

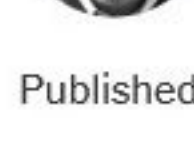
Mills Lane, Who Refereed Tyson Ear Bite Fight, Dies at 85

He was a referee for more than a hundred boxing title fights, but gained national renown for the 1997 bout between Mike Tyson and Evander Holyfield.

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Mills Lane examined Evander Holyfield's right ear after he was bitten by Mike Tyson during the third round of their heavyweight championship match in 1997 in Las Vegas. Mark J. Terrill/Associated Press



By Richard Sandomir

Published Dec. 10, 2022 Updated Dec. 12, 2022

Mills Lane, a former district attorney and judge who became one of boxing's most prominent referees, overseeing more than 100 championship bouts and delivering his exuberant opening catchphrase, "Let's get it on!," died on Tuesday at his home in Reno, Nev. He was 85.

His son Terry said the cause was complications of a stroke he had in 2002, which left him unable to speak.

Mr. Lane, a former amateur and professional boxer, handled bouts between many of boxing's elite champions, including Muhammad Ali, Larry Holmes, Roberto Durán, Marvelous Marvin Hagler and Thomas Hearns.

And though they were far more imposing physically — he stood just 5 feet 7 inches tall and weighed about 150 pounds — he nevertheless displayed a take-charge style in the ring, much as he did in his legal career in Washoe County, where Reno is the county seat. As a prosecutor, he was called "Maximum Mills," for the long sentences he was able to secure against defendants.

"He was one of the most respected referees in the world," [Marc Ratner](#), the former executive director of the Nevada State Athletic Commission, said in a phone interview. "And when he got in the ring, fighters knew there was a special quality about him. He was a man's man."

But almost anything can happen in boxing, and Mr. Lane witnessed his fair share of unusual moments.

The rematch in 1997 between Mike Tyson and Evander Holyfield for the heavyweight championship [became a bloody spectacle](#) when Tyson, enraged at being headbutted by Holyfield in the second round, bit off a piece of Holyfield's right ear and spit it to the mat during the third.

"He bit him!" Mr. Lane shouted. "He's disqualified!"

But after consulting with Mr. Ratner, who asked him if he was absolutely certain that he wanted to eject him, Mr. Lane chose instead to deduct two points from Tyson for the foul, grotesque as it was. And when the ringside doctor affirmed that Holyfield could continue, the fight went on — until, later in the round, when Tyson chomped on Holyfield's left ear, which prompted Mr. Lane to disqualify him for good.

"One bite is bad enough," he said after the fight. "Two bites is not deserved."



Mr. Lane calling the heavyweight title fight between Oliver McCall, left, and Lennox Lewis in 1997. John Gurzinski/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

In 1997, Mr. Lane disqualified Oliver McCall when he appeared to be having a nervous breakdown during his heavyweight title fight against Lennox Lewis.

"It was almost as if he wanted to get knocked out," Mr. Lane said after the bout. "He wasn't putting up any semblance of a defense, so I figured that was it."

He also disqualified Henry Akinwande in a fight that year against Lewis for excessive clinching and holding.

And in 1998, Mr. Lane accidentally pushed the middleweight champion Bernard Hopkins through the ropes when he tried to break up a headlock in which Robert Allen was holding Hopkins. Hopkins was injured, and the fight was declared a no contest.

"It was just one of those things that happen," Mr. Lane said after the fight, one of his last.

Mills Bee Lane III was born on Nov. 12, 1937, in Savannah, Ga. His father, Remer, moved his family after World War II to a plantation in South Carolina, where he raised cattle. His mother, Louise (Harris) Lane, was a homemaker. Remer had chosen not to enter the family-owned business, the Citizens and Southern Bank, and Mills later declined to as well.

Boxing became his passion. He listened to it on the radio and, after graduating from boarding school, learned to box in the Marines, which he had joined in 1956. While he was stationed in Okinawa, he won the Marines's All-Far East welterweight championship. Determined to continue as a boxer, he enrolled at the University of Nevada, Reno, and won the 1960 N.C.A.A. welterweight title.

Although he failed to make the 1960 Olympic team, Mr. Lane soon turned professional. He lost his first fight but won the next 10 (one of which avenged his loss) before retiring in 1967, knowing he didn't have enough talent to be a champion.

By then he had graduated from the University of Nevada, in 1963, with a degree in business and had begun refereeing. He got his law degree from the University of Utah in 1970.

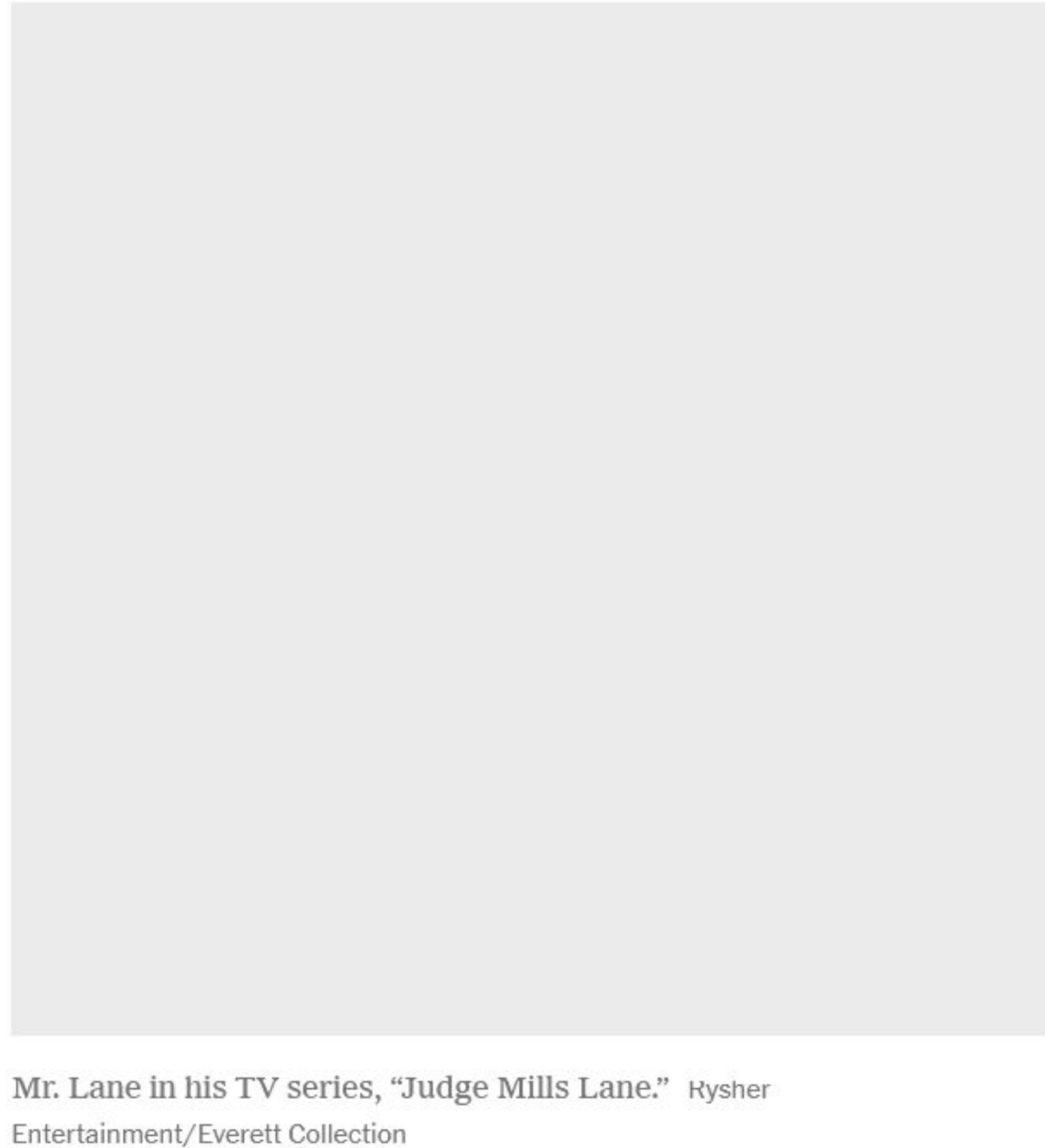
After working in a law firm for two years, he was hired as a Washoe County prosecutor and elected district attorney in 1982.

"Having Mills in the courtroom as a prosecutor was a challenge," Charles McGee, a district court judge, told The Reno Gazette-Journal in 1998. "There was always this question about who was going to run the courtroom."

Mr. Lane was elected a district court judge in 1990.

He carried a gun to defend himself in case any of the people he had sent to the state penitentiary got out and came after him. "It goes everywhere I go, brother," [he told a New York Times reporter in 1997](#). "Except on the airplanes."

He added, "I've got two darling sons, Tommy and Terry. If somebody was to come to my home and hurt my boys intentionally, I'd have a tag on their toes before the sun goes down."



Mr. Lane in his TV series, "Judge Mills Lane." Rysher Entertainment/Everett Collection

Mr. Lane made several changes to his career in 1998: He retired from refereeing, stepped down from the bench after nearly two terms to go into private practice, and began a starring role in a syndicated TV series, "[Judge Mills Lane](#)," an opportunity that had come to him with the national renown he earned in the Tyson bite fight.

"The producers learned he was a real judge and made him an offer he couldn't refuse," Terry Lane said in a phone interview. "In one year, he went from overseeing murder trials to 'this person owes me money for a dog.'"

The series was canceled in 2001, and Mr. Lane had his debilitating stroke a year later.

In 2013, [he was inducted](#) into the International Boxing Hall of Fame.

In addition to his son Terry, Mr. Lane is survived by his wife, Kaye (Pearce) Lane; another son, Tommy; his sister, Louise Talbot; and his brothers Remer and Tom. Two previous marriages ended in divorce.

An hour before the Tyson-Holyfield fight, a memorabilia collector from Canada offered Mr. Lane \$200 for the blue shirt he would wear in the ring.

"Hey man, one more thing," Mr. Lane said he told the man when he recounted the story to The Times. "It's probably gonna be a dirty shirt after this is over:"

"Don't care," the man said. "I want the blood and all."

"OK," Mr. Lane said. "The blood and all."

He sold it but, because of the notoriety of the fight, was left with some regrets.

"What I should've done was hold my shirt up and start the bidding at \$200," Mr. Lane said. "I could've probably gotten \$4,000 for it, but — oh, well — I'd given the man my word."

Richard Sandomir is an obituaries writer. He previously wrote about sports media and sports business. He is also the author of several books, including "The Pride of the Yankees: Lou Gehrig, Gary Cooper and the Making of a Classic."