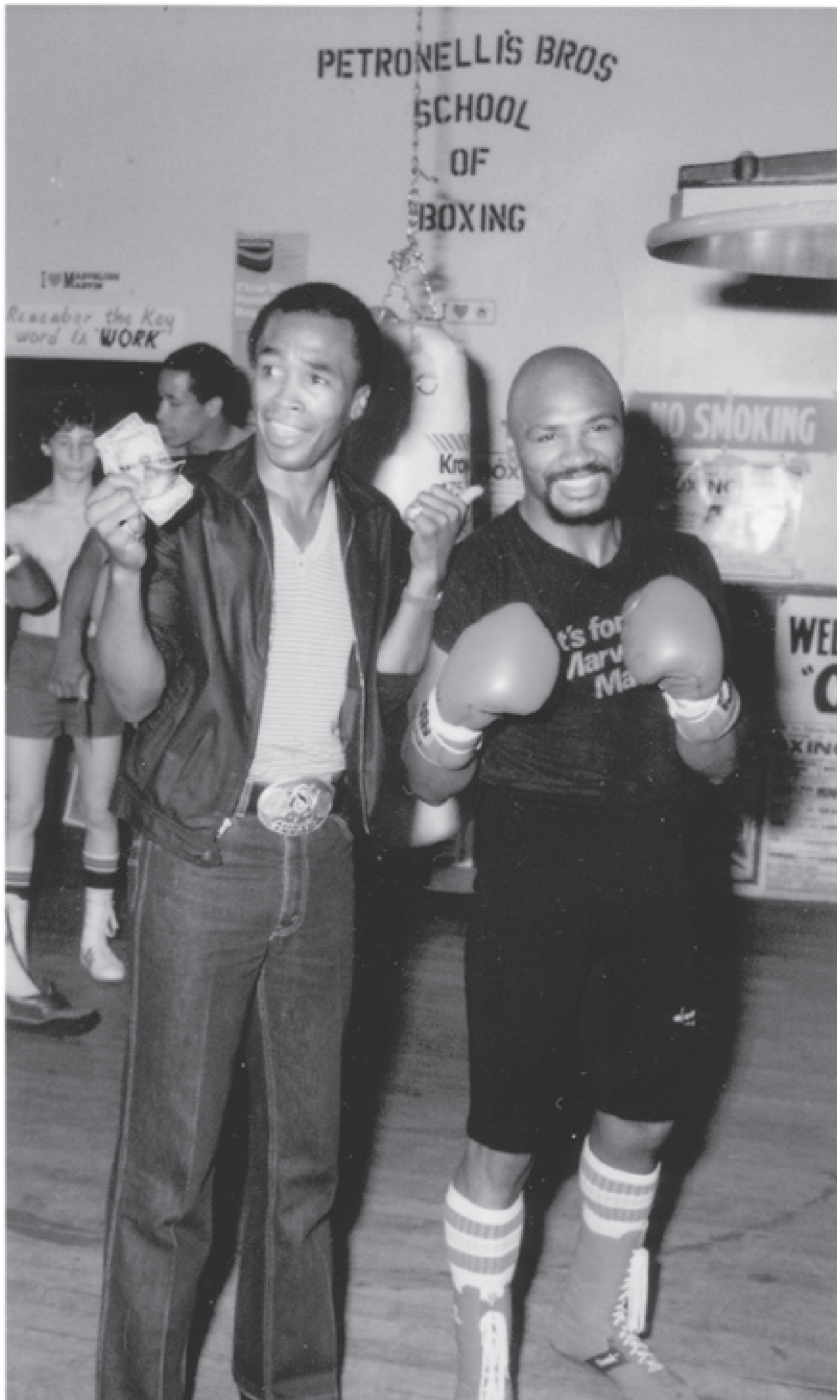

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Sugar Ray Leonard (left) and Marvelous Marvin Hagler, in 1981, at the Petronelli Gym in Brockton, Mass. Each saw in the other a big payday and a career-defining challenge.

SORCERY AT CAESARS

SUGAR RAY'S MARVELOUS FIGHT

STEVE MARANTZ

Portland • Oregon
INKWATERPRESS.COM

To Alison

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Knowing her fate, Atlantis sent out
ships to all corners of the Earth.

On board were the Twelve:

The poet, the physician, the
farmer, the scientist,

The magician and the other
so-called Gods of our legends.

Though Gods they were.

Donovan

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Foreword

THE FUN BEGAN IN 1973. Or thereabouts. I was a sports columnist for the *Boston Globe* and Marvin Hagler was a 19-year-old boxing prodigy from Brockton, Massachusetts, a place well within the *Globe*'s circulation area, so I was consigned to follow him for most of his long and circuitous rise to fame, fortune, and, of course, the middleweight title.

I first watched him work on local fight cards at high school gymnasiums and ball fields, dance halls and function rooms, and eventually traveled with him to London, New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Las Vegas, a succession of grand athletic stops. Fourteen years. Marvin wound up in the spotlight. I wound up in four-star hotel rooms, expense account living at its finest. Not a bad deal for either of us.

"I'm calling from my round bed, looking at myself in the mirror on the ceiling," I reported from a suite at Cae-

sars Palace to friends back home in the days preceding Marvin's ultimate fight on April 6, 1987, against Sugar Ray Leonard. "I think I will now step into the Jacuzzi, which is sunk into the middle of the living room floor."

The stories were very easy to write. (I used a contraption called "a typewriter," which I now describe as "sort of like a word processor, but without the need for either electricity or a printer.") Marvin was the common man doing quite uncommon things. He was without flash or guile, solid as a Sunday morning in a Baptist church. His trainers were Goody and Pat Petronelli, local Brockton guys who turned a lottery ticket into a meal ticket. He stuck with them for the entire ride, stuck with an assortment of Brockton characters that included doctors, lawyers and just plain friends.

Never did he allow himself to be packaged, put under that blister-wrap of sports promotion and hype. He began local and stayed local. There was a timeless quality about his operation, a return to the earlier boxing world of, say, the Fifties, when the Friday Night Fights were a black-and-white television staple and neighborhoods sent their worthiest contenders into the ring. He was black-and-white basic, a bald-headed, left-handed bundle of action with a very good punch and an even better chin.

He sparred with his brother. He ran his training miles in the morning in combat boots. Basic. Not a good interview, his quotes mainly were a collection of aphorisms like "Destruction and Destroy" and "I'm putting myself in jail" when he went into preparations for his next fight. He believed every one of them.

His training camp for the big fights usually was in Provincetown, Mass., on the far tip of Cape Cod. A ring was set up at the Provincetown Inn, which seemed to be an unlikely site since it catered to a gay male clientele.

"Why are you in this place?" I asked on one visit.

"I like to be out here with the sissies," Marvin replied. "Keeps my mind on my business."

Fighting anyone who was put in front of him, a collection of hard cases who mostly had been skipped as too dangerous by the carefully developed Sugar Ray and the well-connected Thomas (Hit Man) Hearns from the Kronk Gym in Detroit, Marvin forced his way into the rotation. He kept knocking down the people in front of him until he had to be taken seriously. He won so much that sound economics, not to mention the paying public, demanded Sugar Ray and Hearns had to fight him.

The entire ride was a wonder. The plots and sub-plots were constant, far removed from the familiar machinations of Boston team sports with their cyclical playoffs and draft days and salary disputes. Surprises abounded as rumors and press conferences, charges and counter-charges, ended with spectacular events, electricity running straight through the assembled bodies.

My favorite night of all was Sept. 27, 1980, when Marvin won the middleweight title at Wembley Arena in London. His opponent was Alan Minter, a well-intentioned Brit who had become a national symbol of English patriotism. He wore the design of the flag, the Union Jack, on his shorts, a reminder to his fans of his love for his country.

Many of those fans, I noticed in the lobby before the fight, seemed to be skinheads, a fearsome group covered in tattoos and black leathers, chains hanging from their tight pants. The skinheads were buying beer in bulk, full cases of the stuff, 24 bottles each, then lugging the cases into the upper reaches of the arena. I never had seen this before.

Dong. The fight began. Marvin destroyed Minter from the beginning. Dong. Cuts were opened quickly on the Englishman's face. Blood ran down to his patriotic shorts. Dong. The fight lasted only a minute and 45 seconds into the third round, stopped by the referee. Marvin finally was the champion.

The skinheads, with their 24 beers apiece, hadn't had time to consume much of the product. What to do? The bottles, full, started flying toward the ring. A riot began. The Petronelli brothers dropped Marvin to the canvas and covered him with their bodies. The people at ringside, myself included, looked for an escape. I was sitting next to Vito Antuofermo, former middleweight champion of the world, who was doing color commentary on Italian television.

"Follow me," Vito said.

I put that typewriter contraption over my head for protection. I followed. Somewhere on the trip out of the arena, fights breaking out everywhere, an unsuspecting Brit put a hand on Vito's shoulder. Just a hand. The former middleweight of the champion reacted with an immediate right uppercut to the jaw. The Brit went flying.

Hah.

• • •

I think of this – all of this and much more – after reading *Sorcery at Caesars*. In deft, terrific prose, Steve Marantz has laid out the itineraries for Marvin and Sugar Ray, leading up to one memorable night in the desert. The whole story is here, as exciting as it was the first time. All the details return.

Makes a man want to take a Jacuzzi in the middle of his living room.

— Leigh Montville

Prologue

On the night of April 6, 1987, Sugar Ray Leonard stole a fight. A couple of million witnesses saw him get away with it.

Leonard's theft was so slick that the victim, Marvelous Marvin Hagler, didn't know until it was too late. His middleweight title was picked clean and gone, forever.

It happened at a parking lot behind Caesars Palace Hotel and Casino, in an outdoor boxing ring, under a Nevada moon.

Hagler was supposed to win. The betting public had made him a 3-1 favorite. In a poll of 67 media experts, 60 picked Hagler to win and 52 predicted he would knock out Leonard. Hagler had not lost in 10½ years, while Leonard had fought just once in five years. A victory by Leonard was considered less likely than permanent damage to his body and mind.

After a round Leonard was unharmed and on his

feet. After two rounds, then four, then eight, Leonard reminded his doubters that boxing is more than a test of strength – it is an art, a Sweet Science. Through 12 rounds, Leonard and Hagler boxed with skill, purpose, and occasional fury. Neither scored a decisive blow, and at the final bell, Hagler raised his hands in triumph while Leonard dropped to his knees in exhaustion. Moments later only Leonard's hands were upraised.

Leonard won by a split decision. Two judges voted for Leonard, and one for Hagler. Though Hagler and untold spectators saw Hagler as the winner, only the votes of the three judges mattered. Their honesty was not in question, by most accounts, only their perception.

Leonard had sold himself to two judges, not literally, but as a salesman sells a product, a con man sells a lie, or a magician sells an illusion. More importantly, he had sold himself to Hagler, who gave him just enough respect, and room, to close the deal.

Leonard was a born salesman. He had sold boxing to an indifferent public after Muhammad Ali's era ended. He had sold beverages and food and sporting goods throughout the 1980s. He had sold an upright and amiable image of himself that was patently false. But this was Leonard's greatest snow job.

In the 1973 Oscar-winning film, *The Sting*, a wry and debonair con man played by Paul Newman swindled cash from a rough character played by Robert Shaw. In the 1987 version Leonard was Newman, Hagler was Shaw, the con was legal, and the prize was not money. It was bragging rights to an era.

Aficionados refer to boxing as the Fight Game, which is both endearing and ironic, because games are fun, and boxing is something else. One subtle use of the phrase, voiced by a Leonard loyalist, Ollie Dunlap, summarized the multi levels on which Leonard operated.

"Ray put the Fight Game on Marvin," Dunlap said.

The caper took 14 years to set up. The last 15 months were plotted in exact detail. The deed took just 12 three-minute rounds to execute.

In its own way, it was a perfect Sting.

Of course, Hagler did not see it that way.

But if winners write history, a salesman, a con, a Sweet Scientist, and a sorcerer wrote this one. Leonard was each and all in the parking lot behind Caesars.

This is the story of sorcery at Caesars, and how Sugar Ray put the Fight Game on Marvelous Marvin.

CHAPTER 1

1982: Sugar Ray Ascendant

AS 1982 DAWNED SUGAR Ray Leonard was the most celebrated athlete in America. *Sports Illustrated* magazine, whose influence was at its peak, named him Sportsman of the Year for 1981. In the 27-year history of the award just one other boxer, Muhammad Ali in 1974, had won it.

SI's cover photo posed Leonard on a wing chair of plush crimson cushion and polished ornamental wood. He wore a double-breasted suit of gray twill, an off-white dress shirt, and a crimson club tie. Two rings adorned the manicured fingers of his left hand and his left leg was crossed casually over his right. A knowing half-smile creased his iconic face. The impression was one of comfort, wealth, and power, and vaguely lethal.

The magazine reported that in a recent poll asking eighth-graders whom they most admired, entertainers dominated, with Burt Reynolds at No. 1. Ranked at No.

9 was Leonard, the top-rated athlete, between George Burns and Steve Martin.

"Unquestionably, Leonard is now the strongest of modern alloys, this blend of hero and celebrity," wrote author Frank Deford.

He was classically handsome, with dark, liquid eyes, prominent cheekbones, strong jaw line, a high brow, full sensuous mouth, and a sculpted physique worthy of a Michelangelo. He moved with the grace of Astaire, and carried himself with elegance more typical of old money than a prizefighter.

His mocha-colored skin was smooth and unmarked, save for a slash over his left eyebrow, and when he flashed his "million-dollar" smile, his face erupted in dimples. He dressed so impeccably that *Playboy* magazine named him to its list of best dressers, his wardrobe an eclectic combination of Brooks Brothers, Armani, and yachting casual.

© Ollie Dunlap

Sugar Ray Leonard's "million dollar smile."

Indeed, Leonard was a nearly perfect embodiment of the pop culture zeitgeist. He seemed less a boxer than an actor playing a boxer, with his matinee idol looks and pitch-perfect ring temperament that veered between playful and vicious. For Leonard boxing was more than a collision of gloved fists, sinew, bone, and will. Boxing was theater, with character and plot, and he played it as a masquerade of deception and concealment.

There was a touch of 007 in his suave and cold appraisal.

"I can train, have lunch with you, beat you up the next day, and have lunch with you again," he once said.

The first actor elected president, Ronald Reagan, symbolized the movement of entertainment to the center of American life. "Politics is just like show business," The Gipper said. "You have a hell of an opening, coast for a while, and then have a hell of a close."

Much of 1980s popular culture reflected Reagan's optimism, Cold War ideology, and emphasis on traditional ideals of family, business, heroism, masculinity and authority. Reagan catalyzed a backlash to the cynicism and anger of the Vietnam years and conjured an America of older, simpler bedrock values. Chief among those values was wealth, a belief in its exquisite desirability and Wall Street's capacity for generating it. Among Reagan's values, this was Leonard's favorite.

In September 1982 NBC would debut a new sitcom, "Family Ties," which featured actor Michael J. Fox in the role of Alex Keaton, the teenaged Reagan-like son of hippie-era parents. The Keaton character seemed to channel

Leonard, who, on the "Tonight Show," had joked that members of his large entourage were "tax write-offs."

As Wall Street and Reaganism ascended in the early 1980s, so too did the CEO of Sugar Ray Leonard, Inc., who stood tall for free enterprise. His business model of free agency had challenged the power brokers of boxing, and his purses, which now totaled about $35.5 million, were the wonder and envy of the sporting world. Leonard's three bouts in 1981 had paid him close to $15 million. In comparison, Dave Winfield was Major League Baseball's highest paid player at about $2.3 million per year. Rich beyond his wildest dreams, Leonard lived in a gated castle with a stone turret and wine cellar in Potomac, Md.

The 1980 firing of his original trainer Dave Jacobs had opened a window on his flinty management style. The dismissal of Jacobs, who had coached him since the age of 13, Leonard said matter-of-factly, meant "one less check to write." Leonard held his payroll to 20 percent, well below the payrolls of other elite fighters. Marvin Hagler, by comparison, gave a standard 33 percent cut to his handlers. Thomas Hearns paid his manager/trainer 33 to 50 percent, while Roberto Duran hardly knew what his patrician manager took, and as a result, ended up broke.

Leonard's image was not defined by political or religious causes. In this, Leonard was the anti-Ali, as he conscientiously refused to voice an opinion on issues outside of boxing. Fifteen years earlier star athletes Jim Brown, Bill Russell, and Lew Alcindor (soon to be Kareem Abdul Jabbar) had stood behind Ali in his refusal to be drafted.

But the 1960s was a brief departure from a tradition of apolitical star athletes, personified by O.J. Simpson in the 1970s and Michael Jordan in the 1990s. Leonard's approach mirrored the relative calm of the post-Vietnam, post–civil rights era.

"Ray didn't really have political leanings," Ollie Dunlap, his administrator, recalled. "If someone talked politics he would say 'we each have our own beliefs' and leave it at that."

"If Ray wanted to support something he did it privately," recalled Michael G. Trainer, his attorney. "Some people were put off by that."

ABC's star broadcaster Howard Cosell advised Leonard on his public persona. Cosell, who had taken Leonard under his wing at the 1976 Olympics, taught Leonard to be an astute listener, and to lead conversations away from politics and religion. "Don't let them lead you," Cosell commanded.

The Nation of Islam, which drew Ali into its fold in the early 1960s, made an indirect run at Leonard, raised as a Baptist. Its followers included James Anderson, Ali's longtime bodyguard, who was hired as a security expert by Leonard in 1980. Anderson, and others, drew Leonard into discussions about Islam, but he was not enticed.

Leonard's apolitical persona extended to race. Except for once early in his career, Leonard avoided race as a topic. This, along with his clean-cut appearance and deft command of language, enabled his attorney, Trainer, to say during the build-up to his 1981 bout with Detroit's Hearns, "Ray has this special ability to make white people

feel good about themselves. They like Ray and they say to themselves, 'There's a black man I like. I'm not a racist. I don't have to feel guilty.'"

African-Americans, on the other hand, were hesitant about Leonard. They suspected he had lost touch with his cultural roots; Hearns' fan base was said to increase the deeper he went into black ghettoes. Yet, African-Americans could not ignore Leonard's symbolic importance. As Deford wrote, "the image of the typical black family as a matriarchy is dented" every time Leonard and his son appeared together in a 7-Up commercial. By 1982 the Leonards were one of the most visible African-American nuclear families. Leonard was Cliff Huxtable before Bill Cosby created the character in 1984 for "The Cosby Show," the first sitcom featuring a stable, middle-class African-American family.

Soon Leonard's life would become a stage façade. After he beat Hearns in September 1981 in a spellbinding match that elevated him to Sportsman of the Year, Leonard began to change. His comments to Deford hinted at a more expansive view of himself. "You see, I don't consider myself a fighter," Leonard said. "I'm a personality."

Leonard's inner circle noticed that he spent more time away from home. In the past, he had returned to Maryland soon after he fought or worked a boxing telecast. But after the Hearns bout he began to linger in Los Angeles, where exclusive doors opened, at sleek private homes in the hills above Hollywood, and at chic nightspots where the rich and glamorous cavorted.

Ten years earlier a boxing coach had nicknamed him "Sugar Ray" because his smooth ring skills evoked the

great post-war champion, Sugar Ray Robinson. The nickname gave birth to Leonard's alter ego, a willful creature of bright lights and hidden pleasures. Now, untethered from gravity, his alter ego came of age.

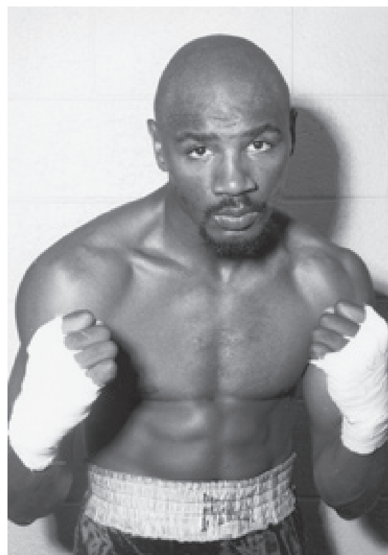
"That's when Ray became Sugar," said Dunlap. "He didn't want to be a world champion. He wanted to be a superstar."

In early 1982, Leonard scheduled a couple of tune-ups until a bout with Hagler or a rematch with Hearns could be arranged. Hagler, at this time, had defended his middleweight title three times, with relative ease. He was 27, in his mid-prime, and respected by aficionados for his old-school professionalism. A former construction worker, Hagler hailed from Brockton, Mass., the gritty mill town put on the map by former heavyweight champion Rocky Marciano.

Geography and sensibility stamped Hagler as blue collar. Early in his career he pushed wheelbarrows of fresh cement to make ends meet. One day he lost control of an overloaded wheelbarrow, flipped it, and had to clean up the mess. When he returned to the cement mixer, he asked for a lighter load. "Don't let these muscles fool you," Hagler said, as his co-workers roared.

To the larger public he was a bit of a puzzle, however. Though his shaved head and chiseled physique had become familiar on the ambitious young cable channel, HBO, he was rarely seen on network TV and was yet to be featured in closed-circuit theaters.

His credo, "destruct and destroy," was alliterative, catchy, and expressive of his clinical approach to may-



© Angie Carlino
Marvelous Marvin Hagler's shaved head and chiseled physique struck fear in opponents.

hem, as was his reaction to blood in the ring. "It turns me on," Hagler said. "The monster comes out."

Both intrigued and repelled, the public kept its distance. Hagler brooded over his lesser celebrity, and envied Leonard his prominence and outsized paydays. He imagined that if he defeated Leonard, those things would come to him.

In February Leonard was in Reno, Nevada, for a bout with journeyman Bruce Finch. He kissed towels monogrammed with his initials and threw them to girls who watched his workouts – one almost fainted. "Leonard is like the Beatles," a publicist said. Then he knocked out Finch in three rounds and pocketed $1.5 million.

But when life imitates Hollywood – as Leonard's – it compels drama. In May Leonard was in Buffalo to fight another journeyman, Roger Stafford, when he experienced difficulty with his left eye. He was diagnosed with a partially detached retina and on May 15, 1982, underwent surgery at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore. Breathtakingly sudden, his future in boxing was uncertain, and Leonard stepped into the role of Hamlet.

CHAPTER 2

1982: Bait

LEONARD SUNK A HOOK – of the bait-and-tackle variety – into Hagler on the night of November 9, 1982. Whether it was the first hook is debatable, and certainly it wasn't the last, but it was sharp, intentionally cruel, and in the end it may have been the one that stuck deepest in Hagler's craw.

"A Night With Sugar Ray Leonard" was a press conference, a tribute, and a fund-raiser – a weird hybrid Leonard had arranged at Baltimore Civic Center to announce whether he would continue to be, or not to be, a boxer. That was the question, and it had hung over his head since his surgery for a detached retina on May 15.

Hagler, who flew in from his Massachusetts home, was there, as quarry and dupe. Cosell was there, as emcee, and Ali was there, as an unwitting example of what could become of Leonard if he quit too late. Entertainer Wayne Newton was in the house. Moreover, the public