

HOLLYWOOD RECOGNITION FOR A HEAVYWEIGHT

He was a heavyweight champion in real life and now he's playing one in a Hollywood film. It may not seem like a big career leap, but only one boxer has done it. He's Michael Bentt, who plays Sonny Liston in 'Ali' and whose road from the ring to the screen had its turning point at Northampton.

Michael Bentt became the WBO heavyweight champ in 1993, knocking out Tommy Morrison in the first round. Bentt wasn't expected to win that bout; it was merely a 'tune-up' for Morrison who was scheduled next for an \$8 million payday fighting Lennox Lewis.

On the other hand, Bentt wasn't expected to lose his next fight, against Herbie Hide, a tune-up for Michael before facing Riddick Bowe. But not only did Hide take the title from Bentt, he ended Michael's boxing career. Bentt suffered a head injury, and doctors warned him not to fight again. At the age of 24, he left pro boxing; it was, in his words, the 'theater of the unexpected.'

Two years later, in 1996, Michael Bentt enrolled at

Northampton. He lived nearby and was eager to pursue a goal he had before he turned pro: to become a sportscaster. One day Bentt came to the office of 'The Commuter,' the college student newspaper, and politely asked me, the advisor, to look at a piece he'd written on the recent death of rapper Tupac Shakur. His prose was deep and vivid, like Norman Mailer's, and barely restrained by commas and periods. I was struck by his raw talent and his gracious manner.

'The Commuter' published that piece and a second one, and they were his first writings to appear in print. He now writes regularly for a boxing magazine ('Burt Sugar's Fight Game'), has a column in the works for HBO's Web site, and is writing a book and a screenplay.

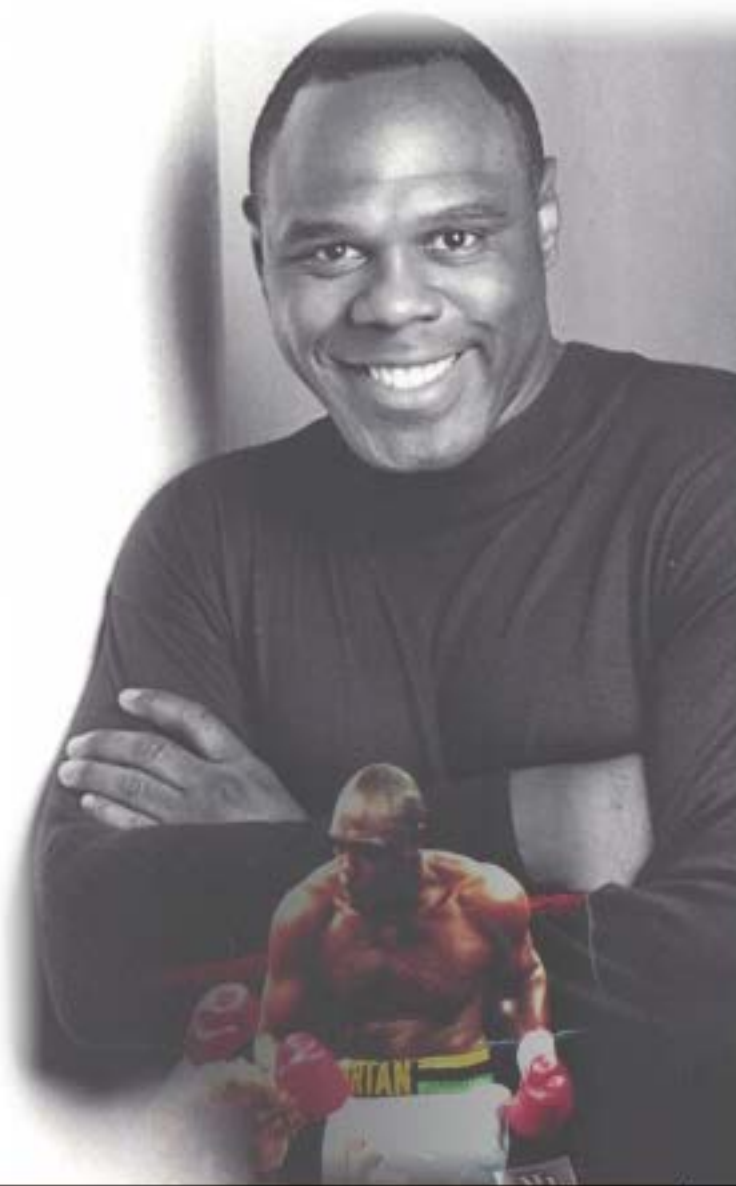
At Northampton, Michael was in the Radio/TV program, and he learned to work before the microphone and behind the set. 'He was a very dedicated and well-liked student,' recalls his professor, Mario Acerra, with a 'keen intellect' that 'shattered the stereotypical image that some people have of a boxer.'

As electives, Bentt took Acting I and II, studying under professor Norman Roberts, who cast him as the Gravedigger in an NCC production of 'Hamlet.' Michael 'played the role with great dignity,' recalls Roberts. It was Bentt's first performance in this other kind of theater, and with it he found a new course in life.

'As fighters, or ex-fighters,' Michael has said, 'we feel that once our career is over with, we have no value or use anymore — but that can be far from the truth.' And so he called Norman Roberts earlier this year to thank him for the chance to learn and practice acting. 'It's indeed brought a new value and use to his life. 'Northampton nurtured my dreams,' he says.

After leaving NCC in 1997, Bentt had roles in three independent films. Suddenly he's appearing in a major Hollywood production, 'Ali,' acting alongside Will Smith, Jon Voigt, Ron Silver, and Jamie Foxx.

The boxer he plays, Sonny Liston, was 'this monster of a man,' in Bentt's words. 'He was a tormented soul.' Sonny Liston seemed invincible during his reign as champion in the early 1960s, until beaten twice by a youthful Muhammad Ali. 'My job is to do that role justice,' Bentt



says, 'and to do Sonny's memory justice.'

Michael also helped prepare Will Smith for the role of Muhammad Ali, and their fight scenes in the film reflect the hard work, determination, and integrity of both men. 'We are essentially fighting for real,' says Will Smith, adding that 'when Michael Bentt hits you on your forehead, you try not to let that happen again!'

Today, the future seems unlimited for Michael Bentt, who, after all, has already worn the belt of a champion. 'Eventually I'll have a best seller, a couple of movie scripts, screenplays — and,' he says, 'a few Pulitzer prizes!'

And maybe an Oscar, too. The word on the Hollywood street has him in serious contention for an award nomination.

— By Jim Von Schilling