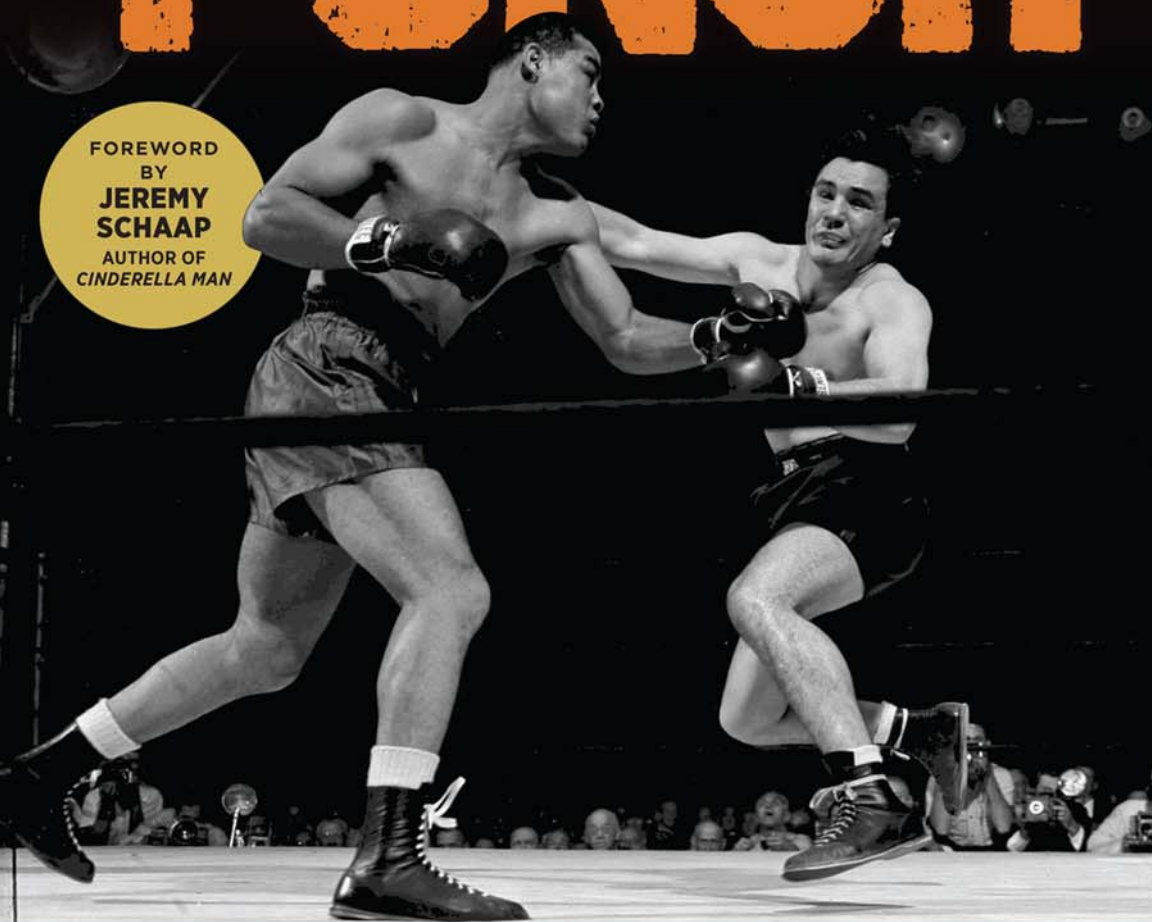


COUNTER PUNCH

FOREWORD
BY
**JEREMY
SCHAAP**
AUTHOR OF
CINDERELLA MAN



**ALI, TYSON, THE BROWN BOMBER,
AND OTHER STORIES OF THE BOXING RING**

IRA BERKOW

PULITZER PRIZE-WINNING AUTHOR



Counterpunch

ALI, TYSON,
THE BROWN BOMBER,
& OTHER STORIES
OF THE BOXING RING

IRA BERKOW



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COUNTERPUNCH

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This book is available in quantity at special discounts for your group or organization. For further information, contact:

Triumph Books LLC
814 North Franklin Street
Chicago, Illinois 60610
(312) 337-0747
www.triumphbooks.com

Printed in U.S.A.

ISBN: 978-1-60078-973-1

Design by Prologue Publishing Services, LLC

Page production by Patricia Frey

Cover photo: *Joe Louis, in defense of his world heavyweight boxing title, knocking out Tami Mauriello in 2:09 of the first round in Yankee Stadium, September 18, 1946.* (AP Images)

*For Bob Downey, who suggested
this book, and
Neil Korf, who encouraged it*



CONTENTS

FOREWORD BY <i>JEREMY SCHAAP</i>	x1
INTRODUCTION	xv
I. MUHAMMAD ALI, THE ONE AND ONLY	
Age Hasn't Cooled the Fire Inside Ali.....	3
The Ali Shuffle Is Not Lost!.....	11
"I'm Bigger Now Than I Ever Been"	14
Ali's Ringside Seat.....	17
Stingin' and Floatin' Come Harder Now	19
II. SMOKIN' JOE FRAZIER	
Joe Frazier, Who "Don't Know How to Go Easy".....	25
Frazier-Ali Transcends Sport.....	28
Joe Frazier at Dawn.....	30
Of Mailer, Taylor, and Frazier	32
III. THE BROWN BOMBER	
Joe Louis: Black King.....	37
Joe Louis Was There Earlier.....	40
Joe Louis Stages Valiant Comeback	42
Louis Had Style In and Out of the Ring: An Appreciation	44
IV. IRON MIKE	
Tyson Rules the Planet	49
The Ring of Fear	52

The Second-Baddest Dude.....	55
The “Animal” in Mike Tyson.....	58
After Three Years in Prison, Tyson Gains His Freedom	61
Boxing’s Beautiful Black Eye.....	66
Tyson, in Training, Is a Man on an Island	69

V. THE MANASSA MAULER

Peachy Caveman.....	75
The Toughest Man in the World	78

VI. A POTPOURRI OF HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPS

Jack Johnson Is a Dandy and Still “Leads” a Full Life.....	83
Ezzard Charles: “A Credit to Boxing”	85
Sonny Liston Draws Some Laughs	88
Floyd Patterson: No Requiem for This Heavyweight.....	90
“Here Comes George”: That Is, Foreman	92
Buster Douglas on the Comeback Trail.....	95
For Holmes, the Bell Tolls.....	98
Hasim Rahman Works His Way Up to Anonymity	101
Lennox Lewis Says This Is All for McCall.....	107
Riddick Bowe Goes Marching Back Home.....	110
Holyfield in His Palace.....	113

VII. CONTENDERS AND PRETENDERS AMONG THE LARGEST LADS

An Old King (Levinsky) of Wepnerdom.....	121
Cookie Wallace: Up ‘n’ Comer.....	124
Carmine Vingo: Rocky Marciano’s Victim	127
Bulletproof Boxer Is Healthy Again	130
Andrew Golota: Aiming for the Belt.....	133
French Boxer Won His Biggest Fight in Auschwitz	137

VIII. THE LIGHT-HEAVYWEIGHTS: A MIXED BAG

Archie Moore: A Very Merry Mongoose	141
Roy Jones Jr. Doesn’t Meet His Match	144
Success Story Is Rewritten in Mystery	147

IX. IN THE MIDST OF THE MIDDLE

The LaMotta Nuptials	155
Jake LaMotta: Philosopher-Bouncer.....	158
Rocky Graziano: The Brawler as Artist	161
Leave Your Worry on the Doorstep	164
Emile Griffith in That “Sinful Business”	167
Justice Delayed Is Bitter Justice for Hurricane Carter	170
Hagler KOs Hearn at 2:01 of Round 3	174
Leonard Beats Hagler for Title on a Split Decision	177
No Hoosegow for JoJo	179
Sugar Ray Leonard Can’t Stay Away from the Ring	182
The End of the Road for Sugar.....	185
The Greatness that Was Sugar Ray Robinson.....	188
Gypsy Joe Can Be Champ, If... ..	190
Dick Tiger Is Fighting on Two Fronts.....	192
Marcel Cerdan and Edith Piaf: In Memory of a Special Love.....	194

X. LIGHTER BUT STILL PACKING A PUNCH

Floyd Mayweather Jr. and Sr.: The Ring and the Cell.....	199
Sandy Saddler Stays on Top of the World.....	202
The Riddle of Kid Chocolate.....	204
Salvador Sanchez Accepts Award with Gusto	207
Argüello Gets Another Shot	210
Tracy Harris’ Debut	213
Saoul Mamby: Behind the Old Boxer’s Dark Shades	217
American Dream Goes Down for the Count.....	220
Charlie Nash: Toughest Olympian.....	224
Tommy Hearn Answers Yet Another Bell.....	227
An Afternoon in Gleason’s Gym	231
The Twin Temples of Boxing.....	234
Barney Ross: Up from Maxwell Street.....	237

XI. A FAMILY AFFAIR

Rocky Marciano Jr. and the Son of Kid Gavilan.....	249
Marcel Cerdan Jr. and the Shadow	252
The Fighting Frazier Clan	254

XII. BEYOND THE ROPES, WHERE TRAINERS AND PROMOTERS RESIDE

Cus D'Amato's Gym.....	259
Angelo Dundee: Ali's Muse Takes a Bow.....	262
Mushky Salow Would Never Call Collect.....	265
Ray Arcel: "The Meat Wagon"	268
Al Silvani: The Hollywood Cut Man	271
Performance of a Loquacious (Don) King.....	274
Arum Is Proven Ringmaster	277
King and Arum in Scuffle	279
Freddie Menna's Lost Art.....	280
ABOUT THE AUTHOR	283



FOREWORD

IT IS PROBABLY ONLY a coincidence that boxing has been in decline since Ira Berkow stopped writing about it—but maybe not. As Berkow demonstrated for decades, nobody covered the fight game with more artistry and insight, with more compassion and humor. When he retired as a columnist at *The New York Times* in 2007, boxing lost one of its keenest observers. The truth is that by that time boxing didn't deserve Berkow. But for a long time, boxing was the perfect subject for his gifts. No other sport offers so many characters, so much color, so much drama, so few scruples, so many tragic endings. This is the raw material that Berkow so ingeniously molded into classics.

I, for one, still remember the day I read in the pages of *The New York Times* his brilliant ringside account of the sixth wedding of that great knight of the fights—Jake LaMotta, the kind of man only a newspaper columnist could love. Here is the Raging Bull in all his glory, surrounded by the other great fighters of his era, all of them chiming in with the kind of bon mots that make those of us who cover sports in this duller age envious.

“Jake's ugly as mortal sin,” Billy Conn tells Berkow. “He's a nice guy, though.”

LaMotta and Carmen Basilio then argue about which of them is uglier.

In the world of sports today, we don't get characters like these guys—and boxing was once the place where we found them in droves. As Berkow reminds us in this astonishing collection, fighters like Ray Robinson and Dick Tiger and Archie Moore weren't programmable automatons, like so many of today's athletes. They had things to say and the courage to say them.

Part of the special beauty of *Counterpunch* is that it functions not only as anthology but as an anecdotal history of the sport of boxing in the 20th century. Berkow was writing when Jack Dempsey and Joe Louis and Barney Ross were all still alive, still cogent, and they told him things we are lucky to have had recorded for posterity.

In Berkow's company, in a New York City taxicab, Louis shuts up a young major league outfielder who's being rude to the driver, with one strong declarative sentence. You remember then that this is the man who said of an opponent, "He can run, but he can't hide," and who enlisted in the U.S. Army, saying, "Lots of things wrong with America, but Hitler ain't going to fix them."

Time after time, Berkow is at his best at the precise moment when history is being made.

In the hours after Mike Tyson knocked out Michael Spinks 91 seconds into their 1988 title fight, Berkow talked to Muhammad Ali. "Terrible," Ali says, "terrible." With hindsight, we know exactly what he meant.

This is the essence of Berkow.

He takes his readers to that place they would never otherwise see and makes connections they wouldn't necessarily make for themselves.

Who better to sum up the carnage that night in Atlantic City than Ali? What other columnist would leave us that night with such a sense of foreboding?

Like a bird of prey, Berkow has eyes and ears that are calibrated to hone in on his quarry: the quote and scene that bring us to the heart of the matter.

After George Foreman knocked out Joe Frazier for the second time, in 1976, Berkow, as usual, was in the right place at the right time. He heard Foreman tell Marvis Frazier, "Your daddy is a courageous man. You should be proud."

Berkow used his feet, too. For half a century, he went everywhere, wherever the stories took him.

There he is in Miami Beach, with King Levinsky, a heavyweight contender in the 1920s, who's reminiscing about the power of Max Baer's right hand. (Between Levinsky and Baer, incidentally you've got at least 1¼ memorable Jewish pugilists.)

There he is in the Catskills, at the Concord Hotel, with Marcel Cerdan Jr., who is still haunted by his father's death in a plane crash 21 years earlier, trying and failing to equal his father as a fighter.

There he is in Las Vegas, covering the epic, and controversial, Hagler-Leonard bout, talking to his old friend Richard Steele, who happened to be the referee. "It was a great fight," Steele tells Berkow, "the greatest fight I've ever seen."

The writing, the reporting, the quality of the insights... this is what has made Berkow an Ali, a Louis, a Robinson, of *his* game.

Reading this book made me doubly nostalgic. First, for the heyday of boxing, because at its best no other sport is nearly as compelling. Second, for all those years, most of my life, in fact, when I could open up my local paper three days a week to read something brilliant written by Ira Berkow.

In *Counterpunch*, we get the best of both those lost worlds.

—Jeremy Schaap



INTRODUCTION

SEATED ON AN AIRPLANE just before takeoff with Muhammad Ali and his trainer Angelo Dundee, I saw the airline hostess approach the once and always Champ.

“Mr. Ali,” she said, “you have to fasten your seat belt.”

“Superman don’t need no seat belt,” he said, with a smile.

She smiled back. “Superman don’t need no airplane, either,” she said.

The airline hostess indeed won that round. The next sound heard was “Click.”

There may not have been a more entertaining, endearing, sometimes antagonizing, mesmerizing athlete in any sport, at any time, than Muhammad Ali, in that brutal yet often captivating sport of boxing.

Some of the greatest sports heroes worldwide have been boxers. It is documented that Ali’s photograph, for example, has been hung in rooms from Boston to Beijing as well as huts in Mozambique and, one might imagine, caves in Afghanistan. His patter, his military stance, his proclivity to ring theatrics and periodic dominance stirred the imagination of many.

There was a legendary story about the hopes and dreams that iconic fighters like “The Brown Bomber” might inspire. A young black man about to be executed in a gas chamber in Alabama called out in tears, “Save me, Joe Louis, save me!” And Louis’ bouts against Max Schmeling from Hitler’s Germany in the 1930s were billed, with a certain hyperbole but also heart, as “Fascism versus Democracy.”

Inspiration could come in the form of art, as well. The paintings of boxers by the internationally acclaimed American George Bellows is a prime example. His “Dempsey and Firpo,” in which he depicts “The

Manassa Mauler” being himself mauled and knocked through the ropes by the large Argentine Luis Firpo, called “The Bull of the Pampas,” in their heavyweight title fight before 80,000 fans in the old Polo Grounds, in 1923, is one of the treasures of the Whitney Museum in New York City. (Undaunted, defending champ Dempsey crawled back from ring-side after that blow in the first round and knocked out Firpo in the second round.)

Few fighters have ever captured the imagination, the admiration, and the disgust as had Mike Tyson. A punching phenomenon, he became the youngest to ever win the world heavyweight boxing championship, at 20 years and four months and 22 days, in 1986, on a TKO of Trevor Berbick in the second round.

As a sports columnist for *The New York Times*, I covered several of Tyson’s fights, but none was more striking than when he knocked out Michael Spinks in 91 seconds of the first round. I was in my seat at ring-side when Spinks, clad in white robe and white shoes, climbed through the ropes. Some seated nearby would later say that they saw dread in Spinks’ eyes. Tyson, built as powerfully as a tank but shorter than one might have conjured, entered the ring in his routinely fearsome manner: no robe, black shorts, black shoes without socks, black gloves. He had come to administer a whipping. Immediately after the fight, Ali was seen making his way to Tyson’s locker room, where I was headed.

“Devastating, wasn’t it?” I said to Ali.

“Terrible,” he said, shaking his head as though he had just witnessed a car crash. “Terrible.”

And yet Tyson would get himself into a multiplicity of problems, from inside the ring—as when he chewed off part of Evander Holyfield’s ear—to outside the ring, the worst being his conviction for rape, and a three-year prison sentence that followed. I was there, too, at dawn one crisp morning in March of 1995 when he was finally released from the Indiana correction facility and whisked away in a black sedan that had been waiting for him at curbside.

. . .

I began covering boxing, among all other sports, when I first arrived in New York City, in September of 1967, hired by a newspaper feature

syndicate, Newspaper Enterprise Association. Since it was a national syndicate, I was expected to write primarily, though not entirely, about national sports figures. While writing about Willie Mays or Joe Namath or Arnold Palmer or Wilt Chamberlain were in many ways dream assignments for a young sportswriter, I was drawn to the fight game.

I am sometimes asked which sport I liked covering, or writing about, the most. My answer is: boxing.

Nothing is more dramatic, more engrossing, than writing, and reading, about life and death. The best plays and novels, from Sophocles to Shakespeare to Arthur Miller, from Homer to Dostoyevsky to Hemingway, are at their apex about life and death. Boxing is a mirror of this element: it is conceivable that every time two men step into the ring, one of them may be carried out on a stretcher, his life hanging by the proverbial thread. It may not even be a conscious perception—generally it’s not—but it is there invariably hunkered in the subconscious.

Some have said that boxing should be outlawed, and sometimes it has been, but there seems some primeval force working inside human beings that is fascinated by, if not even craving, the sight of two men (or even women in recent years) going at each other, though, in the most civilized sense, they are athletes who have trained, who use what are sometimes called strategies, thus giving the appellation, “The Sweet Science,” to what otherwise may be construed by some as a form of mayhem. At its most enthralling, of course, it’s a *mano-a-mano* chess match. And, often for me, as the two boxers meet in the center ring as the bell sounds for the first round, a palpable tension hangs in the air.

And I found in boxing characters like I found in virtually no other sport—at least on a routine, or general, basis. Not just the fighters, but the trainers, the promoters, the hangers-on, all in a kind of demimonde, a world at once sleazy, poignant, comical, courageous, striving, ugly, beautiful—in a word, *wondrous*, in the sense of *extraordinary* (well, two words, then).

One such person was the trainer and cut man for a long list of champions, Whitey Bimstein. He neatly if not idiosyncratically summed up the attraction of the fight game for many fighters. At one time, from 1910 to 1940, for example, there were 27 Jewish fighters who were world champions, from lightweight Benny Leonard to welterweight Barney Ross (profiled in this book) to light-heavyweight Maxie Rosenbloom. In every

one but one of those 30 years there was at least one Jewish world boxing champion, and in 1933 eight of the prominent weight divisions had four Jewish world champs. From 1940 on there were very few Jewish fighters, champs or otherwise. They had emerged from the Jewish ghettos in America and opportunities, from the time of World War II, grew as discrimination in colleges and businesses declined. "When the kids didn't have what to eat, they were glad to fight," Bimstein reflected on the loss of Jewish pugilists. "Now that any kid can get a job, they got no ambition."

And, to be sure, there were other lessons for me to learn from boxing. One evening I found myself in a small armory in Totowa, New Jersey, covering matches by young fighters with dreams, if not skills. In one of those bouts, the names of the battlers now lost in the midst of time, I remember red trunks mercilessly pounding his opponent in blue trunks. People in the close-by seats (the only ones in the arena) were shouting to the referee, "Stop the fight! Stop the fight!"

I felt the same way, a sense of dread beginning to overtake me. I felt like shouting out as well. It was inexplicable to me why the referee would not halt the onslaught. The bell rang ending the round, and blue trunks staggered back to his corner, to be worked on by his trainer/cut man. The bell rang heralding the next round. Blue trunks, obviously revived, met red trunks at center ring and, amazingly, began to administer a thorough whipping, knocking him down, and down again. This time, the referee stopped the action, looked at red trunks, spoke to him, and then waved his hands that the fight was over.

The referee was Richard Steele, who later refereed numerous championship bouts and became the Commissioner of Boxing for the state of New Jersey. But that night, when that fight was over, I approached Steele, who I had never seen before, and asked him why he hadn't stopped the fight when blue trunks was getting pummeled.

"I looked in his eyes," said Steele, "and they were clear. I believed that he could defend himself, and should be given a chance to continue." And red trunks, when he halted the bout? "His eyes weren't clear, and when I spoke to him he seemed not to know where he was. I didn't want any further damage to him. No fight is worth a man's life."

A tutorial in not just looking, but seeing. And understanding.

• • •

I have never known a sportswriter who happened to have covered the first Muhammad Ali–Joe Frazier fight, on May 8, 1971, in Madison Square Garden, who did not say it was the single most exciting sports event he has ever covered. Include me in that category. It was the clash of two undefeated heavyweight champions of the world (Frazier held the title, Ali had had his stripped three years earlier by boxing commissions when he refused induction into the U.S. military, but now had returned to his profession). Two different styles of boxing, as well as personality. Ali was fast and flashy, Frazier dogged and as straightforward as a bulldozer, a right hand as crushing as a wrecking ball. Yet, like many, I watched, from my ringside seat, Ali bound onto the canvas with white robe, white shoes and red tassels, all showmanship. Frazier in green robe climbed quietly through the ropes. Like many, my eyes were riveted on the dancing Ali. And that continued. After five rounds I turned to a longtime boxer writer and said, “Well, I have Ali four rounds to one for Frazier. What about you?” He said, “Frazier four rounds to one for Ali.” I was amazed, and realized he may be right. I had apparently only been watching one half of the fight. I soon trained my eyes on both combatants. (Frazier, of course, beat Ali—twice nearly knocking him out—on a unanimous decision in 15 rounds, retaining the title. He then lost the next two fights to Ali, by a decision in 1974 and a KO in 14 the following year, the “Thrilla in Manila.”)

As a writer, and to try to hone one’s craft, the observation of detail is significant. Winston Churchill once noted that before he began painting in his sixties, he had never noticed the shadows on buildings. For me, in sports, particularly boxing, such recognition came, perhaps more slowly than rapidly, and described so aptly by Ernest Hemingway from his experiences:

I was trying to learn in Chicago in around 1920 and was searching for the unnoticed things that made emotion, such as the way an outfielder tossed his glove without looking back to where it fell, the squeak of resin on canvas under a fighter’s flat-soled gym shoes, the gray color of [boxing trainer] Jack Blackburn’s skin when he had just come out of stir and other things I noted as

a painter sketches. You saw Blackburn's strange color and the old razor cuts and the way he spun a man before you knew his history. These were the things that moved you before you knew the story.

I was born and raised in Chicago, and, again, came to New York and NEA in the fall of 1967, at age 27, where I became a sports reporter and in due time the sports columnist and sports editor, and then in 1981 was hired to write sports feature stories and columns for *The New York Times*. What you will find in the pages to follow are some of those stories and columns that focused on boxing, and, in the best of all possible worlds, depicted the people, the places, the moods, the atmospheres, even the politics, of a corner of our times.

I.

***MUHAMMAD ALI,
THE ONE
AND ONLY***



AGE HASN'T COOLED THE FIRE INSIDE ALI

April 28, 1985

THE SPRAWLING, THREE-STORY HOUSE was quiet, except for the tinny too-wa, too-wee of birds in a small aviary next to the office room on the first floor. It was early on a recent morning and the cool, shadowed office was dimly lit by two antique candelabras which had a few of their small bulbs burned out. An antique lamp was also lit and with its slightly crooked shade peered over the large black mahogany desk scattered with letters and an Islamic prayer book. Nearby were several open boxes stuffed with mail.

Behind the desk, three large windows opened onto a back yard, half in sunlight, with cypress trees and pruned bushes and a swimming pool. Along another wall in the office, a pair of black men's shoes stood by themselves in the middle of a brown suede couch. In another corner, a television set, with another on top of it, rested on the Oriental rug that covered most of the floor of the room. On the wall facing the desk was a marble fireplace without a fire.

Suddenly, a torch appeared in the doorway. The fire, burning at the end of a rolled-up newspaper, was followed by a large man in black-stockinged feet who trotted into the room. "Hoo, hoo," he said, as the flame burned closer to his hand, and he tossed the torch into the fireplace. Quickly, the logs in the fireplace crackled with the flame, and Muhammad Ali, the torchbearer, watched them burn. Then he sat down in an armchair in front of his desk and in a moment closed his eyes.

He said something, indistinct, in a gravelly mumble, and the visitor, in a chair facing him, asked Ali if he would repeat it.

"Tired," he said, with a little more effort, his eyes still closed. It was 8:00 in the morning and Ali had been up since 5:30 saying his daily prayers.

He stretched his legs. He wore a light-blue shirt, unbuttoned at the cuffs, which was not tucked into his dark blue slacks. At 43, Ali's face is rounder and his body is thicker than when he first won the world heavy-weight championship by knocking out Sonny Liston in Miami in February 1964. The 6'3" Ali weighed 215 then and is now about 240 pounds.

In the ensuing years, he would weigh as much as 230 in the ring as he lost and regained the title two more times—an unprecedented feat in the heavyweight division. Ali, who was stopped in a one-sided bout by Larry Holmes while attempting to win the title yet a fourth time, retired five years ago, but he is hardly forgotten.

A few days before, he had been at ringside at the Hagler-Hearns middleweight title fight in Las Vegas, Nevada. Numerous ex-champions were introduced before the bout. Ali was saved for last.

He was asked now how he felt about that moment. He said nothing, and it appeared he was sleeping. Then: "A-li, A-li, A-li," he said, opening his eyes and mimicking the chant that arose among the 16,000 fans when the ring announcer introduced him.

"I had to go like this," he said softly, raising his right index finger to his lips, "to calm the people down."

"A lot of fighters, when they quit no one ever hears of them again. But I've gotten bigger since I quit boxin'. Look at this," he said, nodding to a box in the corner, "people from all over the world writin' me. Thirty-one boxes full of fan mail in four years."

One was from Bangladesh, sent to "Loos Anjeles," and calling Ali "my unknown Uncle." Another from West Germany asked "Mr. Ali" for his autograph. A third was from Drakefield Road in London and sent to the New York Presbyterian Hospital, where Ali had gone late last summer for a checkup. He has been diagnosed as having Parkinson's Syndrome, a nerve disorder.

Ali asked the visitor to open the letter and read it aloud.

"I am very sorry to know of your temporary problem," wrote the Briton, "and wish you most sincerely a rapid recovery. Many of my friends who

are fans of yours are thinking the same, that you will in a very short time be back to your old poetic self and come and see us in dear old London...”

Do you still write poetry? the visitor asked Ali.

“No,” he said, “no more. That was in a different time. Eighteen times callin’ the round. ‘That’s no jive, Cooper will fall in five.’ ‘Moore in four.’”

The visitor recalled a personal favorite, when Ali predicted how his first fight with Liston would go. It turned out that Liston didn’t answer the bell for the seventh round. Did Ali remember the poem?

“Mmmmm,” he said. I wasn’t sure what he meant by that.

But he began, his voice still very low:

Ali comes out to meet Liston, and then Liston starts to retreat.
If he goes back any farther, he’ll wind up in a ringside seat.

He paused thoughtfully, then continued:

And Liston keeps backin’ but there’s not enough room.
“It’s a matter of time—There! Ali lowers the boom.
Ali lands with a right—what a beautiful swing!
The punch knocks Liston right out of the ring.

Just then the phone rang. “My phone’s ringin,” he said. “Hold on.” He reached over to his desk. “Yeah, naw, naw,” he said sleepily into the phone. “I wouldn’t try that for no \$5,000, you crazy?” He nodded. “Check ya later.” And hung up. “Where was I?”

He was reminded that he had just knocked Liston out of the ring.

“Who woulda thought,” he continued, “when they came to the fight, that they’d witness the launchin’ of a hu-man satellite.

“Yes, yes, the crowd did not dream when they laid down their money, that they would see a total eclipse of the Sonny.”

Ali’s voice was fading again. “I wrote that 22 years ago,” he said, his words getting lost in a throat. “That was a long time.” He is taking voice lessons from Gary Catona, who had come into the room during the recital of the old limerick. Catona is a voice and singing teacher who three weeks ago had come to Los Angeles from Austin, Texas, to try to help Ali speak more clearly.

Ali began to speak more slowly and less distinctly over the last several years. There was much speculation about him suffering a variety of illnesses. During his hospital visit in New York last September, doctors determined that he had Parkinson's Syndrome.

Catona believes that the only problem with Ali's voice is that his vocal muscles are weak, that they lack resonance.

Ali was asked what was wrong with his voice. "I dunno," he said, "somethin'."

"Muhammad never really had strong vocal muscles," said Catona. "He used to scream out his words. His normal speech was never a normal speech."

Ali and his voice teacher schedule a one-hour lesson every day, but Ali travels a lot and they don't always connect. "But he's good when we do it," said Catona. "It's like building body muscles; you've got to work at it. He sings the sounds of the scales. 'Ah! Ah! Ah! Ah!'" Catona sang, his voice rising at each 'Ah!'

Catona and Ali had already had the session at the piano in the living room, and beyond this Ali was asked what he's been doing with himself lately.

"People are interested in you," he was told. "You're one of the most popular figures..."

"Popular niggers?" he interrupted.

"Figures," the visitor repeated.

Ali looked at him playfully out of the corner of his eye.

"What am I doin' now, oh, I'm so busy," he said, growing serious now. "I'm busy every day. I've got all this mail to answer—they're startin' fan clubs for me all over the world, in Asia, in Europe, in Ireland, in China, in Paris. But my mission is to establish Islamic evangelists, and to tour the world spreadin' Islam."

He converted from Christianity to the Islamic faith 21 years ago, changing his name, as the world knows, from Cassius Clay to Muhammad Ali.

On the shelf above the fireplace stood a *Sports Illustrated* cover from May, 5, 1969, laminated on a wooden plaque. The cover showed the young boxer wearing a crown, with the caption, "Ali-Clay—The Once—and Future?—King."

What's the difference between Cassius Clay and Muhammad Ali? he was asked.

“As much difference as night and day,” he said. “Cassius Clay was popular in America and Europe. Muhammad Ali has a billion more fans all over the world. Cassius Clay had no knowledge of his self. He thought Clay was his name, but found out it was a slave name. Clay means ‘dirt, with no ingredients.’ Cassius—I don’t know what that means. But Ali means ‘The most high,’ and Muhammad means ‘worthy of praise and praiseworthy.’”

“Cassius Clay had Caucasian images of God on his wall. Muhammad Ali was taught to believe that there should be no image of God. No color. That’s a big difference.”

He rose and got a large briefcase from under his desk. He withdrew several religious pamphlets with pictures of Jesus Christ. All but one was white. Then he took out a Bible and opened it to Exodus 20:4, and asked the visitor to read it. “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above...”

“Ooohh,” said Ali. “Powerful, isn’t it. But what are all these. Man, you thought boxin’ was powerful. Boxin’s little. These pictures teach supremacy. The Bible says there should be no pictures of God, no images, he should be no color. But you see that God is white. Tarzan, King of the Jungle, was a white man. Angel’s food cake is white, devil’s food cake is black. Man, ain’t that powerful?”

“Cassius Clay would not have the nerve to talk like this—he’d be afraid of what people might say or think. Ali is fearless, he’s hopin’, prayin’ that you print this. Cassius Clay would not have the courage to refuse to be drafted for the Vietnam War. But Muhammad Ali gave up his title, and maybe he would have to go to jail for five years.”

He rose again and this time brought back a plastic box, flipped up the latches, and opened the lid. It was a box of magic paraphernalia.

He took two red foam rubber balls and made them become four right before the visitor’s eyes, then turned them into a box of matches, then made them disappear altogether. His eyes widened in mock shock. He still has the fastest hands of any heavyweight in history. It was a very good trick. How did he do it? “It’s against the law for magicians to tell their tricks,” he said. “It’s a tricky world,” he said. He next transformed three small unstretchable ropes of varying sizes into the same size.

He made a handkerchief disappear, but, on the second showing, he was too obvious about stuffing it into a fake thumb.

“You should only show that trick once,” he said, a little embarrassed.

He redeemed his virtuosity by putting four quarters into the visitor’s hand, snapping his fingers, and ordering the quarters to become two dimes and two pennies. The quarters obeyed. He snapped his fingers again and the quarters returned; the pennies and dimes vanished.

“It’s magic for kids,” he said. “It’s my hobby. See how easy they can be deceived? But these aren’t childish things. They make you think, don’t they?”

It was mentioned that perhaps Ali’s best magic trick was transforming the small house he lived in as a boy in Louisville into this 22-room house with expensive antique furniture. He made more than \$60 million in ring earnings and endorsements. “But the government took 70 percent,” he said. He says he is financially secure. He doesn’t do commercials, for example, because, he said, “I don’t need the money.”

He lives here in Wilshire with his two children by Veronica Ali, eight-year-old Hana and six-year-old Laila. They employ a live-in housekeeper. His six other children live with his two former wives.

“My wife likes antiques,” he said, walking into the living room. He pointed to a tall clock against the wall. “It’s 150 years old,” he said.

Gary Catona now took his leave, and arranged for a session the following morning. Ali led his visitor for a tour of the house. “I’m not braggin’,” he said, “just showin’. I don’t like to talk about what I have, because there’s so many people hungry, homeless, no food, starvin’, sleepin’ on the streets.”

In the dining room is a long dark table with 12 tall, carved chairs. On the second floor are the bedrooms. In the kids’ rooms, toys and stuffed animals tumbled across the floor. There’s an Oriental sitting room, and guest room.

The phone rang. “City morgue,” he answered. He spoke briefly and hung up.

They ascended the carpeted staircase to the third floor. On a wall are a pair of red boxing gloves encased in glass. One glove is signed, “To the champion of champions—Sylvester Stallone.” On an adjoining wall is a robe with multi-colored sequins that bears the inscription, “The People’s Choice.” In the corner of the case was a photograph of a man with his arm around Ali. It is Elvis Presley, who gave Ali the robe.

In the adjoining room is a large pool table with a zebra skin lying over it. Trophies and plaques and photographs line the wall and cover the floor.

He was asked about recent efforts to ban boxing.

“Too many blacks are doin’ well in it, so white people want to ban it,” he said. “But how do I live here without boxin’? How would I ever be able to pay for all this? Look at Hearn and Hagler. Two poor black boys, but now they help their mother and father and sisters and brothers. It’s from boxin’.

“There’s more deaths in football than boxin’. Nobody wants to ban football. You see car races. ‘Whoom, whoom.’ Cars hit the wall, burn up. Motor boats hit a bump. Bam! Don’t ban that, do they?”

Going back down the stairs, the visitor is met by a nearly life-size painting of Ali in the ring wearing white boxing trunks. He is on his toes and his arms are raised in triumph. The signature in the corner of it reads, “LeRoy Neiman, ’71.”

Did Ali miss fighting? “When the fight’s over,” he said, “you don’t talk about it anymore.”

The visitor asked about his health. “I don’t feel sick,” Ali said. “But I’m always tired.”

How did he feel now? “Tired,” he said, “tired.”

A doctor friend, Martin Ecker of Presbyterian Hospital, has said that if Ali takes his prescribed medication four times a day—the medication is L-Dopa, which in effect peeps up the nervous system (the disease does not affect the brain)—then Ali’s condition would be improved substantially. The medication does not cure the disease, but it increases alertness.

Ali is inconsistent in taking the medication. He believes it doesn’t matter if he takes the medication, because he is in the hands of Allah, and that his fate is sealed. Days go by when he doesn’t take the medicine. But when friends urge him to, or when he is going to make a public appearance, then he is more inclined to take his dosage.

Did he feel that after 25 years of amateur and professional fights, of countless hours of sparring, that he had taken too many punches?

He stopped on the second-floor landing. He rubbed his face with his hands. “Uh uh,” he said, softly. “Look how smooth. I very rarely got hit.”

As the visitor turned from Ali and opened the door to go, he heard an odd cricket sound behind his ear.

The champ smiled kindly but coyly. There was either a cricket in the house or something that sounded like a cricket in his hand.

Walking to his car in this quiet, elegant neighborhood, and then driving out past the security guard at the gate, the visitor realized he would not plumb the mystery of the cricket sound in Muhammad Ali's house. It's a tricky world, he recalled, and he would leave it at that.



THE ALI SHUFFLE IS NOT LOST!

April 22, 1998

A JEWISH HOME FOR the Aged, peopled mainly by Holocaust survivors, was in danger of closing its doors in Upper Manhattan for lack of money. A spot on the television news described the plight. Soon after, a call was received at the home. “This is Muhammad Ali,” the voice said, “and I want to donate a hundred thousand dollars so the old folks don’t have to move out.” The director of the home, who answered the phone, believed it to be a crank call and hung up.

The phone rang again. Same voice: “It’s me—I’m the champ.” Same hang-up.

On the third try, Muhammad Ali convinced the woman that it was really him. And his \$100,000 contributed in good measure to saving the home.

That was 20 years ago. “She promised she wouldn’t tell anybody,” Ali recalled yesterday, in the indistinct voice that his wife, Lonnie, said is the result of Parkinson’s disease. “I don’t look for praise for good deeds, except from God. God knows what people do. God would say, ‘You want them to praise you?’”

The incident with the Jewish “old folks” home, as Ali called it, happened to be remembered by a visitor to Ali’s Manhattan hotel suite, and was in keeping with the award he and the writer Thomas Hauser received last night at the Givat Haviva Educational Foundation dinner.

The award citation referred to Ali’s efforts for “world peace.” But what, he was asked, can one individual do in efforts for world peace? He said something, which only his wife could make out. They have been

married for 12 years, and she hears well what a casual listener strains to catch.

“I want to do whatever I can,” Ali had said. What he does, it seems—and this might be too sensitive for readers of such hard-boiled sports columns as this—what he does is bring love.

Like when a small boy in the hotel lobby asked for his autograph, got it, and then stood on tiptoes to kiss him.

People recognize Ali on the streets of Paris and Lahore, Pakistan, in Iraq and the Sudan—all places he has visited recently. He said he has invitations to visit 64 more countries.

“Ali is moved by people,” Lonnie Ali said, “and by human suffering. What he does, he does from the heart. When we went into the Afghan relief village last year, Ali would find the dirtiest, most godforsaken kids, with sores and runny noses, and he’d pick ’em up, put ’em on his lap and hug on ’em, and kiss on ’em.”

A visitor smiled at this. “You sound like a Mother Teresa,” he said to Muhammad Ali.

Ali ran a thick, slow hand around his broad face. “Prettier,” he said.

He has always been pretty, of course, though he is a little slower in stride, to be sure, at age 56, and he has put on more than a few pounds since he was the three-time world heavyweight champion. He reached for the bag of oatmeal cookies on the table.

“No other champs, not Sugar Ray Robinson, not Joe Louis, none of ’em did what I did,” he said. “Sugar Ray was a beautiful fighter, and Joe, he brought pride to the black people. But I was controversial, I didn’t believe in the Vietnam War—and I won that fight. I changed my name from Cassius Clay to Muslim—all that put together makes it different. And no one ever predicted the round he’d knock someone out in, and in poetry.”

The visitor recalled one example: “Moore will go in four.” Which is when Archie Moore in fact was dispatched. But Ali, like most authors, felt that an excerpt left something to be desired. He recited:

When you come to the fight
 Don’t block the aisle
 Don’t block the door
 Because Moore will fall in four.

Ali once told Joe Louis that if both were in their prime, Ali would beat him. Louis said, "You know I had a Bum-of-the-Month club." Ali said, "I know." Louis said, "You'da been one of the bums."

Ali smiled when this was recalled. "Been no contest," he said. Then he pushed back from his chair, and rose. "Joe shuffled," he said. His tie dangling, Ali imitated Louis' crouch and stolid approach.

"I," Ali said with pride, "danced. He couldn't have touched me." Suddenly his fists were jabbing and hooking. And Ali, whose gait only a half hour earlier was as stiff as that of a sleepwalker, was now doing the Ali Shuffle. He put it into overdrive, his feet flying, his belly jiggling. Enough. He grinned, slumped back into the chair. He was breathing about as hard as when he fought the Thrilla in Manila.

"The Shuffle," he said between nearly closed lips, "gonna make you scuffle." The Champ laughed and reached for another cookie.



“I’M BIGGER NOW THAN I EVER BEEN”

October 3, 1967

CASSIUS CLAY, MAN-CHILD, LAY in cover to his neck in a small, blue-motif room of the Americana Hotel. He held a sheaf of lined notepad paper in his hand.

“This is what I gotta be restudying all time,” said the former heavy-weight champion, his eyes darting from paper to visitor. “It’s from the teachings of Elijah Muhammad, Allah’s messenger. It’s so pretty, and true. I been going all over the country preaching—San Diego, San Francisco, Chicago, Phoenix, and Newark.”

Then he began to read slowly, about America—“the most sinfulest country in history”—and about whites—“the most evilst men on earth.”

“Since the government took my title away,” he said, “I been converting people to the Muslims. About 1,700 put Xs on their names in five months. Boxing was child’s play to this.

“I’m bigger now than I ever been. Peoples all over the world feel sorry for me. Just yesterday I got letters from Athens, Greece, Germany, Asia, people wanting to know who this America is to take the world’s title from me. It’s not America’s championship, they say, it’s theirs and the world’s.

“But I got more honor now. ’Cause I’m sticking to my beliefs. I ain’t been forgot. Last night I walked on 42nd Street, the biggest street in the world. Crowds started gathering and flowing over. The sidewalk was too small. Little children and people stood on parked cars to see me. Traffic was blowing. [Clay’s hands waved frantically.] They was calling, ‘Ali, Ali.’”

Clay flung the covers aside. His eyes were wide. He wore only yellow shorts. He leaped up, then sat on his heels. He clasped his hands together. His eyes closed.

“I could just see God then. An’ I thought, *He who Allah befriends is not disgraced.*”

He slipped back under the covers.

“I’m satisfied now. I’m happier than I ever been. I’m representing the Holy Messenger, the man who God loves. And the peoples loves me more, too. I’m not supposed to leave the country, you know. My appeal is going through. I probably won’t know for maybe two years about going to jail for not joining up with the Army. But I could get into the trunk of a car and get into Canada. Then fly to England or Pakistan or Syria or Egypt or Lebanon or Saudi Arabia. They all want me. But I don’t want to go. I got me people here I gotta save. I gotta use my fame to promote the truth.

“All this is a test by God. A test to see if I’m weak. All Muslims are tried. Abraham was tried. God told him to kill his son, then stopped his hand with the ax at the last second.” Clay raised his right arm, then grabbed the wrist with his left hand. “God’s a jealous God. Noah, Jesus, Moses, all of ’em been tried by God. I’m in that category. I know it. I been conquering the temptations of list for money and lust for sport.

“Peoples wanting to know how I get along now. I don’t pay for nothing. Muslim people all over pay for my hotel, my plane, my food. They won’t let me pay. They’re all my brothers and sisters.

“I’d like to make a movie. Just one, for all these people to see. It would be a true, life-story movie of me. Oh, I’d like that. It would start off on Monday morning, January 17, 1943, in Louisville General Hospital.”

His hands circle his left eye. “The camera focuses down on this little ole baby boy who’s crying. That’s me. The music goes dum-de-dum-dum, dum-de-dum-dum. (Clay’s voice goes deep.) This is the actual story of a man who shook up the world, who came from a little country town and was destined to sit with kings and monarchs, who turned down millions for principle.”

Then he twisted his neck slowly, hands still cupping his left eye.

“The scene shifts. Dum-de-dum-dum. Dum-de-dum-dum. Here is the true alley he run down as a young boy. Then they’d show my high school. And the house I grewed up in. It’s still standing. Dum-de-dum-dum.”

He dropped his hands and covered his eyes. He smiled and looked up.

“That would be a helluva movie, wouldn’t it?”

Clay reached over to the night table and picked up a book, *Message to the Blackman in America*, by Elijah Muhammad. And he began to read, droning, pursing his lips and stumbling over words like “de, uh, di, uh, dreck, uh, uh di-reck-ly.” It was a very long passage.



ALI'S RINGSIDE SEAT

December 16, 1968

DAYS RAPIDLY TUMBLE INTO weeks and yet the soulful, sorrowful, sweet-and-sour memory lingers of Muhammad Ali at the Joe Frazier–Oscar Bonavena bout here, for a morsel of the heavyweight championship. It was the first fight he has attended in two years, since the title was taken from him by decree and not by fist.

The fight itself, an intriguing, guileless, bloody brawl, is over and fading from memory. Frazier, the winner of the five-round decision, will next enter the ring against Jimmy Ellis, probably.

Muhammad Ali will soon enter a continual battle with the federal courts. He is appealing a conviction for refusing to serve in the armed forces.

“Ali, Ali,” came the squeals and roars as he bounded up to the Spectrum, grinning and waving like a victorious politician. Fight fans swarmed around him. They tugged at his blue, pin-stripped suit coat tails. The two black prelim boxers had just climbed in the ring. Both stopped and stared, wondering about the commotion. Then Charley Polite, in red trunks, saw who it was and waved shyly. Ali waved back.

“Hey, what you doin’ here, champ?” someone called.

“Heard talk ’bout a fight tonight,” he replied. “I wanted to see what was goin’ on.”

A man in black Astrakhan cap and yellow turtleneck shirt waded in, pumped Ali’s hand. Ali’s attention was elsewhere. The man whispered in Ali’s ear.

“Chubby Checker, the twistin’ man!” said Ali. “Yeah. Yeah.”

Ali had a ringside seat. It was a \$50 seat and all around them were the traditional dazzling stick pins and dangling earrings and dimpled cleavages. People from all sections of the arena came to pay homage of sorts. "He's the greatest fighter there is," said a young white man, trapped in an usher's half nelson. "Lemme just get his autograph."

Crinkle-necked Jersey Joe Walcott and Buster Mathis, who traded soul slaps with Ali, came by. Ali continued signing autographs, jabbering all the while.

"Champ, looka this way," said a photographer with yellow-tinted glasses. "This is for the people in Argentina. For Bonavena's country. You are still champ there." An usher put the hook to him. "You've taken 50 pictures already. Out."

"Please let me rest, please let me rest," moaned Ali, only approaching sincerity. "I am not the champ no more. They say I am not the champ no more. Don't these people read the papers?" He put on a pained expression.

The "title fight" that Ali had come to see what was all about, impressed him little. When the referee warned Bonavena about low blows, then Frazier about hitting after the bell, Ali cupped a playful hand to his mouth and booed. "C'mon, all together now, let's boo." He seemed to be having a hellish good time.

Mathis was seated nearby. Ali called, "Hey, Buster. You can't be champ. They want a white champ. But you're too black—like me." Buster nodded and smiled respectfully.

"I haven't had a fight in two years and I can take off my coat right now and lick both of 'em together in one round," he said, rising half out of his seat. He let his suit coat slip partially off his shoulders, laughed loudly, and sat back down.

An old friend of Ali's, Gus Lacy, was saying, "That talk you hear don't mean a thing. When we're alone, he spills his heart out to me. It's broken his heart, how they took the title away. He puts up a front. It's a beautiful front, just like the champ."

Close by, a white man in open-collared sport shirt said to a pal, "If Liston don't take both tanks, Clay'd have nothin' to holler about."

"Champ," someone asked after the fight, "when will you get back in the ring?"

"When Nixon lets me," he said, still scribbling autographs, waving to well-wishers, telling how he could whomp that Frazier.



STINGIN' AND FLOATIN' COME HARDER NOW

July 14, 1971

CHICAGO—A COUPLE OF FLIES did midair imitations of the Ali Shuffle as the original, Muhammad Ali himself, sat in the motel lobby talking with a companion. One fly alighted on the right knee of Ali.

“See that fly? Mind that fly,” said Ali, his conversational tone interrupted by his whisper. His large left hand began to creep out. His eyes were fixed on the fly.

“You gotta know how to do it,” he said, barely moving his lips. “The fly is facing me and he can only fly forward. Now, I come forward and turn my hand backhanded. It’s like a left jab.”

Ali struck. Then he brought his fist in front of the man seated next to him. “Watch this,” said Ali. He slowly opened his hand. Ali looked up wide-eyed. “Thought I had him,” he said. “My timing’s off.”

Ali was in Chicago training for his July 25 fight with Jimmy Ellis in Houston. This was shortly after the announcement that had overturned his conviction for refusing the draft.

“It’s hard to train now,” he said. “I got bigger things on my mind, bigger things than just beatin’ up somebody. Fighting’s not the thing any more for me. I see myself fighting for another year, at most. I’ll have one more fight with Joe Frazier.

“Then I got obligations to keep. I want to help clean up black people. I want to help respect black women. I want to help the wine-heads in the alleys. I want to help the little black kids in the ghettos. I want to help in narcotics programs. I want to serve the honorable Elijah Muhammad

(the head of the Black Muslim religion, of which Ali is a minister, though temporarily suspended).

“Fighting is just two brutes beatin’ on each other. A man goes through certain stages in his life. Fightin’ stages in his life. Fightin’ was a joy to me at one time, now it’s work. I don’t even like for anybody to see me doing roadwork. But I remember when I first turned pro in 1960, I was in Florida and I was going to write the name Floyd Patterson on my jacket. To trick the people, to make them think I was the champ when I was runnin’ alongside the highway. I wanted to show off.”

Ali was suspended by Elijah Muhammad because Ali continued as a fighter, a profession supposedly anathema to the religion. But Ali has been a boxer since he was a boy in Louisville. And he needs money to pay alimony to his first wife and also to pay the astronomical legal fees which have piled up in the last four years as he fought his draft case.

Ali swiped at another fly. Missed. He tried again. Missed. And again. Same result. One more. Nothing.

“You’ve missed five times,” said the companion.

Ali looked embarrassed. “Five?” he repeated.

“These flies keep flying ’round me,” he said. “They must know I’m not all I used to be. They must see the little gray hairs that been growin’ in my head lately.

“If Ellis is as quick as these flies, I’m in trouble.”

A man approached and asked for Ali’s autograph for two boys. “Their mother has trouble making them clean their room,” the man said.

Ali wrote: “To Timmy and Rickie. From Muhammad Ali. Clean that room, or I will seal your doom.” Ali smiled at his spontaneous doggerel, the man laughed, thanked him.

The implied threat to the boys was in keeping with his easy wit, his breezy charm, the bluster that too many people have taken too seriously over the years. His still-smooth face and, now, subdued yet animated ways seem to belie his vicious profession. And when he refused to enter the draft, saying, “I ain’t got no quarrel with the Viet Cong,” many held that he was being hypocritical. A fighter is a fighter, they held, whether in the ring or in the rice paddies.

A fly again landed on his knee. Ali suddenly grew still. He slowly reached out to snatch the fly. Jabbed. Had it! “My timing’s back!” cried Ali. “See, at least I’m not *too* old.”

He dropped the fly to the carpet. The fly didn't move.

"He's staggered," said Ali, proudly bending down. "That's a science, y'know. To stagger the fly not to kill him. You get him to your hand, but you don't squeeze."

Ali flicked the fly with his index finger. "Go on, fly, fly away. I don't want to kill him. Let him live like us."

The fly flew off.

II.

SMOKIN' JOE

FRAZIER



JOE FRAZIER, WHO “DON’T KNOW HOW TO GO EASY”

June 14, 1968

A CLUSTER OF HEDONISTS at the Concord hurried through lunch of chopped chicken liver and blintzes to view Joe Frazier begin his daily exercise in masochism.

Frazier, heavyweight champion of five states and a scattering of foreign countries, is preparing for his first title defense on June 24 at Madison Square Garden against Mexican champion Manuel Ramos.

In a little rec building called King Arthur’s Court, Frazier pounded sparmate Curtis Bruce for a round, then Charley Polite, then Bruce again. A stout peroxide blonde in flowered chartreuse blouse and iridescent green slacks rose, and said to her old man, “You can stay here and enjoy this. Me, I can’t stand it no more.”

Several other persons have trouble standing when Frazier’s in the ring. First, there are the 18 opponents he has knocked out in his 20 straight wins as a pro.

Then there’s his manager-trainer-adviser, Yank Durham. In the ring Yank hugs a medicine ball. Frazier follows him around, snorting, as he pummels the ball. Sometimes Frazier misses the ball and catches Durham in the belly.

At one of these misses, Garden publicist John Condon, announcing at ringside, informed the crowd, “It may look like Yank has another medicine ball under his T-shirt, but he doesn’t.”

Yank was asked if the misguided blows hurt. “Naw,” he said. “I got a great body.” Before the Buster Mathis title fight last March, Yank’s

bulging body was not so great. Frazier pounded the ball into Yank's solar plexus and knocked his graying tutor unconscious.

Spartmates are growing scarce. "We're looking for more," said Durham. "The ones here are sore. My man's an animal. Joe don't know how to go easy."

A looming creature named James J. Johnson appeared at camp with his manager. He wanted to be a sparmate. Yank was assured by the manager that his boy was not only big, but ornery, too.

When James J. Johnson answered the bell for the first round, he danced—no, fled—around the ring and returned to the womb of his corner, where Frazier caught him. James J. Johnson absorbed head and body shots and hung over Frazier's shoulder.

Time was called and he climbed out of the ropes and grabbed his robe and bag.

"Where you goin', killer?" asked Durham.

"Away," said James J. Johnson.

"Lemme pay you," said Durham.

But James J. Johnson and his manager were gone.

Frazier, as usual, is confident, bordering on arrogant, about his title defense. "I don't know anything about Ramos," he said. "I never saw any of his fight films. But I never see my opponent's films. I don't want to. All I care is that they want to fight. I'm going to fight my fight—moving and swinging—against anyone I meet."

Durham said Frazier will wear Ramos down with body blows, then knock him out early.

"I'm not looking past this fight," said Frazier, "but I want to get at Jimmy Ellis (WBA heavyweight champion) or Muhammad Ali. Ellis got to his title the easy way. He fought bums. I think I could lick Ali, too. He's the greatest heavyweight champ ever—except for me."

About a year ago, Frazier went one round with Ali, shadow-boxing.

"He came into the gym where I train in Philadelphia," said Frazier. "About a thousand people followed him. He said, 'Where's Joe Frazier? Where's Joe Frazier? I'm gonna whup 'im.' I had just driven up. When I walked in, he said he wanted to fight me, and he was rapping how fast and good he was.

"I said I'd fight only if Yank was there. I said then we'd see if he could whup me. He said, 'Hey, listen at that. Confident, huh?'

“I said, ‘Yep.’ Well, Yank wasn’t around. But Ali took off his suit jacket and cuff links and rolled up his sleeves. He put on gloves and boxing shoes. I did the same.

“He couldn’t jab me like he did with the others. I was slippin’ ’em pretty good. He said ‘Fast, too.’

“I said, ‘Yep.’”



FRAZIER-ALI TRANSCENDS SPORTS

March 1, 1971

LIKE MOST OF THE other “Fights of the Century,” there is a score to be settled in the Joe Frazier–Muhammad Ali heavyweight championship bout that transcends the ring.

Racial and/or political antagonisms have put the spar to the most celebrated fights of the 20th century.

One of the participants in this bout, Frazier, is a virtual stranger to any kind of image in America. Ali has enough for both. Fans are in most cases not for or against Frazier, they are for or against Ali. For Ali represents, depending on your background and perspectives, a knave or a knight, an Army slacker or a hero, a charmer or a bore, a racist or a rational man.

So it has been, in varying degrees, with Johnson–Jeffries and Johnson–Willard, Carpentier–Dempsey and Tunney–Dempsey, and Louis–Schmeling. All heavyweights carry the burden of the nomenclature, “The Fight of the Century.”

The ballyhoo leading up to those fights was usually much more frenzied than the vaunted battle itself. Jim Jeffries against Jack Johnson, glamorized on stage and screen as “The Great White Hope,” was such a case in point. Jeffries came out of retirement to try to wrest the crown away from the first black champion, on July 4, 1910.

Jack London, the novelist, was at ringside and wrote: “Once again has Johnson sent down to defeat the chosen representative of the white race and this time the greatest among them...It was not a great battle after all, save in its setting and significance.” He went on to ask: “And where now is the champion who will make Johnson extend himself, who will glaze those bright eyes, remove that smile, and silence the golden repartee?”

It would be, in a still disputed match, Jess Willard, five years later.

The first \$1 million gate and one of the most tumultuous fight build-ups was for the Georges Carpentier–Jack Dempsey bout in Boyle's Thirty Acres in New Jersey, July 2, 1921.

Carpentier, suave, affable French light-heavyweight champion, called "The Orchid Man," was pitted against the gruesome Dempsey. Dempsey, not only a brutal pugilist, was suffering with a public image of one who had shirked his military obligation in World War I. Carpentier had fought for his country, which was now a bosom ally of America.

"[The promoters were] selling admission not only to a fight," wrote Paul Gallico, "but at one and the same time to living drama, the oldest and most time-tried hokum—virtue against scallawaggery."

Politics and race were less of an issue in the Dempsey–Gene Tunney clashes. Yet there was plenty of "virtue against scallawaggery." In their first fight, 1926, Tunney was the ex-Marine, a young, well-read underdog against the snarling Dempsey. Tunney won. One year later, in the first \$2 million gate, images had been reversed. Tunney was now a prig, Dempsey the sentimental old champ on a valiant comeback.

Perhaps the second Joe Louis–Max Schmeling fight, in 1938, stands out as the most hate-filled in recent history. Schmeling happened to be a German who "represented" Hitler. Louis was a Negro, a target of the *Übermenschen*. Louis knocked him out in round one.

The greatest "Fights of the Century" have appealed to our basest appetites of prejudice, malice, and vindictiveness. So does Frazier–Ali. It will certainly be *a* Fight of the Century, if not *the* Fight of the Century, no matter what transpires in the ring.



JOE FRAZIER AT DAWN

February 1971

JOE FRAZIER'S DAY BEGINS in the dark, in Fairmount Park. The blue-black morning is damp with drizzle and already soggy with carbon monoxide from some early autos on the road. Joe's chauffeur-driven Cadillac limousine creeps behind him with bug-eyed lights.

A long undulating shadow is cast downroad and bobs in eerie rhythm to the Army-booted scraping of Joe Frazier's jogging. The rhythm is relentless even when a big twig, snapped underfoot, issues a sharp report.

To Joe's right is one sparring partner, Ken Norton. In back of the car is another, Moleman Williams. Suddenly, from behind a black bend emerges a hooded man. He jogs past, tosses a cursory wave.

"How ya doin', daddy?" asks Frazier rapidly. A nod, no reply.

Frazier has been up and running at 5:30 in the morning for six weeks now, in preparation for his heavyweight championship bout with Muhammad Ali on March 8.

He has returned to Philadelphia from the Catskills because the cold was 17 degrees below zero, the snow 17 inches high, the mountain roadwork treacherous, and the beads of sweat froze like black pearls on his face.

But Spartan routine must be adhered to. The pain of tedium and fatigue must be respected, accepted, and pursued. So Joe Frazier runs even when his sparring partners cannot stir from within womblike blankets. He does not like to run alone, for that compounds the hollowness of his solitary profession. And the hour before daybreak is of primeval isolation. Yet Joe's schedule waits for no man.

Imperceptibly, a wash of gray has changed night into day. Now, in a little blue pinstriped railroad cap cocked a bit cockeyed on his skull and

gold sweat jacket with upturned collar and blue sweat pants, Joe has lost his shadow. Headlights off; wipers on.

He grunts, snorts. Perspiration streaks with rain. His black, flat-nosed face glistens.

“We don’t talk much,” said Ken Norton later. “Just some idle talk to pass the boredom. Sometimes Joe’ll ask me how much time left.”

Without breaking stride, Norton calls to the driver, Les Pelemon (also assistant trainer and lead singer in Joe’s rock group, “The Knockouts”). Whatever time Les says, Norton relates, Joe grumbles. “I think you wanna buy another watch,” says Joe.

Sometimes another car will come by and slow up and the driver looks. But mostly there is only the wet, caped statue of General Grant; the quill-poised statue of Lincoln, bearded like Frazier; barren trees; mud-gray gullies; the Undine Barge Club along the Schuylkill River; a long sculler escaping a wake of water in the dawn.

They have run 28 minutes, nearly three miles, almost 10 rounds. They are about done.

“Muhammad’s hurtin’!” cried Norton. “Two minutes to go! He’s on the ropes. Let’s go git ’em!”

The two take off in a sprint. Shortly, Ken shouts, “He just fell.”

End of roadwork.

• • •

Joe Frazier went on to win a unanimous decision over Muhammad Ali.



OF MAILER, TAYLOR, AND FRAZIER

July 7, 1976

GEORGE FOREMAN, LIKE SOME in the crowd, is a former champion, still hanging in there. While ex-champ Joe Frazier, like others in that same crowd, had decided to hang 'em up—after much encouragement by Foreman in their recent bout in the Nassau Coliseum in Uniondale, Long Island.

It was a spectacular night for champs, for even ex-champions are always called “champ.” Just as ex-emperors are always known as “emp,” or ought to be. It is more than a courtesy, it is deserved homage to a past, but nonetheless ultimate achievement.

Jersey Joe Walcott and Joe Louis and Jack Dempsey were there, all former heavyweight title-holders, all called “champ.” Rocky Graziano was there, the former middleweight king. He held the title only for a few months in 1947, between losses to Tony Zale.

When Graziano entered the ring before the fight, he dazzled the joint with a sports jacket that could have been made from all 31 Baskin-Robbins flavors. “Wow, Rock,” fans exclaimed. “Lookin’ good, Champ!”

Toots Shor and Jack Dempsey came to the fight together. Each is in his eighties and rather saggy round the gills. Each must use a cane. Toots like Dempsey was a champ—champion nightclub owner.

Before the fight, a young man told a friend, “I’ve got to shake Jack Dempsey’s hand.” He walked over, shook hands, returned, and said, “Now I can tell my grandchildren that I shook the hand of the champ.” The friend snorted, “What champ? You shook hands with Toots Shor.”

Norman Mailer was there, too. Some call him Heavyweight Champion of the “Word.” Others say, “Ex,” or “aging challenger.” They’ve been

waiting 30 years for him to write a novel to top his *The Naked and the Dead*. He is 53.

Mailer's hair now is nearly all white. He was accompanying a tall, toothsome young woman, red-haired and wraithlike who would be fitting for the entourage of a current champ.

When he noticed Joe Louis, Mailer recalled the de facto end of Louis' career. "I was there the night Rocky Marciano knocked Joe out," said Mailer. "Joe looked dead on his feet for the whole fight. It was strange because he had looked his best in training camp."

Elizabeth Taylor was at ringside. She had held the title of Beauty Champeen of the World, and she may still lay claim to it—but not in very many states anymore.

She has had for years a problem with making the weight. There is a roundness to her face, a frazzled look to her hair and a figure that could stand some roadwork. She might be vulnerable to any number of shapely challengers, in the way that Joe Frazier, 20 pounds heavier than when he last found Foreman three years ago, was vulnerable to Foreman's younger powers. Joe is 33, Foreman 27, Taylor 44.

All saw the cool right punch by George Foreman in the fifth round that arrived like a baseball bat into Joe Frazier's chops. It had a double result. Upon impact, Frazier began spitting out teeth as if they were popcorn. Next, referee Harold Varian, scrutinizing Joe's glassy eyes and bloodied face, said, "Joe you've had enough. You were a great champion." Marvis Frazier, Joe's 17-year-old son, jumped into the ring, a look of anguish on his face. Foreman walked over to comfort him, as if to say, "Your daddy is a courageous man, you should be proud."

In the crush outside Frazier's dressing room afterward, his slim 13-year-old daughter Weatta slipped through the crowd to the closed door. She was crying. She was about to enter past the guard when a friend said, "Wipe your tears, honey, your daddy don't want to see you sad."

She came back out shortly, her eyes dry. A reporter asked what her father had said. "He told me to go to the party, to boogie on down."

Frazier planned, as most in the crowd had gathered, that if he lost it would be his last fight. One of his trainers outside the door now said, "We want Joe to go out with all his marbles, and that's what he's still got." Besides his marbles, he's got estimated assets of \$2.5 million.

After nearly an hour of patchwork on his countenance, Frazier emerged in dark suit and florid sport-shirt to hold his last press conference as a fighter. His head, shaved bald as a brass knob before the fight, gleamed in the lights of the passageway under the stands. His head sparkled as if he were wearing a crown.

As he walked through the emptied, quiet vast arena to the press area, a young fan called, “Go get ’em, champ.” Although Frazier didn’t acknowledge it, he heard it—as he will all the rest of his days.

III.

***THE BROWN
BOMBER***



JOE LOUIS: BLACK KING

February 10, 1970

“Outside in the villainously lit streets—they still have gaslight in dark-town Baltimore in 1937—it was like Christmas Eve in darkest Africa. This, it turned out, was the night Joe Louis won the heavyweight championship, and for one night, in all the lurid darktowns of America, the black man was king.”

—from *One Man’s America*, by Alistair Cooke

IT HAD BEGUN TWO years before that night, Joe Louis was saying, in the same month, coincidentally—May 1935—when he knocked out Primo Carnera, and Jesse Owens, a sophomore at Ohio State, broke three world track records and tied a fourth.

“The colored people back then could raise their head a little bit finally, ’cause their head was hung low for a long time. And they walked a little straighter up, ’cause their backs was bent low for so long,” said Louis.

Louis recalled this in his dreamy way as he slouched in a chair in a hotel room here in Rochester, New York. He was famous for that slough, and his shuffle, and his serene demeanor, and his pithy comments despite a lack of education, and for his swift fist that knocked you over like a train roaring out of tunnel.

The sun came out through the window silently and highlighted the pores on his tawny, heavy face. And some of the tight curls of his hair showed white. He is 55 years old and had won the championship nearly a third of a century ago. Yet, as one 27-year-old black man said when he saw Louis recently, he is still an idol and a symbol of the heights a black

man can reach in America, and the man said he still goes through the scrapbook of Joe Louis that his grandmother gave him when he was a boy.

Louis was in Rochester for the Hickok Belt Athlete of the Year banquet, and would receive the “Golden Links” award as a sports hero of the past. He said he felt like Jack Dempsey did a few years back at this same banquet, that he did not know how the people would accept him because he was “out of the past.” As it turned out, like Dempsey, he received a standing ovation.

Louis was the second black man to hold the heavyweight title. Jack Johnson was the first, early in the century. But Johnson was an iconoclast and was generally unpopular among blacks as well as whites. “Johnson might have set the colored man back some,” said Louis.

“I think I just come along at a time when white people began to know that colored people wouldn’t be terrorized no more,” he said. “Many of them had been terrorized through the land and was what they called Uncle Tom’s people. And the Ku Klux Klan came into being and colored people were scared to move hardly.

“When there was one colored man in a town who wanted to get ahead, maybe get a little better house than the next man, there’d be some other colored fella and slip ’round to tell the whites. ‘So-so tryin’ to make it big.’

“So I came along, and Jesse, and now the colored man had somethin’ to look forward to. And the way I carried myself during that comin’ up made some whites begin to look at colored people different.

“I kept my nose clean, and I acted like a gentleman, like an American.”

Jackie Robinson has said that he felt Branch Rickey admired Joe Louis’ comportment so much, it inspired him to sign Robinson as the first black man in organized baseball.

“I never knew Branch Rickey,” Louis went on, “and I didn’t know that about Jackie and him that way. But I knew Jackie from the Army, we was at Fort Riley together in 1943. I helped get him his officers’ school. I paid for a lot of their officers’ uniforms. The Army doesn’t give you officers’ clothing. And most of the colored men was too poor. I didn’t buy Jackie’s. He had money.

“Jackie’s my hero. He don’t bite his tongue for nothing. I just don’t have the guts, you might call it, to say what he says. And don’t talk as good either, that’s for sure. But he talks the way he feels. He call a spade a spade.

You need a lot of different types of people to make the world better. But I never felt insulted about prejudices. I felt sorry for them.

“I think Paul Robeson did more for the Negroes than anyone else, even though someone like King did a lot. Robeson went to Russia in '36 and he said this place is better for the Negro than in America, more opportunity, better treatment. What happened was the American politician got mad and said it was a lie. Ralph Bunche is a result of that. They gave him a chance after that.”

Louis went on to say that “Cassius Clay could’ve done more for the black man than I did. But he missed his opportunity. He could go into places now. He could count now. He should have belonged to the people, not to just one segment of the group.” He referred to the so-called Black Muslims. And it was shameful, said Louis, that South Africa denied Arthur Ashe a visa. “Sports should never be involved in politics,” he said.

Louis was asked, as he flipped open the top of a can of orange soda with his very large hands, what he feels his role in American history is, and had been.

“I was in sports, and it is sports that has done more than anything else for race relationship all over the world, not just America,” he said. “I was in Germany not too long ago. I wanted to see East Germany. Well, they told me how sourpuss the Russians were. So me and a few others went to Checkpoint Charlie.

“A man on the other side recognized me and wanted to take my picture. This Russian soldier comes over and says ‘No picture.’ The man told him who I was. The Russian soldier throws his arm around my shoulder and he says, ‘Take my picture, take my picture, too.’”



JOE LOUIS WAS THERE EARLIER

April 22, 1997

TIGER WOODS BRINGS UP the aspects of legacy—of the golfers, and athletes, of color who had preceded him, and who struggled against discrimination. Immediately after winning the Masters, and in an interview while at the Bulls-Knicks game on Saturday, he spoke of Charlie Sifford and Lee Elder and Ted Rhodes in golf, and of Jackie Robinson in baseball.

Some wonder if the 21-year-old hadn't been programmed by the image-makers at Nike or Titleist—who are paying him a combined \$60 million to be their billboard—to say this, in light of acidic public response brought on by some black ballplayers, such as Vince Coleman and Frank Thomas, who, more or less, said that they had no time for and little interest in history, black or white or beige.

Woods, however, seems genuine. He was apparently a legitimate candidate to get a degree at Stanford, the university he attended for two years, until it became clear that he'd be a dunce to pass up, as it were, the green.

As Woods and the nation pay homage to Robinson on the 50th anniversary of his breaking the color barrier in modern major league baseball, it is of historical pertinence that Robinson, also a product of a West Coast university, UCLA, had a definite model as he battled the many-headed monster of bigotry.

Joe Louis, Robinson once wrote, had “been an inspiration to all of us. Joe made it easy for me and the other fellows now in baseball. I'm sure his example had a lot to do with my breaking into big-league ball. I imagine that Mr. Rickey said to himself when considering the idea: ‘Joe Louis has proven that a Negro can take honors and remain dignified. If we get one like that in baseball, the job won't be hard.’”

Louis, the great heavyweight champion, had become in the 1930s a national hero, to whites as well as blacks, by virtue of his fists and his demeanor. When he knocked out Max Schmeling, Hitler's *Urbemensch*, in the first round in 1938, he was hailed as emblematic of a powerful America. And while he was unlettered, he was knowing. Irwin Rosee, a publicist close to Louis, recalls the time another black man objected to Louis' decision to enlist in the Army in 1942. "It's a white man's army, Joe, it ain't a black man's army," the man said. Louis looked at him, and explained his decision: "Lots of things wrong with America, but Hitler ain't going to fix them."

When Robinson joined the Army, it was Louis, a sergeant but with State Department connections, who succeeded in getting him and other blacks into Officer Candidate School. When Robinson had a racial incident in the school, Louis interceded on his behalf again. When Lieutenant Robinson was at Fort Hood, Texas, and refused to move to the back of a military bus, he said he was following what Louis and Sugar Ray Robinson had done, which had helped mandate open seating on military vehicles. Robinson's protest, however, resulted in a court martial; he was acquitted of all charges, and eventually was honorably discharged.

When Robinson went before a House Un-American Activities Committee in 1949, he denounced American racial policies but also was critical of Paul Robeson, the one-time athlete and deep-voiced singer and actor, and said he was not going to "throw away" his hopes and dreams for America "for a siren song sung in bass."

Robinson would later say that his rebuke of Robeson was one of the gravest mistakes of his life. But Robinson lived and learned. So, it is anticipated, will Tiger Woods.



JOE LOUIS STAGES VALIANT COMEBACK

November 24, 1970

DETROIT—WHILE JOE LOUIS WAS in a Denver mental hospital earlier this year, President Richard Nixon sent him two letters and three golf balls.

“The president just said he was pullin’ for me and that I should get well soon,” said Louis, as he sat on a wooden folding chair in a Detroit gym recently while some hopeful boxers sparred, jumped rope, whacked the big bag. “He’s a nice man.”

Louis made use of those golf balls, too. He was with 20 other patients who regularly underwent group therapy. And every Wednesday they had a tournament on the hospital’s 18-hole putting course.

“I lost only one time in 16 weeks,” said Louis, smiling his soft smile. “I’d shoot a 32 or 33 or 34. Won \$2 every time.”

Louis recalled that other presidents were interested in him, too. One was Franklin D. Roosevelt.

“I met him before the second Max Schmeling fight [in 1938] and he squeezed the muscle on my arm and said, ‘This is the kind of muscle we need to win a war.’ And he squeezed pretty good, you know. It hurt. He had strong hands from using his wheelchair.”

Presidents and plumbers alike have been deeply interested in Louis. He is one of our authentic folk heroes. He was a sports star, but also a man of warmth and integrity. And his recent illness brought a shocked gasp from the nation.

“It’s a mystery why I went into the hospital and maybe someday I’ll tell the whole story,” said Louis. “But I will say one thing now—that stuff about my using cocaine is untrue.”

Louis was committed despite his protests to the Colorado Psychiatric Hospital. “I don’t know why my family thinks I’m nuts,” he said then, on May 10, 1970.

He was released in October and now is an outpatient. Three times a week he returns for care and sedatives.

The diagnosis was a paranoid complex. Louis, according to his doctors, believed that Mafia members were trying to kill him. Once he tore up a hotel room because he thought hired murderers were coming into the room. Other times he awoke in the night screaming.

Rumors burst forth. One that persisted in whispers was that Louis was a dope addict hooked on cocaine. Irving Andrews, one of Louis’ lawyers, was quoted on this subject: “The drugs enter the picture this way. He has not been able to sleep because of the obsession he has about a person or persons trying to kill him. His friends told him a certain drug would help him stay awake. But there’s no addiction at all.”

Louis now appears relaxed and less jowly than he was before his hospitalization. His weight is down 20 pounds, to 240.

The weight of being yesterday’s hero, of having struggled to pay immense back taxes to the Internal Revenue Service (since forgotten about by the government), of having suffered bad financial advisers, of sweating through paranoid delusions—those weights seem to have been lifted somewhat now.

Bill Gore, an 80-year-old fight trainer, looked at Louis and said in a quiet aside to a friend, “Gee, isn’t that somethin’? Six months ago Joe wasn’t worth a \$1.40. Now look at him. He’s the comeback kid!”



LOUIS HAD STYLE IN AND OUT OF THE RING: AN APPRECIATION

April 14, 1981

ON A COLD NIGHT in January 1970, three men rode in a cab to Grand Central Terminal, where they would board a train for Rochester. They happened to be going to the same awards dinner. In the back seat were a baseball player and a sports reporter. In the front seat was Joe Louis, the former heavyweight champion, who stared straight ahead as the lurid city lights flashed on his broad face. He listened to the baseball player making cracks about the young cab driver, who had long hair, which was not yet the vogue among athletes.

The ballplayer said something about “hippies” and “sissies,” and then about the unusual music playing on the portable radio on the front seat. Louis said nothing.

“Hey,” the ballplayer finally said to the cabbie, “turn that damn hippie music off.” “That’s Greek music,” Louis said quietly, speaking for the first time. There was a silence, except for the music. “Oh,” the ballplayer said. Joe Louis made his point as deftly, simply, and thoroughly as he had when dispatching opponents in the ring.

Louis died Sunday morning, one month short of his 67th birthday. His death, like his life, moved many people. It was his style as much as his prowess that established Louis as one of the more important figures of his time. “I kept my nose clean,” he once said. “And I had to be a gentleman. If I cut the fool, I’d have let my people down.”

Blacks in America had few heroes to look up to in the 1930s—in some parts of the United States, blacks still had to get off the streets when the

sun went down—and when Joe Louis won the heavyweight championship of the world by knocking out James J. Braddock June 22, 1937, there was rejoicing.

Walt Frazier, the former Knick basketball star, remembers meeting Louis for the first time. They sat at the coffee shop in Caesars Palace in Las Vegas, where Louis worked as a greeter.

“I had formed an impression of him, from all that I had heard all my life about him,” said Frazier. “I was kind of nervous. But he stuck out his hand and said, ‘Hiya, Clyde,’ like he had known me all his life. Gave me a warm feeling.”

Frazier asked him about being a black athlete in the 1930s and 1940s. Louis casually told of not being allowed in some hotels. He told, too, of being in New Orleans when he saw a car hit a black man, of how ambulances from white hospitals wouldn’t pick up the man.

In time, though, Louis would be admitted to some of those hotels, and he was instrumental in breaking down other racial barriers. “It’s hard for me to relate to his experiences, because I was too young to remember,” Frazier said. “But Joe was a pioneer, like Jackie Robinson. He helped the black man to be proud of himself. He was someone we always looked up to. Black athletes have it so good today. We’re reaping what he paved the way for. We should have given him a percentage of our pay.”

Louis retired as an undefeated champion in 1949. But in 1950 he decided to try a comeback. Ezzard Charles was the champion. “I didn’t want the fight,” Charles would say later. “Joe was my boyhood idol. But my manager, Ray Arcel, said that if I wanted everyone to consider me the champ I’d have to fight Joe. I signed, but I wasn’t happy about it.”

Charles dominated the fight. “About the eighth or ninth round,” Charles said, “Joe began to falter. I started dreaming, ‘Could this be the great Joe Louis?’ I wanted to win, but I didn’t want to knock him out.” Charles won on a 15-round decision.

Louis could look back, though, at a remarkable career: He was knocked out by Max Schmeling—Hitler’s Aryan hope—then came back to knock him out in the first round; he was losing to Billy Conn after 12 rounds and then knocked him out in the 13th.

Another time, he was asked his biggest thrill. “I was able to pay for my sister to go to Howard University,” said Louis, who was the son of an Alabama sharecropper and had only a sixth-grade education. “My mother

and me went down to Washington for the graduation. The three of us walked across the campus. That was the biggest thrill of my life.”

In 1942, at a New York boxing writers dinner, former mayor James J. Walker made a presentation to Louis and, in his flamboyant, sentimental style, said, “Joe Louis, you laid a rose on Abraham Lincoln’s grave.”

One night in 1968 Louis was again honored by the New York reporters, for his “long and meritorious service” to boxing. He was to receive the James J. Walker Award. Now Louis rose and accepted the plaque. “Thank you for voting me this James J. Walker Award,” he said, in the hushed hall at the Waldorf Astoria. “I think it is a great thing. I remember when he said that I laid a rose on Lincoln’s grave. I didn’t know what he meant then. But I knew he was trying to make me feel good. I thought about it later on, and I understood what it was about. Thank you.”

IV.

IRON MIKE



TYSON RULES THE PLANET

June 28, 1988

IT WAS BIGGER THAN the world championship, or at least more far-reaching. The Tyson-Spinks fight had interplanetary implications.

“No man on this planet can beat me,” Mike Tyson had said.

Meanwhile, there were some—a minority, to be sure, but some nonetheless—who believed before the bout that Michael Spinks could actually defeat Tyson.

If such a scenario indeed took place, then Tyson would have been either incorrect, or correct and the fact was that Spinks simply hailed from another planet.

Never mind. If Michael Spinks is the closest competitor that Iron Mike Tyson has, then surely no man on the planet—or any creature in the galaxy, for that matter—can beat him.

The introductions for the fight last night were longer than the fight. The singing of the national anthem was longer than the fight. It took just 1 minute 31 seconds of the first round—and that includes two knockdowns in which the only action was poor, wobbly Spinks attempting to find his remote legs—for Tyson to establish himself as the undisputed heavyweight champion of the world.

The bell rang to start Round 1 and Tyson, body crouched, forehead furrowed, came out and hit Spinks fast. Tyson does things fast. He dresses so fast, in fact, that he doesn't even have time to put on socks. He hurries into the ring for a fight so fast he doesn't even have time to throw on a robe.

All that encumbers him, anyway, he said.

As for designer trunks or designer boxing shoes, forget it. He's black trunks, black shoes, and red gloves, blood-red gloves.

Whomp. Whomp. Whomp. Spinks, in white trunks and white shoes and high white-and-black stockings, reeled and bounced against the ropes and fell to the canvas.

He was up, and rapidly—whomp, whomp, whomp—he was down again. For good. Entangled in the ropes, and his legs, and the circuits of his suddenly scrambled brain.

Tyson waited for him to be counted out, and then a smirk came over his face. As if to say: This was nothing. I told you it was nothing. Is this the best this planet has to offer? Some planet.

He turned to his wife and mother-in-law sitting in the front row at ring-side and extended his arms wide. Let's go home, he seemed to be saying.

Not yet, though. There was a press conference to be held, in the area of Convention Hall behind the ring area.

"What can I say?" he said to the horde of reporters and the many other hangers-on who muscled their way in. "Give me something to say."

He said that it was tougher than it seemed. "I trained eight weeks to make it this easy," he said.

He was asked about the distractions before the fight, that is, the business of his wife, Robin Givens, and his mother-in-law, Ruth Roper, who had been painted in some corners as Lady Macbeth and progeny, and the problems dealing with the rift with Bill Cayton, his manager.

"Let me just say that I'm the ultimate professional," said Tyson. "And I had a job that has to be done."

He'd been fighting in organized bouts since he was 12 years old, he said, and, growing up in the toughest sections of Brooklyn, "my whole life has been chaos." So this was just a little more of it, and he could handle it.

But it made him mad that some reporters were uncivil to him, and felt that he could be gotten to by "attacking" his family, the people he loves. "They tried to embarrass my family, and disgrace me," he added.

And it seemed to make him want to withdraw from the world of magazine covers, and cameras, and bright lights. "As far as I know, this might be my last fight."

Sitting beside him at the lectern in the interview room was his wife, wearing a red dress, nearly the color of his boxing gloves. When he said he was thinking of giving up the fight game at 21, nearly 22, she applauded.

“Who knows what I’m going to do,” he said.

One of those at the fight was one James “Boncrusher” Smith. Mr. Boncrusher, or Mr. Smith, as he generally receives his mail, went 12 rounds with Tyson in March 1987, one of only four men out of 35 who had ever gone the distance with Tyson.

“Pickin’ Tyson,” said Boncrusher, in the lobby of the Trump Plaza, the site of the fight, earlier in the day of the encounter. “By a knockout.”

It was suggested that if he went to a decision with Tyson, then why couldn’t Spinks?

“He’s not strong enough to turn him around, to stop his rhythm,” said Boncrusher. Boncrusher weighed about 233 pounds in his fight with Tyson, while Spinks came in at around 212, some six pounds lighter than Tyson.

What would Spinks need to win? “He’d need to take me in with him,” said Boncrusher. “I think he’s gonna need some help.”

And one who was picking Spinks to win on a decision was Muhammad Ali, here for the fight, wearing a dark, striped British-tailored suit, a pink tie, and a warm and bright look in his eye.

He was mobbed wherever he went, as he always is, and there still may be no single public figure that commands such attention, such adoration, and perhaps even such sympathy, as Muhammad Ali, and he received the undisputed biggest hand when he was introduced to the 21,785 in attendance.

He walks slowly, and his speech is slurred, and for one who had not seen him in a year it seemed that he moved slower and was harder to hear than before.

Ali, earlier in the day, said: “Spinks will jab and move. He’ll pick up points. He’ll take a few shots but that won’t be enough to stop him.”

After the fight, Ali was walking out of the arena when someone whispered in his ear, “Devastating, wasn’t he?” in reference to Tyson.

“Terrible,” said Ali, shaking his head in admiration of the brutality of Iron Mike Tyson. “Terrible.”



THE RING OF FEAR

June 30, 1988

AN IMAGE OF MICHAEL Spinks remains in the mind well beyond the fight, well beyond the sight of his eyes rolling back in his head as he took his second and last tumble in the ring to conclude his evening's work in 91 seconds of Round 1 Monday night.

The image that remains in memory occurred about 9:30 that night, inside Convention Hall in Atlantic City, about two hours before Spinks would climb into the ring to meet Iron Mike Tyson for the undisputed world heavyweight title.

Spinks came through the door from the street and proceeded toward his dressing room. He wore a white snap-brim straw hat with bright band, and a white jogging outfit, and a jaunty smile below his modest mustache. He walked in the middle of a phalanx of several of his handlers and pals.

Nearby, on the other side of a roped area, were a number of fans. They called out for autographs, and asked Spinks, at that moment still an undefeated prizefighter, to stop and pose for a photo.

He called back over his shoulder that he'd do it later, after the fight.

Spinks walked with his head high inside the straw hat, and his chest was out—a bit of a strut, it seemed—and the look in his eyes appeared to be like a man whistling as he walked through a graveyard at night.

No one knew for certain, though; no one knew whether unseen demons were jabbing fear into his heart with little pitchforks. Spinks had talked about fear in the days leading up to the fight, and admitted to possessing a measure, but said he used fear to keep his mind on matters, to discipline his training. And other boxers have spoken about the normal fear before

a fight, when one's head might in fact be punched so hard that it would be made to fit funny on one's body.

When Spinks arrived in the ring he seemed not unlike a lot of fighters, and not deathly afraid. He waved to his mother, who stood near the ring and waved a red bible, and he waved to his brother, Leon, who stood beside his mother.

When Mike Tyson got into the ring, he was the glass of fashion as usual—no socks and no robe. Just black shoes and black trunks, and looking conventionally menacing. He waved to nobody.

Soon—and maybe not too soon, for reasons of personal health—Spinks was down and out and done with, the victim of a swift, vicious onslaught from the fists of Tyson. In effect, it reduced Spinks not to the light-heavy-weight he had been, but to the lightweight he now appeared to be.

“He fell apart, he just went to pieces,” said Ray Arcel, the octogenarian fight trainer. “You see sudden changes in a fighter, in their makeup. And I know Spinks for a long time, and admired his courage and determination, but he was simply in there with someone who, well, who is the nearest thing to Jack Dempsey in his prime. He could hit you once on top of the head and finish you.”

Arcel had seen fear firsthand with numerous fighters, since he carted a dozen or so out of the ring against Joe Louis.

“I remember in 1940 I walked Johnny Paycheck into the ring against Joe,” said Arcel, “and his knees were actually trembling. He wasn't a live body.” Arcel helped escort Paycheck back to the dressing room, the fighter having been knocked out in the second round.

The next year, he helped train Lou Nova against Louis, who would dispatch the challenger in the sixth. “Lou knew how to fight—like Spinks—but he lost all control of his whole system,” said Arcel. “He didn't know who he was.”

The element of fear can transform a man, said Arcel. “And even someone like Spinks, who has outstanding boxing skills, and a fighting spirit, and one of the great trainers in Eddie Futch,” he said. “But there's so much attention, and pressure from the build-up—and then there's Tyson.”

Arcel said Tyson could have fought in any era and been one of the outstanding fighters. And he agreed with Tyson that he, Tyson, is a fighter's nightmare. “He's young and powerful and fast,” said Arcel. “His punches have speed and he's always applying pressure. I'd love to have seen him

against Dempsey, or Louis, or Marciano. I'd love to have seen him against Ali or Joe Frazier. He's like Frazier in his style. You know, people forget how good Joe Frazier was because he was overshadowed in his time by Ali."

This reporter remembers Joe Frazier very well. Upon first seeing the left hook of Frazier, it was considered that if he would hit a building with it, the building might waver for a moment, but that it would sag and collapse, like most of Smokin' Joe's foes. Even Ali crumbled a few times, but incredibly he rose from the canvas and quickly glued himself back together.

Before one of the Ali bouts, I visited Frazier's training camp. I was much younger then, and wondered what it would be like to lightly spar one round with him.

"Ever box?" asked Yank Durham, Frazier's trainer. "A little." "How little?" "Very little." "Are you in shape?"

"Yeah, sure," I said, "I ride my bicycle around the neighborhood a few times a week." Durham looked me over. "In that case," he said, "Joe will only break a couple of your ribs. My man, he don't know how to play."

I thought about that for a moment. "Yank," I said, "I think I'll take a rain check."

The element of fear, as Arcel had observed, could indeed transform a man.



THE SECOND-BADDEST DUDE

February 14, 1990

IRON MIKE TYSON, BEATEN decisively but clinging to a technicality, had claimed that the heavyweight title was still his. Some say, paraphrasing Jimmy Swaggart, that Don King made him do it. Others had spoken about big money from future fights being jeopardized, or that it was simply a refusal to face reality.

Fact is, Tyson was embarrassed. Tyson had been going around saying he was the baddest dude on the planet. And everything he did fortified his contention, like knocking out a crowd of people in the first round, or shortly thereafter.

The embarrassment is not so much that he had been beaten in Tokyo last Sunday by James “Buster“ Douglas, a 42-to-1 underdog, who had been described as merely a tomato can. Tyson, after all, said that he has lost before and can accept it. He hadn’t been defeated in nearly six years, however, or since he turned professional, and was 37–0 before Douglas.

No, Tyson, at age 23, understands that a grown man can’t be telling everybody that he’s the second-baddest dude on the planet. You don’t dine out very often on a line like that. First-baddest dude, yes.

Tyson, like many others, believed in his invincibility. He was Iron Mike. He was the assassin, and in the ring wore all black—black trunks and black shoes. But no socks and no robe. It seemed he never had time in the dressing room to don such garments; he was too eager to rush out and punch somebody. He talked with lust of crushing an opponent’s nose so that the bone might be driven back into his brain.

Tyson was so dominant in professional bouts that, before Douglas, he had never been knocked down, or hardly even been bruised. He may

have suffered most from rope burn on his bare back, by climbing into the ring too hastily. Some were calling him the greatest ever, better than Louis or Dempsey or John L. Sullivan. It was said about Iron Mike that the only person who could beat him was a 12-year-old lad in Cleveland, or St. Louis, or some other place. But this 12-year-old wouldn't be ready to whup Iron Mike until about the year 2000.

By then Tyson would be about 33, and ripe for an upset.

Meanwhile, some had continued to believe Tyson indestructible. Like those in the World Boxing Council and the World Boxing Association, a pair of baffled, if not corrupt, organizations that have ordained themselves rulers of this bizarre but compelling sport. They had said they were withholding the title from Douglas until they reviewed the fight, in about a week. Public outrage was so great, however, that they surrendered to it yesterday, and gave their grudging blessings to Buster.

According to reports, immediately after the bout WBA and WBC officials had their ears scorched by Don King, the promoter of the fight, an impartial observer who just happens to be Tyson's de facto manager. King talks the way his startling hair—it stands straight up like the broken lines of a graph—looks: you may not want to take notice but you can't help yourself.

King argued that Douglas took a long count when Tyson knocked him down with a right uppercut in the eighth round. No one disputes that it was a long count by a few seconds, because of the referee's admitted error. But that had no bearing on the fallen fighter. His responsibility was to follow the referee's count, and rise before 10 if he could. And he did. Douglas then resumed battering Tyson, as he had for most of the fight, and knocked him out in the 10th round.

Two days later, when the WBA and the WBC decided that Douglas was the champ, they finally concurred with both the International Boxing Federation, a third organizing body, and the court of public opinion, where it counts most. Asterisks are only for footnotes. Roger Maris, the single-season home run champ, proved that, and the Babe took second chair.

In the weeks before the fight, Douglas spoke with great confidence to a yawning audience. But he followed through, and fought a superb fight, jabbing, counterpunching, tying up the shorter fighter, becoming Ray Leonard to Tyson's befuddled Duran.

Many wondered where the real Iron Mike was on fight night. Some said he was stale, or hadn't trained properly, or didn't get guidance from his corner, or lost desire. What it was, at bottom, was a case of Iron Mike's dents being exposed by a fine and determined athlete.

Excuses or convoluted logic, though, are part of the lore of sport, especially boxing. One of the best was given by a New Jersey light-heavyweight named Frankie DePaula, who was knocked out by Bob Foster in the first round of a world title fight some years ago in Madison Square Garden.

In the dressing room afterward, DePaula told his trainer, Al Braverman, "You were right, Al, he couldn't take it in the belly."

Frankie DePaula didn't dine out too much on that line, either.



THE “ANIMAL” IN MIKE TYSON

February 11, 1992

THIS IS WHAT MIKE Tyson once said about himself in an interview about five years ago:

“When I fight someone, I want to break his will. I want to take his manhood. I want to rip out his heart and show it to him. My manager tells me not to say those things, but that’s the way I feel. People say that’s primitive, that I’m an animal. But then they pay \$500 to see it. There’s so much hypocrisy in the world.

“I never liked sports. Sports are only social events. What I do is an obsession. If I wasn’t in boxing, I’d be breaking the law. That’s my nature.”

Apparently, his nature had an even deeper, more malevolent side. Last night a jury in Indianapolis, after hearing testimony for two weeks and deliberating for nearly 10 hours, found Mike Tyson, in a stunning verdict, guilty of rape and two counts of criminal deviant behavior.

He could go to prison for up to 60 years, though there was speculation he may get only seven when he is sentenced on March 6. That’s some “only.”

Here is a man earning as much as almost any other man in the world, something like \$100 million a year. Here is a man who came from a tough background, pulled himself up, made himself an adored champion of the world, and none of that was enough.

He had to continue now, in fancy suits, being just what he was on those Brooklyn streets when he was growing up: a punk.

He had come out of the Brownsville section, spent time in reform school, and then became the heavyweight champion at age 20. He lost the title two years ago, but had been scheduled soon to fight the current

champion, Evander Holyfield, in a title bout. It would have earned him millions more. Now there will be no such fight.

The world had stood and cheered Iron Mike Tyson, and showered him with adulation and money. It wasn't enough.

The defense in the rape trial took the position that their man was a lecher, a jerk, a grabber, a callous, out-for-one-thing thug. But the young woman, it said, knowing all this, still went to his room at 2:00 in the morning, sat on his bed—for what, asked the defense attorney, “to watch television?”—and consented to have sex with this famous and infamous personality.

The prosecution said he was all those things the defense said he was, and one thing more: a rapist. She was naive, said the prosecution, even bringing a camera along with her to photograph the other famous people that Tyson was going to introduce her to that night. She was enticed up to his room because he said he had forgotten something. He seemed a gentleman. So, no harm.

Each side brought in witnesses, including the only two people who truly knew what happened, the former heavyweight champion and the beauty pageant contestant. Each side had 25 witnesses, and it seemed from the reports that 50 percent of them were lying. The question for the jury was, which side?

One never knows from reading news accounts, or hearing those accounts on television, just how credible any of the witnesses are, and how the evidence is being presented. No one knows just what is going on in the heads of the jury—in this case, the nine white and three black men and women.

Now we know. They bought none of the Tyson story, none of the interpretations of the 25 witnesses for the defense.

None of Tyson's crude behavior surprised those who have spent much time around him. In recent years, as he grew richer and more prominent as a boxer, he grew bolder, acting as if the rules of society did not apply to him. He seemed to feel he could do or say anything that came into his mind, at any time. And people would, if not love him for it, accept him for it.

As years passed, it seemed he was becoming more out of control. There were charges of sexual harassment, and one conviction, and various public

incidents in which he acted like a bully and common thug, even getting into a late-night street fight with another boxer.

Approaching the trial, some bizarre things happened that added credence to this strange lifestyle. One of the beauty pageant's sponsors, who had sought to sue Tyson, and had called him "a serial buttocks fonder," then had second thoughts, and dropped the whole suit idea.

"I don't want to be part of an attempt to crucify a black role model," he said.

Some role model, black or white.

Now Mike Tyson has been removed from the public stage. "I don't need anyone," he once said. "All I have to do is win. As long as I win, I'm fine."

What Mike Tyson has never understood was that only until he stopped acting like an animal outside the ring would he be fine.

The state of Indiana will now give him a long time to rethink his philosophy.



AFTER THREE YEARS IN PRISON, TYSON GAINS HIS FREEDOM

March 26, 1995

WHETHER THE BLUE DAWN that broke like a thin ribbon across the Indiana horizon this morning was fitting symbolism for Mike Tyson upon his release from the Indiana Youth Center prison, only time and Tyson will be able to determine.

More than 200 reporters and camera crews, along with hundreds of curiosity seekers, some wearing T-shirts that read **TYSON IS BACK**, waited for hours in the cold and dark outside the low, red-brick administration building here about 18 miles east of Indianapolis to witness the 28-year-old Tyson step into a waiting black limousine after serving three years and six weeks of a six-year sentence for a rape conviction.

Tyson's departure at 6:15 AM, with his retinue encircling him, was reminiscent of his scenes from the ring, except for the expression on the former champion's face. There was none of the arrogance and swagger so often associated with him, after having mercilessly dispatched an opponent, or on the witness stand at his trial in 1992, haughtily snatching a garment in evidence worn by his accuser, Desiree Washington, then an 18-year-old beauty pageant contestant at the Black Expo in Indianapolis and now a fifth-grade student teacher in Pawtucket, Rhode Island.

Followed by Don King, the boxing promoter and Tyson's Svengali, and surrounded by John Horne and Rory Holloway, Tyson's co-managers, and Fruit of Islam bodyguards, Tyson emerged from the doorway of the building. Wearing a dark suit and a crocheted, eggshell Islamic prayer cap,

he was shielded from the cameras by a bodyguard who spread open his black leather coat.

Tyson's eyes darted momentarily to take in the spectacle.

On either side of the building were the 10-foot-high barbed-wire fences that shown silvery in the wide expanse and many light stanchions of the prison area. Armed guards watched from nearby towers, and faces appeared from behind bars in the lighted windows of tiered cellblocks to observe the scene outside.

From around the country and from such places as Japan and Italy and England and Brazil, several hundred reporters and camera crews, restrained behind the kind of yellow tape familiar in crime or accident scenes, stood in the near-freezing morning amid vans and satellite dishes and glaring television lights to catch a glimpse of Tyson.

Several radio-station helicopters whirred overhead in the still-black sky that was illuminated with a sprinkling of stars and a quarter moon.

Before leaving prison, Tyson filled out the count form, which states that he will not be among the 1,130 prisoners who must be accounted for, and signed a probation form, and is on probation for the next four years. On Monday, he must report to his probation officer in Ohio.

"When I saw him before he left, he said, 'Good-bye, and thanks,' nothing more," said Phil Slavens, assistant superintendent for the prison, who noticed Tyson was reading *Ring* magazine in his cell.

Tyson did not acknowledge the crowd, but a statement was released that said: "I'm very happy to be out and on my way home. I want to thank everyone for their support. I will have more to say in the future. I'll see you all soon."

The limousine with King, Horne, Holloway, and Monica Turner, a Georgetown medical student whom Slavens said had visited Tyson before, arrived at 5:52 AM with members of the Fruit of Islam in a red Lincoln in front of it and a blue Buick in back. When Tyson climbed into the limo and the cars pulled away, there was a chase, some in cars and some on foot. There had been rumors that Tyson would join Muslims in prayer on the lawn of a dance studio across Moon Road from the prison. But that never materialized as the cars kept driving past the location.

Tyson's multistar entourage then sped to the headquarters of the Islamic Society of North America, a mosque about five miles from the prison. Tyson, who is said to have converted to Islam two years ago, was joined

in prayers by Muhammad Ali, the former heavyweight champion and convert to Islam, and the rapper Hammer, who is not a Muslim. Tyson has not publicly declared his religious affiliation, though in 1988 he was formally baptized, with the Rev. Jesse Jackson presiding.

He then was flown by private jet from the Indianapolis International Airport to Youngstown-Warren Municipal Airport in Ohio and was driven to his 66-acre farm in Southington, near Youngstown.

Nine months ago, Tyson had attempted to have his prison sentence reduced. In an Indianapolis courthouse in which he was brought in blue prison clothes and handcuffs, Tyson told the judge he had witnessed things that “could totally drive” someone “insane.”

Tyson, who once described himself as “the baddest man on the planet,” told the court he had changed. “I was young, I was arrogant, I didn’t treat people correctly,” he said. “I’ve changed.”

But Tyson, or offender No. 92335 in the Indiana Youth Center, wasn’t convincing to the judge, Patricia J. Gifford, particularly because he had neglected to attend classes regularly for completion of a high school equivalency program that was part of the rehabilitation program and because, while he said he was “sorry” about the “situation,” he never formally apologized to Washington, with whom he maintains he had consensual sex. Gifford ordered the fighter to complete his sentence.

But had he changed? “It seems he’s matured,” said Slavens. “He seemed at peace with himself.”

Tyson would be trading in his 8' x 10' prison cell for his 14-room estate in Southington. And he would be trading in his jobs of cleaning dormitories and handing out equipment in the prison gym, and his \$75 every-other-week spending money, for a return to the arena, where fighters are lined up in hopes of exchanging punches with him in his first return fight for what some estimate could be as much as a combined \$100 million payday. According to King’s boxing director, Al Braverman, his first fight will be in late June or early July, against a ranking but probably not well-known fighter.

It had been a long and circuitous route for Tyson, often spectacular, sometimes tumultuous, invariably finding his way into the headlines for events he got involved in outside of the ring as frequently as in it.

He came from a broken home out of tough Amboy Street in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn, where, he had said, he grew up sometimes

mugging old ladies. He was discovered by Cus D'Amato, the old and sometimes eccentric fight trainer, whom Tyson idolized, and who realized the enormous fighting potential of the teenager. On November 22, 1986, one year after D'Amato died, Tyson, at age 20, became the youngest man to win the heavyweight championship, knocking out Trevor Berbick in two rounds.

He knocked out Michael Spinks in 91 seconds of the first round. He battered the former champion Larry Holmes in four rounds.

He was the elemental man, but with a kind of brilliance. He could be ironic, sometimes self-mocking, and he was a keen student of pugilism, diligently viewing on film the styles and techniques not only of his opponents but of the great fighters of the past, including his predecessors of the heavyweight crown, from John L. Sullivan to Joe Louis to Ali.

He made an estimated \$40 million and lived like a sultan, believing that anything he wanted, whenever he wanted it, was his by the birthright of his swift, menacing fists. His former manager, Bill Cayton, believes he has been “stripped clean” of almost all of his money. His marriage and divorce to the actress Robin Givens made headlines around the world, and his wild forays, from conviction of fondling a woman in a bar—he was fined \$100—to the rape conviction contributed to his notoriety.

And when he lost his title in one of the great upsets in sports history, to a journeyman, a 42-to-1 underdog named Buster Douglas, in February 1990, it was blamed on his disdain for conditioning. Before he could enter a scheduled fight to try to regain his crown from Evander Holyfield, he was convicted of raping Washington, whom he met as a guest celebrity to the Miss Black America pageant in Indianapolis. He invited her to his hotel room late one night and, because of the charge and conviction, didn't leave Indiana again until this morning.

“Mike Tyson may be the most recognizable person in the world,” said Jeff Powell, a reporter for *The London Daily Mail*, and who was among the members of the media at the Indiana prison. “And part of it may be what Teddy Atlas, his former trainer, said: ‘There is simply a fascination with Godzilla.’”

“Maybe,” Camille Ewart, who had formally adopted Tyson when he lived in Catskill, New York, and trained under D'Amato, said at his sentence-modification hearing last June, “maybe prison will prove to be a good thing for Mike.”

All the success, so early, Tyson admitted, was harmful. “It was like it all just dropped from the sky,” he had said. “But I’ve learned.”

As the cars pulled away from prison in the growing light of day, people shouted well-wishes after Tyson. Someone, perhaps lost, shouted, “Free the Juice!”

On the grass near the entrance to the prison, Slavens, the assistant prison superintendent, was saying that Tyson had been “a very, very unremarkable prisoner,” other than that he would get up to 150 pieces of mail a day. “He had one small problem early on, but that’s normal. Otherwise, he followed the rules.”

Slavens was asked if he knew where Tyson was now headed.

“No,” he said. “All I know is that he is off state property.”



BOXING'S BEAUTIFUL BLACK EYE

March 17, 1999

THE FUEL OF BOXING is controversy—after all, what are matches, not to speak of rematches, made of, anyway? It goes back to at least Pindar, who composed soaring odes to the boxing brawls in the ancient Greek Olympiad, some of which were surely, as the saying goes, manipulated. The peculiar fascination continued through the centuries, to Saturday night, when, by the estimation of a thick majority of spectators, Lennox Lewis clearly won the unified heavyweight championship of this planet, but the three judges awarded him a measly draw with Evander Holyfield. Ah, but such is the essential charm of boxing—the sleaziness of it all. And thus the fuel for controversy. There is simply no fuel like an old fuel.

Return, for just one example that comes to mind, to the second heavyweight title bout between the new champion, Rocky Marciano, and the dethroned champion, Jersey Joe Walcott, in Chicago in 1953. Walcott got knocked down late in the first round and sat on the canvas on his backside, one arm resting on a ring rope, as the referee counted him out. In the dressing room after the fight, Walcott's manager, the questionable Felix Bocchicchio, protested that his fighter didn't hear the count.

"I was robbed in New York the first time we boxed Joe Louis," he said, "but I never saw no robbery like this."

As it happens, he didn't live to see the fight Saturday night. A fight some have said, to echo a remark from *The New York Clipper* newspaper in 1873 following the Harry Hicken-Bryan Campbell bare-knuckles battle, was "a put-up job" and "drove another nail in the coffin of pugilism."

Just 21 months ago, after Mike Tyson had made all gone with pieces of Holyfield's ears, the belief among many was that this was not just another

nail in the very large coffin of pugilism, but also the final one. In other words, boxing had finally bitten off more than it could chew.

Never mind. We turn around and have a sellout crowd at Madison Square Garden for Holyfield-Lewis. Not only that, but tickets were also sold out swifter than for any bout in Garden history, including the historic Ali-Frazier fights.

This is just when many say that boxing is so corrupt they wouldn't pay two cents to see a fight. True—they pay hundreds and thousands of dollars. Somewhere in the back of our primitive heads is a love of the sordid. Somewhere back there is also a taste for violence.

Is there any question that the next Holyfield-Lewis fight—and there will surely be one, as early as the beginning of summer—will be a bigger box office and pay-per-view draw than the last?

Every time we learn from the experts that boxing is dead, that there is no longer a James Fig, or a John L. Sullivan, or a Jack Dempsey, or a Joe Louis, or a Muhammad Ali, there rises from the gym of worn boxing shoes, tattered gloves, tape, headgear, mouthpieces, and cigar butts, another fight in which we can't wait to see what happens, who wins, who gets robbed.

It is a kind of burlesque, and in that sense one is reminded of something Ann Corio said. Corio, once the most famous of burlesque strippers who died in her eighties earlier this month, had been asked to describe the art of undressing artistically. "Always keep your pants on," she said, "It brings the boys back hoping next time you'll take them off."

The lure of boxing is similar. We aren't quite sure of the outcome, but the activity goes to the very core of our being. And this despite the frequent pronouncements by the American Medical Association that boxing should be banned—not just the judges in the Holyfield-Lewis fight, but also the whole shebang. I find this curious, since most doctors I know can't wait to close up shop and fly out to see a big fight.

Should boxing be better supervised? Yes. Should judges be better qualified? Yes. Should there be boxing at all in a civilized society? Probably not—but look around, what's civilized? We have a long way to go. Meanwhile, our primordial nature speaks.

And the controversies rumble on. Some even as harmless as who were history's best fighters, in or out of their divisions. One day the two late sportswriters, Red Smith and Frank Graham, were in just such a

discussion. Smith remarked that Sugar Ray Robinson was the best fighter he had seen.

“Perhaps,” Graham said, “but Benny Leonard would have beaten him as a lightweight, Jimmy McLarnin would have beaten him as a welterweight, and Mickey Walker and Billy Conn would have beaten him as a middleweight.”

“I don’t know whether you’re right,” Smith said.

“Neither do I,” Graham said.



TYSON, IN TRAINING, IS A MAN ON AN ISLAND

May 1, 2002

IN WHAT SOME MAY consider an unlikely setting for a fighter training for any fight, let alone the heavyweight championship of the world, Mike Tyson is preparing here in Maui for his June 8 bout in Memphis with the titleholder, Lennox Lewis. Tyson is training in a gym not far from the Haleakala volcano, which before Iron Mike showed up was the lone volcano on this lush, splendiferous island.

In a hotel suite crowded with about 20 journalists from around the world, Tyson agreed to hold one of his few interviews before the fight.

In a discussion that lasted about 1 hour and 15 minutes, Tyson, sometimes charming, sometimes bullying, dealt with a mind-spinning array of topics: Machiavelli (he's reading the book *Machiavelli in Hell*); the morality—or lack of it—of religious leaders; and even Lennox Lewis.

Tyson is famous, and infamous, for his volatile eruptions, a long list that includes street fights; road rage; smashing crystal in hotels; biting the ears of Evander Holyfield in a title bout; and a three-year prison sentence for rape.

Haleakala is dormant, and so was Tyson this afternoon, but history tells us that he seethes. Tyson agreed with that assessment, saying, as he often has, that his growing up as a “dog guy from the den of iniquity” in Brownsville, Brooklyn, among other reasons, has produced the mercurial person he is today.

At one point this afternoon, Tyson was asked if this fight was going to be won by mind over matter.

Tyson smiled. “His mind’s not going to hit my mind,” he said. “I’m going to be professional, but I’m going to try to kill him. We’re brothers, and you have to love your brother. But I know he sure wants to kill me, and I sure want to kill him.”

And how did he wind up in Maui to train? “I don’t know how I got here,” he said. “I came here one time with my second wife and didn’t have a good time. I didn’t want to be married.” He is now in divorce proceedings with that wife, Monica.

“I’m having a good time now,” he said. “But that doesn’t mean I’m not training hard.”

Tyson recalled that when he was a teenager and living with Cus D’Amato, his manager and trainer, he liked to play around.

“Cus told me, ‘If you do that, then you have to train three times as hard as you normally would,’” Tyson said. “Well, I’m not playing nearly that hard, but I’m still training three times as hard as I normally would.”

Tyson, who turns 36 on June 30, is trying to regain the title he first won at 20 in 1986, when he became the youngest heavyweight champion ever. “I’ve been fighting for about 25 years,” he said, “and I basically know what I have to do to get ready for this fight. I’m in great shape, and will get into even better shape, and I have to be hungry and determined.”

He was asked if he had any nightmares about losing.

“Losing?” he said. “It’s impossible. It doesn’t even cross my mind.”

Of Machiavelli, Tyson said he was cool. Machiavelli was an Italian statesman in the 16th century who wrote the primer on the ends justifying the means.

“I’m a bad guy,” Tyson said. “But if I was a good guy, nobody would want to pay to see me fight.”

On one hand, he said, he likes his reputation for being unpredictable and “an animal.” On the other hand, he said he had received bad press.

He also said he could have been like Tiger Woods or Michael Jordan, playing a kind of game for the public. “But that’s not me,” he said. “I’m a lot of people in one, but I’m not going to be someone that other people want me to be.

“I can’t help it who I am.”

His conversation journeyed from self-love (“I’m honest about who I am, not like some of those reverends like Jimmy Baker or Jimmy Swaggart, or those priests”) to self-hate.

“I wake up every morning and hate myself,” he said. “I don’t have any dignity left. I lost my dignity in prison. So I don’t care how the public feels about me. Love me or hate me. Don’t care.”

He spoke about his brother, Rodney, “about five or six years older than me,” who was a pharmacist’s assistant and, Tyson said, is now an assistant to a brain surgeon in California. “We’re totally different people, and always have been,” Tyson said. “Rodney’s brilliant, and he was embarrassed in how we grew up and wanted to separate himself from that, and from the way I was.

“But we’re friends now, not close, but friends. And we took two different paths in life. I scramble people’s brains, and he fixes ’em.”

V.

*THE MANASSA
MAULER*



PEACHY CAVEMAN

February 1970

“IF JOE FRAZIER BITES me, I’ll take one back outta him,” said Jimmy Ellis, laughing and showing large, white teeth. “Johnny Morris bit me in Pittsburgh a couple years ago, and I just bent over and got my chunk from him.”

This testimony on carnivorous delights was delivered one afternoon in a dressing room in Madison Square Garden as Ellis, his fluff of reddish-brown hair bent over while he laced a boxing shoe, prepared to work out. On February 16 he would meet Joe Frazier at the Garden to decide the heavyweight championship of the world.

The discussion began when a sparring partner asked Ellis who it was that gnawed Rudell Stith that time. Ellis said it was Randy Sandy, Angelo Dundee, Ellis’ trainer, recalled that Oscar Bonzvena once savored Lee Carr’s neck. And Teddy Brenner, Garden matchmaker, remembered when Terry Young mistook Paddy DeMarco’s shoulder for a fillet.

They were still laughing about it when Ellis came up to the workout area. He was grabbed immediately by photographers, who already had apprehended a gray-haired, dark-suited, dignified gentleman named Jack Dempsey.

Mr. Dempsey did not look much heavier than his fighting weight of 180. His hazel eyes were a trifle rheumy, but maybe that was from the glare of his red sweater.

“Glad to meet you, Mr. Dempsey,” said Ellis.

Very polite, very nice young man, Mr. Dempsey would later say of Ellis. And Ellis would say, “From all I’ve heard and from all I’ve read, Mr. Dempsey was some hard man.”

“It’s much, much different nowadays,” said Mr. Dempsey, taking a seat at ringside to watch Ellis spar. He looked around at the crowd of 200 or so. “When I went to training camp, like at Luther’s, upstate in Saratoga, there’d be 2,000 people up there. It was jammed. And very nice. The air was beautiful, water was fine, and good swimming, too.”

Ellis was introduced and so was his first sparmate, Rufus Prassell. Mr. Dempsey placed his cigar in his mouth and clapped politely, like milady at the opera sticking the lorgnette in her eye and applauding softly.

“Sure,” Mr. Dempsey replied to a question, “some people still call me champ. I was champ for six years, 1919 to 1926—that’s seven years, isn’t it? That’s long enough. But they’re nice people. You know, ‘Hiya champ, hiya champ.’ Still makes me feel good.”

The bell rang, and Mr. Dempsey gave the sparring his full attention. Both fighters wore red gloves and stern expressions.

Earlier, Mr. Dempsey had watched Frazier spar. He said, “A rough, tough fighter. The kind of fella who’s on top of you all the time.”

The former champion noted that Ellis was more of the boxing type, and that he moves pretty good and throws ’em pretty fast.

Mr. Dempsey was asked how he would fight Joe Frazier, who has a crouching style. “Gotta get the man up,” said Mr. Dempsey. He did not raise his right arm off the arm rest, but he made a quick fist and gave an upward snap of his wrist.

Though he is 74, there was an electricity of brute power in that gesture, and it is easy to see why a reporter in the 1920s was shocked when he came to Mr. Dempsey’s room the morning after a title fight and saw Mr. Dempsey, this maneater, in silk pajamas.

Someone asked who he was picking. “Let the best man win,” Dempsey said, civilly and with a kindly grin. “I don’t want to make any enemies.”

After three rounds, Mr. Dempsey rose to depart. He said good-bye to Ellis and to the other fight people. On the way out he shook the hand of his old friend Lester Bromberg, boxing writer for the *New York Post*. Then Mr. Dempsey lifted Bromberg’s hand and bit it. Just like that.

“Caveman,” said Bromberg later. “He’s always been that way. A peach of a guy.”

• • •

Joe Frazier knocked out Jimmy Ellis in seven rounds.



THE TOUGHEST MAN IN THE WORLD

June 4, 1983

IT WAS A COOL fall Sunday afternoon a couple of years ago, and an elderly man was walking down Second Avenue near 53rd Street in Manhattan.

He walked with his left hand holding a cane and his right hand in the crook of the arm of his companion, a woman who may have been his wife or daughter.

It was a windy day, and the man wore a black topcoat with the collar turned up and a gray fedora pulled low on his shadowed face. He walked very slowly.

A young couple came up the street from the opposite direction. “Do you know who that is?” the young man said quietly, motioning toward the man with the cane. The young woman looked and, after a moment, said, “No, who is it?” “He was once the toughest man in the world,” the young man said as they drew nearer. “That’s Jack Dempsey.” Dempsey was then about 85, and his hands looked thin.

They were and were not the hands that, in 1919, some 60 years before, had savagely pounded Jess Willard to win the heavyweight championship of the world. Willard, known as the Pottawatomie Giant, stood 6’6½” and weighed 245 pounds. The challenger, Dempsey, at 6’1” and 187, was the decided underdog. But the 24-year-old Dempsey, swarthy and sleek, with swift, powerful fists, finished Willard in the third round.

The old man’s hands on that fall day on Second Avenue a couple of years ago were and were not the gloved hands that were painted by George Bellows in his famous oil titled “Dempsey and Firpo.”

In that painting, which depicted the garish setting of fight night, Dempsey, the defending champ, is seen flying backward through the ropes

and into the first row of ringside seats from a blow by Luis Firpo, known as the Wild Bull of the Pampas. Dempsey, dazed and enraged, would climb back into the ring and knock out Firpo in the second round.

The hands of the aged Dempsey were and were not the hands that dropped Gene Tunney in 1927. That was the historic “long count” title fight, in which Dempsey neglected to go immediately to a neutral corner—he stood over Tunney—and allowed his opponent enough time to recover and rise, and go on to win a decision.

“I remember Jack Dempsey’s hands,” said Theodore Mann, artistic director of the Circle in the Square. “I was a boy of about eight years old, and his hands seemed huge, the biggest hands I had ever seen. My father had taken me to his restaurant on Broadway. This was years after he had retired from boxing. He shook my hand. Funny, I remember that they were not menacing hands. They were kind of comforting.”

For years, Dempsey sat in the window of the restaurant that bore his name, on Broadway near 49th Street, waving at friendly passers-by and shaking hands with his legion of admirers. He was called on countless times to strike playful poses with his fist tapping the jaw of a fan.

Dempsey could also take a punch. He would recall the time when he was a young fellow working in the mines of Colorado and fighting on the side for a few bucks. “I was knocked down plenty,” he said. “I wanted to stay down, but I couldn’t. I had to collect that \$2 for winning or go hungry. I was one of those hungry fighters. You could hit me on the chin with a sledgehammer for \$5. When you haven’t eaten for two days, you’ll understand.”

Dempsey is remembered outside the ring as a gentle, amiable man, but he was not to be trifled with. And when two muggers attacked an old man one afternoon, he knocked one down with a right and the other with a left. They had no idea the old man was Jack Dempsey.

“I don’t know why I did that,” Dempsey told me one day. “I guess it was just instinct. But later I thought to myself, *My God, they could have shot or stabbed me.*”

Last Tuesday, about 4:00 in the afternoon, Jack Dempsey died. He was 87 years old. The following day, in the corner of a funeral home on Madison Avenue, a coffin was draped in an American flag, surrounded by flowers and under a spotlight. In it lay the body of the former heavyweight champion of the world, his hands at rest.

VI.

*A POTPOURRI OF
HEAVYWEIGHT
CHAMPS*



JACK JOHNSON IS A DANDY AND STILL “LEADS” A FULL LIFE

May 27, 1969

FOR A MAN WHO has been dead for over 20 years, Jack Johnson certainly has been leading a full and glorious life recently.

Some people view him as being reincarnated into the double image of Muhammad Ali/Cassius Clay, still clanking about and being haunted and hunted by white society.

Others see Johnson, the first black heavyweight champion of the world, resurrected with the bowling-ball-shiny head of James Earl Jones who plays Johnson on the Broadway stage in *The Great White Hope*, soon to be a Hollywood film. The play recently won the Pulitzer Prize for 1968 and the New York Drama Critics award.

Well, Johnson who was always there when a buck was to be made and who was a music hall performer and a nightclub operator and even a matador, would surely not have missed a good bet like this to cash in on his fame. True to form, he hasn't. His autobiography has just been published. And without a "ghost" writer.

The book actually was written by Johnson in 1927. He was nearly 50 years old then and felt he should tell the world just what kind of right-minded and righteous fellow he really was, contrary to the opinion of much of humanity.

A new publishing house in New York, Chelsea House, which recently had a big seller in the reissue of the 1897 Sears Catalogue, came across Johnson's long out-of-print autobiography. Probably because they have

put it into big type and have fine pictures and an epilogue by Mrs. Irene Johnson, Jack's fourth and last wife, Chelsea House is calling this a "first."

How else does one justify an autobiography of a man alleged to be dead 23 years as a current release?

Yet the book does have moments. The comparisons between Johnson and Ali/Clay have been much written about and the book bears out the relevancy. Both felt oppressed. Neither, because of social actions, was allowed to continue making his livelihood in the American ring. Both were sentenced to jail. Johnson, after an exile of several years, spent eight months in jail for violation of the Mann Act, which was probably a trumped-up charge.

But, while Ali/Clay has compared himself to Jesus and Moses, Johnson wrote: "If the troubles of Job were compared with the troubles of Jack Johnson, I think mine would be found the more intense, for they struck at my soul, while Job's greatest cause for complaint was that he had been deprived of his worldly possessions and his health... It was probably because I saw the story of Job in some parallel to my own experience that he became my favorite Biblical character."

The controversy over Jess Willard's knockout in the 26th round in 1915, ending Johnson's seven-year reign as champion, is discussed. Johnson said he took a drive, as he had stated publicly before, to "mollify" Americans so he could return to the United States. In the book he describes in greater detail why he waited until the 26th round:

"I instructed Mrs. Johnson to sit at ringside and watch the fight; and there was more money due me, and until this money was paid to me, I would not let the fight take the course agreed upon... The fight was originally intended to end in the 10th round, but when that round arrived the money had not been paid. It was nearing the 26th round when the money was turned over to Mrs. Johnson."

There is both a buoyancy and a sadness in the book, how Johnson chased Tommy Burns around the world for two years for a crack at the title, death threats to Johnson if he beat Jim Jeffries—"The Great White Hope"—the suicide of his first white wife, and his exiled days in Europe as a matador (when the snorting bull tore forth, "I was quite willing to show how speedy I was in a demonstration of how to get out of a bull ring, but in this I was hindered by my tight-fitting trousers...").



EZZARD CHARLES: “A CREDIT TO BOXING”

November 6, 1968

FRIENDS OF EZZARD CHARLES seem to be coming out the woodwork to attend a dinner in his honor at the Sharman House in Chicago on November 13. This puts lumps on the cliché that a prizefight champion has more friends than Dale Carnegie so long as he is greasing their palms, but when the green lubrication begins to dry, pals evaporate.

It is now 17 years since Charles lost the heavyweight championship to Joe Walcott and nine years since he retired from the ring for the second and final time. And his friends—some were boxing adversaries—are popping up all over, a show of appreciation for one of boxing’s most gracious, most skillful, most unappreciated champions.

Charles, now 47, has been under the weather of late, and days in his office at the Commission of Youth and Welfare in Chicago are shorter. He is an outpatient at the Illinois Rehabilitation Center and much of his ring earnings have been exhausted by his illness, lateral sclerosis. But Charles still gets to the YMCA, where he works with youngsters interested in boxing.

“Not many fellas want to sacrifice for boxing nowadays,” said Charles. “There are easier ways to make a living, so fighting has lost its popularity. Money is plentiful. A kid can make as much working in a supermarket as he can starting out in the ring. Boxing is too hard.”

Boxing was sometimes hard for Charles, too, not so much in the physical sense, for he was endowed with a superior body—broad-shouldered, narrow-wasted, deep-chested, and arms and legs that were lean but fast

and powerful. And he had heart. But fighting was difficult because, at times, his sensitivity and intelligence got in the way of his killer instinct.

Charles fought Rocky Marciano twice in 1954, and failed both times to regain the title. Before the first fight, a respected sportswriter wrote: “Charles’ weakness is that he has no natural ardor for fighting. In the case of a prizefighter, there must be an inner force which has an affinity with the primeval. Charles most certainly doesn’t. Fighting to him is a chore. It could be that he’s too nice, too genteel, too intelligent.”

Charles lost that bout in a 15-round decision. But he slugged with such boldness and ferocity that Marciano said afterward, “He’s the toughest guy I ever fought.” Charles was the only title challenger to go the distance with Marciano.

In a rematch three months later, Marciano knocked out Charles in eight. It was another rugged bout, and proved that Charles was not the cautious tactician some had labeled him.

However, in the years from 1949 to 1951 when Charles was champ, he was not the most popular and colorful heavyweight since John L. Sullivan. He was a scientific boxer, successful but not exciting. Also, he gained the title under, as he called it, “a shadow.” The shadow was cast by Joe Louis, Charles’ boyhood idol, who had retired as undefeated champ.

Louis continued to box exhibitions, and often dropped hints that he might return to the ring. Finally, at 36, Louis decided to come back. Charles was 29. Reluctantly, he climbed into the ring with Louis on September 27, 1950.

“I didn’t want the fight,” Charles recalled. “But my manager Ray Arcel said that if I wanted everyone to consider me the champ I’d have to fight Joe. I signed with reservations.”

Charles dominated the 15-round fight. Louis, who won the title in 1937 and held it for 13 straight years, was of course, considerably slowed. He still has a devastating punch though. Charles took everything Louis threw, and returned jolts of his own.

A unanimous decision was announced for Charles. Immediately, radio commentator Ted Husing jumped into the ring. He asked Charles about his plans.

Charles replied, “I only hope and pray that I will someday be as much a credit to boxing as the man who is now leaving the ring.”

At the dinner for Charles, friends like Marciano and Rocky Graziano and Archie Moore and Muhammad Ali and a thousand or so more will muscle into the Sherman House. And if that point about Charles being a credit to boxing, as well as to simple decency, isn't made pretty fast, someone there will get a fat lip.



SONNY LISTON DRAWS SOME LAUGHS

July 7, 1970

SONNY LISTON BOBBED IN the ring before the fight and the white cowl of a towel over his head swung slowly this way and that, and the ends flapped down comically like a bunny rabbit's ears. The whites of his eyes in the black face were expressionless and sleepy. Once, they were expressionless and chilling.

The entire setting for this fight was a parody of itself. In the Jersey City Armory, hot and murky with smoke and Mafia and women with whipped-cream hairdos. A big plodding white club fighter named Chuck Wepner, also known as the Bayonne Bleeder, the local favorite. An ex-heavyweight champion, an ex-convict, Liston, self-styled villain for the night, who eight and seven years ago started with an unstated malevolence and froze Floyd Patterson into two straight one-round knockouts in title fights.

He could not do the same with Cassius Clay (now sometimes known as Muhammad Ali). And Clay took the championship. Liston has been striving off and on since then to get back into the money and title contention. Wepner had dreams of the same.

Now, when the towel was removed, Liston no longer looked like the "big, ugly bear," as Clay had called him. His white robe was carelessly rumpled at the neck and his closely-cropped head gave the impression of a mischievous boy. The several lines above his brows that dovetail down his nose, and that have looked so baleful, seemed painted on to impersonate an Apache. In his corner, a midget holding a water bottle added to the odd humor.

In midring, Liston and Wepner received instructions from the referee and glared at each other. It was Liston's famous terrifying ritual and

Wepner accepted the challenge of the eyes. But somehow it resembled something from a rasslin' scenario, with Pretty Boy Rogers and the Bad Phantom burling threats histrionically and mutely. Their trainers stuffed in mouthpieces as the fighters glared and, now, chomped. Liston's thin mustache wiggled.

Soon, the Bayonne Bleeder donned a blood-red mask, as Liston sliced up his face with that ax of a left jab.

Between rounds, Liston, while getting rubbed, gazed without moving his head as if to count the house.

The fight was stopped because of Wepner's cuts before the 10th and final round. Liston sat on his stool and raised his right arm in bored, inevitable triumph. He had earned his \$13,000 guarantee.

After the fight, he sat on a table in an office, and talked with reporters as his left hand was stuck in a water bucket and his trainer applied an ice pack to his left ear.

He said he still fights because he has no other income. But, he was asked, did he think before the fight that if he lost he'd retire?

"That's not in my mind," he replied. "You start thinkin' that and you're whupped before you get in."

How do you feel about your age? Are there any things you did a few years ago that you can't do now?

"No...no."

Who would you like to fight next?

"Quarry, maybe. Frazier, mostly."

Did you think the fight should have been stopped earlier?

"Yeah," said Liston, with a warmth that once would have seemed unbecoming. "I'm a bear, but not that much of a bear. Sure, I could've taken him out earlier. But it's like drivin' a car. I never put in gas when I think I got half a tankful. That's the way I felt on points."

He was asked how old he is. "Thirty-eight," he said. But a reporter continued, I read in the paper that you may be 45.

"I get angry at people who say that. That means they're callin' my mother a liar..."

And the people around him laughed, when once they would have been silent with fright, for Sonny Liston's eyes under his painted Apache scowl looked, if not melting, then surely not menacing, not anymore.



FLOYD PATTERSON: NO REQUIEM FOR THIS HEAVYWEIGHT

February 25, 1972

FLOYD PATTERSON'S HEAD, UNDER a white-towel periwig, is bowed. His body is hunched and humble. He emerges from the tunnel on fight night into the glare of voices and the eerie roar of lights. A great swelling of cheers for Floyd; it's enough to chill one's bones. How similar to, how different from his childhood: Afraid of the awesome world, he would finally climb out of a day in the cellar and stumble into the dark street with searing horns and headlights.

And one wonders why Floyd Patterson, at age 37, continues to fight.

Who of us knows the addiction of having 20,000 people scream one's name? Of your name strutting blackly in headlines? To know, as Patterson has, what it's like to be honored as the best in your field? By the world, no less. To have stood triumphantly on a little mound of hard snow and push away two or three playmates, mummy-wrapped in mufflers, shod in galoshes, and to be for a moment King of the Hill!

Floyd Patterson has been making a comeback, after having been "retired" for two years. "Those two years," he says, "were the most boring two years of my life."

Why does Floyd Patterson continue to fight?

"You've got to be able to feel what it means to be somebody—to belong—and then suddenly you don't belong..." he says.

He had become, like a lot of us, headlineless. He says he tried to get absorbed in stocks and bonds. Boring, not like boxing. "Sold 'em," he said. "Couldn't get interested." He has lived the American nightmare:

ghetto boyhood, fear of being inferior, says he didn't laugh until he was a teenager—"when I heard laughter I thought people were laughing at me." Then the American dream: Olympic champion, world heavyweight champion, millionaire who has retained his wealth. So swift. So unforgettable. Of course a bore to be in bonds.

At 15, he learned to box. Quick, agile, strong, determined, he took to it readily. He was at Wiltwyck, a New York school for emotionally disturbed children. Soon, there was nothing else except boxing in his life. Did that single-mindedness hurt him later?

"I got acceptance and I got commendation," he says, "the same things I still want. If I had not devoted so much time to learning prizefighting, I may not have won the title, may not have regained it, may not have known the satisfaction of the sound of the crowd lifting me."

Why does Floyd Patterson, a soft-eyed, gentle man in a brutal business, a man who knocks another through the ropes and then helps him back, continue to fight? "Boxing has allowed me to help others," he says. "My parents, my wife. And my children will never have to roam the streets like I did." And for himself: "Thank the Lord for allowing me to use my natural talents. And I like to be able to say 'yes' when everyone else says 'no,' and to prove I'm right."

There's more to boxing than fighting: roadwork is not rote for Patterson. He will stop and pick an unusual leaf and send it home to his wife. In the gym the rat-a-tat of the small bag is a soul beat. Training is uplifting: isn't there piety in self-denial?

And yet why does a man who can suffer such public humiliation (he donned sunglasses and fake goatee after a first-round KO to Sonny Liston) continue to fight?

"I have been down more than any other heavyweight champ in history," Patterson says. "But it means that I've also gotten up more than any other heavyweight champ in history. I'm proud of that."

Will he ever leave the ring?

"No," he says quietly. "When I can't fight anymore, I'll train youngsters. Teach them what I can no longer do."



“HERE COMES GEORGE”: THAT IS, FOREMAN

April 20, 1991

FROM RINGSIDE, THERE WAS one sight that stuck out. It was the back of George Foreman’s head. It is a bald head, and with a deep dimple where the head meets his beefy neck. It is a head befitting a man of considerable weight, and of a certain age.

Again and again, that dimple was doubled, and beads of sweat flew off, as the head was jolted by repeated driving blows by Evander Holyfield, the defending heavyweight champion of the world.

From the front, there was the face of this 6’4”, 257-pound challenger who is 42 years old. It was a face that took many ripping punches to the face, again and again, and continued on, with a kind of vague indifference. On and on for the full 12 rounds of this title fight at the Convention Center here last night, which ended with a decisive decision for the champ.

The blows were administered by the champion who, at 28, is 14 years younger than Foreman, and was two inches shorter and weighed 49 pounds fewer, the difference between Holyfield and Sugar Ray Leonard.

Before the actual tiff, a rap record sung by the challenger himself was heard throughout the arena. It went “Here comes George,” and revealed such things as his “punches are so hard, they sound like thunder.” And then Foreman entered the ring, with a little skip. When his red terrycloth robe was removed, he stood huge in long white shorts that covered his ample belly.

That was the end of laughter. When the bell rang, the next 36 minutes were filled with all the grimness and much of the satisfaction that this lurid, grotesque, but compelling sport holds.

There were times when Foreman appeared to rock Holyfield himself, but the champion shook it off, just as Foreman did.

By the end, Foreman looked exhausted from absorbing the blows, and Holyfield looked exhausted from throwing them.

“I would have won except there was a mule got in the ring that kicked me,” said Foreman afterward.

“I proved, though, that if you can live you can dream. The only thing that stopped me was the fine jaw of Evander Holyfield.”

In the days and weeks and months leading up to last night, Foreman, the elderly cherub, made more of his fight with Evander Holyfield than just one guy trying to further flatten the nose of another guy. A big fight must certainly take on a cosmic significance, at least in the eyes of the promoters.

Which is why the fight last night was called “The Battle of the Ages,” and which is why George Foreman, a promotional force, among other sorts of forces, was such a willing and effective spokesperson.

George Foreman, it turns out, was not fighting just for the sake of a nice little payday—he was guaranteed \$12.5 million. No, it was to prove that a guy who is his age could challenge a man so much younger (and guaranteed \$20 million), and, if successful, provide inspiration for all quadragenarians and beyond. Which made it less a battle for the ages, but more a test for one who was aged.

Foreman, a 3-to-1 underdog last night, also wished to demonstrate that a guy as massive and slow as a barge, with a 38½-inch waistline compared to the trim, 32-inch waist of his opponent, could by wit and wiles and a thunderous punch be victorious over a muscular, chiseled, swift, and skillful crowned head.

It would be King Kong vanquishing a stealth bomber, as much Methuselah as Goliath over David, and a full-grown Fat Albert, say, leveling Popeye.

It was, in Foreman’s script, a chance also to show that someone who had been in retirement for 10 years—from 1977 to 1987—could make a comeback and realize his promise to regain the heavyweight title that he

held 16½ years earlier. It would be an accomplishment as prodigious as Foreman's physique.

Holyfield, as much straight man as champion, as much Abbott to Foreman's Costello, took it all graciously, until he entered the ring.

Foreman, meanwhile, was a buffet of food jokes, if not a surfeit. What was he looking forward to about the fight? He was looking forward to it being over, so he could celebrate with room service, and the cheeseburger de luxe special.

While many in the country took an interest in this fight, some out of a weird but uncontrollable curiosity—would the moose maul the mouse, or the mouse the moose?—the promoters took an even deeper interest, for a fight next with Mike Tyson and their man would necessitate their buying suits with deeper pockets.

Yesterday's fight was co-promoted by Bob Arum, the Foreman promoter, and Dan Duva, the Holyfield promoter. Oddly enough, each predicted that his fighter would win the bout.

"But Evander knows all that food talk is just a psychological ploy," said Duva, with a smile. "How can anyone take George Foreman lightly?"

Everyone was getting into the act.

But it was Holyfield who took the final bows.



BUSTER DOUGLAS ON THE COMEBACK TRAIL

January 10, 1997

JAMES “BUSTER” DOUGLAS WASN’T much impressed with the Evander Holyfield–Mike Tyson heavyweight championship fight on November 9.

“Two corpses in there smacking each other,” he said today, sitting on a bed in a hotel room near here in northeastern Connecticut.

But what about Holyfield’s knockout of Tyson?

“Holyfield was fighting a shell of Tyson’s former self,” Douglas said. “And look how hard it was for Holyfield to finally knock him out. That tells you about both of ’em.”

Douglas won glory by knocking out Tyson to win the title in Tokyo in February 1990, and then won ignominy in his first title defense eight months later. Holyfield dropped him to the canvas in the third round. Douglas checked three times to see if he was bleeding—he wasn’t—but decided to stay down anyway. And down, and down, and down.

At age 30, he quit the ring, though he never quite made it official. He became depressed. He had achieved a dream of winning the heavyweight championship of the world, owning the belt that he had seen idols like Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier and Larry Holmes wearing when he was growing up in Columbus, Ohio. But the newly crowned champion wondered, *Is this all there is?*

With the \$26 million he made from his Tyson and Holyfield fights, he bought, among other items, five cars, five houses, and tons of food and cases of alcohol. He ate and drank so much that he could hardly fit into his cars or his houses. He went from about 231 pounds (when he fought

Tyson) to 400 pounds. His blood-sugar count skyrocketed from 100 to 800. In 1994, he fell into a diabetic coma and nearly died. He was unconscious for four days.

“When I woke up in the hospital bed,” he recalled, “I said, ‘What am I doing?’ I was unhappy and I was destroying myself.”

He looked around at his life—his wife, Bertha, his three sons, Lamarr, 18, Carda, six, and Arthur, three—and decided that he had a lot to live for. So he went back into the gym to lose weight, and while he was at it, the motivation to fight again resurfaced.

Douglas (31–5–1, 21 knockouts) is on the comeback trail. He will fight someone named Rocky Pepeli (19–9–1, 18 knockouts) of Des Moines on Friday night in the arena of the Mohegan Sun casino and resort. Douglas’ only previous fight since he lost the heavyweight title was last June—a third-round technical knockout over Tony La Rosa, in Atlantic City.

Douglas weighed 244 pounds for the fight—about what he weighs now, and about what he weighed for Holyfield. He wore a maroon T-shirt and white sweat pants with the sleeves of his shirt cut off, and his tattooed arms appeared massive, while the rest of his 6’4" frame looked as if he has continued to lay off the cookies.

He says he has not returned to the ring, as so many fighters do, for the money, but to prove something to the world as well as to himself.

“I’m rich,” he said. “And I was never driven by money to be a fighter, anyway. I was driven by a desire to compete. And now that desire is more than ever. I’m coming back to get the respect I believe I never got. I want to prove that being the first to beat Tyson was no fluke. I know people were laughing and joking about my knocking out Tyson, saying he wasn’t in shape. Not in shape! He was getting blown out of the water for 10 rounds, but he kept sucking it up and coming back.”

And then there was the Holyfield fight. Why didn’t Douglas get up?

“Maybe I didn’t want to—or thought I didn’t have to,” he said.

An odd admission for a fighter, perhaps, but much of what Douglas has done and not done over the last seven years defies convention.

He said so many things were happening so fast after the Tyson fight that he hardly had time to grieve for his mother, who had died three weeks before the fight. He also had to resolve a conflict with his father, James Sr.

“I wanted to come into my manhood, but he was still treating me as his little boy,” Douglas said. “But we’re okay now.”

Douglas hopes to get a shot at the title by “just looking impressive in every fight.”

And his age, 36, is not a barrier. “George Foreman was nearly 50 when he won the title back,” he said.

He lay back on the bed and said: “But even if I stopped fighting after this bout, the main thing is I’ve got back up and turned my life around. That’s being a true champion.”



FOR HOLMES, THE BELL TOLLS

January 23, 1988

HAROLD CONRAD, THE FORMER boxing press agent, ran into an old friend, Mickey Duff, the British boxing promoter, in Trump Plaza here the day before last night's heavyweight title fight.

"Have you seen Holmes?" asked Conrad.

"Doesn't he look good?" said Duff, with his British accent. "Think so?" said Conrad. Duff smiled. "There's a comic in England named Tommy Trinder. He said, 'There are three ages of man—young, middle age, and doesn't he look good?'"

Age was a major topic of conversation among the boxing cognoscenti as the bout drew near—that is, the 17-year age difference between the defending champion, Mike Tyson, a mere pugilistic stripling at 21, and Larry Holmes, the 38-year-old ex-champ and ex-retired ex-champ.

Holmes had been out of the ring for nearly two years, having retired after his second bout, and second loss, to Michael Spinks, in April 1986. But now he believed that his experience, his size—he stands 6'3" to Tyson's 5'11"—and his left jab could carry him back to the title.

Harold Conrad, though, took a different slant, one shared by many: "You don't get better when you get older."

Someone had mentioned to Conrad that he had seen Holmes' last fight against Spinks, and that Holmes' reflexes "were shot."

"And you don't repair reflexes," said Conrad.

In this case, with Holmes an 8-to-1 underdog, it was prophetic. Holmes, with the nearly four-inch height advantage, stayed away from the lethal Tyson for three rounds, then decided to show his stuff in the fourth.

“The crowd pumped him up, souped him up,” Tyson said after the fight. “I knew his ego was getting involved, and I knew he was gonna get it.”

Spinks, the other heavyweight in the picture, who had been stripped of his International Boxing Federation title, sat at ringside in a tuxedo. “Holmes was doin’ fine until he started showboatin’,” Spinks observed. “He lost concentration.”

Holmes came out aggressively, throwing jabs and overhand rights, dancing and lowering his left, and then, with his aging chin exposed, Tyson landed a solid right that sent Holmes to the canvas.

Holmes was up, was hit hard, and fell again.

“Stop the fight!” came a few cries from the crowd. “What’s wrong with you? Stop the fight!”

Holmes was now powerless against the relentless young champ. Tyson, in stark black shorts and high-top black boxing shoes with no socks—just the most basic accoutrements for this wicked fighting machine—hit the old challenger again, and Holmes dropped once more.

Holmes had been to the canvas on several other occasions, in bouts against Snipes and Shavers, but always, he got back up and went on to win.

Holmes was still struggling to get back on his feet. But not this time, not against this fighter. The referee, Joe Cortez, waved his arms over the toppled Holmes and stopped the bout. The fight ended with five seconds left in the round.

Tyson retained his championship. Holmes retained his cut of the purse. Tyson, who appears to simply stalk his prey without much finesse or craftsmanship, revealed a fighting mind as keen as his punches.

“I saw the mistake he always makes, saw it in his other fights,” said Tyson. “He always kept his left hand low, and I waited for him to do it tonight. And when he did, and I hit him with that right, I knew he wasn’t going to finish the round.”

Tyson proved beyond a doubt that he is “no cheese champ,” as, he said, his critics have charged.

Tyson was gracious to the old champ. “Larry’s a courageous fighter,” he said. “You saw that when he kept trying to get up.”

And Holmes was gracious to the young champ. “He’s sharp with his punches, and he’s tough to hit,” said Holmes.

Holmes left the ring in his white robe with red-sequined collar, slightly wobbly, but his arm raised to the crowd.

Tyson climbed gingerly through the ropes, his green championship belt slung over his shoulder.

The old guy tried to come back, as so many have, but, like so many, the reflexes were no longer there, the punch was a thing of the past, and the legs, although they hadn't yet informed the brain, wished to be elsewhere.

Some recalled the night in 1980 when Holmes, then the relatively young champ at 31, fought Muhammad Ali, then 38—same age as Holmes is now—and Ali was a shell of his former self. “I knew the fight was going to be bad,” said Conrad, “and I told Ali. ‘Listen, man,’ he said to me, ‘I’m gettin’ six million.’”

“Ali needed the money, Holmes doesn’t. But when you’re getting \$3.1 million like Holmes is, it’s hard to turn down.

“Just before the weigh-in, I was standing close to Holmes. There were no reporters around, just some boxing people, and someone said something to Holmes—I didn’t hear what it was—but his answer told everything. He said, ‘Tomorrow’s payday.’”

It was indeed a payday for Holmes, and an education. He learned the hard way that older doesn’t necessarily mean better.



HASIM RAHMAN WORKS HIS WAY UP TO ANONYMITY

November 11, 2001

VIRTUALLY IN THE CLOUDS, on a mountaintop resort that is making the transition from the rust color of fall leaves to the rainbow raiment of skiers, the heavyweight boxing champion of the world is in training for his first defense of the title.

This is Hasim Rahman, no household name, at least not yet. Rahman is working here for his return match November 17 in Las Vegas against the former champion Lennox Lewis in near anonymity, and it has nothing to do with the secluded setting. On the street, in a mall, at the post office, Rahman, at 6'2½", 245 pounds, might be noticed for his rippling muscles, but hardly for being, as his title belts suggest, the toughest man on the planet.

He is, in what has traditionally been one of the most acclaimed positions in sports, no Mike Tyson, no Muhammad Ali, no Smokin' Joe Frazier. Nor is he a Lennox Lewis, here or anywhere else in the world, including in his hometown of Baltimore. But for Rahman, this is a good thing, especially the part about Lewis.

Last April 22, in Brakpan, South Africa, Rahman, a decided underdog, stepped into the ring against Lewis, who had held the titles of the World Boxing Council and the International Boxing Federation for seven years and who considered this only a tune-up before his next fight, a widely anticipated big payday with Tyson.

Rahman—called Rock because of the pronunciation of the first syllable of his last name as well as for his mass—did have an impressive professional

record: 35 victories, two defeats, and 29 knockouts, despite having been boxing for only eight years. His amateur record was lackluster.

Lewis, at 37–2–1, with 29 knockouts, had fought fighters with greater reputations than Rahman had, and Lewis also had the experience of 14 previous heavyweight title fights.

Lewis, at 254 pounds, seven pounds heavier than he had ever been for a fight, seemed to take the match against the 29-year-old Rahman lightly. He was too busy acting in a cameo in the remake of the movie *Ocean's 11* to travel early to adjust to the nearly 6,000-foot altitude in Brakpan, which is near Johannesburg. Lewis showed up 11 days before the fight, while Rahman had been there for a month.

"It was do or die," Rahman recalled recently about that bout. "If I lost, I might never get another opportunity at the title. I couldn't afford just a moral victory, of having given the champ a decent fight. I had to win, and I thought I would. But I've always had confidence in my ability, and I know Lewis thought I was just a journeyman, someone from the meat wagon."

In Round 5, just a round after a gash from an accidental head butt had opened over Rahman's left eye, Rahman staggered Lewis with a right. Lewis smiled, as if saying, "Is this really the best you got?" A few moments later, that question was answered: another overhand right to the jaw sent Lewis to the canvas, where he was counted out at 2:32 of the fifth round.

Afterward, Lewis disparaged Rahman, saying he had been felled by "a lottery punch."

"Ah, so you saw the lottery punch," Rahman said with a half-smile to a visitor who had recently seen a videotape of the fight. Rahman had just bicycled from his rented living quarters to the small training facility on the outskirts of town for a training session. "There are more Powerballs where that one came from," he said.

There would be no sparring session this late morning, but the workout would be rigorous, starting with six rounds of working on his hand speed and combinations with an assistant trainer who wore padded mitts. Rahman, with thick red boxing gloves, punched the mitts vigorously—grunting a rhythmic "uh, uh, uh" with each blow—while his trainer, the gray-bearded Adrian Davis, moving in the ring like a referee, barked instructions and encouragement.

On his head, Rahman wore what is known as a do-rag, a handkerchief tied in a knot. The design was the American flag.

Rahman said he was proud to have returned the heavyweight title to America. “It meant a lot to me,” he said. “It had been gone from here for too long. And I’m equally pleased to defend the title at home. This country is a great country. There are opportunities like nowhere else in the world. I’m living proof of that.”

Rahman is a lifelong Muslim. His father, John Cason, is an imam employed by the Maryland state prison system to offer religious services and guidance.

“Bad people are bad people, regardless of their religion, or what they profess to be their religion,” Rahman said of the September 11 terrorist attacks. “There is no justification for the killing of innocent civilians. I don’t equate terrorism with Muslims. There are bad people in many different groups, including Muslims. But you can’t take all Muslims as one. The Ku Klux Klan is supposed to be Christian, but all Christians don’t act or feel the way the Klan does.”

Rahman’s father earned a college associate’s degree and eventually operated his own business in engineering before devoting full time to religion. Rahman’s mother worked as a receptionist. His parents, who divorced when he was a boy, decided that they would rather have him be a swimmer than a football player, despite his being big for his age.

“I just didn’t like the football mentality, the coaches as dictators with a young man’s body,” Cason said. “So I paid for Hasim and his brother to swim at a private club, and be on the swim team. I was able to afford it.”

Rahman was a superb student in the first years of grade school, but he was being picked on. “I saw that the bad boys got respect, and by the third grade I decided to change my whole MO,” Rahman said. “I walked with that strut like a bad boy. I pouted and poked my lips out, and I sassed back the teacher. I got respect after that. Fear was more important to me than knowledge.”

When he reached the 11th grade in Baltimore, he dropped out of school, partying and getting into street fights. He said he spent time “riding around in stolen cars, hanging out with street kids, and just missing being killed and being behind bars.”

“Friends were getting shot, others were going to jail for life,” he said. “There were shootouts every day. I never thought I’d live to 21, and I didn’t care.”

When he was 19, Rahman met Crystal Simpson, a day-care worker; they fell in love and had a son, Sharif. They are now married with three children.

“When my son was born, I felt a responsibility to him, to be there for him,” Rahman said. “When my parents were divorced, I felt neither was around me as much as I think I needed them. And I didn’t want this to happen to my children.”

He went back to school, earned his high school equivalency degree, and entered a community college. One day he was driving with a friend in a truck that collided with another vehicle. Rahman was thrown and the truck rolled over on him. The driver, his friend, was killed.

“My whole side of my face was taken off,” he said. “I needed 560 stitches to put it back on. And I broke my wrist. My buddy, who was driving, was killed. But I was still alive.”

Sometime after the accident, an uncle took Rahman to a small neighborhood gym in Baltimore. “I knew I was strong,” he recalled, “because anytime I ever hit anyone, they told me I was strong.”

In an odd way, the accident gave him perspective in the ring. “If I could take that from a truck,” he said, “how much damage could a man do to me?”

He entered the amateur ranks and was less than spectacular. “He was something like 10 wins and three losses,” recalls his co-manager, Steve Nelson. “But he had called, because I’d handled some fighters that he respected. He asked me to see an upcoming fight. I went to it. I saw an overweight heavyweight—I think he weighed about 280 pounds. He had no boxing skills. He had no footwork, no balance. But he could punch.”

Stan Hoffman, Rahman’s other co-manager, said, “And when a heavyweight can punch, you tend to want to roll the dice on him.”

Nelson went to Rahman’s home to meet with him. “I told him I’d sign him up to turn pro, and there would be no initial money, no bonus,” Nelson said. “I thought I was doing him a favor, just to be representing him. Let me tell you, there was no line out the door to manage him. He was hardly impressive. I was the only one talking to him.”

But Rahman balked. He said he wanted \$25,000 to sign, and a car. “Amateurs with outstanding records get deals like that,” Nelson told him. Rahman said, “If you sign me, I’ll become the heavyweight champion of the world.”

Nelson recalled: "You hear stuff like that all the time from young fighters. But there was something in Hasim's tone, his look, that said to me, 'This kid's confidence is real.'"

Rahman got his \$25,000 signing bonus, plus a used car.

Rahman turned pro eight years ago and won his first 28 fights, 23 by knockout. He was learning his trade, developing a jab, counterpunches, footwork. Hardly Sugar Ray Robinson, but making progress. He was moving up, getting better fights, beginning to earn as much as \$100,000 a fight.

In December 1998 he ran into a punch by the contender David Tua, delivered after the bell of the ninth round. Rahman, ahead on points, could not quite recover, and Tua knocked him out. It was Rahman's first professional defeat.

Rahman won his next two fights with early knockouts and in November 1999 faced someone he thought was a pushover, the Russian Oleg Maskaev. Rahman neglected his training and was knocked through the ropes in the eighth round. He hit his head on the cement floor and could not get back in the ring before he was counted out.

"I totally underestimated him," Rahman said. "I learned a valuable lesson: never underestimate your opponent."

He won his next three fights, two by knockout, then got the surprise call to fight Lewis.

After the Lewis fight, Rahman wanted a tune-up, an apparently easy-money title fight, before giving Lewis the immediate return bout stipulated in the contract. Lewis sued to be Rahman's next opponent, and won. Each is guaranteed \$10 million.

So here is Rahman back in training for Lewis, skipping rope, lifting weights, punching the bags, sweat pouring off his thick body.

"It's up to Rock, to not be Buster Douglas II," Nelson, his co-manager, said.

Douglas had upset Tyson in 1990 by training and fighting brilliantly, then lived off his laurels. He got fat fast, lost the title in his first defense in embarrassing fashion, and faded away.

Rahman said he is determined not to be a one-shot wonder. "Buster gave his title away," Rahman said. "That's not going to happen to me. Someone's going to have to take the title from me."

Rahman was now hitting the speed bag as the sun from a small nearby window illuminated his face, speckled with sweat. He stroked the bag with a sleepy rhythm, then stepped up the tempo, and ended with a crescendo and resounding punch, leaving the bag limp. It was all a metaphor, he expects, for Lennox Lewis.

• • •

Lennox Lewis knocked Hasim Rahman out in the fourth round.



LENNOX LEWIS SAYS THIS IS ALL FOR MCCALL

September 3, 1994

WHILE OLIVER MCCALL MAY be someone to take seriously, his nickname, “The Atomic Bull,” isn’t, said Lennox Lewis. “Everyone who steps into the ring can do damage if you’re not careful,” said Lewis, “but that nickname doesn’t mean anything to me except he’s got a bulldog style and I don’t have to look for him. He’ll come to me. And that will be just lovely.”

A broad grin appeared inside Lewis’ goatee, as his imagination wandered. Lewis, who owns one-third of the heavyweight boxing championship, was sitting on a folding chair in the gym in the Concord Hotel here Friday morning, dark sunglasses propped on the championship nose and a black cap turned backward on his head.

He wore a turquoise sweat suit, but he wasn’t sweating yesterday, which happened to be his 29th birthday. He was taking the day off from his training regimen in preparation for his fourth defense of the World Boxing Council championship September 24 in London, where he was born. The match against McCall will be offered live in America on HBO.

McCall is a top-ranked contender, though he will be a decided underdog against the hard-punching Lewis. And Lewis, if his trainer, Pepe Correa, is correct, is “real, real sharp.”

“He’s going back to England tomorrow to continue training, and I thought I’d give him the day off today,” said Correa. “Don’t want to push him too hard.” Plenty of time to concentrate on the Atomic Bull.

Lennox Lewis himself has no nickname, in an occupation where sobriquets abound. It seems a fighter feels he’s practically naked if he steps

into the ring without a nickname. “When I first started out I thought of Lennox ‘Lethal’ Lewis, but I rejected it,” he said. “Didn’t want too many people to know I was lethal. Then I thought of Lennox ‘the Tower of Power’ Lewis”—he stands 6’5”. “But no, I didn’t want my prospective opponents to be too scared. And besides, I like Lennox Lewis.”

So there would be no name like those among such contemporary pugilists as Michael “Second To” Nunn or Terrible Tim Witherspoon or Evander “the Real Deal” Holyfield or James “Bonecrusher” Smith or Jesse “Bogey Man” Ferguson or Michael “Dynamite” Dokes or Tony “TNT” Tubbs to underscore Lewis’ lethal propensities.

Regardless, Lennox has shaken up some people, including and especially the 21 folks he has knocked out in his 25 professional bouts. And although his three title defenses have been lackluster, especially the last, against Phil Jackson, which he won in a TKO in the eighth in Atlantic City last June, he believes he deserves the rest of the title. “I should be the undisputed heavyweight champion, that’s my goal,” he said. “But this is a business, not really a sport, as I’ve come to learn, and you can get blocked at certain points, like I’ve been.”

He had hoped to fight Riddick “Big Daddy” Bowe for the undisputed title of the three major sanctioning bodies—the World Boxing Association, the International Boxing Federation, and the WBC—but Bowe’s manager, Rock Newman, played hide and seek for whatever reasons. Then when the WBC stripped Bowe of the title and awarded it to Lewis, Bowe at a news conference and in front of Lewis, threw the WBC championship belt in a garbage can.

Lewis plucked it out, and had it on display in the gym at the Concord. “One man’s garbage,” said Lewis, “is another man’s gold mine.”

Bowe, whose appetite for cheeseburgers was apparently greater than his lust for the ring, has since lost his other titles as well. “It’s ironic that Bowe is now begging for a fight to get back the belt he threw away,” Lewis said.

One day soon Lewis would like to wing punches at Michael Moorer, who owns the WBA and IBF titles, having taken them to his bosom after defeating Evander Holyfield. Then, of course, there is the possibility of Iron Mike Tyson appearing on the scene if he is sprung from prison as anticipated next spring. If Tyson will fight again—and he will be only

28 in 1995—it would surely mean a huge payday for him as well as his opponent.

Lewis never fought Tyson, and their only common opponent is Donovan Ruddock, nicknamed “Razor,” presumably because of the way he cuts people down. Or maybe the way he gets cut down. Anyway, Razor was dull against Lewis, who knocked him out in Round 2, and wasn’t much sharper against Tyson, though it took Iron Mike longer, one 12-round decision and a seventh-round knockout, to dispose of Ruddock.

“I am ready,” said Lewis of McCall. “My arsenal of punches can be launched at any time.”

Sounds like Lennox “Tinder Box” Lewis to me.



RIDDICK BOWE GOES MARCHING BACK HOME

February 22, 1997

RIDDICK BOWE HAS SUDDENLY become the envy of thousands of men and women who have ever dreamed of leaving the military after getting fed up with latrine duty, unappreciative drill sergeants, and that thing served in the mess hall called, in polite society, slop on a shingle.

It may be recalled that when last we heard from Bowe, the onetime unified heavyweight champion of the world had decided to enlist in the Marine Corps Reserve, and was marching off to boot camp at Parris Island, South Carolina. It was there, he had said, where he would make his mother proud as she gazed upon him in his “dress blues.”

A lot of people questioned Bowe’s decision-making, as well as his sanity, and wondered just what effect the low blows Andrew Golota inflicted on him in his last two fights had actually had.

Yesterday, he seemed to come to his senses. After 10 days in basic training, he threw in the towel on Private Bowe. He was allowed to resign from the Marines, and, according to his manager, Rock Newman, he was on the way back home to his wife and five children.

“I haven’t talked with Riddick yet,” said Newman, at a news conference yesterday in front of his house. “But I have spoken a few times with his wife, Judy. And the reason he decided to leave had nothing to do with the rigors of training, but it was the fact that he had lost total control of his life. He is a multimillionaire and he had become used to living a life of luxury. Even in training for a fight, he’d be up at 6:30 AM, train for two hours, have breakfast, take a nap, train for two hours in the afternoon,

and that's it. Now, he was up at 4:15 in the morning and didn't get to bed until 10:00 PM, and it was nonstop. He couldn't even make a phone call home. This was a real culture shock."

And of course there were those noncommissioned officers making suggestions in his face and at the top of their lungs.

Bowe, 29 years old and weighing 245 pounds, had to get special permission to have the maximum enlistment age of 28 waived. "Now," said Newman, "he had to get permission from the base commander and the commander of his unit to come to an agreement that he would be released from duty." According to Capt. David Steele, a public affairs officer for Marine Corps recruiting, a recruit "can't just quit," but about 12 percent are permitted to withdraw after consultations.

Since Bowe had already sampled the glories of sports celebrity, achieving one boyhood dream, he figured why not embark on a second. Perhaps Bowe had seen too many John Wayne movies, in which you save the nation by chewing off the clip on a hand grenade and throwing it at the bad guys as if it were a baseball. No one ever told Bowe, apparently, that even a former heavyweight champion in boot camp would be treated like everyone else, the same way my own drill sergeant would shout, "C'mon, girls, get with it!"

Bowe did say how much he missed his family and, according to Newman, has said over the years that perhaps the hardest thing about being a professional boxer was the time away from home.

Well, what next for Bowe? R.O.T.C.? Or will he return to pugilism? Newman says that after Bowe rests for a while he will decide.

Is this a blow to the security of the country? Only time will tell, but there may be a positive effect.

A lot of young men and women will feel: join the Marines and prove you're tougher than a heavyweight champ.

Bowe didn't inquire, but I could have told him about the joys of helping to protect the nation. Yes, I have war stories from basic training in Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, in 1959, that would have made the champ's hair stand on end.

Once, on field maneuvers at Fort Leonard Wood in a pouring rain, a chow line served soup and a slab of beef into our mess kits. Burdened with unsteady helmet, slung rifle, and the pelting rain, it was difficult to dine. Because of the rain, the more soup I drank, the more there was. I

managed to find the trunk of a leaky tree to sit against. I was starving. As I bent to cut the beef, my mess kit tilted and the meat slid into the mud. I swallowed hard, then reached over and with thumb and forefinger plucked up the hunk of beef, shook it off, and consumed it.

Had Bowe asked, I would have filled him in. Could've saved him a lot of trouble.



HOLYFIELD IN HIS PALACE

January 7, 2005

WHY DOES EVANDER HOLYFIELD keep fighting? Is he in denial, dreaming that he is still the fighter he once was? Is he another great athlete unable to depart the stage gracefully? Or does he know something most people do not know or cannot understand?

Holyfield is 42, a four-time world heavyweight champion who was distinguished by his professionalism, skills, and pugilistic intelligence. Over the last 20 years, he earned respect as a warrior in memorable fights with Buster Douglas, George Foreman, Riddick Bowe, Michael Moorer, Mike Tyson, and Lennox Lewis.

Holyfield, who was usually smaller than his opponents but nearly always their match or better, has been battered in recent bouts. Many people in boxing are concerned that he is risking his well-being by prolonging his career.

But Holyfield, a religious man who says he believes that the Bible speaks to him, is convinced that his pursuit of a fifth heavyweight title is preordained. God's plan for him as a boxer is "a greater ending than my beginning," he said.

"I believe in the word of God," Holyfield said, "and I believe in what it says about overcoming. That no matter what the situation, you can overcome it. As the Bible says, 'I walk by faith, not by sight.'"

What many people see, however, is a once-dominant fighter whose skills have deteriorated. His last two fights in particular have been unmitigated disasters. In October 2003, with his head characteristically shaved and gleaming in the arena lights, his body still muscle-rippled and a mar-

vel of conditioning, Holyfield was consistently beaten to the punch by his opponent, James Toney.

“Evander kept walking into the right hand that was right in his face,” said Don Turner, Holyfield’s trainer at the time. “After the eighth round, I said, ‘If you can’t get out of the way of his right, I’m going to throw in the towel.’”

“He pleaded with me not to do it. ‘I’m not a quitter,’ he said. But he took the same beating in the next round, and after Toney knocked him down, I threw in the towel. I care a whole lot for Evander Holyfield. I didn’t want to see my guy get hurt. I’ve seen four guys get killed in the ring, and I didn’t want to see another.”

After the fight Holyfield fired Turner, with whom he had worked for 10 years. In his next bout, at Madison Square Garden on November 13, 2004, Holyfield faced Larry Donald, a ranked fighter, but someone not considered in the same class as Holyfield, or the Holyfield of old. Moving sluggishly, Holyfield was not floored during the 12-round fight, but only one of the three judges awarded him more than a round. Donald landed more than three times as many punches as Holyfield.

Ron Scott Stevens, the chairman of the New York State Athletic Commission, watched from ringside, evidently appalled. Two days later Stevens, with the concurrence of the two other commissioners and the agency’s chief medical officer, took the unusual step of placing Holyfield on an indefinite medical suspension for “poor performance.”

Medical suspensions normally are invoked after a boxer loses by a knockout or sustains a serious injury. Holyfield strenuously objected and will undergo medical tests, seeking to overturn the suspension.

“It’s the responsibility of the state athletic commission to save a boxer from himself,” Stevens said. “I don’t think Evander Holyfield should be fighting anymore.”

Marc Ratner, the executive director of the Nevada State Athletic Commission, said he had seen Holyfield fight Toney in Las Vegas. “He couldn’t get away from the punches as he once did,” Ratner said. “Evander’s been a gentleman here throughout the years. But you have to wonder, is he putting himself in danger?”

To reach the main house from the gated entrance of Holyfield’s estate, which sits on 235 acres in Fayetteville, a town south of Atlanta, visitors drive past a lake and over a hill. Holyfield built the 54,000-square-foot

house in 1990, the year he first won the undisputed heavyweight title by knocking out Douglas. The \$20 million house has 11 bedrooms, 17 bathrooms, a bowling alley, a movie theater, huge exercise rooms, and a dining room with a table large enough to accommodate 32 upholstered chairs. The enormous outdoor pool, Holyfield said, is the largest residential pool in the country.

Holyfield arrives at the front door with a smile and a firm handshake. He is wearing a black leather cap to match his black leather boots, a sweater with sleeves rolled past the elbow and exposing formidable forearms, and blue jeans that fit snugly on a trim body. He is 6'2" and, ever careful about his diet, weighs about 210 pounds.

As he walks through the house, Holyfield is asked if it is true that there are 109 or 110 rooms in the house, as has been reported. "Don't know," he said, in an unboastful manner. "Never counted."

It is a long way from where Holyfield grew up on Connally Street in the Summer Hill neighborhood of Atlanta, in a four-bedroom apartment in the projects that was home to 12 people.

"We were poorer than most of the others, and they were poor, too," said Holyfield, who is the youngest of nine children. "But a lot of them laughed at us, calling me and my brothers and sisters 'government kids,' because every month we had to line up with our mother at a warehouse and get canned goods marked USDA for our food."

Holyfield invites 5,000 underprivileged children to his home for a picnic and fireworks on the Fourth of July, and for Christmas he buys \$50,000 worth of toys and invites hundreds of children to visit. "To see for themselves that a black man can make it, a man that came from a place like they live in," he said. "To give them hope and something to strive for."

Holyfield's charitable work is not limited to poor people in his hometown. He left on January 3 on a nine-day trip to Sri Lanka and other nations in South Asia to help children devastated by the tsunami.

His estate and his lifestyle suggest that Holyfield has not endured the desperate circumstances of other former heavyweight champions, from Joe Louis to Mike Tyson, who spent more than they earned in their careers.

He has made an estimated \$200 million from his 48 professional fights, which included 38 victories, eight losses, and two draws. (His last six fights account for half of his losses and one of the draws.) He owns real

estate, a record label, a clothing line, and a small television network that emphasizes family and religious themes.

At the moment, nearly a dozen people live in the house, including Holyfield's wife, Candi, a 24-year-old former nursing student at Emory University, four of Holyfield's 10 children, a nanny, a housekeeper, and a few nephews and cousins. At any time, there might be several other people there, including his brothers and sisters and even former wives and girlfriends with whom he has fathered children. Holyfield had three children with his first wife, Paulette; one with his second wife, Janice; one with Candi, his third wife; and five other children with four other women.

Holyfield believes fervently in God and in the teachings of the Bible. He is close with his children, friends and associates say, taking them on trips and vacations and dotting on their projects and schooling. He did not meet his own father until he was 21, and he said he had a void because of it.

Holyfield said that insults aimed at him by Lennox Lewis before their first fight in March 1999 motivated him to boldly predict victory in the bout.

"Lewis called me a hypocrite because I was supposed to be a God-fearing man and yet had a bunch of kids out of wedlock," Holyfield said. "I thought that was none of his business, and he was ignorant about me. And I was mad.

"So I said publicly that God told me I was going to knock him out in the third round. It didn't happen. And by the time the third round ended and I didn't knock him out, I began to lose energy."

The bout ended in a draw, with Lewis and many ringsiders convinced Lewis had been robbed. Holyfield retained his title, but lost it to Lewis in a rematch eight months later.

His children are among the reasons that he continues to fight, Holyfield said. "I don't want them to see their father go out a loser," he said. "I want them to know that even when obstacles are stacked against you—as they often have been for me—that you can overcome them. This is just one more example."

Ebonee, one of Holyfield's four daughters, was asked whether her father should continue to box.

"He should keep going until he fulfills his dream," said Ebonee, who is in her last year of high school. "He feels God's not going to let anything bad happen to him."

Many people, including Turner, Holyfield's former trainer, said he now has great difficulty protecting himself in the ring.

"There was a time when Evander Holyfield gave as good, or better, than he got," said Stevens, the chairman of the New York athletic commission.

Now, Stevens said, Holyfield "just gets beaten up."

Jay Larkin, the vice president for sports and event programming at the cable network Showtime, said the decision to retire was Holyfield's. Larkin left little doubt, though, about his own opinion.

"From my perspective as a fight fan, Evander has nothing to prove to anyone," Larkin said. "He consistently proved people wrong, and has achieved amazing things. They thought he was too small—going from light-heavyweight and cruiserweight to be heavyweight champion—and he did it. No one thought he'd lose the title and win it back four times. He did it.

"He's not getting any younger. Why not now go out as one of the greatest fighters of all time and go on to do productive and wonderful things?"

Holyfield said he had rebounded before from subpar performances. "Look, I've had some bad fights before and come out good," he said. He mentioned a bout with Bobby Czyz in May 1996; Holyfield beat Czyz on a technical knockout after the fifth round, but looked lackluster. Some people wondered whether Holyfield, then 33, was finished.

Six months later, Holyfield battered Tyson into an 11th-round technical knockout. "That was Evander's finest hour," Turner said. "I never saw him train with such intensity."

In the infamous return match in June 1997, Tyson was disqualified after he bit off a piece of Holyfield's right ear.

George Foreman was 45 when he won the heavyweight title for the last time, Holyfield noted. "And I'm in better shape than George was," he said, "and three years younger."

"I will know when it's time to quit the ring," he said.

"It's true that I don't have the reflexes I once did," Holyfield said. "Once, I knew that if a guy dropped his glove just ever so much, I'd do damage. And I could see the punches coming and avoid them. I'm not that fighter anymore. But while I'm older, I'm smarter. I have to make adjustments. I can, and I will."

Holyfield talked about the adjustments he made against Riddick Bowe, who defeated Holyfield to win the heavyweight title in 1992, with

Holyfield winning a rematch the next year. He rose from his chair, and moved about, fists high, again in the ring, in his imagination.

“I learned I couldn’t go toe-to-toe with him, so I danced, like this,” he said.

And in his cavernous office, Evander Holyfield, the four-time heavy-weight champion and now 42 years old, was up on his black leather boots, returning to a bout he had fought 12 years ago, bobbing and weaving and punching the air, punching the Bowe who was no longer there.

VII.

***CONTENDERS
AND PRETENDERS
AMONG THE
LARGEST LADS***



AN OLD KING (LEVINSKY) OF WEPNERDOM

April 2, 1975

BEFORE THE RECENT HEAVYWEIGHT title tangle between champion Muhammad Ali and challenger Chuck Wepner, an expected cockeyed mismatch, the long forgotten name of King Levinsky was dug up.

Larry Merchant of the *New York Post* wrote, for example. “The noble sobriquet ‘Bum of the Month’ has been bestowed retrospectively on King Levinsky. The impression he made against Joe Louis was so stunning, so dramatically correct, that ring historians cannot resist updating them from 1935, when they met—fought would be an inappropriate verb—to several years later...”

The stone-faced Louis was an up-and-comer with fists as lethal as wrecking balls. The King, as he was called, was a happy-go-lucky lug.

Before the bout, according to Barney Nagler, author of a Joe Louis biography, *The Brown Bomber*, the fight promoter feared the trembling Levinsky might leave the dressing room at Comiskey Park and return to his home on Maxwell Street in Chicago, where his family peddled fish.

So the promoter hurried to the officials and said, “We’d better start the fight now.”

An official said, “But we have a half hour to go.”

“Well, but it might start raining,” he replied, looking up into the balmy, starry sky.

The King went down and out within a minute of the first round. Some ringsiders say that the King wasn’t really knocked out; he fainted.

Forty years later the Louis encounter is pretty much the King's claim to fame. He is a tie salesman here, as devoid of malice and violence as when he was a pugilist.

His sales technique is as earthy as was his looping right-handed fighting style. He might with great good-nature wrap a tie around a prospective customer's neck and, pulling crosshanded, tell him that it fits good.

In the battered gray tie box that he carries with him from hotel to hotel here, the King has photographs of himself with Louis, as well as photos of himself with Bobby Kennedy and Frank Sinatra.

A husky six-footer, he walks in a hulking manner because of a pinched nerve. At age 64, his hair is gray and sparse. He wears glasses down his flat nose. His voice is rough, as if he had swallowed some resin.

What happened to the nearly half-million dollars he made in the ring? "Bad managers," he whispers coarsely in your ear.

Although born Harris Krakow, he has remained to all "King Levinsky," his ring name—"King" from Kingfish and "Levinsky" from a popular boxer of his youth, Battling Levinsky.

He lives here, and is married to his third wife, a local masseuse. His first wife divorced him, calling him "an alleged prizefighter." He divorced his second wife, saying that she was, in effect, beating him up.

The King, besides meeting Louis in the ring, had two other athletic distinctions of sorts.

One was that he was the last man to box Jack Dempsey, who was considering a comeback. It was in an exhibition match in Chicago Stadium in 1932. The King was told by his manager, who was also his sister, "Leapin' Lena" Levy, that a good showing here could make people take notice. He pummeled the old ex-champion, a rather unusual tactic in an exhibition.

It was enough for Dempsey, though. He figured if he could lose to the King, then the sun had surely set on his career.

The King tried a like technique in an exhibition with another former champ, Max Baer. The King rushed Baer in the first round. Baer had begun casually. Now his hackles were high and he knocked the King out in the second. Did you ever hear of anyone being knocked out in an exhibition match?

The King, however, danced over to Baer's corner after the fight and began to joke and toss his arm around Baer's shoulders. Baer knotted his brows, and proceeded to ignore him.

There were some good days, though, for the King. He beat Jack Sharkey and Primo Carnera, among others.

The King has been in the tie racket since 1939. He was asked how the action is today. “Quiet,” he said confidentially, dragging the listener closer with a still formidable arm.

“Nixon—you know, he messed it all up.”



COOKIE WALLACE: UP ‘N’ COMER

March 1970

IT WAS THE FOURTH time he had been knocked down. This time Cookie Wallace flumped and made a hammock of the bottom ring rope. His scuffed and deeply scarred white boxing shoes lay still. The referee did not bother to count, but waved his arms to signal the fight in the sixth round was finished. He then raised Bob Foster’s long arm in triumph.

It was a non-title fight, and the purpose was simply to keep Foster, the light-heavyweight champion, in trim and in pin money until his next title defense, and after that a hopeful shot at Joe Frazier and the heavyweight title.

In this seedy Tampa, Florida, armory, the crowd of some 2,500—those seated on unsure folding chairs at ringside, those in the two paint-peeling balconies—cheered for the winner who did what they all knew he would, or grumbled for the underdog who, as he would say later, “got up from three knockdowns by the champ. Not many men can say that.”

The fans watched and shouted as Wallace finally rose and walked across the ring to congratulate Foster. Then there was a sharp gasp from the crowd as Wallace’s knees buckled and he collapsed again.

A doctor was at his side now, and Wallace’s handler sponged his neck, and Cookie was up, smiling with crooked teeth within a scraggly patch of mustache and goatee. But Cookie’s muscular brown torso was still not quite sure of the direction his thick legs would wobble.

Wallace is 22 years old, has a wife and four children, and works on a cargo ramp for Braniff Airlines in Dallas. He has been fighting for three years, and thinks he’s had some 45 bouts, and believes he has won more than he has lost. He recently dumped his manager who, he said, was

stickin' it to him, and now he manages himself and it is not so easy gettin' good fights.

"I was takin' this fight for the buck," he would say later. "I need a little cash right quick. I got liability with the car, and that sort of thing."

Now, Foster sat in the corner of a little dark room and his left hand was in an ice bucket. He assured the small group of reporters that his hand was all right, he just wasn't taking any chances on injury.

The questions concerned Frazier, and of course Foster said he could beat him and, with a wry smile under his thin mustache, he said don't nobody tell Frazier about that right hook they saw tonight because it's a secret weapon and Frazier thinks Foster only got a left jab. No one asked about Wallace.

Soon, however, Wallace appeared quietly, smiling broadly. ("I'm the type of fighter, I like everybody and I want for everybody to like me," he says.). He wore a black leather car coat, with the hem loose, and the cuffs of his blue jeans were rolled up. Wallace apologized to Foster for what Foster complained in the ring was butting.

"I didn't try to fight dirty," Wallace told him. "I was just tryin' to get inside." He hunched his shoulders and shadowboxed a bit.

"I know that," said Foster, kindly. "But that's the way champs do. You want the other guy to think he's fighting dirty."

They shook hands and Wallace departed. Now Foster began a little story of when Yank Durham, Frazier's manager, came by recently and newspaper photographers shot Foster hitting the big bag with Durham holding it.

"Whop, whop, whop," said Foster, his lean left hand out of the bucket and whiplashing the air. "My manager, Billy Edwards here, he said, 'Goddamn, you don't have to hit the bag so hard. We'll never get a shot at Frazier.'"

At the box office, waiting for his 20 per cent of the gate, "He hit me so hard and so fast" Wallace said, "that I didn't realize I was hit until I tried to move my legs. Then I sank. It was like putting a gas mask on when you get ready for an operation. You just get weaker all of a sudden.

"I knew nobody gave me a chance tonight. But I felt if I could get inside him, keep a-movin', keep a-pushin' until I get my right cross, then I could knock him out.

“But he don’t trade punches. No, he’s a jolly good fellow. Takes his time, bam, bam, bam. But at least people can say that Cookie fought Bobby Foster, the champ. I think it’ll help me get some more fights. They’ll say I’m someone who’s comin’ up.”

• • •

Cookie Wallace became Bob Foster’s sparring partner, and helped him prepare for the Joe Frazier fight. Frazier knocked Foster out in two rounds.



CARMINE VINGO: ROCKY MARCIANO'S VICTIM

January 1971

THERE WAS NO HEAT in the large office building on Broadway, and Carmine Vingo, a big man in blue uniform, stood in the tomblike marble lobby and rubbed his rough, chilled hands together. The midnight cold crept under the glass-door entrance. Carmine Vingo shivered and uttered a quiet oath that ended in a puff of breath.

“Cold,” he said. “I ain’t got no radio tonight, neither. The guy with the radio busted his back and he’s in the hospital. His room is locked with the radio in it.”

Carmine Vingo is the security porter here (“People say security guard, but it’s really security porter”), and on this wintry Sunday night he would have to keep one purblind eye on the door while he mopped the floor, emptied the ashtrays, scrubbed the elevators.

“Who’d ever believe it?” Vingo asked. “I figured the worst that could happen was to get knocked out. Actually, I was figurin’ on winnin’.”

Vingo was referring to another wintry night, December 30, 1949, the day after his 20th birthday and a few weeks before he had planned to be married. He fought Rocky Marciano. It was the first 10-round event at Madison Square Garden for both. Vingo had a 16–1 record, and he and Rocky and Roland LaStarza were considered the best young heavyweights around and one of them, said experts, would surely become champion.

Vingo was knocked out in the sixth round; he did not get up. He did not regain consciousness for three weeks. He was paralyzed for two years, his right leg is still stiff, and he is partially blind in both eyes.

“I can’t drive a car no more, I can’t walk so good no more. I can’t even put my pants on without leaning against the wall. Imagine that! And I can’t dance no more. Used to love to do the Lindy Hop,” said Vingo.

He speaks softly, hoarsely. His salt-and-pepper hair is combed carefully back in stiff lines. His face is clean-shaven but bluish from a heavy beard and a trace of pock marks. His eyes are soft-brown and lingering. His nose is flat. He appears older than 41.

“There were two other 10-round fights after us that night,” said Vingo. “Both guys who lost, Ruben Jones and Dick Wagner, used to live in my neighborhood in the Bronx. They’d come by and visit and they blamed *me* for their losses. ‘Carmine,’ they said, ‘we were slippin’ in the ring because all the water they threw on you.’”

A few months after he left the hospital Carmine Vingo married his sweetheart, Cathy. They moved in with her folks.

“And all the neighbors thought we were rich because of all the rumors that we were collecting thousands from all over the place,” said Vingo. “What a laugh. The only money we got was from Cathy working. I couldn’t hardly get out of bed for two years.”

There were and are no pension plans for prizefighters (though recently there has been a slow movement in this direction in New York). “Pension?” said Vingo. “They didn’t even have a stretcher. I heard that six guys carried me out of the ring.”

Another belief was that Rocky Marciano was helping Vingo financially. In fact, after Marciano died in a plane crash on August 31, 1969, *The New York Times* obituary read: “Despite his reputation for conservative spending, Marciano had a list of beneficiaries to whom he sent money regularly. One of these was Carmine Vingo...”

(“The only thing we ever got from Rocky were promises,” said Cathy Vingo recently. “He’d tell Carmine that he’d have something going for him soon, to put him in some business, that he had some property for him in Florida, that he’d have a benefit for him. Nothing. Each man is for himself in the fight game. That’s the game.”)

“I didn’t care,” said Carmine, blowing on his hands in the lobby. “But my wife gets mad about it. I didn’t push Rocky or Al Weill, his manager. Maybe if I’d pushed... But I’m not the type. Rocky, he was one of the nicest guys you’d ever want to talk to. I’d go up to his training camp in the mountains. And I was at his wedding and met his family, went to

his funeral. Paid my own way. My wife came in one morning and said, 'Carmine, I got terrible news. The radio said Rocky Marciano was killed in a plane crash.'

"I never asked Rocky for nothin'. But he did send me two tickets for his second fight in Chicago with Jersey Joe Walcott. Sent two round-trip tickets, too. And you know, I never did get my purse for the fight with Rocky. It was \$1,500. It went for doctor bills. I had four private nurses, and the whole bill was about \$4,000. I still don't know who paid that. It coulda been Rocky. But he only got \$1,500, too. And he couldn't have had much money because he was just startin' out, just like me. He didn't start makin' it big till after our fight."

Carmine makes a \$125 a week now and things are getting tougher. The house of his in-laws, where he has lived for 21 years, is being torn down by the city for a housing project. He must find a new apartment. He needs three bedrooms because he has a son, 12, and a daughter, 10.

("I don't know where we're going to move," said Cathy Vingo. "We pay my parents \$40 a month now. Rents everywhere are so high. Everything's over \$100 a month. And this is a new job for Carmine. He worked in Jersey for 15 years, but he had to quit because car fare was too much. To cross the bridge one way was 55 cents.")

Carmine Vingo shrugs. "We ain't rich and we ain't poor but it's not so easy either," he said. "I think about what happened, and I got to shake my head. Twenty years old. A couple months later I was in a school yard watching a softball game and a guy swings and throws his bat. Guess who it hits in the nose. *Carmine.*"

He smiled and blew on his hands again.



BULLETPROOF BOXER IS HEALTHY AGAIN

November 27, 1982

FOR ONE MONTH LAST summer, Jeff Sims was ranked 10th among heavyweights by the World Boxing Council. “Then I got health problems,” he said. The health problems were due to a bullet that had been shot into his left shoulder, a bullet shot into his left side, and another into his right buttock.

This came about last July 17, when, according to Sims, he and another man took opposing sides on an issue in the apartment they shared in Yonkers. The man left, returned by way of the fire escape, and clinched the argument by shooting at Sims through the window.

Ten years ago Sims had another accident, as he refers to it, and wound up with a bullet in the lower back. “And I got glanced in the right shoulder and in the back of my head,” he said. “But those bullets didn’t stick.”

Doctors have decided that to remove the bullets he has actually caught would do more harm than good. Now, though Sims is back in training, the four slugs lodged in his well-sculptured 6'3", 210-pound body do cause some inconvenience.

“Jeff’s my friend,” says Renaldo Snipes, the highly ranked heavyweight, “but I told him I don’t want to be walking down the street with him. He attracts lead.”

Sims, Snipes added, can’t get into airports, because he can’t pass the metal detectors. “Nah,” Sims said with a small smile above his patch of a goatee, “they let me fly.”

His most recent health setback grounded him from boxing for two months. Now he's back in a gym in Yonkers hitting the bag, hitting sparring partners and hoping one day for a shot at the title.

"My tragedy don't affect me no more," Sims said, speaking of the shooting last July. "I got my speed back, and my stamina. I just got to get my balance together. But I got a natural one-two punch, and if I catch a dude solid with a right hand and a left hook I'm gonna knock him out."

His professional record supports that. He has won 18 fights, 16 by knockout, against three defeats and a draw. In his first eight bouts, each of his opponents was knocked out in either the first round or the second.

"He's a devastating puncher," said his trainer, Pat Versace. "He was kind of a stiff-board fighter when I got him 15 months ago, but he's improving on his technique. Of course, he's starting kind of late. He's 27. Jeff has spent a lot of time away."

For seven years Sims was locked up, first in the Sumter County Correctional Institution and later in the Belle Glade Correctional Institution, both in Florida. He had been convicted of manslaughter at the age of 17.

This happened 10 years ago in Sims' hometown, Belle Glade, near West Palm Beach. "A guy I knew accused me of stealing his jacket from the pool hall," said Sims. "I didn't do it. But one night he waited for me in an alley and shot at me three times. No questions asked.

"I was livin' by myself in a little apartment then, and I worked in the field pullin' corn and sharecroppin'. I had been survivin' on the streets since I was 12 years old. And when this argument happened, I didn't have nobody to help me, because my mommy had died and my daddy left home when I was a baby and I got 10 brothers and sisters, but they was all struggling to make it for themselves. I asked the police for help, but they didn't do nothin'.

"So I took it on myself. I got a .22 and shot the guy twice. The guy didn't live." In prison, Sims learned to box. "I had been a pretty good street fighter," he said. "Nothin' fancy, but I could always punch. "I represented the institution when I'd go outside to box. And I got respect, and they got to trusting me. I was popular with the inmates, because I gave them entertainment from my boxin'. The warden said I helped relieve tension. I didn't have to do any fighting except in the ring. That was nice.

“I also earned certificates in auto mechanics, masonry, and welding.” While in prison Sims won the heavyweight championship of Florida. And three years ago, at age 24, he won his parole. He found his way to Miami Beach, where he got on some fight cards. “They put me in as some beanbag who would help other fighters move up,” said Sims. “But instead I knocked out people.” In his fourth bout, there he was, fighting in the main event.

Chris Dundee took him under contract, but Dundee eventually decided that Sims was too close to home and to unsavory elements. With Sims’ consent, an arrangement was made to send him to Yonkers and to be co-managed by Nick Ratenni.

“It was a good idea,” said Sims, “because there was no one I knew up here who I could be runnin’ the streets with.” He continued moving up the heavyweight ladder. Last year, he lost to Earnie Shavers by a technical knockout—after he had floored Shavers—and dropped a disputed split decision to Jimmy Young. But he knocked out Jumbo Cummings and Henry Porter in his last two fights.

His next bout is scheduled for early December, against Franco Thomas.

In the gym recently, Sims appeared quite healthy. Nothing seemed unusual, except for his boxing shoes. Holes had been cut away in them at the front and sides.

“The only health problem I’ve got now,” Sims said, “is bad dogs.”



ANDREW GOLOTA: AIMING FOR THE BELT

February 10, 1997

IT WAS 11:00 IN the morning, the appointed time he was to arrive at a gym and begin a light workout—then five after 11, 10 after, and 11:30, and still there was no Andrew Golota.

Golota, a 28-year-old who had been ranked among the top five heavyweights in the world until losing consecutive bouts over the past seven months by disqualification for hitting Riddick Bowe below the belt, was scheduled to be at the Windy City boxing gym on the southwest side of Chicago, a neat but traditionally inelegant second-floor gym, which had once been a warehouse. Golota has just returned to training, and is looking toward a possible bout in May with Jesse Ferguson and then perhaps a bout with Ray Mercer in June.

On this day, though, Golota was late. At 11:45, a call was made to the northside home where he lives with his wife and their five-year-old daughter. His wife, Mariola, answered the phone. “Oh, Andrew left some time ago,” she said. “He knows he’s supposed to be there. He’ll be there. But things happen to Andrew. He was late to our wedding. Both of them. Can you believe it, our own weddings? The first one was in Poland, at the Palace of Marriages, and he decided he wanted the pictures taken before, and not after, the civil ceremony. Everything got scrambled up, and we were late.

“Then we had a church wedding in Chicago, but he had forgotten to confess his sins. So first he went into the church to see the priest and stayed there a long time. My God, what could he have been telling? Everybody’s waiting. Finally Andrew comes out, and we got married.”

That was six years ago, and Golota, who at that time moved to Chicago, where Mariola lived, still seems to be catching up.

“Andrew can be a terrific fighter, maybe a champion one day soon,” said George Simms, a British trainer, who was in the gym working with a couple of young prospects. “He hits hard and can take a punch, too. But in the ring, he has to keep his lid on. He just can’t be going off his trolley, as he did in the two Bowe fights.”

He said this as a pair of amateur middleweights sparred in one of the two rings in the gym, their shoes scraping with an odd rhythm on the resiny canvas, their gloves thudding upon each other’s leather headgear, their sweat being illuminated by shafts of gray morning light issuing down from the skylight.

Then the front door opened and in walked a large man in a brown leather jacket and blue jeans. He had short brown hair and sharp but not unappealing features, stood about 6’4” and weighed about 240 pounds.

“I supposed to be here at 11:00,” Golota said.

Except now it was 11:58.

“But still 11,” Golota said.

Well, maybe in Omaha, he was told.

Golota smiled, a slightly apologetic smile. In short order, he donned a pink T-shirt, white trunks, and black boxing shoes, taped his own hands, did some loosening-up exercises, was helped on with a pair of red boxing gloves darkened at the fists from heavy use, and proceeded to pound the big black punching bag.

On the off-white walls of the gym were old, yellowing fight posters, some publicizing cards with Golota, and the earliest ones with the Polish spelling of his first name, Andrzej, and sites like an outdoor arena in Joliet, Illinois, billed as “Rumble by Starlight.” He was fighting then for \$50 a round, a long way from the \$2 million he earned in the second Bowe fight, but still far from such potential bonanzas as the \$35 million deal the champion Evander Holyfield signed for his second Mike Tyson heavyweight title fight on May 3.

Golota’s fists thumped against the big bag, which, upon receiving the blows, seemed to sometimes swing precariously from the long chain attached to the high ceiling. Patches of sweat blossomed on his pink shirt. A shrill bell rang, indicating three minutes were up, then another bell

indicating the one-minute rest period was up, and Golota attacked the bag again, each time hitting above what seemed to be an imaginary waist.

“It is easy to hit above the belt of the punching bag,” Golota said later. “It’s not going anywhere. But in the first fight, I hit him below the belt four times. The second fight, I did it only two times. I make progress.”

Golota was 28–0 with 25 knockouts before the disqualification losses to Bowe. In each of those Bowe fights—the first last July 11, the second on December 14—Golota was beating the former unified world heavyweight champion handily, and then unleashed blows that sent Bowe writhing to the canvas, ending the first fight in the sixth round, and the second in the ninth.

After the workout, he drove in his silver Mercedes to a restaurant in the heavily Polish Milwaukee Avenue area and ate a lunch of hot borscht and cheese pierogis with sour cream.

“In the first fight, I hit Bowe low on purpose the first time,” Golota said. “He hit me in back and I feel so much in kidney. I decide, you got to feel something, too. So you don’t do anymore.”

But to lose two fights in a row by identical types of disqualification is strange. “What could you do?” Golota said. “Sometimes you don’t think.” And this despite his manager, Lou Duva, hollering between rounds in the second fight for him to keep his punches up. “He was yelling too much,” Golota said. “There was so much noise. I could hardly hear him.” In his corner after the fight, Golota held his head in his gloved hands. “I stupid,” he groaned.

He recalled: “The fight was a war. I was angry, I was tired. I don’t know. I no can let it happen again.”

He was not happy with Duva’s response when someone asked how Golota might not foul again. “Maybe I should match him with a midget,” Duva replied. Golota said now, “He knows that wasn’t funny.”

Golota still retains dreams of owning the championship belt. “I just want it for a short time,” he said. “I don’t need it forever.”

But things do happen to him. Like last summer, when he tried for the first time to cook steaks on a grill in his backyard. “I burned them,” he said. “My friends couldn’t eat it. So I gave it to my dog. And he got sick.”

He has become a national hero in Poland behind only Lech Walesa and Pope John Paul II because of his boxing success. He won a bronze medal in the 1988 Olympics, but he also became a fugitive in his home country

until recently being given a suspended jail sentence and a \$7,000 fine on charges of assault and robbery, after a man had apparently begun a fight with Golota in a bar in Boleslawiec. Golota said he left the man with only a shiner, his underwear, and one shoe, dumping the rest of the man's wardrobe that night into a trash can.

"I was drunk that night," Golota said. "I not do anything like that if straight. I be careful of my drinking from now on."

Yet Golota is not without certain winning ways, and his wife, Mariola, now a law student, told how she was smitten. "We met when I made a visit to Poland," she said. "I found Andrew to be very intelligent, very gentle, even. We had a whirlwind romance.

"I remember one bitterly cold night when we were coming out of a nightclub in Warsaw and there was an old grandma sitting on the curb selling roses. Andrew felt bad for her and he bought all the roses she had for me. We had so many roses we couldn't carry them all. So he stuffed them in his jacket. I had tears in my eyes. My Prince Charming."



FRENCH BOXER WON HIS BIGGEST FIGHT IN AUSCHWITZ

January 19, 1973

THIS INCREDIBLE STORY BEGINS: “In December 1944, I was hanged at Auschwitz.”

Yet Sim Kessel lived to write about it in *Hanged at Auschwitz*, winner of the Grand Prix Literature de la Resistance, and recently translated from the French into English.

Kessel, once a promising French professional boxer, had been arrested by the Nazis for his two-year involvement in the French resistance and for being Jewish. When he and four fellow convicts were caught trying to escape from the Auschwitz concentration camp, they were brought back to camp and hanged.

Kessel’s rope broke. But no reprieve. He was brought to “the notorious Jacob, chief kapo (prisoner-collaborator) and the camp’s official killer.” Jacob was to put a bullet through Kessel’s head.

Jacob, according to Kessel, had been a sparring partner for Max Schmeling, the onetime world heavyweight champion. This knowledge was Kessel’s only chance for survival, he felt.

“I argued that one boxer could not kill another boxer,” writes Kessel. “He looked at me in surprise.”

“Did you box?” asked Jacob.

“The words poured out of me. I named names, described bouts. And though he obviously hadn’t heard of me and my ring career, our common passion for boxing was a bond. I felt that he was becoming interested, that

he was beginning to struggle with himself. I thought that I detected a flash of something—was it sympathy?—in his cold gray eyes.”

Jacob saved him. It was the second time Kessel’s boxing background moved an enemy to spare his life.

About a year before that, Kessel was marching in a column to the gas chamber to be exterminated. He had the marks of a boxer: “broken nose, ridges over the eyes, cauliflower ears.” Naked and shivering, Kessel walked over to him, and said, “Boxer?”

“Boxer? Ja!”

“He didn’t wait for me to explain,” writes Kessel, “he understood. I too had a broken nose.” The S.S. man put the nude condemned man on the back seat of his motorcycle, and drove him to safety, for the time being.

Kessel says that neither the kapo nor the S.S. trooper were compassionate men. They were killers but their life-giving acts stemmed from the “casual good sportsmanship of one boxer to another, the act of a man who still felt some link with the past.”

Kessel’s story tells in stark and simple language how he endured 23 months of the most gruesome horrors and tortures (he dropped from 155 pounds to 78 pounds, had a finger removed during a torture session).

When Kessel was first arrested, the S.S. troopers tortured and beat him to find out who his Resistance collaborators were. His now-purple face, he says, was a mass of raw wounds, eyes were swollen, his body cut up, his fingers raw from having match-sticks jabbed under the nails, his testicles were beaten blue.

“Perhaps it was my training that gave me the ability to take torture without breaking down,” he writes. “A boxer learns to live with pain. And, most important, he can only consider himself a real boxer if he stubbornly perseveres to the end, refusing against all odds to admit defeat.”

Something else, another remnant from his athletic days, kept Kessel going: his inherent optimism. “This particular feeling helped to keep me alive, and to a large extent spared me the dejection that burdened most of the prisoners and hastened their end.”

Kessel is now 53 years old and, according to friends, has regained his vigorous health. He returned to Paris after the war but he never returned to the ring. He says he wrote *Hanged in Auschwitz* to keep the memory of “the concentration-camp martyrs” fresh. The Nazis took the boxing out of Kessel, but not the fight.

VIII.

***THE LIGHT-
HEAVYWEIGHTS:
A MIXED BAG***



ARCHIE MOORE: A VERY MERRY MONGOOSE

March 6, 1983

ARCHIBALD LEE MOORE, KNOWN as “The Mongoose”—“The Merry Mongoose,” he corrects—former light-heavyweight champion of the world; professional boxer for 29 years; holder of the record for most knockouts in major competition (145); retired from active fighting in 1965 to “enter the cinema and television fields”—his most prominent role was Jim in *Huckleberry Finn*; now primarily a “master boxing instructor,” a trainer and manager in San Diego and Los Angeles, but still, he admits, an unofficial international ambassador of good will (once, when stripped of his title by a commission for inactivity, he appealed to the United Nations), and he is still going strong at 69, or 66—his mother put his birth date as December 13, 1913, but he insists the year was 1916. “My mother should know, she was there,” he once said. “But so was I. I have given it much thought, and have decided that I must have been three when I was born.”

Being for most of his life a participant and aficionado of “the art of self-defense”—he pronounces the phrase slowly—with respect and affection, Archie Moore is concerned about its future.

With the death in the ring of South Korea’s Duk Koo Kim, and mismatches such as the recent heavyweight title fight between the champion Larry Holmes and Tex Cobb, Moore has, of course, been aware of a move in the country to do something about the sport, from improving safety measures to banning the sport.

Congress is studying it and federal regulation has been proposed to take the place of ineffective state commissions, and as a check against the two “world” boxing organizations.

“I’m not sure who should govern boxin’,” Moore said by telephone recently from his home in San Diego, “but it should be somebody honest, who knows the sport, the implementation and organization of it. The Federal Government might be all right—you couldn’t be going backward. Everybody else seems to have had a cut at it.”

Boxing, said Moore, is important and valuable. “It can give a boy a fresh start in life. Maybe he’s come from jail, or the ghetto, or the streets, maybe he’s been downtrodden. It’s great for giving a man a chance to assert himself as a man. To prove, ‘Hey, I’m not the worst dude in the world.’”

“I can remember back when I was in reform school in Boonesville, Missouri, in the 1930s, yes, well, when I was a student there”—he said with a chuckle—“I dreamed about making something of myself, about being champion of the world.

“And when I got back out onto the sidewalk I was lucky to find some wonderful friends—we all need them—to help me. I felt like a sprinter, like I had had a bad start, and was given another chance to win the next race.”

He is critical of boxing today on several levels, from the training of fighters to the matchmaking of bouts. “Take Kim,” said Moore. “The boy is dead, and it’s a pity, but what was he doing in the ring with the champion? Kim wasn’t the next-ranked lightweight contender. He was far, far down. In fact, I never even heard of him before.

“And you saw Kim, who is a southpaw leading with his left hand. That’s supposed to be his power punch. The only way he performed was through a lot of courage, that was his schtick, as we say in boxing. He was nothing more than a pretty fair amateur at the stage when he fought for the title. He was no match for Boom Boom Mancini, who himself is just getting his boots on as a fighter.”

The dream of becoming a champion is nurtured by young fighters today, as it was when Moore was growing up. “But even if they don’t become professional fighters, I think the lessons learned in the ring can give a boost in anything you try. If you instruct ’em right, make ’em think, teach ’em that you don’t cut off the ring, for example, you cut off an opponent—the ring will still be there. You develop a young man’s mind and

body, his health and morals, and if you encourage him enough, then he reaches a point where he won't turn back. I have seen this happen more than occasionally."

The last time this reporter saw Moore was in June 1973 when Moore was in the corner of Earnie Shavers, who knocked out Jimmy Ellis in the first round in Madison Square Garden.

Moore, a believer in psychological ploys, recalled the advice he had given Shavers. At the weigh-in, the two fighters met, and Ellis, conventionally, extended his hand to shake. But Shavers grabbed Ellis' forearm and said, "You're in trouble, boy."

"Ellis," said Moore, laughing, "never recovered." One of Moore's last fights was against a young Muhammad Ali. Moore was knocked out in four. How did he feel about that? "I had a headache," said Moore.

"Old Man Age," he added, "is quite a fighter. He knows how to creep up on a guy." Moore, a pugilist until he was about 50 years old, disdains talk of punch-drunk fighters. "There are many people who are mentally unbalanced and they never took a punch," he said. "I, for one, can prove that I never had my mentality jarred loose. I would be willing to discuss with any psychologist, any professor, or anybody else who is supposed to be the brainy type on various and sundry general topics."

He was asked about his nickname, "The Mongoose." "I received it," he said, "because of my unique talent for ridding my life of snakes and rodents, some of which were people. I eliminated them from my path and mind. How? I got out of their way, simple as that."

He added a few other axioms for good living: "I never retired. I just changed procedures." "Age is like a bulldozer. It's gonna push you out of the way once you stop moving." On how he plans to lose weight—he weighs about 220 pounds, some 45 pounds more than in his fighting days: "Every morning I stand in front of the mirror and look at it." (Then he makes a commitment to himself.)

Moore was once asked whether his wife minded kissing him with his mustache and goatee. He smiled and replied, "A girl doesn't mind going through a little bush to get to a picnic."

Is that still the case? "Some things," said the Merry Mongoose, "never change."



ROY JONES JR. DOESN'T MEET HIS MATCH

July 18, 1998

“DO YOU THINK LOUIE has a chance?” asked José, a porter in a large apartment building on Manhattan’s East Side.

“The odds are 15-to-1,” said Sid, a doorman in the same apartment building. “That’s really an underdog.”

“Even if Louie gets his butt kicked,” said Eddie, a maintenance man there, “he’ll still make \$850,000. He was getting \$24,000 a year here.”

For three years, starting in 1989, Lou Del Valle was employed as a porter in the building, a building in which I reside. And then he left to seek his fortune, and try to avoid a punch in the nose, in the bargain. He became a professional prizefighter. Tonight he fights Roy Jones Jr. for the chance to become the undisputed light-heavyweight champion of the world.

Del Valle has compiled a formidable professional record of 27 victories, one loss, and 19 knockouts. His lone defeat was in a disputed 15-round decision for the World Boxing Association light-heavyweight title in 1996 against the champion Virgil Hill, in Hill’s hometown of Grand Forks, North Dakota. Del Valle had been a 20-to-1 underdog.

“I got robbed,” Del Valle said. “I dropped him in the second round and should have finished him. But I still felt I had won the decision. Just about everyone else there except the judges saw it the same way.”

Although coming into the Theater at Madison Square Garden as a decided underdog against Jones, the World Boxing Council champion with a record of 36–1 with 31 knockouts, Del Valle does not appear to be intimidated.

"I'm going to beat him," he said. "I have the style to beat him. He's strong and can punch, but the best part of my game is movement. And I can crack, too. If he gets stupid, he's going to get it. But it's like pitching. Against Roy Jones, you can't throw a bad pitch, or he'll hit it out of the park, like McGwire, or Griffey. Jones is a great fighter. I have to pitch a perfect game to win, and I have a perfect game in me."

I knew Louie, as everyone called him, as a personable, confident, red-headed young man with, at 6'0" and 175 pounds, an athletic build. And Louie had dreams—he was 20 when he first came to work in the building—but most young men have dreams. Many, however, do not have the skill or forbearance to realize those dreams.

Was Louie different? I'd see him sweeping the lobby floor, or on the way to the garbage disposal. We talked frequently. "I have bigger goals in my life than being here," he had told me. He wanted to be a professional boxer, he said. He wanted to become a world champion.

He wore the green shirt and pants that were standard for the building's laborers, but he also wore around his neck a pair of miniature gold gloves with a single diamond, emblematic of the Golden Gloves light-heavyweight championship he won in 1989 at the Garden.

In 1990, he lost in the Gloves finals. And it was in this loss that it became apparent that Louie might have a future, because of his work ethic. In the apartment building, he worked the 4:00 PM-to-12:00 AM evening shift. This caused a trial in his training. He grew up in the Queensbridge projects in Long Island City, and after work would run home over the 59th Street Bridge.

"It wasn't so great, with all the fumes," he recalled recently, "but I had no choice. I needed the money at work and I needed to fit in the training when I could. But I lost in the finals because I got tired."

Louie, a southpaw, decided to put his fists where his dreams were, and turned pro. In his debut on January 12, 1992, he beat Worthy Hendricks in a four-round decision. And he was off. Last September he knocked out Eddy Smulders in the eighth round to win the WBA light-heavyweight title.

"I love boxing," Louie said. "I love the challenge. And I wanted to make something of myself. When I was younger, I got into a lot of trouble. Fights, drugs—doing drugs, selling drugs—jail time. It was a tough neighborhood, and that was the life. And sometimes I'd fall back. Like after the

Hill fight. I was discouraged, frustrated. I hung out, I ballooned to 228, then I got myself back together again. Right now, I'm 175 and in the best shape of my life.”

Louie recalls that his uncle, Rocky Candelaria, a maintenance man in the building, got him the job there as a young man. “That changed my life,” Louie said. “Got me off the streets.”

But it was Louie, now 30 years old, who through dedication and intelligence made himself into a respected professional. And regardless of the outcome of the Jones fight, it is unlikely that any of that will change.

Louie Del Valle lost a unanimous decision to Roy Jones Jr. However, he became the first fighter ever to knock Jones to the canvas.



SUCCESS STORY IS REWRITTEN IN MYSTERY

November 27, 1995

“HAVE WE GOT ANYTHING yet?” asked Lt. Walter Wilfinger, in his office as chief of detectives of the 61st Precinct on Coney Island Avenue in Brooklyn. He squared the black-rimmed glasses on his face and turned to Bob Sommer, one of his detectives.

“Nothing,” replied Sommer, his amber tie loosened, sitting across the desk from him. “It’s going on three weeks and still not a clue. It’s a total mystery.”

“But,” said Detective Arthur Semioli of the Brooklyn South Homicide Task Force, also seated in the room, his green velour pancake cap on a hook on the wall behind him, “we’re not about to close the book. It’s an active investigation, that’s for sure.”

Tacked to message boards in restaurants and post offices in Brooklyn, as well as in the detectives’ office of the 61st Precinct, are white 4"x6" laminated cards distributed by the New York City Police Department that tell some of the story. They say in big black letters: **MISSING PERSON**.

Below this are details of the search, beginning with: “Subject: Sergei Kobozev.”

For those who follow professional boxing, the name has significance. Kobozev, with a 22–1 record including 17 knockouts, was the United States Boxing Association’s cruiserweight champion—not quite a major title in what is often an overlooked division, between light-heavyweight and heavyweight. But Kobozev, who came to the United States five years ago from Russia, had also been a captain in the Red Army and held a

degree in chemistry from the Institute of Moscow—hardly common pedigrees for a prizefighter. And he had been a member of the Soviet national boxing team and was looking toward his biggest boxing payday ever in March.

It was an expected \$100,000 shot for the World Boxing Council title against the winner of a January match between the champion Anacleto Wamba and the challenger Marcel Dominguez.

On November 8, Sergei Kobozev was last seen leaving a garage in the Flatbush section of Brooklyn between 5:45 PM and 6:00 PM after having a cable short repaired in his 1988 black-and-white Chevy Blazer. He was reported missing that night by Lina Cherskikh, his dark-haired live-in companion. Five days later, his car was found beside a dumpster in the parking lot of the Petrina Diner in Bensonhurst, where he sometimes ate. The diner, open 24 hours, is about five miles from the garage in Midwood. No one remembers seeing Kobozev in the diner. The car was locked from the outside. There was no sign of foul play.

Kobozev had \$12,000 in a bank account in his name. It has not been touched. No checks have been drawn on it. No credit cards owned by him have been used. There have been, according to the police, no ransom notes. The police have not found any connection between Kobozev and the so-called Russian Mafia in America. They have established no connection to another woman.

“It seemed he wasn’t a ladies’ man,” Semioli said. “And there were no signs of any mental lapse by him or disorientation. Was there foul play—either random violence or planned? Or did Kobozev disappear on his own volition? We’re ruling nothing out.”

The Missing Person card goes on:

“Description: Male, White, 6’1”, 190 lbs., light complexion, Muscular, Blue Eyes, Brown Hair, 31 years old.

“Clothing: Lt. blue Levi jeans, blue & brown leather jacket, grey button down crewneck shirt, black dress shoes.

“Last seen: 11/8/95, near East 15th Street and Avenue L, 61 pct.”

The background information was all on the left half of the card. On the right was a slightly washed-out head shot of Kobozev in a red shirt open at the neck. He wore his hair short and looked into the camera with a half-smile and the paradoxically kindly eyes of a prizefighter.

“The ropes really separated the two worlds of Sergei,” said his assistant trainer, Peter Kahn. “He was very even-tempered, very unexcitable, very pleasant, almost shy when you’d meet him on the street. But he was a beast in the ring. He never took a step back. He really earned the right to be called tough.”

“The police have investigated and can’t find any enemies that he had,” said Tommy Gallagher, the boxer’s manager and trainer. “And outside the ring, he never caused trouble.”

“It is terrible,” said Cherskikh, who, with her seven-year-old son, Vitaly, lived with Kobozev in their one-bedroom, fourth-floor apartment on 16th Street in a working-class section of Sheepshead Bay. “I wake up every morning and see the pictures of Sergei on the wall. And every morning I cry.”

Kobozev had come to America in pursuit of a dream. “All he wanted was to be world champion,” she said. Cherskikh, who is also Russian, said Kobozev didn’t miss Russia. “He loved here, you know.”

On Wednesday evening, November 8, she had been expecting Kobozev to return home to take her son to a karate lesson. When, after several hours, he didn’t show up, and didn’t call—“he always call if he will be late,” she said—she called the police.

Kobozev’s last fight was on October 14, in Paris, where he lost a narrow split decision to Dominguez. It had been a bruising, crowd-pleasing affair in which Kobozev came back from two knockdowns to take the fight to the 12-round distance.

Some close to him reported that he was depressed by the loss, his first as a professional. And some wondered how that had affected Kobozev, a dedicated fighter who took his career seriously.

“He was very, very proud of being undefeated,” said Teddy Atlas, who had trained Kobozev the first two years the fighter was in America. “It might have been working on his mind and he might have eventually decided he just wanted to get away and be alone for a while.”

Still, Kobozev disappeared nearly three weeks after his last bout, long enough, conceivably, to get over any depression. And suicide was out of the question, according to everyone who knew him. They say he had too much to live for.

“He was also a man, not a boy, and he had put up such a good fight against Dominquez that he had been assured of a title fight in March,”

Gallagher said. "His future looked better than ever. He was looking at millions of dollars."

As no clues turned up, Cherskikh sought other means of looking for Kobozev. She went to several Russian psychics. "They also say different things," she said. "One say he is dead, another say he is alive. So now I believe nothing."

"One psychic said he was in Staten Island behind some water," Gallagher said. "But Staten Island is surrounded by water!"

Beatrice Rich, a Manhattan psychic, was consulted. In a spare room hardly larger than a walk-in closet, she sat at a small desk and tried to get impressions from tarot cards. "I don't see that anything dire has necessarily happened to him," she said. "But I also am not sure he is alive. I see him not in a cold place, but a warm place. A place like California. Normally, when someone is dead I get a very clear impression of it. But I also see another woman, a light-haired woman, though I don't know if she's a part of this. And I see two children."

There was, in fact, another woman in Kobozev's life, and another child. Apparently, only those close to him knew this. According to sources, he had been married in Russia to a doctor who gave birth to Kobozev's son soon after he had come to the United States. The police say, however, that he had never returned to Russia after leaving, that he had not seen his son, and that he either was divorced or was getting divorced to marry Cherskikh.

The relationship between Cherskikh and Kobozev, the police believe, was essentially a stable one. She refers to him as her husband, and said that her son asks every day, "When is Daddy coming home?"

The 61st Precinct detectives recently cracked another case of a missing person, one Stefan Tanner, who, after two weeks, was found to have been murdered. Another missing person recently "popped up," as Detective Semioli put it, having opted for a new life with a new love interest. "There are hundreds of missing persons every year in New York," he said. "But we usually get to the bottom of them before this."

Kobozev had been working on Saturday nights as a greeter and bouncer in a Russian nightclub in Brooklyn, the Paradise, on Emmons Avenue, for \$100 a night and free meals for him and Cherskikh. Friends say that she, more than Kobozev, enjoyed the nightlife.

There were reports of a fight at the club about a week before Kobozev disappeared, a brawl in which Kobozev was said to have acted as a peace-maker. Was there a punch thrown by Kobozev, however? Did someone get mad at him? "Right now," Semioli said, "it's something we're looking into."

Kobozev trained in Gleason's Gym, on Front Street near the Brooklyn Bridge. Inside the gym, there was the sound of fighters punching bags, the scrape of boxing shoes on canvas, and the snorting of fighters throwing and taking blows.

"Everyone treated Sergei with respect," said Don Diego Poeder, a young undefeated cruiserweight who sparred with Kobozev. "He had a way about him, quiet but confident. He seemed more mature than a lot of guys, maybe because he was a little older than some of the fighters here, and with that background in college and the Army. And he was very strong and always very tough to fight, but nice. He didn't speak much English, but he made himself understood. He'd hit me and tell me that I wasn't dodging enough. He'd say, 'Move head, move head.'"

Last summer, a week or so after Kobozev won his title, he was celebrating at a Russian supper club on Brighton Beach Avenue in Sheepshead Bay with Cherskikh and his Russian manager, Steve Trunov, when a friend, Sergei Artemiev, came in.

Kobozev cheerfully invited him to join them. Artemiev had been on the Soviet national boxing team with Kobozev. He had fought in the light-weight division and the previous year had suffered a massive blood clot in the brain in a fight that was one step from a world championship bout. Artemiev had been in a coma for 10 days before beginning to recover. He still had some health problems, and would never be allowed to fight again. Like Kobozev, he had left Russia to become a world champion. Now that dream had been dashed.

And while this was a happy time for Kobozev, he was sensitive to Artemiev's feelings. As the evening went on, Kobozev saw the sadness in Artemiev and sought to relieve it.

Kobozev urged him to have more caviar and blini. "Sergei," he said, with one hand on the neck of a bottle and throwing an arm around his friend, "some champagne?"

Artemiev is currently in Russia on business. No one, though, seems to know where Kobozev is.

For those who know and care about Sergei Kobozev, there are now only questions. There is no caviar and no champagne.

• • •

Some four years after the disappearance of Sergei Kobozev, his bones were found by the FBI in March 1999 in a shallow grave in the Livingston, New Jersey, backyard of a reputed member of the Russian Mafia, Alexander Spitchenko. In a trial in a Manhattan courthouse, Alexander Nosov and Vasiliy Ermichine, also members of the Russian Mafia, were convicted of the murder of Kobozev, the result of antagonisms following the nightclub brawl.

IX.

*IN THE MIDST
OF THE MIDDLE*



THE LAMOTTA NUPTIALS

April 20, 1985

NEITHER OF THE LAS Vegas dailies, nor, for that matter, *The New York Times*, reported in their society news sections the wedding of Jacob “Jake” LaMotta, 63 years old, erstwhile pugilist, and Theresa Miller, younger than the bridegroom and decidedly prettier.

Perhaps it was determined in some editorial conclave that to cover one of Jake’s nuptials is to cover them all, for this was the sixth time he’s tied the knot. But to Jake, each, of course, is unique. His first wife divorced him, he says, “because I clashed with the drapes.” Another one, Vicki, complained about not having enough clothes. “I didn’t believe her,” LaMotta says, “until I saw her pose nude in *Playboy* magazine.”

The betrothal of LaMotta, the former world middleweight champion, to Miss Miller—this was her second trip to the altar—took place last Saturday night in Las Vegas at Maxim Hotel and Casino in a room stuffed with a wide assortment of beefy people with odd-shaped and familiar noses: They included such ex-champions as Gene Fullmer, Carmen Basilio, Willie Pep, Joey Maxim, Billy Conn, José Torres, and, the best man, Sugar Ray Robinson, plus a potpourri of contenders, trainers, and matchmakers, all of whom were in Las Vegas to attend the Hagler-Hearns world middleweight title fight two nights later.

For LaMotta, having Robinson as the best man was a sweet and perfect touch. “I fought Sugar six times,” he said. “I only beat him once. This is my sixth marriage and I ain’t won one yet. So I figure I’m due.”

Both the groom and the best man wore tuxedos with white corsages in their lapels. The bride was radiant in a white dress with

mother-of-pearl-and-lace design, and a garland of baby's breath in her auburn hair. The wedding party assembled under a white lattice arch in the corner of the room as District Judge Joe Pavlikowski of Clark County presided over the ceremony.

Despite the loud, happy chatter of the guests, the judge began a recital of the vows. "Quiet, please," a man shouted. "Quiet." When that didn't work, the man stuck two fingers in his mouth and whistled. That got their attention.

The judge continued. He asked Jake and Theresa if they would love and obey. They said they would, and Jake kissed the bride.

"Wait a minute," said the judge. "Not yet."

Jake looked up, and Theresa smiled. The judge coughed.

In another corner of the room, a phone rang.

Jake looked around brightly. "What round is it?" he asked.

The room broke up. Theresa, laughing, said, "I've changed my mind!" Then she hugged Jake, who smiled proudly at his *bon mot*.

"We've got to finish," said the judge. The room settled down somewhat. "...With love and affection," continued the judge, speaking quicker now. In short order, he pronounced them "Mr. and Mrs. Jake LaMotta."

Applause and cheers went up, and the couple kissed again, this time officially.

"Jake's ugly as mortal sin," observed Billy Conn. "He's a nice guy, though."

Shortly after, Jake and Carmen Basilio argued about who was uglier. The issue wasn't resolved. Steve Rossi, the comedian, who was performing at the hotel, was the master of ceremonies at the wedding. He brought the fighters onto the stage, where they talked and laughed and fainted and hit one another with friendly jabs and hooks.

When all the fighters were on stage, Rossi said, "Let's all go eat before the platform collapses."

Teddy Brenner, the matchmaker, asked Joey Maxim, "Who was the only white guy to beat Jersey Joe Walcott and Floyd Patterson?" Maxim said he didn't know. "You, ya big lug," said Brenner. They both laughed. The story gleefully made the rounds, varying a little with each telling, until finally, "...and so he asked Joey, 'Who was the only white guy to beat Louis and Ali?'"

Someone asked Fullmer how many times he had fought Robinson.

“Three and a half,” he said. “The second fight, I asked my manager, how come they stopped it? He said, “Cause the referee counted to 11.”

Basilio said he had recently retired as a physical education instructor at Le Moyne College in Syracuse. Someone asked if he had a degree.

He smiled and brushed the ashes from his cigarette off the sports jacket of the person he was talking to. “I got a degree from H.N.,” he said. “The school of hard knocks.”

Billy Conn, who lives in Pittsburgh, was telling about the time that his brother Jackie, a nonconformist, visited Conn on a Thanksgiving Day. “We were having the Mellons over and I told Jackie that we wanted everything to run smoothly, so here’s 50 bucks and go buy a turkey for yourself. But he kept the 50 bucks and took the two turkeys we had in the stove.”

What did the Conns and the Mellons eat that night?

“We didn’t eat,” he said, “we drank whiskey all night. Oh, Jackie was a character. Jackie’s dead now.”

Roger Donoghue, once a promising middleweight from Yonkers, and now a successful liquor salesman, was recalling the television-fight days of the early 1950s. Basilio came over and handed Roger a small camera and asked him to take a picture of him and his wife.

“I got hit in the head a lot,” said Roger, looking at the camera, “but I’ll try.”

The doors of the room were opened and the clanging of slot machines was heard from the adjoining casino. People wandered in and out of the wedding party.

Jake was explaining, “You wanna go through life with someone, and she’s a great kid, a great kid.”

“This one,” said Theresa, “is going to last until we die.”

Now, Jake and his bride stepped onto the dance floor. A trio, headed by a piano player wearing a black cowboy hat, played “The Nearness of You.”

Joey Maxim removed the cigar from his mouth as he watched Jake dance with his new bride. “Ain’t that nice?” he said.

“Hey, buddy,” said a man who walked in from the casino, “you know where a fella can get two tickets for the fight?”



**JAKE LAMOTTA:
PHILOSOPHER-BOUNCER**

November 1973

INSIDE THIS DARKLY GLITTERING, rock-pulsating, many-mirrored topless emporium, a supple blonde, one of five shimmying maidens, ends her choreographic stint. She steps down from the bar stage and walks past the nearby tables. She wears a G-string with bills—tips from admirers—tucked like green butterflies down her rear side.

“Kiss, honey, gimme a kiss,” urges Jake LaMotta, from behind his cigar. She smiles, decorously kisses the hefty ex-middleweight boxing champion on the bridge of his well-worn schnoz, and departs.

“A nice broad,” said LaMotta, who is the keeper of the peace, so to speak, here in mid-Manhattan. “But she’s young. She don’t know nothin’ about life or love. It’s true, you’re wasted on the young—that’s not my original saying, it’s someone else’s.

“But me, I’m 50 years old, and I gone through two million bucks, four wives, 4,000 pounds, millions of punches, and been with—you won’t believe this—a thousand women, at least.

“I made all that money goin’ up and comin’ down from being the champ, and I always had a weight problem so I had to lose a lot of pounds. And the women, well, a friend of mine once told me that they like me ’cause I’m the ultimate in manhood.

“I always been symonymous (sic)—is that how you pronounce it?—with beautiful women. But the next time I get married—I been divorced now from my number four ex for a year—I’m goin’ to marry a woman

uglier than me. So far, I ain't found one that fits the description." LaMotta laughed.

"And I know I ain't gonna find her here. Funny thing, I love women but I'm turned off here. You seen one topless broad, you seen 'em all."

Another employee in a microscopic frock walked by and sat briefly on LaMotta's lap upon request. When she left, LaMotta was asked why he shows the ladies so much attention if they don't titillate him.

"Showmanship," he replied. LaMotta prides himself on being a sometimes after-dinner speaker, maker of television commercials, and actor in a couple of Hollywood movies (one being called, fittingly, *Cauliflower Cupids*).

"What would make me happy is a woman I can love. I need a relationship. I need a woman I can communicate with.

"Happy. Who the frig is happy? So many negative things throughout the universe. Sure, there's sunshine, but there's also storms and hurricanes and blizzards and floods. We got to get rid of our negative feelings and become spiritual.

"That's why I became a Christian Scientist eight years ago. Matter does not exist. The *soul* exists. That's what they believe. You have to almost hypnotize yourself. Like rain and winter don't exist for me. I don't own no winter coat and I don't own no raincoat.

"Whatever the mind can conceive and believe, the mind can achieve. That's not my quote, either, but it's right. Think about it. See that ashtray on the table? If you believe strong enough you can make it move." He stared hard as a bullfrog at the small black ashtray. It seemed not to budge. "Unfortunately," said LaMotta, "I haven't reached that level of consciousness yet.

"The Law of Karma has the right attitude about life. You only get out of it what you put into it. Like jealousy. I used to be a jealous guy with my broads. No more. Life is too short. Jealousy is a disease, a negative thing. It's all wrong.

"My life now, it's a period I'm goin' through. I been a bouncer here for almost two years. I accept it. I don't feel sorry for myself. Don't forget I been in jail, in a chain gang, was put in a box in a hole in the ground. And I been punched silly. So this place is not terrible. I do my job. They don't want me to sit in a window and advertise myself the way Jack Dempsey

does in his restaurant down the street. Because here, they ain't sellin' me, they're sellin' tits."

He has plans, though. "There's negotiations for a movie on my autobiography, *The Raging Bull*. I'm in a vending machine business with my brother. And I got my public speaking and acting. Nature provides, makes your skin tough. If it don't, you end up in the looney bin.

"I learned to have patience. Ride with the punches. I did plenty of that. And I was always good at self-hypnosis. I wanted to be champ, wanted to be champ. Dreamed it, wished it, believed it. It came true."

He excused himself for a moment to shoo away some teenagers who were peeking through the door of the window-covered bar.

He returned and spoke of the after-effects of a boxing career. "All those punches I took in the head must be why I talk kind of funny," he said. "But I don't know. I didn't talk so good when I started, either." He discoursed briefly on world affairs: "The only honest politicians are them guys who ain't been caught, and they're hypocrites."

"I amaze myself," LaMotta continued, puffing languorously on his cigar. "I've become a philosopher in my own right. Say, you got a lot of good information from me, don't ya? Maybe you could write the article from the standpoint of a philosopher ex-fighter. People think fighters are stupid, punchy—and most are. But we got good hearts."



ROCKY GRAZIANO: THE BRAWLER AS ARTIST

April 14, 1990

EVERYONE KNEW ROCKY GRAZIANO was dangerous. There was a time, for example, several summers ago when the former pugilist broiled hamburgers on a grill on the patio of a friend's brownstone in Manhattan. Rocky found a chef's hat to wear, and, in loafers without socks—he rarely wore socks because he had developed gout and his feet were happier sockless—he proceeded to cook up a storm. Not so much a storm as a smoke, big clouds of smoke into which he disappeared for long moments at a time.

He was soon excused from his duties, to the relief of everyone on the scene, including the host, who owned the flammable building.

In the ring, of course, Graziano was dangerous in a different way. He could turn around a fight with one punch, a right hand. That was demonstrated explosively the first time I ever saw him, when I was a boy in the summer of 1947. His second fight with Tony Zale for the middleweight championship of the world was shown on film in theaters a few weeks after the event. The memory of the savagery of that fight is spine-chilling.

Not just to me, but to boxing academics who consider the three Zale-Graziano title fights perhaps the most furious and fearsome of all time. They are classics of the genre, like certain Renaissance triptychs.

By the sixth round of the second fight, Graziano, knocked out in the first fight, was cut and bleeding badly, sagging on the ropes, his eyes glazed, when suddenly he summoned strength and crashed a right to Zale's jaw. Moments later, Zale was defenseless against Graziano's barrage, the fight was stopped, and Graziano's arm was raised as the new champ.

They fought again less than a year later, and Zale won by a knockout again. The last time I saw the two of them was about a year ago at a banquet at the Downtown Athletic Club for the longtime fight trainer Ray Arcel. Zale had come from Chicago, Graziano from his apartment in midtown.

When the two old fighters saw each other, they hugged, as men who share special times together in that brutal line do, and they mugged a little for photographers, as they have more than once in the last 40 years, with playful, posed fists at each other's jaw.

Graziano, who is now 69 years old, looked older than that. His face had aged, with that lumpy nose and the eyebrows that were applied, it appeared, with charcoal, and the gentle eyes that one wasn't prepared for in a brawler named Rocky.

But he could still make one laugh, with the stories he told more than once. Like, "I put Sugar Ray Robinson on the canvas—when he tripped over my body."

Early on Thursday morning, a newscaster on television reported that Rocky Graziano was in critical condition in New York Hospital, after having suffered a stroke. Two months ago, he suffered a heart attack. Now the puncher who came back so often from tough blows must try to do so again.

Talk about Graziano, and people say, "Everybody likes Rocky." One of his old boyhood friends from the Lower East Side, Joe Wander, said, "Rocky always remained humble."

Born Thomas Rocco Barbella, Graziano grew up in mean circumstances, was in reform schools, went AWOL from the Army because he didn't understand Army etiquette—such as, if a captain dresses you down, you shouldn't punch him in the mouth—but then found his niche as a prizefighter (using his brother-in-law's name). Later, in his winning, unpolished but aware manner, he became a television personality and a comedian.

He also became an amateur painter. "I like to paint 'cause it's very, very—it's sometin' in my life what makes me feel good and it always has since I started wit' it in de reformatory when I was t'irteen," he once told me. "And it was good even for kids, 'cause den you don't have to just be in sports or robbin' or bookmakin' to get along.

“It gives you pride, like you done sometin’, like, Ma, look, I made dis pitcher myself.”

He said: “I paint bright. Green and red and white are my favorite colors, believe it or not. Come to t’ink of it, my boxin’ robe was green and white. So I always liked dem colors. And red, too. Yeah, t’row red in wit’ ’em. Some people who aren’t bums and are supposed to know about art tell me I got good perspective and good coordination. My subjects are anyt’ing I see: a building, a face, a cab passin’ by.

“I even done copies of Picasso. He was fantastic. He had guts enough to do stuff people thought was nuttin’ but a rag, and he became a champ in his field.” And Rembrandt? “Oh, tree-mendous.” Da Vinci? “Un-bee-lee-vable!”

Graziano said he had great respect for the Impressionist painters, too. “Do you know Van Gogh?” I asked. “I didn’t know the guy,” Graziano said. “But I liked his pitchers a lot.”

Rocky Graziano, a man of the canvas, has always been a craggy original, to be sure, and perhaps even a masterpiece.



LEAVE YOUR WORRY ON THE DOORSTEP

May 26, 1990

“ON THE SUNNY SIDE of the Street,” sung by Louis Armstrong, was playing on a tape recorder beside the laid-out body of Rocky Graziano in a room in the Frank E. Campbell Funeral Chapel in Manhattan.

It was Graziano’s favorite song, and it was the wish of the family that it be played at his wake, which was Thursday. Rocky died of cardiopulmonary failure Tuesday night at age 71. But the wake wasn’t altogether a solemn occasion, because Rocky wasn’t a solemn guy, even in death.

Oh, it’s true that he had suffered in the last several weeks, and even months and years, from a series of ailments, but even as he lay in his coffin, in red tie and dark suit, there seemed actually to be a smile on his face.

The life had been a hard one, especially early on, in the poverty of the Lower East Side, but he had made something of himself, something even beyond the achievement he was best known for, and that was winning the middleweight championship of the world.

At that moment, when his hand was raised in the Chicago Stadium on July 16, 1947, after he knocked out the incumbent, Tony Zale, Graziano grabbed the microphone and shouted, “The bad boy done it!”

He had started off, certainly, as “a bad boy,” a kid in and out of reformatories, who later joked about dropping out of school in the fourth grade because of pneumonia. “Not because I had it,” he’d say, “because I couldn’t spell it.” He would hit an officer when he was in the Army, go AWOL, and be jailed in Leavenworth for nine months.

Speaking at the wake, and delivering the liturgy at the funeral Mass for Graziano yesterday in St. Patrick's Cathedral, Msgr. Anthony J. DallaVilla called Rocky "this very good man."

There was not much from him about how hard Rocky punched, or the savage way he'd come back to knock out with that lethal right Red Cochrane twice, and Harold Green and Zale, among scores of others.

But those who came to pay their last respects to the guy with the flattened nose and the backward diction saw him as something beyond just a pug. He had made something of himself. "He was a nice boy," said Tami Mauriello, a onetime heavyweight contender who used to work out in Stillman's Gym with Graziano, "a beautiful boy."

"Know what I learned from Rocky?" said Jake LaMotta, a boyhood friend and reform-school mate of Graziano's. "I learned you should be nice to people. He was a master at that. I had become bitter in later years from the way some people treated me, and I became like a recluse, a loner. I'd watch Rocky, and people was always comin' over to say hello. I learned that the good people overcome the bad."

"Inside the ring," said Bernie Palmer, a preliminary fighter in the 1930s, "he would do anything to win. Like when he fought Red Cochrane, a fast fighter, and both times Rocky had lost all nine rounds. But in the 10th round, the last round, of both fights he grabbed Cochrane by the throat and hit him with the right and knocked him out.

"But what I remember best about Rocky is one time a few years ago there was a banquet for old fighters, and the champs were up on the dais. At that time, I'd had some problems with gambling, but I turned my life around. He said to me: 'You oughta be up on the dais. You're as much a champ as dese guys, for all you went t'rough.'"

When one of Graziano's daughters, Roxee Lifton, talked to the gathering Thursday night, she recalled the advice that Rocky always gave: "Let people be who they are."

She recalled: "You would walk down the street with my father, and one block would take half an hour. Everybody wanted to shake his hand. But he wasn't doing it just for them, he was doing it for himself, too."

One old friend from the Lower East Side was talking about Rocky's wide appeal, and remembered driving in a convertible with Graziano just a few years ago and stopping for red lights in Harlem and people would be shouting: "Hi, Champ! Hi, Champ!" In 1956, Paul Newman starred

as Rocky in the autobiographical film *Somebody Up There Likes Me*. At the end, Graziano, having beaten Zale for the title, comes home to New York and, in a parade, receives the applause of the multitude.

Graziano later became a television personality, doing comedy routines and commercials. Always, he played only Rocky. He was married to the same woman, the former Norma Levine, for 47 years. “What was the secret?” she was asked. “I hit harder than he did,” she said, smiling. Before the Mass, a man on Fifth Avenue noticed the television cameras in front of St. Patrick’s. He said to someone standing nearby, “What’s going on?”

When told it was because of Rocky Graziano, the man said: “Oh, yeah. I saw the movie. Good story.”

Very good story.



EMILE GRIFFITH IN THAT “SINFUL BUSINESS”

August 17, 1992

THE REPORT LAST WEEK that Emile Griffith lay “close to death” in a hospital in Queens because of kidney damage, while a Senate subcommittee was looking into the current evils of boxing, struck a curious and tragic historical note.

Griffith is the 54-year-old former world welterweight and middleweight champion. Thirty years ago, he killed a man in the ring. The opponent in that welterweight championship fight was Benny “Kid” Paret. In the 12th round, Griffith caught Paret in the ropes and pummeled him with 17 straight right-hand blows.

“As he went down,” wrote Norman Mailer, who was at ringside that March night in Madison Square Garden, “the sound of Griffith’s punches echoed in the mind like a heavy ax in the distance chopping into a wet log.”

Paret lay in a coma for nine days, then died. “All I was trying to do was win the title,” said Griffith. “I didn’t want to hurt him.”

The killing unleashed a fury in this country, and around the world, a demand that boxing be abolished, or at least be reformed.

What set this fight apart, and gave it such renown, was that it was the first time that a man was killed in a championship fight that was nationally televised. A good part of the country (and later the rest of the world) watched it—including many replays of the knockout—and was revolted by it.

There were investigations, and government probes. Even the Vatican issued a comment about commercial fist-fighting, calling it an “objectively immoral sport.”

Yet the essence of the sport remained unchanged. In fact, one year later, in another title fight, Davey Moore, the featherweight champion, was beaten to death by Sugar Ramos. Little has changed through these 30 years; there have been repeated, if not annual, cries to kill boxing, or, at least, to exact some reform.

There have been numerous appeals to place professional boxing under a federal commission, where it belongs. Right now, each state conducts its own prizefighting affairs, some of them wildly slipshod. Through the years, various elected officials stand up, holler, wave, posture, get their names in the papers and their faces on television, making sure their constituents take notice, then drop boxing to go onto other, more politically potent issues.

Meanwhile, the world of boxing, with few exceptions, remains as bizarre and corrupt as ever. It may be, as Paret’s Cuban mother said, “a sinful business,” but it is a legal business, and a lot of money is made on it. The largest sums are often scooped up by the promoters and at the expense of the fighters, who, in the end, often wind up with little more for their efforts than flat noses and flat wallets, and hearing funny noises in their heads.

Boxing won’t be abolished anytime soon, and shouldn’t. There are people who fight of their own free will, for whatever their reasons (and usually it is to seek a way out of mean circumstances, a cliché that happens to be a fact). And there are the lusty multitude who pay to see men attempt to beat each other senseless. At certain times in the nation’s history, boxing has indeed been ruled illegal, but that turned out to be as successful as Prohibition. This is the reality, as are such occupational hazards as the periodic deaths.

So the next best thing is reform, which is what the Senate’s Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, which can recommend legislation, seemed to be after last week in its two-day focus on corrupt practices in boxing. The group centered some of its attention on the sport’s governing bodies.

It looked at how organized crime infiltrates the boxing business, how payments are made to improve fighters’ ratings so they can get shots at the

title, how the alphabet governing bodies—the WBC, the WBA, the IBF, and even the fledgling WBO—work their sleazy wonders, how a promoter like Don “the Barber” King clips his fighters, or Bob “Yesterday, I lied to you, but today I’m telling the truth” Arum performs multimillion-dollar equivalents of three-card monte.

While some fighters, like heavyweight champion Evander Holyfield, testified, along with a former Mafia marcher, Michael Franzese, the proceedings were watched with interest by those who care about boxing. One of those observing was Gil Clancy, now a boxing broadcaster, who was Emile Griffith’s trainer.

“The whole business seems to be getting worse, with more governing bodies acting independently and more title fights—there were once eight champions, now there’s a million of ’em—and less and less real concern for the fighters themselves,” said Clancy. “I followed the hearings, and I got the impression that these senators just don’t know what they’re doing.”

What he didn’t hear much of, and what continued to be lost, was the fact that for professional fighters, there are no pensions, no general health plan, shoddy sanctioning, haphazard training of referees, and few devices in place to protect them not just from unscrupulous promoters or managers, but also from themselves.

Clancy recalled the great clamor for reform after Griffith killed Paret. “Nothing ever came of it,” he said.

After Griffith’s fighting career ended, he continued in the sport, which, he said, he loved, seeing the beauty of achievement amid the brutality of the life. Until he was hospitalized over a week ago after what was reported as a fall, he had been training boxers at Gleason’s Gym in Brooklyn.

“Emile’s doing much better now,” said Clancy. “I think he’s out of danger.”



JUSTICE DELAYED IS BITTER JUSTICE FOR HURRICANE CARTER

January 24, 1993

WITH HIS ONE GOOD eye, his left, still piercing out from behind steel-rim glasses, the black man, the onetime middleweight contender, half-blind because of a botched operation in prison, stood Friday night at the lectern and looked out over an audience of some 400 people in the Austin Hall auditorium here at Harvard University.

For nearly 19 years he had looked out from behind steel bars, until, in 1985, a federal judge in New Jersey determined that he had been unjustly and wrongly convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment for a triple murder he did not commit.

“It’s a long way from Trenton State Penitentiary to the Harvard Law School,” Rubin “Hurricane” Carter said Friday with a smile that combined irony, humor, pain, anger, and even warmth. “A very, very long way.”

Carter, now 55, a free man for the last seven years, living in King City, Ontario, near Toronto, had been invited to give the keynote address in a two-day conference on “The Future of Habeas Corpus” at the Criminal Justice Institute at Harvard. Carter is an expert on the subject, and a subject of prominence to the experts, because it was the Great Writ, as the federal review is known, that became Carter’s passport to freedom from a New Jersey state verdict.

Habeas corpus—the requirement that a detained person be brought before a court to determine the legality of the detention—has been under attack in recent times, primarily by conservatives who contend that the

process clogs up the courts, Carter said. But Carter, who fervently studied the doctrine in his cell, was at Harvard to defend it, to talk about it as an American “birthright,” and did so with understandable conviction, in a strong, almost clipped speaking style.

Carter, at 5'7" and close to his fighting weight of 160 pounds, wore a dark suit and a blue tie. His hair is full on his head and he has grown a mustache. This is not the way many remember Hurricane Carter. Sports fans recall him in the ring with a shaved head, sometimes a goatee, and a look that was baleful at best. In a middleweight championship fight in Philadelphia on December 14, 1964, Carter lost a controversial 15-round split decision to the reigning champion, Joey Giardello. “I lost because I didn’t knock him out,” Carter said.

He was convicted of murder in 1967, when, reaching his prime as a prizefighter, he had signed and was in training to fight again for the middleweight title, against Dick Tiger, who had dethroned Giardello. Carter had lost a 10-round decision to Tiger—“he beat me up pretty bad”—and had hoped to avenge that loss. He never got the chance.

In 1966, Carter and a friend, John Artis, were arrested for the murder of three white people at the Lafayette Bar and Grill in Paterson, New Jersey, in June of that year. They were convicted on the testimony, later recanted, of two criminals. They were convicted even though identifications by eyewitnesses varied, and despite the fact that both of them had strong alibis—and even though two separate grand juries had refused to bring indictments.

Carter and Artis were finally released because, said Judge H. Lee Sarokin 19 years later in his statement to the writ of habeas corpus brought by Carter and Artis, “the extensive record clearly demonstrates that (the) petitioners’ convictions were predicated upon an appeal to racism rather than reason, and concealment rather than disclosure.”

“To permit convictions to stand which have as their foundation appeals to racial prejudice and the withholding of evidence critical to the defense,” Sarokin continued, “is to commit a violation of the Constitution as heinous as the crimes for which these petitioners were tried and convicted.”

Carter’s talk here, with Judge Sarokin in the audience, ranged wider than just the importance of not allowing habeas corpus to erode. He spoke movingly of the root causes of crime—“it is not genetics, but economics,” he said—and added that serious commitment by government to educate

and to provide jobs is what is needed, “and not the building of more prisons.”

As for prisons, he said they are in need of monumental reform, from medical care (his eye operation for a detached retina was performed in the prison and not in a hospital) to general treatment.

“They take away your dignity, your humanity, your goodness, your meat and bones,” Carter said. “And then when they release inmates into society, people wonder why the recidivism rate is so great.”

At a reception later, Carter was asked about Mike Tyson, the former heavyweight champion, who is in prison in Indiana on a rape conviction.

“I feel sorry for Mike Tyson,” said Carter. “I’m sure his problems in prison will be magnified because he was somebody when he was outside. He probably won’t have difficulty with fellow prisoners—I never did—but with the administration. The warden and the guards, they want him and the other inmates to know, ‘Hey, he’s not the champ in here. He’s not a strong black man. He’s just a number, like everybody else.’ I was the one they had to break, to put in line, as an example for the other prisoners.

“I was the prizefighter, the man making \$100,000 a year, which in those days was like the millions some fighters are earning today.

“And my difficulty was compounded because I refused to go along with anything the administration wanted from me in prison. I was innocent and I didn’t recognize their authority. When I first walked into prison, I refused to wear prison clothes. They threw me into solitary confinement for four months, with nothing to eat but bread and water.”

On the other hand, Carter said, being a boxer helped him get through those 19 years in prison.

“It’s very individualized—a boxer has to be dedicated, disciplined, and learns to live with loneliness,” he explained. “You’re basically alone as a fighter, and you learn to talk to yourself, laugh with yourself, and in training camp you bear up under being alone.”

Carter clearly bears resentment for what he went through. “The state wants inmates to show remorse and rehabilitation,” he said. “They want us to repent. But they do none of that. They never gave me anything back when I was released and when it was proved I was wrongly confined. They never even said, ‘Look, man, it was a mistake.’

“And I still had some good years in boxing left.”

He said that he stopped following boxing because his fight for freedom took up all of his time.

“I have no interest in boxing these days,” Carter said. “I’d like to have the money they’re making. If I can have that without getting my brains rattled, I’d be glad to accommodate.”

These days, he earns a living primarily by lecturing. His book, *The 16th Round*, has just been reissued in Canada. He has also sold his life story to a Hollywood movie company.

At the Harvard reception, a woman serving hors d’oeuvres extended her tray to Carter. He picked up something and bit into it. “Quiche,” he said. He smiled, but looked slightly uncomfortable.

“Well,” he said, “it’s better than prison food.”



HAGLER KOs HEARNS AT 2:01 OF ROUND 3

April 16, 1985

UNTIL THOMAS HEARNS FELL, with the assistance of a smashing right to his face by Marvelous Marvin Hagler, and was ruled the loser at 2:01 of the third round, hardly a second passed that one of the fighters wasn't throwing and landing a stunning blow.

But the last punch was the one that allowed Hagler to retain the undisputed middleweight championship of the world. And the last punch ended, at least temporarily, a dream for Hearns, who wants to become the first man in history to win four world championships. He was hoping to add the middleweight championship to his junior-middleweight and welterweight titles and then go on to the light-heavyweight class.

He will have to back up and try for No. 3 again, as, he said later, that he would.

Hagler is content to keep one title, and his ambition is simply to successfully defend it at least four more times, thus bettering by one the most title defenses by a middleweight champion. Carlos Monzon defended the title 14 times.

The fight tonight, held in an outdoor arena besides Caesars Palace and before a sellout crowd of 16,034, was a title fight that will have to go down in history as one of the fiercest ever, ranking with the great wars of Graziano-Zale, of Dempsey-Firpo, of whomever else the boxing historians want to recall.

Hagler earned a purse of at least \$5.6 million as he improved his record to 61-2-2, with 51 knockouts. Hearns, who has won 40 bouts, including

34 by knockouts, lost for only the second time. His earlier defeat was a 1981 welterweight contest to Sugar Ray Leonard.

From the opening bell, the action was nonstop. Shortly after the first round began, Hearns rocked Hagler with an overhand right. Hagler responded by banging Hearns with a hard left in center ring. Hagler moved in and Hearns was punching furiously with his longer arms to keep Hagler off—Hearns had a 78-inch reach to Hagler's 75 inches. But Hagler, a southpaw, slammed the challenger with a right to the jaw.

Hearns was not going to run, though it was obvious that the compact Hagler was the physically stronger fighter. Although Hearns was backpedaling, he was punching, and not running. And he stunned Hagler with a left to the jaw. Hearns moved back and hit Hagler again with another hard right to the head and followed with another left. Hagler kept penetrating, and caught Hearns on the ropes and flailed away.

A cut suddenly opened above Hagler's right eye.

Now Hearns tried to measure him for his powerful overhand right. But Hagler was able to move inside and throw lefts and rights to Hearns' head.

Hagler's blood was smeared on Hearns' left shoulder as Hagler bulled Hearns along the ropes.

Then Hagler threw a vicious left that staggered Hearns as the bell rang.

When the pair separated to return to their corners, Hearns looked over his shoulder and stared evilly at Hagler.

Hagler wasted no time in the second round. He opened with a left hook that bounced off Hearns' head.

Hearns retreated but popped a right that reopened Hagler's cut. As Hearns retreated, he tripped. He righted himself just in time to catch a lunging right to the jaw by Hagler.

Hearns banged a couple of shots to his favorite target now, Hagler's cut, and opened another cut now, this one below Hagler's right eye.

Hagler was undaunted, though, and kept throwing punches with both hands, and then a straight right and a left hook staggered Hearns. They were back on the ropes, and blood covered Hagler's face. And that is where they remained, each returning punch for punch as the round ended.

As the bell for the third round sounded, and Hagler moved out of his corner, referee Richard Steele halted his progress. The champion's face was still bleeding despite the doctoring by his corner men, and Steele wanted an opinion by the ring physician, Donald Romeo, regarding Hagler's health.

He was deemed able to continue.

He was wild with a right but caught Hearns with a left. Hearns slammed a couple of long jabs at his eye, and then Hearns threw another and Hearns seemed to stagger at the energy all this punching was taking, and compounded by the punches he had been absorbing.

Hearns suddenly looked tired.

The two clinched and the referee broke it up and checked Hagler's cut. The fighters were allowed to continue.

They were in center ring and Hagler threw a solid right that caught Hearns on the chin. The challenger staggered against the ropes, and fell to the canvas. He fell on his side and then turned over on his back.

Slowly, he raised himself, holding onto the ring ropes, and was on his feet at the count of eight.

Referee Steele looked into Hearns' glassy eyes and waved that the fight was over. As he did, he held Hearns in an embrace, so he couldn't continue in the ring, but though Hearns' heart might have wanted to continue, his legs were weak and the look in his eyes was forlorn, the end of a dream crushed.



LEONARD BEATS HAGLER FOR TITLE ON SPLIT DECISION

April 7, 1987

IN A STUNNING DISPLAY of boxing artistry and perseverance, Sugar Ray Leonard, with just one fight in five years, scored a 12-round split decision over Marvelous Marvin Hagler to win the World Boxing Council's middleweight championship tonight at the Caesars Palace outdoor arena.

On a warm desert evening, Leonard danced, twirled, jabbed, and uppercutted his way to the title in an action-filled upset. Hagler, who won the title from Alan Minter on September 27, 1980, had been a strong favorite going into the fight.

"I feel in my heart I'm still the champ," said Hagler, who had not lost a fight since March 1976 and had successfully defended his title 12 times. "I really hate the fact that they took it from me, and gave it to, of all people, Sugar Ray Leonard."

The scoring was close, with the judges going this way: Lou Filippo scored it 115-113 for Leonard; Dave Moretti 115-113 Hagler, and JoJo Guerra 118-110 Leonard. The round-by-round breakdown was, respectively, 7-5, 5-7, 10-2.

Hagler, who is said to be anywhere from 32 years old to 36, would make at least \$12 million, Leonard, 30, would earn \$11 million.

Leonard's left eye, in which he had suffered a detached retina in 1982, and since had received a clean bill of health, seemed to be without problem after the fight.

Hagler, the reigning champion, spent most of the night in dogged pursuit of the challenger, and when he finally located him, he discovered what

appeared to be a dozen or so red boxing gloves working his bald head and spare abdomen.

The 15,336 seats were filled, some more spectacularly than others. Among the celebrities in attendance were Telly Savalas in a pink sweat-shirt; Bo Derek in a derby; Whoopi Goldberg in a cascade of curls; and, with that familiar pair of ol' blue eyes, Frank Sinatra.

In the middle rounds, it seemed that Hagler's strength was beginning to wear down Leonard. But then the challenger rallied.

"A lot of blows stung, but I don't think either of them was ever seriously hurt," said Richie Steele, the referee, afterward. "But it was a great fight, the greatest fight I've ever seen."



No Hoosegow for JoJo

April 9, 1987

IT WAS A COUPLE of hours after the middleweight championship fight in Las Vegas, Nevada, Monday night, and a woman who had attended was condemning the decision as an unmitigated disgrace, a blatant miscarriage of justice, and a rotten, lowdown call, too.

“How could they have stolen the title from Hagler?” she said to a guy who happened to be a reporter. “Didn’t they see the points he was scoring with his infighting? He did damage. And Leonard spent the whole night on his bicycle. How can you win a fight when you’re running and hiding all night?” The reporter listened. “And one judge, he gave it 10 rounds to two for Leonard!” she said. “Only a moron could have seen it that way. By the way, how did you have it?” “Nine rounds to three,” he said. “Of course,” she said, “precisely, had to be.”

The reporter cleared his throat. “Uh, nine rounds to three for Leonard,” he said quietly.

“You’re kidding,” she said, adjusting her glasses, and searching the room to converse with someone with half a brain.

It was an intriguing fight—the one between Marvelous Marvin Hagler and Sugar Ray Leonard, that is—and controversial. Veteran reporters at ringside were as divided in their scoring as the judges, or as the judges seemed.

Some reporters had Hagler winning decisively, some Leonard. Others saw it close for one or the other. At least one scored it a draw.

Fight judging is purely subjective. The extent of appreciation is often in the eye of the beholder. The judging of this fight by the three ringside offi-

cials, in terms of rounds, had it 7–5 Hagler, 7–5 Leonard, 10–2 Leonard. The judge whose card read 10–2 was JoJo Guerra.

“Guerra was way out of order,” said Goody Petronelli, one of Hagler’s two managers. “They should remove the man. He was inept.”

Pat Petronelli, Hagler’s other manager, kept a cooler, more reasoned, more judicious posture than his brother. “This here official, JoJo Guerra, should be put in jail,” he said.

The Petronellis admitted, however, that when they asked around about Guerra before the fight they heard only good things from respected sources.

The Petronellis also didn’t dispute Dave Moretti, the other official who scored Leonard the winner. “I can understand that,” said Pat Petronelli. “It was a close fight.” Breaking down the scoring, it appears that in regard to the other officials, including Lou Filippo, who scored for Hagler, Guerra wasn’t out of line after all.

In fact, Guerra agreed with one or both of his brethren in nine of the 12 rounds, or 75 percent of the time. In only three rounds—the seventh, eighth, and ninth—when he went for Leonard in each, was he a lone dissenter (nonetheless, as they would in every round in the fight, each of the judges scored these three rounds close, too, 10–9).

The other two officials, Moretti and Filippo, weren’t exactly Siamese twins with their scoring pencils, either. They disagreed with each other on four of the 12 rounds, or once in every three rounds.

Overall, there was disagreement among the officials in seven of the 12 rounds. Judges, when evaluating a bout, generally analyze boxing artistry, effectiveness of punches, and who is carrying the fight.

The Petronellis turned down one proposed judge, Harry Gibbs of England, because they thought that English officials “favor the boxers... And we knew Marvin would be fighting a rough, tough, swarming style.” They wanted, ironically, a Mexican official because Mexican boxers are often aggressive fighters.

They believed that on Monday night their fighter wasn’t rewarded enough for his aggression.

But a bull is not rewarded for aggression against a matador. And that’s the way much of the Leonard-Hagler fight appeared.

There were 792 punches thrown by Hagler, and he missed on 501. Leonard wasn’t exactly standing around and enjoying the breezes. He threw 629 punches, and missed on 323.

None of that means much, however, if the 291 punches landed by Hagler, and the 306 punches that connected for Leonard, were effective.

The Hagler people said that Leonard's punches generally came in flurries—"he only fought for 20 seconds a round"—and were, in effect, powder puffs. Moretti, for one, saw it differently: "The hardest punching was by Leonard." Thomas "Hit Man" Hearns, who fought and lost to both Leonard and Hagler, said that Leonard hit him harder than Hagler did.

To these eyes, Leonard was the master of the ring on this night, and that's what mattered in the end. It is still the sweet science, not a barroom brawl, at least according to the textbooks. Once, Willie Pep, the clever Will o' the Wisp, told informed officials sotto voce that he was not going to throw a single punch for an entire round. He didn't. He weaved, he twisted, he ducked, he slid. His opponent swung and missed and tumbled into the ropes, and fell all over himself. Pep even slipped around him, and for a moment the other fighter couldn't find him. The officials scored the round for Pep.

Could scoring be more objective? Could it be done by machines? Several years ago a computer title fight between Rocky Marciano and Muhammad Ali was arranged. Angelo Dundee, trainer for both Ali and Leonard, recalled it.

"In the States, Marciano won," said Dundee. "But in England, Muhammad won. It's all what you put in the computers. It still comes down to the human element. Muhammad said the reason he lost here was that the governor of Alabama then—Governor Wallace—ran the computer."



SUGAR RAY LEONARD CAN'T STAY AWAY FROM THE RING

August 7, 1988

MANY FANS SURELY COULD have been knocked over by a feather when they heard the news Thursday that Sugar Ray Leonard had unretired yet again.

Ray has drawn an X over his career three or four times, or thereabouts, and this was the third or fourth time, give or take a time or two, he had taken eraser in hand to gum out the X. Then again, maybe in the past when we thought he was saying “retire,” it wasn’t so much that he mis-spoke, it was that we misheard.

Maybe he was saying, “I rehire,” or “I rewire,” or even the royal “We tire.”

Leonard announced that he would fight Donny Lalonde in November for the World Boxing Council light-heavyweight title as well as for a newly created WBC super-middleweight crown.

When Thomas “Hit Man” Hearns heard this, he sprang to his feet and shouted that he wanted to win his fifth title, too (he has held four), and before Leonard got his—assuming, of course, that Leonard would dispatch Lalonde.

Now, to the uninitiated, this might have been startling news. After all, Hearns, so we thought, had recently announced, “I retire,” though maybe he said “rewire,” or “We tire,” too.

Much of the Western world, and the Eastern world, as well, has not been waiting anxiously for anyone to win five titles in boxing, especially

since now the ranks are bulging with so many titles and initials, like Burke's Peerage.

Leonard said that part of his motivation was to be the first ever to win five professional boxing titles, after having won the ornate welterweight, junior-middleweight, and middleweight championship belts. Maybe he just needs belts and has never fancied suspenders.

Some believe that a fighter never comes back unless he needs money. They cite Joe Louis and Ray Robinson and Muhammad Ali and most recently the saggy George Foreman.

Leonard, though, appears in no financial difficulty. It must be confessed, however, that neither I nor anyone I know has counted his money lately.

Leonard said he simply likes boxing, likes the art and science of it, and the psychic and esthetic and, not least, pecuniary rewards of that sometimes discomfiting occupation.

What Leonard does best in the world is punch someone and in turn dodge that someone's punch, as he did to frustrate Duran in their second fight, and to befuddle Hagler, a bull in a china shop who became enraged because he couldn't find the china.

Professional athletes are always on the prowl for challenges to prove, and continue to prove, their mastery in their chosen field, often a field in which they have spent their lives, to the exclusion of other pursuits. Athletes are often as insecure as the rest of us, and base their self-esteem and self-worth on who they've conquered recently. Leonard appears no different. A 19th century British philosopher named Herbert Spencer once said to a young man who had just beaten him at billiards, "Moderate skill, sir, is the sign of a good eye and a steady hand, but skill such as yours argues a youth misspent."

Spencer might have simply been a sore loser. He certainly didn't earn a living at billiards, though if he could have earned such millions as Leonard has in his sport, he might have spent more time chalking the cue than devising his theory on the manifestations of the unknowable.

Spencer, though, might have been pleased to know that Leonard has attempted other endeavors, such as broadcasting and coaching and business. He may have been good, but he wasn't great. Not like boxing. So, at age 31, still fit and full of surging juices, he returned to what he knows best and likes best and which fulfills him the most.

A few years ago Leonard had a problem with a detached retina in his left eye. It was operated on and now, according to his doctors, is as good or better than ever. So apparently there is no fear within him about that.

There is also the concern that one day he will develop, like some other fighters, a case of scrambled brains. That is the occupational hazard. Though Leonard is an ace at slipping punches, he must perforce receive a certain number.

Ray Robinson and Muhammad Ali, two other fighters who like Leonard danced around the ring the way Astaire danced on walls, caught their share of blows, as well. They are suffering, respectively, from Alzheimer's disease and Parkinson's syndrome.

There remains a medical question as to how much the many punches each absorbed to the head influenced the onset of their illnesses.

Neither has been diagnosed as suffering from the old fighter's malady, punch-drunkenness. (Ali, in fact, appears to have full control of his brain; when a TV sports broadcaster pestered him to do an interview, Ali finally looked at him and said, "Be cool, fool," ending the discussion.) And many who never stepped into a fight ring suffer from those diseases, just as many who boxed have walked away with a clear head, though with maybe a funny nose as a keepsake.

The hope for Leonard is that one day he will no longer need to hear the roar of the crowd, can truly say "retire" and not "rewire," and with unfuzzied mind sit in the shade where, if he wishes, he can ponder the manifestations of the unknowable.



THE END OF THE ROAD FOR SUGAR

February 11, 1991

BY FIGHT'S END, THE relatively elderly gentleman, Sugar Ray Leonard, had suffered a lump to the side of his face, a reddened puffiness to both eyes, a bloodied mouth, and some hard, cruel facts to the psyche, all courtesy of the younger, quicker, stronger, though not necessarily tougher, opponent, "Terrible" Terry Norris. Norris, who is 23 years old, looked, as the bell ended the 12th and final round, like 23; not a hair on his black mustache appeared to be out of place. Leonard, meanwhile, who is 34, looked 54.

On Saturday night at Madison Square Garden, a less-than-half-filled arena of 7,495 fight fans saw Norris, on the way to a unanimous decision while retaining his World Boxing Council super-welterweight title, twice knock down Leonard. Sugar Ray Leonard has held five titles—welterweight, junior-middleweight, middleweight, super-middleweight, and light-heavyweight—over 14 years and it was apparent in the ring Saturday night that he retained the pride of a champion, if not the punch. Leonard twice rose up from the canvas and battled back.

It was one-sided from the opening bell, however, as Norris, in white trunks and white boxing shoes with floppy red tassels, pummeled Leonard. Leonard, attired in basic black, had numerous flurries that lifted the hopes of some of those in the crowd chanting: "Ray! Ray! Ray!" and, "C'mon, Ray, make 'im eat leather!" They were imploring him to be the same Ray that whipped Benitez and Duran and Hagler and Hearns. It is the same Ray, only different, the difference that age makes in all of us. Different reactions, different legs, different results. "Ter-ry! Ter-ry! Ter-ry!" came a sweeping chant for the inevitable new kid on the block.

“Terry Norris gave me all the reasons tonight to call it quits, and that’s what I’m doing, calling it quits,” Leonard said after the fight, wearing sunglasses to cover his bruised eyes. “Terry Norris is a very composed, very classy fighter. He’s got power and speed. He showed everything that I used to show guys.”

“It was a sad victory here, the way I ended Ray’s career,” said Norris. “I gave him a pretty bad beatin’. Ray is my idol. Still is. That’ll never change.”

Norris said, yes, Ray was slower than he thought he would be. And, yes, Ray did land some good blows, but not particularly damaging ones. And yes, again, Ray was cunning and had tried to lure him into his trap on the ropes, and he was aware of how Ray could sucker a guy in, especially in the last 30 seconds of a round. “But,” said Norris, “I had studied Ray’s tapes closely, and learned my lessons.”

Leonard talked about being a “risk taker” his whole career, and in this fight he had allowed himself to be vulnerable in order to try to win, rather than, as the rounds and reality wore on, to just hold on in order to keep his health.

“I wanted to be very impressive, and then call it quits,” he said. Now, he was just calling it quits, again.

He quit after he won a gold medal in the 1976 Olympics, and said he would enter college. A year later he began his pro career, putting college on permanent hold. He suffered a detached retina in a bout and quit the ring in 1982. He returned to fight two years later and beat Kevin Howard, but was so disappointed in his performance, a ninth-round knockout, he retired again. Yet he still couldn’t sit in the hammock, and for millions and millions of dollars gave in to the urge to continue to punch and be punched. After beating Marvelous Marvin Hagler for the middleweight title in 1987, Leonard discussed retirement in a news conference, and waffled. “That was sort of a half-retirement,” recalled Bert Sugar, a boxing writer.

So this is the fourth and a half time that Leonard has retired. “It’s been a very illustrious career,” he told the assembled journalists immediately after the Norris bout. It was said without braggadocio because it was the simple, unvarnished truth. “It took this kind of fight to prove to me that I’m no longer the fighter I was,” he said. “It just wasn’t there. I was the fighter of the ’70s and ’80s, but not the ’90s. If there’s any young person I’d pass that on to, Terry Norris is that person.”

After the decision was announced, Leonard, unsteadily, holding the shoulder of one of his handlers, departed the ring looking considerably older than when he entered about 45 minutes earlier, bouncing through the ropes. Several in the thinning, milling crowd near the ring apron now cheered “Bravo!” for a great performance, for great performances. And like Pavarotti, or Domingo, or Bernstein, the once and always champ, managing a smile, responded with a little wave of the hand.

In the interview area later someone, recalling Leonard’s best moments against young Norris, said to Gil Clancy, the fighter trainer, “Ray’s still got a lot of heart.”

“That’s all he’s got left,” said Clancy. “And that’s the worst thing he can have at his age—a heart and nothin’ else.”

Clancy was saying that it’s a dangerous thing, a heart and nothing else, because it can inspire illusions of a prowess long gone.

Even though Leonard said he was finished, one wondered whether he would ever return to retire yet another day.

“What I plan to do now is something I’ve wanted to do for a long time,” said Leonard. “Take up golf.”

The lights of the room sparkled off his dark glasses, which hid his battered eyes, as well as the conviction that many in the audience hoped, finally and forever, was in those eyes.



THE GREATNESS THAT WAS SUGAR RAY ROBINSON

April 22, 1970

FOREVER, SUGAR RAY ROBINSON will be known as “pound for pound, the greatest fighter.” It would be a cliché if it weren’t so on target. And one of the joys and curiosities in reading a book about a man who excelled is to find out just what it was that pulled him up to superiority.

In *Sugar Ray*, Robinson’s autobiography assisted with the professional grace and invisibility of Dave Anderson, one gets almost no notion of what it was that made Robinson’s dashing footwork, glittering combinations, and solid wallop so spectacular.

But then, we neither expect nor desire such technical knowledge. Yet we do learn that Robinson trained passionately, and that he often studied an opponent and then worked toward a discovered weakness. When he knocked out Gene Fullmer to win the middleweight title for the fourth time, he won on a “perfect left hook.”

Through three rounds I waited, watching his hands as he bullied at me. In the fourth he was moving at me again, his head low, his tiny eyes squinting with sweat. I feinted a left hook, leaving my midsection open. You’ve got to let a fish see the bait before it’ll bite, and Fullmer bit. He let go his right hand, exposing his jaw.

His jaw looked as big as any of the jaws on Mount Rushmore.

Left hook drove in and nailed Fullmer to the floor.

But mostly in this book we find out that Sugar Ray was as quick with a buck (“In my big years, a five-dollar bill was tip money”) as with his left, and that is why he was forced to return from retirement several times and fight again.

But he also loved the approval of the multitude. When he beat Tommy Bell to win his first title, the welterweight championship, in 1946, he said he did not want to depart the ring. (“The noise seemed to come down out of the balcony—a steady roar, like a waterfall, splashing all over me.”)

Robinson was a performer, and had his entourage and his flamingo-pink Cadillac as accessories, and his skill as collateral, then. “You are an *artiste*, like a musician or a dancer,” said a French fight promoter. And Robinson felt he always had to uphold this reputation. (Now he survives mostly on bit parts in movies and television.)

He always felt an obligation to entertain the folks. He was not beyond carrying a fighter. Once, he was asked what his toughest fight was. “Charley Fusari,” he said, “because I had to fight my fight and his, too.”

Striking bits of honesty are included. How Robinson turned down attempted bribes by mobsters, the political rabbit-punching in the fight business, his love affair with a society white woman, his nightmares of killing a man in the ring (he did) and of himself dying in that violent manner, and even the sexless life of a champion in training: “I would abstain from sex for about six weeks... You’re meaner because your nervous system is on edge. And when you walk into the center of the ring for the referee’s instructions and stare at your opponent, you dislike him more than ever because he’s the symbol of all your sacrifices.”

And finally, Sugar Ray, the “true gladiator,” the “blessed, chosen man,” who skipped through \$4 million and says he’d do it all over again. Not long ago he received a big, gold trophy for “The World’s Greatest Fighter” and sat next to it on the bare floor of his bare New York apartment. Still handsome, smiling, broke, proud, hopeful. (“Throughout my life, each setback prepared me for a greater triumph.”)



GYPSY JOE CAN BE CHAMP, IF...

August 12, 1968

DESPITE HIS LOSS TO Emile Griffith, it appears that Gypsy Joe Harris still has a future, as an elf or a toy soldier or, even, as a middleweight pugilist.

After the 12-round unanimous decision, Griffith said that Harris could be champion “if he trains as hard as I do.” Griffith knows all about championships. He had won five, three welterweight and two middleweight titles. He also knows about training, an endeavor only vaguely familiar to Harris.

Stories of Harris’ unorthodox style of conditioning, which included pool halls over punching bags and women over workouts, seemed not to affect his ring performance. He had won all 24 of his pro bouts before meeting Griffith. And in the Griffith fight, he maintained a flapping, dancing, spinning, bouncing pace that spurted, flagged, spurted, and concluded with a climactic war dance in the final round that, in the days of Sitting Bull, would have brought rain.

“I trained to go 15,” said Harris, afterward. He was told what Griffith had said. “How can he say that? Emile doesn’t know how hard I worked.”

So, the 5'5", 22-year-old Gypsy Joe can remain remarkably fresh. He can also take a punch. In the first round, Gypsy Joe came out of his corner, did a Muhammad Ali shuffle, flapped his arms like a crippled hawk, then got slammed from post-to-pillar by Griffith. At the bell Joe straightened up, sucked in his gut, and began a march to his corner. It turned into a wobble.

Another time Gypsy Joe took a whack to his flat profile and another to his immaculately bald head, which looks as though it had been sanded

and varnished, and a spurt of sweat steamed straight up as if from a whale. But Gypsy Joe hung in, always with sharp, quick movements. Everything he does is an exclamation point.

“I thought I won it,” said Gypsy Joe. When it was mentioned that the judges disagreed, he countered, “I can’t judge and fight at the same time.”

In a less bumptious mood, Gypsy Joe admitted that Griffith’s experience (at 30, Griffith has had 19 championship fights and this was his 56th win against nine losses) was a decisive factor.

“His vast experience was enough to beat the other fighter,” he said. “To fight for the titles he did, you have to beat some helluva dude. I had to think twice as hard for him as anyone else I ever fought.”

Did Gypsy Joe learn anything?

“I learned I could be defeated,” he said.

“Joe,” a reporter asked, “what are you plans?”

“I’m gonna take a month off and catch up on my women,” he said. A strip of tape covered his right eye.

Outside the door, three women waited.

“Surrounded by women,” said Gypsy Joe, “isn’t that somethin’ for a loser!”

The women were his bride, the former Gladys Cooper, and his mother and grandmother.



DICK TIGER IS FIGHTING ON TWO FRONTS

April 8, 1968

SOON, DICK TIGER WILL be fighting to retain his light-heavyweight boxing title. After, he will return to his home in Biafra and resume fighting for his life.

Tiger, 38-year-old African who once was the middleweight champion, dressed slowly for his workout in the new Madison Square Garden gym. When he leaves his dressing quarters, hardly larger than a telephone booth, his mind is on Bob Foster, challenger for the title at the Garden May 24.

When he is not skipping rope or punching the bag, Tiger's thoughts are with the civil war raging between Biafra and Nigeria. Tiger is a second lieutenant in the Biafran army.

"Boxing is my business," said Tiger, in soft musical, accented English. "It is the only business I know. So this is what I use to help my people.

"I give money to the country to help fight the war. But I am not alone. Everyone must give or the effort to win the war will be nothing. And we must win. That is the only way we can live in peace.

"I do not fight on the front. But I have been there when the bombing was going on. My job is to help soldiers with physical condition, so they can run well. I lead in exercises and also take soldiers in the morning and run for two, three miles."

Besides this, Tiger is an inspirational leader. As a world champion, Tiger is a hero in his country.

"When we first begin fighting in July," he said, pulling on green stretch pants, "many young men do not know how serious the war is for our safety. But I and other respected people talk with them. Then they all want to get uniforms and go to the front. You see, there is no conscription in

Biafra. Everything is volunteer. Many of them helped the war by working on farm or in factory. Now they want to know how they can get a gun.”

The civil war began when thousands of Ibo tribesmen, of which Tiger is one, were victims of pogroms in northern Nigeria. The Ibo then fled to eastern Nigeria and formed a new nation, Biafra.

“The Ibo are Christians,” said Tiger, “and the Nigerians Muslim. They say they are trying to make Nigeria one again. But they only want to kill. That is part of their religion. They think they gain favor with their God if they kill Christians.

“They spare no one. They come into a village and murder old men and women and children. They bomb hospitals and schools. I have pictures, horrible pictures of what they have done. I have them in my hotel room. I wish I would have brought them for you to see.”

Tiger rose and pulled a T-shirt over his broad chest and back, which are marked with blue tribal tattoos. He retains the graciousness and gentlemanliness of earlier days, but some of his sprightly good humor is gone.

When he first came to the United States in 1959, he was amused that Americans wondered if he was a cannibal. And he would joke, deadpan, with waiters who asked how he liked his steak. (“You fix it the way it should be,” he would say. “I don’t know anything about beef. In my country we eat people.”)

He has changed. “I used to be a happy man,” said Tiger. “But now I have seen things I had never seen before. I have seen massacres.

“I hope you understand me with my Japanese English.”

He smiled good-naturedly, bent, and laced his high, black boxing shoes.



MARCEL CERDAN AND EDITH PIAF: IN MEMORY OF A VERY SPECIAL LOVE

November 19, 1974

ONE OF THE MOST unconventional, sweetest, and tragic romances in sports history ended 25 years ago this month, when a Paris-to-New York airplane crashed into the Azores Mountains.

Marcel Cerdan was returning to the United States to try to regain the middleweight boxing title he had recently lost to Jake LaMotta. He was also returning to his lover, Edith Piaf, the petite but powerful singer who was appearing at the Versailles in New York.

He had been fighting exhibitions in and around Paris. She called him long distance, 24 hours before his scheduled flight, and asked him to come immediately. “I can’t wait another minute to see you,” she said. “Hurry.” He left immediately. She never forgave herself for that call.

She had also been blamed by some members of the French press for Cerdan’s loss of the title. The French couple attended many late-night parties flowing with champagne, and Cerdan admittedly was not in prime condition for his title defense.

But Edith had felt that her influence was beneficial—or at least not harmful—to Cerdan’s training. She lived with him in a hideout in the Catskills while Cerdan, then a challenger, trained to fight the champion, Tony Zale.

Cerdan’s trainer, Lucien Roupp, was opposed to Edith’s seeing Cerdan during this time, for two reasons. As recounted in *Piaf*, a book written by her half-sister Simone Bertaut, Roupp said, “Come on, Edith, you know what America’s like. A man and a woman can’t sleep in the same room

if they're not married. You'd ruin Marcel's career doing stuff like that." Also, he believed that making love would debilitate his slugger.

But Cerdan had found an empty bungalow on the grounds of his Loch Sheldrake camp. It was quite far away from the other bungalows. And there he hid Edith and Simone.

No one knew the women were in the bungalow. And they could not venture out during the day. And there was no hot water and nothing to eat. So Cerdan brought sandwiches hidden in his jacket at night.

This lasted for two weeks. Then came the fight.

Zale took an early lead, but in the fourth round Cerdan came on strong and withered Zale, who slumped and virtually collapsed in a corner as the bell rang. The referee stopped the fight and raised Cerdan's hand, shouting, "Ladies and gentlemen, Marcel Cerdan, the new world champion!"

That night, Edith Piaf came onstage at the Versailles and the audience gave her a standing ovation. There were tears in her eyes and she said, "Forgive me, I'm just too happy."

At one point in her performance, a burst of applause was heard. Marcel Cerdan had entered. That night, the two walked home through the streets of New York holding hands.

There was a great interest in the couple. Both were "pestered" by reporters to discuss their relationship. Finally, Cerdan agreed to a press conference.

"Well, here we are," began Cerdan. "You're interested in just one thing, so let's not waste each other's time. You want to know if I'm in love with Edith Piaf. Yes, I am. As for her being my mistress, if she's only that it's because I'm married. If I weren't married and didn't have children, I'd make her my wife. Anyone here who's never cheated on his wife raise his hand." The next day there was not one word about the press conference in the newspapers.

For religious reasons, Cerdan never divorced his wife. And his children became fond friends of Piaf. To this day, Marcel Cerdan Jr. regularly places a rose on her grave (she died in 1963).

In the ruins of the plane crash, the searchers were able to identify Cerdan's body because he wore a watch on each wrist.

"Edith couldn't see anything or hear anything," recalled Ms. Bertaut. "She cried constantly, not loudly, but without stop. When her manager told her he had arranged everything so she wouldn't sing that night, she

came to her senses and said, 'I am singing tonight.' She was so exhausted she had to take a stimulant.

"The Versailles was filled to the rafters. When she came on, looking tinier and more lost than ever in the spotlight, the whole audience got to their feet and applauded. And Edith said, 'No, don't clap for me. The only person I'm singing for tonight is Marcel Cerdan.' ...And she made it through to the end."

X.

*LIGHTER BUT
STILL PACKING
A PUNCH*



FLOYD MAYWEATHER JR. AND SR.: THE RING AND THE CELL

March 24, 1998

THE TRAINER WHISPERS SOMETHING to the fighter in turquoise trunks shortly before the bell rings to begin the round, and the fighter nods, in time-honored tradition. This is no ordinary trainer, however, and this just may be no ordinary fighter, either. They are father and son, one a former convict and the other a potential world champion.

It is a small corner the father is working in the Foxwoods Resort Casino bingo and boxing hall, but it is a far more welcome place than the 6'x10' cells he occupied, usually with two other men, in the Milan, Michigan, federal penitentiary during his five-and-a-half-year sentence on a drug-dealing conviction. Floyd Mayweather Sr. was released five months ago, and this is only the second fight in which he has worked in his son's corner as his trainer.

Floyd Sr. is 45, and Floyd Jr. is 21. The resemblance is close, and although the father stands 5'9½" and weighs 170 pounds and the son is 5'7" and 133, it appears that they may well have been chiseled from the same block of granite. Both have confidence—the son has the youthful makings of a swagger—and they are now happily reunited and bound together on a course, they hope, to fame, fortune, and title belts—starting perhaps with that in the super-featherweight division. Mayweather Jr. is undefeated in 15 bouts, with 13 knockouts, after tonight's fight with Miguel Melo (8–2, six knockouts), which ended 2:30 into the third round when the referee decided that it was not in Melo's best interests to continue to absorb Mayweather's blows.

But it is from the vantage point of that prison cell that Mayweather Sr. believes he will not only change his life, but keep his son heading in the right direction. “I remember him visiting me in jail many times,” Mayweather Sr. said, “and I could tell by the expression on his face what he was thinking: *Daddy, you’re caged up like an animal.*”

Mayweather Jr. said: “I wanted to cry, seeing him like that, but I was supposed to be a man. So I didn’t.”

But that experience has been something to build on. “You never have to make the mistakes I made,” the father tells the son. “I made enough for the both of us.”

The father, once a contender himself, was stopped by Sugar Ray Leonard in 1978 in the 10th round, but only after breaking his hand in the eighth. Four months after the fight, he was shot in the leg in a family dispute, and that virtually halted his career. The drug world then opened up.

Throughout, he has been a mentor to Little Floyd, as he calls him, teaching “both sides of the fence.”

“I taught him the right things, and I’ve tried to teach him how to avoid the wrong things,” Mayweather Sr. said. “He was training to be a fighter in the crib. No kidding. He was throwing jabs even then. And then when he got a little older he’d be beating the doorknobs.”

The father took the boy to the Tawsi Gym in their hometown of Grand Rapids, Michigan, where he had trained. He would put the boy on his shoulders and have the other boxers fall when Little Floyd flung a punch.

Soon people were falling for real. As an amateur, Floyd Jr. won the National Golden Gloves at age 16 in 1993, and won it again in 1994 and 1996. He won a bronze medal in the Atlanta Olympics.

Mayweather Sr. only heard about it. He could not get to a television set to watch the fight.

The father had been the lad’s trainer until being incarcerated. Then two uncles, Roger and Jeff Mayweather—Roger is a former junior- and super-lightweight champion, and Jeff was a contender—took over the reins.

“They were just holding the path until I got back,” said Mayweather Sr. “I would hear reports that Floyd liked to stay out late, that he was not training properly. I told him, ‘You don’t want to do what I did. Anyone doing things with drugs either ends up dead, in jail, or drugged out.’

“You’re only young once. You have great ability. You’ve got a chance to become a rich man, and not have to end up working in someone’s

factory. Professional boxing is a short career. Be smart; give it everything you have.”

Mayweather Jr. says he feels more comfortable now that his father is on the scene. “He only wants what’s right for me,” he said. “I’m doing all the proper things to become a world champion.”

The father laughs about how much his son depends on him. “He says, ‘Watch me in the spar,’” Mayweather Sr. said. “‘Watch me shadow box. Watch me jump rope.’ It’s just his way of keeping us tight.”

The father and son live in Las Vegas, Nevada, now, while Floyd Jr.’s mother, Deborah Orr, still lives in Grand Rapids and occasionally attends her son’s fights. But tonight it was just father and son. And when it was over, the son was grinning. The father was pleased, but somewhat less jubilant. “He’s still learning,” said Mayweather Sr.

No matter. As they returned to the dressing room, Floyd Sr.’s arm was around his son’s shoulder. It seemed the perfect place for a parent to be after his boy had been in a brawl.



SANDY SADDLER STAYS ON TOP OF THE WORLD

January 3, 1968

“SANDY IS FINE AND well off,” said Sandy Saddler. “You know it couldn’t be any other way because bad news travel fast and no one ain’t heard nothing about me.”

Sandy had just hustled into the gymnasium of the slick, \$11 million National Maritime Union building, where he is physical director.

The former featherweight champion, who is most memorable for having whipped Willie Pep in three of four title bouts, was dressed in an iridescent brown suit with matching tie and dapper brown hat. He wore sunglasses, gnawed a toothpick in his gold teeth, and sported a trim mustache. His black leather loaders were glossy.

“I’m enjoying life a little better than the average guy,” he said, with a bob and quick hand movements. On his right hand was a ring with a single diamond and on the left pinky a 13-diamond, blue sapphire ring.

“Oh, jeez, everyone’s always asking, ‘How’s Sandy, how’s Sandy?’” he said. “Well, I got a ’66 Cadillac Brougham—that’s next thing to a limousine—and I’m in great condition. Yeah, yeah, sure, sure.

“I kin beat a lot of the featherweights and lightweights around today. I’m 139 pounds, about 10 over what I was when I retired undefeated champ in 1957.

“Yeah, sure. You know I got several fighters I’m working with now. One is a pretty good boy. I was in the ring with him. He made a move. I said, ‘Don’t do that.’ He done it again. Wop. Bam. He went down. Suck ’em in and bang ’em. It’s one of them things. Yeah. Sure.

“That’s because I’m still running with my boys. I’m 42. But my circulation in the blood is tops. I strength my hard muscles. Yeah. Sure. You know. Get rid of the fat between the tissues and the fat between the blood stream.

“I just got a new boy. A big heavyweight. Goes 213, 6’4½”. Out of Missouri State Prison. I got him for guidance. Same prison Sonny Liston was in. Francis Peay of the New York Giants saw him when he was visiting there. Told me and Joe Louis about him.

“So we and William Perry, vice president of the Maritime Union, and Larry Williams, my assistant, and a couple others went out there and got him under guidance. Why was he there? Well, you know how it is, in some states a colored man looks at a woman and they jail him for reckless eye-balling.

“They even got a laughing barrel in some places. A colored man actually got to laugh in a barrel or they lock him up. Foolish. Stupid. Yeah.

“But I like being a physical instructor. You know, after fighting I went into the Maritime Union. Six years at sea. I was a lousy sailor. Funny, isn’t it? After all them licks in the stomach, you’d think I could take it. But soon’s that boat starts rocking just a bit, I’m at the side sick as a dog. Yeah. Sure. I appreciate land, now.

“Lots of fighters, old-time ones and young ones, like Emile Griffith and Luis Rodriguez, come around. Lot of old-timers say ‘Give me a 10. Give me a five.’ I give ’em. Boom. A 10 here. Boom. A two. I know how it is. He needed it or he wouldn’t have asked.

“One thing I don’t get. How come I’m not in the Hall of Fame. I was the hardest puncher ever in the featherweight division. One hundred and three knockouts. Willie’s in it. I been up for election several times. But nothing. What does a guy have to do? Yeah. I can’t figure it. Can you?

“It’s the greatest, though, being undefeated champ. People respect you and call you Champ. You feel good. You can hold your head high. Yeah. Tell ’em Sandy’s fine and well off.”

A telephone rang. It was for Sandy. He excused himself and trotted off, in his duck-waddle fashion. The heels of his glossy black leather shoes clicked on the shiny green concrete floor. The toothpick was still in his mouth. His head was high.



THE RIDDLE OF KID CHOCOLATE

August 21, 1988

A BRIEF OBITUARY IN this newspaper recently noted that Kid Chocolate, the former boxing champion, died in Havana under, if not mysterious circumstances, then certainly unrevealed circumstances.

The news came by way of the Cuban state radio and no details were given concerning survivors or cause of death.

The item sketched some background of the Kid, who was 78 years old when he died on August 8.

He was born Eligio Sardinias in Cerro, Cuba, and came to America in the late 1920s and shortly emerged as one of the finest boxers of his era. He won the New York featherweight title, then considered a major championship, in 1932, and the world junior-lightweight title the following year. He retired in 1938 with a professional record of 132–106 with 50 knockouts. He was elected to the Boxing Hall of Fame in 1959.

Now we go back 20 years, to the winter of 1968. I was visiting in Chicago when someone told me he heard that Kid Chocolate was working as a handyman in a nightspot on the near North Side.

I didn't know much about the Kid, other than that he was a champion, and a kind of flashy and highly skilled boxer—he was also called the Cuban Bon Bon. And I knew that he had supposedly returned to Cuba when he retired, received a government pension, but had slipped from public view. Some thought Chocolate was dead. It was worth a trip to the nightclub to find out.

It's not uncommon for old boxers to wind up in humble positions. Joe Louis was a so-called greeter in a Las Vegas casino. Beau Jack, the former

lightweight champion, was a bootblack in Miami Beach. Johnny Bratton, the former welterweight champion, slept on park benches in Chicago.

I phoned the club and asked for Kid Chocolate. The man who answered was the boss. He told me that a few years before a guy had tried to break into the club. "The Kid flattened him with one punch," said the boss. "Yep, he's still got the goods. And what a fine, warm, gentle guy he is. Does a great job here, too."

The afternoon that I visited the club, it rained darkly outside, but inside in the muted red-velvet tawdriness, it was quiet, the doors not yet open. The only sounds were the plinking of rain on the window and the clinking of glasses and bottles being sorted behind the mirrored bar by a rather slight black man. He wore a hat with a narrow upturned brim and introduced himself as Kid Chocolate.

"I'm feelin' great, like I could get back in the ring tomorrow," he said. "But I'm not sure my legs would agree. I'm 60 years old now. But every morning you can still see me doing the roadwork in Washington Park. I takes real good care of myself. Eat the right foods. Don't take the weed. Don't drink, neither. I just run the stuff you see here."

"You gotta stay sharp," he continued. "I mean, it's a critical world we livin' in. When I was champ I was like a rattlesnake. Still am, too. If I'm rattlin', you better be movin'. Take the guy who tried to get in here a while back. He didn't heed the warning. You do not take no chances with this cat." He stuck his thumb in his chest. "So I popped him through the alley. That's how a rattlesnake do. He rattles. Woof, he hits you!" He wiped a long-stemmed glass and placed it upside down on the bar. He was asked about his days as champion.

"I forgets about it now," he said. "Don't like to talk much about it. You start seein' it in your mind, and that's all you thinking about. Drive you crazy, like it done Johnny Bratton.

"I was a big man then, but I didn't get no swell head. Use to like to do the cabaretin' and good timin', though. My home was New Orleans and them days I was always 'round Bourbon Street. You hear about that place? I was friends with ol' Chick Webb and Fatha Hines and Louie Armstrong and Count Basie. 'Member them?

"I made money the hard way, didn't graft it like some others done. Now I only associate with the poor class, 'cause I'm from the poor class. But some who makes it big forgets the little man. Some peoples don't look

back at the poor folk. That's what is wrong with the world today. When I sees the scum I toss 'em a few bucks and say, 'Enjoy it, boys.' Then I leave. They'll respect you and maybe later they'll listen to you when you tell 'em about the good life.

"I got a little green saved up. Know what I'd like to do with it? Open a boys camp. Yessir. Lecture the young 'uns on clean livin'. Wouldn't that be somethin'?"

When I returned to New York with my notes, I called Nat Fleischer, the boxing expert, then 82 years old. I asked about Kid Chocolate.

Fleischer said that the last time he saw him was at a fight in Havana in 1959, shortly before Batista's regime collapsed.

"He was sickly," said Fleischer, "bent over and he walked with a cane. It's like he disappeared when Castro came. If the Kid was in America, we surely would know about it. He was extremely popular. It would be big news."

I called the nightspot and spoke to the man who said he was Kid Chocolate. I told him what I had learned.

He admitted that he wasn't Kid Chocolate, though he said he had once been a boxer and used that name. Kid Chocolate was his idol. "People call me Champ," he said, "and I only goes by what they call me."

Now the real Kid Chocolate, the Cuban Bon Bon, is dead. I don't know what happened to the other fellow, but he was a lovely guy, and a capable imposter, with one recorded knockout to his credit.



SALVADOR SANCHEZ ACCEPTS AWARD WITH GUSTO

January 13, 1982

SALVADOR SANCHEZ, THE WORLD Boxing Council featherweight champion from Mexico, came to the luncheon wearing a bouquet of curly hair and a long scarf, black leather gloves, and two winter coats—a woolen one over a leather one. The dark shaggy top was nature's protection against the elements, and the rest was Sanchez's attempt to keep warm in New York's stiffening cold.

He didn't seem to be succeeding. He came in sniffing and shivering. If anything could warm him, it was the reception. He was one of several WBC champions being honored at the Madison Square Garden Hall of Fame. He and Sugar Ray Leonard were there to receive trophies as co-fighters of the year. And his defense of the title last August against Wilfredo Gomez—he knocked him out in the eighth—was chosen as fight of the year.

As soon as he arrived, Sanchez was escorted to a corner of the room where television lights and cameras had been set up. He speaks no English, but most of the interviews were in Spanish, so there was little problem for him. There was also a profusion of translators for the English-language members of the press.

He is a pleasant, even pacific-seeming young man of 23. He has a ready smile and bright, sparkling, close-spaced eyes. Rubbing his hands from the cold, he looked spiffy in white summer sport jacket, dark tie, dark summer slacks, and dark loafers. If not for his flat nose, one might never guess that

he is one of the most bruising of fighters, a quick, strong puncher with a resistant chin.

“Hey, Salvador,” someone called. He turned around. It was Larry Holmes, the WBC heavyweight champion. They hugged. “I want you to take a picture with me.” Sanchez looked uncertain. Holmes got the drift. “Anyone interpret for me?” Someone did quickly, and the two champions—one huge, the other not—gripped hands in the traditional fight pose, their several diamond rings sparkling in the lights.

“What’s the picture for?” Holmes was asked. “My restaurant,” he said. The business is in Holmes’ hometown, Easton, Pennsylvania. “I’ve got pictures of me with all the great current fighters, and I didn’t have one with Salvador.”

“You gonna have one of you and Cooney?” someone asked. “Yeah,” Holmes said, referring to Gerry Cooney, his next challenger. “One of me with him standing up and one of me with him layin’ down.” It drew an appreciative response from the people nearby. When the line was translated for Sanchez, he threw back his head and laughed.

Sanchez was having a good time, and has been for quite a while. His record as a fighter is sensational: 42 victories, one loss, and one draw. He has scored 31 knockouts and has never been counted out himself. Often, now, he is being compared to the finest featherweight champions in history, particularly Willie Pep and Sandy Saddler.

Since Sanchez won the title nearly two years ago, February 2, 1980—knocking out Danny Lopez in the 13th round—he has defended it seven times, all successfully and three by knockouts.

Nearby, Gil Glancy, the fight trainer, observed Sanchez. “The thing about him that’s so great,” Clancy said, “is that he can go 15 rounds without taking a deep breath. He stays in terrific shape.”

There are two primary ways he stays in condition, one old and one new. He chops wood, something that seemed to have gone out of style with Rocky Marciano. And his trainers take his pulse when he is running and sparring. If it’s a low count, they keep him going past the established goal to build stamina.

“And he’s got a different image than some recent Mexican champions,” said José Sulaiman, the WBC president. “A few have dissipated themselves after winning the title. Sanchez is of a different mold.”

Unlike many fighters, Sanchez had a middle-class upbringing. His father, Felipe, owns a small construction company in Santiago Tianguistenco, a town of about 3,000, 30 miles from Mexico City.

In high school, Sanchez had aspirations to be a doctor, but he found that he liked boxing and was surprisingly good at it. “I started at 14 in the amateurs,” Sanchez said through an interpreter, “and it gave me a lot of pleasure. I was in my territory. When I heard the bell ring to start a round, I felt my blood rushing.”

He decided to quit school to turn professional. “My parents—especially my mother—were against it,” he said. “But I said, ‘I don’t want you to waste the money you’re investing in my education. I like fighting better than school.’”

His argument was persuasive. He has since done well enough to buy himself eight cars and to buy each of his seven brothers cars. And for his three sisters, he says, he has bought other gifts.

“But I also save my money—I don’t want to happen to me what happened to Napoles,” he said, referring to the former welterweight champion, José Napoles, a Cuban who fought out of Mexico. Sanchez’s finances are controlled by a Mexican lawyer named Torres Landa. “José’s down on his luck. He’s trying to straighten out. I saw him not long ago, he’s playing the conga drums in a band.”

Sanchez was asked what his boxing plans are. “I hope to fight Argüello,” he said. Argüello is the WBC lightweight champion. “Maybe that will come in the summertime.”

The luncheon was breaking up and Sanchez seemed unhappy to have to leave. How do you like the weather? he was asked. He replied in rapid Spanish.

The interpreter looked sheepish. “I can’t translate that,” he said.



ARGÜELLO GETS ANOTHER SHOT

August 1, 1983

HE ENTERED THE MIDTOWN restaurant the other day and could nearly have passed for just another businessman out to embroider his expense account. But not quite. He wore a blue suit, black shoes, and a strawberry-red tie. His dark hair was very clean-cut, his black mustache was very neatly trimmed, and his nose was quite flat.

This was Alexis Argüello, one of only seven boxers to hold the world championship in three divisions, and who will be trying for a fourth.

He tried once before. That was last November 13, when the onetime featherweight champion, the onetime junior-lightweight champion, and the onetime lightweight champion was knocked out in the 14th round by Aaron Pryor in a fight for Pryor's World Boxing Association 140-pound junior-welterweight title.

It was a close, bruising fight, but it ended decisively. Argüello was unconscious for a few minutes afterward, bleeding from the nose, his gloves and shoe laces immediately cut open to increase circulation.

Argüello, 31 years old, born and raised in Managua, Nicaragua, now makes his home in Miami. He had stopped in New York on business and then would head for Las Vegas, Nevada, where he begins training for his rematch there with Pryor on September 9.

At lunch, Argüello was asked if he ever gets frightened before a fight.

He smiled. "After fighting in the ring for 17 years, it is no time to get scared now," said Argüello, who began fighting at age 14. "But before a fight, you get butterflies. That is normal, it is only human. And especially in the last fight, because it was for something so big. Four titles. Very nice to think about."

He said that he had made a grave error in his fight with Pryor. “In the first round he hit me with a punch that made my knees weak,” said Argüello. “I never expected that. From then on I didn’t fight my fight.

“It was maybe the macho, the ego. But I went in and traded punches, instead of boxing. Move here, slip this punch, dance away out of the ropes. That’s my style. But Pryor made me dance to his song. Next time, he going to dance to the Salsa.”

“Alexis,” someone said, “do you know about Duran getting up a singing act?”

Roberto Duran, the Panamanian fighter, is a friend of Argüello. “I don’t want to hear him sing,” said Argüello. “I remember in Nicaragua there was a great piano player who wanted to be a singer. He asked this great singer what he thought. The singer said, ‘I believe in your hands, not in your voice.’” Argüello’s dark eyes crinkled in a smile and he said, “That’s how I feel about Duran.”

Talking about show business, Bill Miller, Argüello’s agent, mentioned that they had been with Sylvester Stallone shortly after his film, *Rocky III*, came out. Stallone, a true boxing enthusiast, recently signed a promotional contract with Pryor.

“Sly wanted to compare with Alexis how much he sparred, how much roadwork he did, what he ate before a fight—and told him what he did before one of his *Rocky* fights, as if he was a real boxer, and not an actor,” said Miller.

“Do you know how they make those fight scenes?” Argüello asked. “It’s in slow motion, and they punch like this.” He threw an uppercut, and it stopped abruptly at the edge of the table. “Then for the movie they go into a little room and speed up the film.

“After an actor is supposed to get hit, they stop and put makeup on him. But Sly is a great actor. I think he’s the best there is today. Did you see *First Blood*? It was terrific. And I loved his *Rocky* movies.”

“One time Sly got in the ring and was sparring lightly with Earnie Shavers,” said Miller, referring to the former heavyweight contender. “After a little while Sly says to Shavers, ‘Open up on me.’ Open up on me! So Shavers hits him with a left hook to the body. The next thing I see, Sly is on the way to the men’s room.”

“You know what was realistic about *Rocky*?” asked Argüello. “It was how the promoters treat the fighters. The fighter who is down-and-out, they

won't give him \$10 for a loan. If the fighter is hot, they'd give him \$50, but with a contract under the money. But when a fighter is through—no pension, no nothing. For me, I don't care. I am fixed good for money. But others..."

Argüello put his fork into the apple pie and vanilla ice cream and said, "Boxing is a beautiful sport—it's the art of hitting someone without being hit, but the promoters, they ruin the sport. They get rich out of our bones, and they don't give anything out. They are like politicians."

Argüello has had experience with politicians in Nicaragua. He grew up poor on the streets of Managua. That was under the Somoza government. He and his family hoped for better things.

Argüello had a brother die with the Sandinista guerrillas before they took over the Nicaraguan government in 1979. He had given money to the group "because I wanted to, not because I had to." Yet his house and car and many other possessions were still confiscated.

"Politicians," he said, "just want to make themselves rich, to fill up their pockets. And provide nothing for the people. That's why there is revolution in Central America."

Meanwhile, Argüello attends to his profession. He is determined to avenge the loss to Pryor. The defeat so disturbed him that he had blamed Eddie Futch, who was his trainer then. The other day he publicly apologized to Futch.

"I was like a drowning man after the fight," said Argüello. "I felt all alone, and I wanted to take somebody with me. Then I couldn't sleep because of what I said. I hurt Eddie, who was a good friend."

Now, after 86 professional fights, he says he will retire at the end of this year. "No matter what happens with the Pryor fight," he said.

"He's been saying he was going to retire for the last five years," said Miller.

"This time, it is certain," said Argüello. "I have promised some people." One is his son, A.J., age 10.

And when his career is over? "I want to move to—what's that thing, Bill?" asked Argüello.

"New Hampshire," said Miller.

"Near the lakes," said Argüello, "near Golden Pond."

. . .

Alexis Argüello was knocked out by Aaron Pryor in the 10th round of their rematch.



TRACY HARRIS' DEBUT

June 23, 1985

IT WAS 8:00 AT night, and in about an hour he would enter the ring for his first professional prizefight. It was a significant night, not just for him but for his famous father, too.

He was fighting one of the few who had whipped him in the amateurs, his amateur record being 90 victories against only seven losses. This was last Wednesday night in the Ice World Arena here, a skating rink occasionally converted for boxing matches.

Tracy Harris, the 5'6", 130-pound junior-lightweight who was making his debut, looked almost slight in the corner of the small, pale-yellow dressing room, which was crowded with other fighters and handlers and rock music from someone's radio. Harris rummaged through his bag on a bench and didn't find what he was searching for.

Tracy turned to a broad-shouldered man wearing a white short-sleeve shirt and blue warm-up pants and sneakers who is his manager and trainer, and father. "I forgot my cup," said Tracy. "Is there an extra one around?"

The manager-trainer-father, as well as former heavyweight champion of the world, Floyd Patterson, left and returned shortly with that essential piece of sportswear for his adopted son.

Harris, who is 20 years old, said that neglecting to bring his cup wasn't a sign of nervousness. "I'm not nervous," he said. "It's just that I can feel the adrenalin pumpin'."

"I'm nervous," said Patterson. "I think I'm more nervous than I was for any of my fights. I felt I could control what I was going to do, but I can't control what Tracy's going to do."

Tracy is special to Patterson. “He’s exceptionally quiet, like I was,” said Patterson, “and he’s got ability. I saw that right from the start.”

The start was about nine years ago, when Tracy Harris, then 11 years old, walked into the boxing gym in New Paltz, New York, that is owned and run by Patterson, whose home is on the same property. Tracy had heard about Patterson, but had been too young to know him as a boxer.

“Tracy came off and on to the gym for about a month,” said Patterson. “He sat and watched. He never said anything. One day I said to him, ‘Would you like to try it?’ He said, ‘Yeah,’ and I got him some shoes and trunks and gloves.”

The youngster kept coming back. One summer evening, after the gym was locked up, Patterson saw Tracy sitting on a rock outside.

“Anything wrong?” asked Patterson. “No,” said Tracy. “Aren’t you going home?” “Later,” the boy said. Patterson, sensing a need, asked him if he wanted to work around Patterson’s house, doing chores such as mowing the lawn and weeding. The boy said yes.

He became friendly with Patterson’s wife, Janet, and his two daughters, Janene and Jennifer, respectively three years and five years younger than Tracy.

One winter evening the boy asked if he could stay in the gym for a night. The gym has a bedroom and bathroom and was heated.

“I said yes,” Patterson recalled. “Next thing I know, two weeks pass and he’s still there.”

Patterson looked into Tracy’s home situation. He learned that Tracy was the oldest of five children, all boys, of Annie Harris, who had worked as a nurse’s assistant in a hospital but was now unemployed. Tracy’s father had left home.

Tracy had been getting into trouble at school and on the streets. He remembers stealing things—“anything I could use,” he said, including food for home. “And sometimes I stole Pampers for the babies,” he said. “We were low on money.”

At school he was getting into fights. “And just doin’ ignorant things,” he recalls.

Patterson began to provide stability in Tracy’s life. “I was a kid like he was,” said Patterson. “It’s just that I grew up in a Brooklyn slum. There’s

nothing good in any of these slums. And when you can't find anything good to do, then you find something bad."

Patterson, also from a broken home, was sent at age 10 to Wiltwyck, a school for delinquent boys in upstate New York. It was there he learned to box. "It changed my life," he said. "I wanted to be somebody, I wanted it so much, and I found that I had talent in boxing, and so I went at it with all my heart."

Harris says that boxing has changed his life, too. "The better I got at boxin'," he said, "the better I felt. I wasn't gettin' into any more trouble."

Annie Harris, unable to overcome her financial problems in New Paltz, decided seven years ago to return with her family to Alabama, her original home.

"I loved my family," said Tracy Harris, "but I didn't want to go south." Patterson offered to have Tracy live in his house, and the boy, then 13, accepted.

Patterson continued to work in the ring with Tracy. The boy was developing into a fine little fighter.

At home one afternoon in 1979, a year after Mrs. Harris had left, Patterson called Tracy over. "We all care for you quite a bit," said Patterson, referring to his family, "and we'd like you to be with us permanently."

"What do you mean?" asked Tracy.

"Well, we thought we'd adopt you—that doesn't mean you dismiss your real family. But you'd be part of our family, too." "I'd like that," said Tracy. Patterson recalled that Tracy left the room quickly. "I remember I'd do something like that, so no one could see I was crying," said Patterson.

The roar from the Ice World boxing arena could be heard from inside the dressing room, and someone opened the door and said, "Harris is next."

Tracy's opponent, Ray Doughty, was about 5'10", some four inches taller than Tracy. But a compact style, a good defense, and a stinging overhand right that buckled Doughty's knees near the end of the last round of the scheduled four-round bout resulted in a unanimous decision for Harris.

He earned \$500, about double what a boxer in his first fight would usually get, but Harris' amateur record, including his two New York State golden glove championships, elevated his status.

“What are your plans after this?” someone asked Harris afterward.

“To get to the top,” said the young fighter.

And how did Patterson feel about the fight? “My heart,” he said, tugging several times at the breast of his shirt, “was beating like this.”

• • •

Tracy Harris Patterson, as he would soon call himself, went on to win both the WBC super bantamweight and IBF super featherweight titles.



SAOUL MAMBY: BEHIND THE OLD BOXER'S DARK SHADES

July 14, 1992

IT WAS MONDAY MORNING, five days after the savage fight. The former champ was wearing dark glasses as he slid into the booth of the coffee shop in the Bronx, where he was born and raised and where, after traveling and boxing around the world for 23 years, sometimes followed by adoring crowds, he still lives, in a modest apartment.

When the companion he met at breakfast asked to see the left eye, the one that had absorbed such a beating, the former champ removed the shades. The eye was still a little closed and very much black and blue, looking like a terrible tattoo.

“The scars of a warrior,” the fighter said, smiling somewhat.

This was Saoul Mamby, who held the world junior-welterweight title for two and a half years, from 1980 to 1982, and who, at age 45, is the oldest active fighter in the world. One might have to qualify the word active, though, because he has lost six straight fights, including one last Wednesday, a unanimous six-round decision, in a preliminary to the World Television Champions II pay-per-view tournament. Mamby was beaten by one Charlie “White Lightning” Brown, a fighter who, at 27—Mamby referred to him as “the kid”—is just four years older than Mamby’s daughter, Yvette.

“I know I didn’t look good,” Mamby said. “But I only had three days to train. They called me up and said, ‘Mamby, we need you to fight.’ Well, I didn’t want to get thrown out of the tournament, and so I fought.”

Once, Mamby was known as a great ring technician, someone with the beautiful skills of a boxing artist. “His reflexes are shot,” one of the television promoters said. “He was a ghost of himself—not even that.”

After the fight, Mamby’s trainer, Don Turner, told him he should hang up his gloves. So did Don Elbaum, a promoter of the fight. “But I can still fight given the right training,” he said. “And I’d like to go out a winner. I’d like one more shot at a title. Look at George Foreman—he’s 44—and Larry Holmes—he’s 43. They’ve fought for titles.”

He says he understands the risks. “You see a guy like Ali who’s taken too many blows to the head, and it’s tragic,” said Mamby. “But I’m a boxer. I know how to avoid getting hit.”

That wasn’t the case last Wednesday, in a surreal, if not bizarre setting. Six live fights were held in the Supper Club, a restaurant and nightclub on West 47th Street in Manhattan. A boxing ring, illuminated by the bright TV lights, was set down amid the tables. While people punched each other and drew blood, the clientele watched and ate dinner. Those at ringside might not have been surprised to find a mouthpiece land in their salmon, or have their marinara sauce turn a brighter red.

“My god, when you’re up this close you realize how vicious fighting is,” said a patron. “When you watch it on television, it just looks like a dance.”

“It’s a brutal sport, but it’s a brutal society,” said Mamby. “People don’t come to a fight to see nice boxing. They come to see someone knocked out. They come lusting for blood.”

It had been a long night Wednesday night for Mamby, longer even than the six rounds, which, for an ex-champion, is a comedown from his usual 10- and 12-round bouts. He had spent five hours in the room there trying to get his money in cash, and not a check that would have to be deposited.

“The whole night was degrading,” he said. “But this was really embarrassing.” Not only, as he said, having to “scrounge” for the money, but the money itself: \$1,500. It was a long, long way from his best purse, \$370,000, when he outpointed Thomas Americo in Jakarta, Indonesia, in 1981 to retain his title.

Why does he keep fighting? To keep hearing the roar of the crowd? Or is it the money? “It’s what I know, it’s what I’ve done well,” he said.

And the money? “There’s a saying: ‘If you have a million, you want another million.’ I’ve made a million. But I got ripped off by a lot of people. When I won that \$370,000, for instance, I kept only about \$135,000.”

Between fights in recent years he has worked as a cab driver and a chauffeur. “Right now,” he said, “I’m like most of them out there. I’m unemployed.”

In the next week or two, the New York State Athletic Commission will suspend Mamby. It has a rule that after six straight losses, there is an automatic suspension.

It is easy to be moralistic and say that boxing is disgusting and someone like Mamby should never fight again. Of course he shouldn’t—for his health, and for our sense of propriety. But in the end, the whole brutal business of boxing says less about Mamby than it does about the rest of us.



AMERICAN DREAM GOES DOWN FOR THE COUNT

August 19, 1994

“SERGEI! SERGEI! OVER HERE!” A man’s voice rose above the other sounds in the Russian supper club on Brighton Beach Avenue in Sheepshead Bay, Brooklyn, an enclave for Russian immigrants. Sergei Artemiev had just entered the restaurant on a recent night and was squinting to find his caller.

Others in the restaurant turned, and some seemed to recognize Artemiev, the 25-year-old former lightweight boxer from Russia who nearly died of a blood clot on the brain from punches absorbed in a bout in Atlantic City in March 1993.

A revolving chandelier sparkled overhead. People at tables and red banquettes talked and laughed. At a corner of the restaurant was a dance floor with couples dancing to songs sung by a nearby Russian woman.

“Sergei!” the man called again. Artemiev, with short dark hair, which doesn’t quite obscure the scar in his scalp from surgery, and Slavic features, was wearing a flowery short-sleeved shirt and tan slacks. He spotted the man standing and waving at a table along the wall. He was with a small party, all friends of Artemiev.

The man was Steve Trunov, the manager of Sergei Kobozev, who was also at the table. This was one of several dinner celebrations held over the last few days for Kobozev, who had shortly before won the United States Boxing Association cruiserweight championship. “It is really one long celebration that is winding down,” Trunov explained with a smile.

Artemiev, who just happened into the restaurant for dinner that night, hugged Kobozev, a former teammate of his on the Soviet national team. They were two of the five boxers brought to America by the New York manager Lou Falcigno five years ago, all of whom had dreams of coming to America, “where there is gold all over,” Artemiev recalled thinking, and envisioned becoming champions of the world.

Artemiev was one fight away from a shot at the world title, as Kobozev is now. At Artemiev’s home, he has a large championship belt in a box under his couch. The belt was a gift from Bob Arum, the boxing promoter, after Artemiev had been released from the hospital. Artemiev appreciated the gesture but is uncomfortable with the belt, since, he said, he never earned it.

“Sit down, have some champagne,” said Kobozev, in Russian. “We order for you. Like blinis?”

There had been reports that Artemiev, who had a benefit thrown for him in Atlantic City and received other money from friends, had squandered whatever financial resources he had, that he had spent lavishly on clothes and in nightclubs and was strapped.

“I like to live good, as good as possible—we only have one life, I think,” he said. “And I didn’t save a lot because I knew I was going to be champion. Everyone did. There was no doubt. So I bought the best clothes for me and my wife and son, Peter, and I bought him the best toys.”

Artemiev had earned only about \$70,000 in three years of fights here, though he was also subsidized by investors at \$200 a week.

“I have a little money,” he said. “But my friend Igor helps me with the rent. And other friends help with food. Lina is going to school to learn to be a secretary. There have been doctor bills and expenses and when I go to nightclubs, I mostly have friends who pay the bill. They know my situation, what happened.”

He smiled. “And we play the lottery every week.”

Artemiev ate some of the caviar on rye bread passed to him. After a moment he reached into his pocket and drew ear plugs, which he inserted into his ears. He carries ear plugs now because he is so sensitive to noise, among other things. He once could eat lemons, he said, but can’t anymore. He once would drive fearlessly, “like New York cab driver,” but doesn’t anymore. Ever since he suffered the blow from Carl Griffith in the 10th

round in the Trump Taj Mahal, and had the operation and, in a kind of miracle, survived, things have understandably not been quite the same.

“I look at pictures of me fighting and can’t believe I ever fought, that it was me,” he said. “But sometimes I am so sad that I don’t fight anymore, that I don’t go for my dreams, of my house I want to buy for my son and wife, that I start to find tears in my eyes.”

He and his wife, Lina, and two-year-old Peter, live in a ground-floor apartment in Sheepshead Bay, where they pay \$650 a month rent.

He began boxing as a 10-year-old in his hometown of St. Petersburg, Russia. “People said I was too small, too skinny, to be fighter,” he said. “But I proved to them it wasn’t so.”

Artemiev, who stands about 5'9" and is once again at his fighting weight of 135 pounds, had quick hands, quick feet, a good punch, and a willingness to mix it up. He was determined to become a champion and buy a house for his family, perhaps in Phoenix, “where it is so beautiful and the oranges grow on trees.”

In America, while the Cold War still existed, Artemiev was at first booed in arenas in towns like Biloxi and Butte and Oklahoma City, as though he were the embodiment of the Evil Empire. Fans grew to appreciate his grit and ability, however, and soon were cheering for him.

He had taken ill in the weeks leading up to the Griffith fight, suffering a fever and malaise. But he and his trainer, Tommy Gallagher, decided that he could still fight and beat Griffith because Arum had promised him that bigger payday against the USBA champion, Miguel Gonzalez, in June.

Artemiev wound up not in Las Vegas in the ring for that fight, but in a hospital bed in Atlantic City, fighting for his life. He was in a coma for nine days.

“My son saved me,” Artemiev said. “He didn’t know it, but I believed he held me in his arms.”

Peter—named for Peter the Great, the namesake of Artemiev’s hometown—was four months old when Artemiev was taken on a stretcher from the ring to an ambulance and taken to the Atlantic City Medical Center. His wife was at his bedside and she was the one who in fact held his hand.

“I don’t know if you can hear but I am here, Sergei,” she told him, as he lay motionless.

And Gallagher, his trainer, was at bedside when Artemiev finally came out of the coma. “His first words were, ‘I want a rematch,’” said Gallagher. “I think he was kidding.”

Artemiev has a playful sense of humor, but in weeks to come he had hoped to indeed fight again. He had lost some of his peripheral vision and some memory, and no state could conceivably sanction a fight with him again. He realized this, too, in time, though he jogs three or four miles a day now down streets and along the pier in Sheepshead Bay.

For four months, Artemiev had physical therapy four days a week at the John F. Kennedy Head Injury Center in Edison, New Jersey. They are seeking to place him in a job.

“I will do anything now,” he said, “but one day I want to be a boxing instructor for kids, to help them with physical training. And maybe train some boxers, too.”

He said he has no wish to return to Russia because of the instability there and the crime.

While the music played in the Russian restaurant, Artemiev appeared distracted, a far-away look in his eyes. Kobozev’s manager, Trunov, sitting across the table from Artemiev, was sensitive to it.

“You can sleep well, Sergei,” Trunov said. “Everybody knows what you did.”

He meant everyone in the Russian community, those who had followed Artemiev’s progress on the championship trail, who had rooted for him and talked about him with pride. They had waited, like him, for the day they and he knew he would be champion of the world and realize his dreams for fame and fortune in America. And they were the people who also had prayed for Artemiev’s recovery. All of them, Trunov was saying, still view him as one of their heroes. Like Kobozev, who now had thrown an arm around his former Soviet teammate and friend.

“Sergei,” said Kobozev, holding a bottle by its neck, “some champagne?”



CHARLIE NASH: TOUGHEST OLYMPIAN

September 1972

CHARLIE NASH SLEPT LIKE a baby through the burst of gunfire in the night between the guerilla Arabs and the German police. “Made me feel at home,” he said. He in fact had trouble sleeping when he first got to the Olympic Village because it was so tranquil.

Nash, the Irish lightweight boxing champion, is from the Creggan Estate in Derry, Northern Ireland, an occupied, bloody battleground between the Irish Republican Army and the British Army.

“The bombs and the shootin’ goin’ off at home put me to sleep now,” he says. “They used to keep me starin’ at the ceilin’. Now if I don’t hear a whale of a lot of shootin’ I stay awake. I think maybe there’s somethin’ really terrible just around the corner.”

Nash may be the toughest kid at the Olympics. He had dodged bombs and bullets and officious British soldiers to get to his gym to train for the Games. And yet he nearly had to be withdrawn from the boxing competition because of a busted-up pinky.

When he finally landed in the Munich ring, it was the harmless hard head of a Dane that almost did him in. Nash, a 5’7”, 132-pound southpaw counterpuncher, beat Erik Madsen of Denmark in the opening round of lightweight boxing. He won with hardly his thick brown mustache getting sweaty. Only his bobbing cowlick seemed to get a workout. But Nash hurt the little finger of his hand when, in the first round, “I give him a wee bit of a hammer.”

The hand swelled. He was rushed off for X-rays. "His hand's gone," whispered one of the ashen retinue of boxing teammates hurrying along to the hospital.

Nash's blue eyes were expressionless. "Imagine goin' through all I gone through and maybe bein' put out because of a pinky? Well, worse things can happen."

Like what happened to Willie Nash, 19, Charlie's younger brother by two years. He was shot and killed while marching in the peaceful civil demonstration on infamous Bloody Sunday last February about a half-mile down the bogside from the Nash home.

"Me father was shot as well, but he was only wounded," said Charlie. "I cannot understand the shootin' by the British soldiers that day. My brother was still wearin' the black suit from the night before when our other brother was married."

Training for the Olympic dream was a literal nightmare for Charlie, starting with sleeping.

He could not do roadwork when he returned home evenings from his job as a guillotine operator in a printing factory. "I didn't dare run on the road for fear of gettin' shot," he said. "There are lots of British foot soldiers about. Some of 'em are a wee nervous. Well, what would you do if you saw a boy shootin' past?"

Getting to his club, St. Mary's, only about 300 yards from his home, was a rugged affair. He has been stopped as many as six times on the way to the gym. "I reckon I look suspicious carryin' me duffel bag," he said. "They ask me, 'What's up, boy?' Then they empty out alla me trainin' gear."

To save time Charlie began to take back roads. He would leave his home on Dunree Gardens Street, slip down Melmore Gardens, go up Leenon Gardens, around to Malan Gardens, over to Dunmore Gardens, and finally make it to the end of Innissown Gardens where the club is, dodging into the shadow of a building when soldiers clicked by.

He says he couldn't relax even when he got to the gym because of the bombings and the bomb threats. But then he'd do his daily total of 20 rounds of sparring, bag punching, rope skipping, and medicine ball (four rounds each). He did 20 rounds instead of the customary 12 to make up for his lack of roadwork.

“But sometimes,” he said, “I would just stick in the house and do me exercises when there was too much of the shootin’ outside.”

For the first time in history, Northern Ireland athletes could be part of Ireland’s Olympic team instead of the Great Britain team. Some of Nash’s countrymen, like pentathlon winner Mary Peters, were asked to participate with the British and did. Not Nash. “I don’t think it’s right for foreigners to rule our country,” he said.

He had trouble concentrating on his training during the Olympics because he worried about home. “There are only British newspapers in the Olympic Village,” he said, “and they only tell what they want you to hear.”

He can’t turn professional because that would mean leaving Northern Ireland. (There is no pro fighting there.) “I don’t want to walk away from the troubles at home,” he said.

X-rays of Charlie’s hand proved negative. But the hand remained swollen when he next knocked out a Spaniard in 40 seconds of the first round. In the quarterfinals, he lost to a wily, 33-year-old Pole who had cunningly butted him. Nash then opened butted the Pole in return. The referee disqualified Nash.

Charlie Nash was not crushed. “This is just child’s play compared to back home,” he said. “But I am retirin’. I am thinkin’ it is about time I get married and settle down. Fightin’s no kinda life.”



TOMMY HEARNS ANSWERS YET ANOTHER BELL

September 13, 2005

ABOUT A YEAR AGO, Sugar Ray Leonard, then 48, got a phone call at his home in Baltimore. The voice at the other end was a little slurred, but it was familiar.

“Ray, how much you weigh?” he was asked.

“Why?”

“Because we ought to get back in the ring for one more time,” Thomas Hearns, 46, said. “The people would love it. It would be a hot item today.”

“Tommy,” Leonard said, “forget it.”

Both fighters had been retired for several years, but for boxing fans, their two bouts were memorable. Leonard knocked out Hearns in the 14th round to retain his world welterweight title in 1981. Eight years later, Hearns beat Leonard—even Leonard said so, having been knocked to the canvas in the third and 11th rounds—but the 12-round bout was called a draw, and Leonard retained his super-middleweight title. The two have remained friends, and every so often Hearns, who is serious, calls to see if Leonard is in shape and if he has reconsidered his proposal.

“I love Tommy—everybody does,” Leonard recalled recently. “But I tell him, ‘Tommy, the only thing I hit these days is a golf ball, and I don’t hit that very often, either.’”

Hearns, who will be 47 in October and had been retired for more than five years, is on the comeback trail and looking quite dapper—at least outside the ring. He pulled up to the front of a hotel in this Detroit suburb in August in his cherry-red Bentley. When he emerged from the car, at 6'1",

he looked lean in a lemon-yellow suit, a patterned tie, shiny brown shoes, and a goatee. He had the gentle look in his eyes that has always belied his nicknames—Hitman and Motor City Cobra—and a flattened nose that he earned with distinction as the man who, from 1980 to 2000, held seven world titles in six weight classes, from welterweight to light-heavyweight.

If he had not been returning to the ring, he would have been eligible for the International Boxing Hall of Fame, which requires a five-year hiatus from the sport.

“He would have been a shoo-in to go in on the first ballot,” said Brad Wright, the chairman of the Michigan Boxing Commission. And there are few who would disagree. Along with Leonard, Roberto Duran (whom Hearns beat), and Marvelous Marvin Hagler (to whom he lost in one of the greatest fights ever), Hearns is generally considered among the best fighters of his time—a time, however, he is trying to extend, despite protests from some of the people closest to him, like Emanuel Steward, his longtime manager and trainer.

“Manny won’t train me anymore,” Hearns said. “He said he doesn’t want me to get hurt. And that this is too much of a risk. Said he wants to remember me the way I was.

“But I feel age is only a number. And if you train hard, you stay in tip-top shape—which I’ve always done—you can do whatever your will is. I want to live my life to the fullest, and I’m in God’s hands. I know God watches out for me. He has this far.”

Jay Larkin, a friend of Hearns’ who in his role as the executive producer of Showtime’s boxing telecasts has televised a handful of his fights, is also opposed to his return to the ring.

“I’ve never heard of anyone getting faster and stronger with age—at Tommy’s age,” Larkin said.

Hearns, fighting as a cruiserweight at 177 pounds, got into the ring for the first time since 2000 on July 30, and, before a half-filled Cobo Arena in Detroit, with blood specked on his white trunks from cuts on his opponent’s face, scored a technical knockout over John Long, a 35-year-old journeyman who did not answer the bell for the ninth round in a nontitle fight.

“I started slow,” Hearns said. “I thought, *This can’t be happening to me*. I was very alert, very aware, but around the fourth round, some of the rust started coming off and I juiced it up.”

When Hearn, who grossed millions for his ring efforts, including at least \$13 million for the second Leonard fight, told Wright he wanted to fight again, Wright tried to dissuade him.

“Don’t do it, Tommy,” Wright recalled telling Hearn. “It’s too dangerous, at your age.’ And I said to him, ‘You know, Tommy, in the last few years, there’s been a noticeable change in your speech.’ He said, ‘Okay, give me tests.’ So we put him through thorough physical tests, and an MRI and a CAT scan, and he passed everything very well. Nothing more I felt I could do but allow him to fight again. He’s a grown man, after all.”

Wright was at ringside to see Hearn in his 66th professional fight.

“I was worried,” Wright said, “but he’s in tremendous shape, and as the fight went on, Tommy did look okay. Not the Tommy of old, not slick, but okay. There were openings he saw, but he couldn’t pull the trigger.”

Hearn’s son Ronald, a 26-year-old middleweight, was on the undercard that night, and he won his seventh straight professional fight without a loss.

“My dad refused to let me fight until I got my college education,” Ronald Hearn said. “And even then he was hesitant. He told me, ‘You’re my baby, and boxing’s a brutal sport.’

“But I graduated from American University three years ago”—with a degree in criminal justice—“and I’ve had amateur fights and turned pro a year ago. I’ve even sparred with my father. But he shows my moves. We don’t hit each other hard. We love each other. I didn’t want him to fight again, either—he’s financially secure—but he’s a determined guy. So I support him because it’s what he wants to do, and it hurts me when I see him get hit, but it’s what I want to do, too.”

Wright sat beside Hearn’s wife, Renee, at the Long fight.

“She told me Tommy has been wanting to fight again ever since he left the fight game five years ago,” Wright said. “But she discouraged him. But she said: ‘I live with him every day, and I know how much he misses it. He’s got the bug; been doing it since he was nine years old. I said, ‘Baby, if you train hard, then I’ll go along with you.’ And he has.”

Leonard, who said he had made “more comebacks than anybody,” is now involved in a variety of businesses and travels the country as a motivational speaker. He said most fighters came out of retirement because they needed the money.

“But this isn’t the case with Tommy,” Leonard said. “You know, it’s very difficult to prepare for life after boxing. You’ll never accomplish anything like you did when you were fighting. But you have to accept that, have to stop chasing that spotlight.”

Hearns, who is 60–5–1 with 47 knockouts, said he planned to fight for a few more years, and his goal is to win the world light-heavyweight title.

He has not found what Leonard says he has found: contentment outside the ring. What has Hearns been doing? Some business ventures and, he said, “a lot of fishing.” Many believe that is the best place for an old fighter’s hooks. In front of the hotel, meanwhile, Hearns was meeting some folks he did not know who had traveled from out of town. He told the elders of his church, Great Faith Ministries, in Detroit, that he would escort the man who was scheduled to preach the service that night. A man carrying a bible and his wife got in the back seat, and Hearns drove off. Shortly, Hearns got a call on his cell phone.

“Uh-huh,” he said. “Oh, no! Can’t be! It is?”

He shut off the phone and looked into the rearview mirror. “You’re not the preacher for tonight?” Hearns said.

“Oh, no,” the man said, “We’re just with the church group from Louisiana. But I’m not the preacher.”

“Oh,” Hearns said, smiling sheepishly and turning the car around. “I got to go back and get the preacher. I picked up the wrong people. I’m going to have to tell my wife, ‘Oh, honey, everything went fine.’ Oh, this is bad, man, this is bad.” He laughed an embarrassed laugh. “People going to think all fighters are alike.”

All fighters are not alike, and Hearns, a champion with heart, proved that in the ring, in his time. And whether his decision to return to what he calls “this brutal sport” is wise, it’s still his decision. The decision of a grown man who obviously loves what he does—or once did.



AN AFTERNOON IN GLEASON'S GYM

December 15, 1984

THERE IS THE OLD man, and the young man. The old man is teaching the young man the skills that made him so proficient when he was young. "He's catchin' on real good," says the old man.

They are in Gleason's Gymnasium on West 30th Street just off Eighth Avenue. It is a small gym, with two boxing rings, and the young man is alone and shadowboxing in the ring farthest from the door. In the adjoining ring, there is the thump and grunt of boxers sparring. In a corner of the gym, a rope is being skipped with a slap-slap-slap. The smell of sweat clings to the old blue-gray walls of Gleason's.

The young man wears a red sweatshirt, black boxing trunks, and his hands are taped to the knuckles. The old man at ringside keenly observes the young man move about on the squeaky canvas. The old man, as lean as the young man but no longer as muscular, wears a blue turtleneck sweater, jeans, and has wisps of gray in his hair.

The young man is Ricky Wallace Young, age 24, a professional prizefighter for 19 months. The older man is Bobby McQuillar, age 61, who quit fighting when he was nearly the same age as the young man, at 25 years old.

The old man was a contender in the lightweight division, at 135 pounds. The young man is slightly heavier, at 140, and is a junior-welterweight.

The old man had dreams of fame and fortune when he turned professional, just as the young man has now. The old man, though, didn't realize those dreams.

He quit after he killed a man in the ring. It was the night of September 29, 1948, at Chicago Stadium, and Bobby McQuillar, who was, he says,

“fixin’ for a title fight” with the champion, Ike Williams, floored one Kid Dinamita, a fighter from the Dominican Republic. *Dinamita* is Spanish for dynamite. McQuillar hit him with a crushing right hand that sent Kid Dinamita to the canvas. The bell saved him. But he was unable to come out for the ninth round. He was carried out of the ring, and five hours later, on a hospital operating table, he died of a cerebral hemorrhage. Kid Dinamita was 22 years old.

“I had no desire to fight after that,” said McQuillar. He says his record was 72–6, and he had beaten three men who went on to hold world titles: Joe Brown, Jimmy Carter, and Sandy Saddler. With a smile now, the old man says, “I was washed up at 25.”

He returned home to Detroit, earned a degree from the Detroit Institute of Commerce, and started work in a pharmacy. Not long afterward, he accepted an offer to help train a fighter, Johnny Bratton. McQuillar would also help train Sugar Ray Robinson and, as he calls him, “Muhammad”—Muhammad Ali.

“There is a thrill,” said the old man, “in helping a talented youngster make the good moves, watch him improve. It’s inspiring. Boxing kinda gets in your blood.”

The young man, Ricky Young, is disciplined, says the old man, he takes this profession seriously. He has won 11 of 12 professional fights. As an underdog to the veteran Angel Cruz, last August in a bout for the New York State junior-welterweight championship, Young lost a close decision in 12 rounds. “I’m an up-and-comer,” he says. “Definitely.”

Ricky Young is a high school graduate, and lives in a housing project in Harlem. He lives with his parents—his father is a bookkeeper, his mother works as a trimmer in a clothing factory—and with his two younger sisters. It is a tough neighborhood, he says, but has a lot of good people in it, but some bad ones, too. He would like to move away, to make enough money to buy his family a home “on Long Island or upstate New York.”

Young had been employed as a carpenter’s assistant when he decided to go to a gym “just to get in shape.” He found he had a talent, and began to nurture it.

“Boxing gives me a chance to maybe be rich,” said Ricky Young. He wasn’t interested in any kind of street life in pursuit of wealth, because “you always have to be lookin’ over your shoulder,” he said.

“People told me when I went into boxing, ‘Hey, Ricky, you’re going to get brain-damaged,’” he said. “My mother, especially, was worried when I started training. But then she came to my first fight—and it’s the same reaction from the others. They were surprised how good I was, and they got behind me. And they cheered. Oh, that makes you feel good. ‘Hey, Ricky,’ they say, ‘you fought beautiful. You fought smart.’ It’s a feeling like you’re on a cloud.

“I always liked boxing and boxers. They used to talk about Joe Louis, a great fighter and a great person. They said that a lady couldn’t pay her rent and had no place to stay. Joe Louis went into his pocket and gave her not one month’s rent, but three months’ rent! Stories like that overwhelm you.

“I’d like to have that kind of respect and prestige as a champion, too, to be looked up to in the community.”

He understands how dangerous boxing can be. “You have to be a scared fighter—one that doesn’t want to get hit,” he said. “The best fighters are scared, and great on defense, like Sugar Ray Leonard.”

Ricky Young is aware that the American Medical Association and others have condemned boxing and want it banned. “I don’t think it should be,” he said. “It should be monitored closely. But it’s a beautiful sport, an art and a science. You’re not out to hurt anybody. It’s the slippin’, duckin’, blockin’, and scorin’ that makes it so nice.

“There are dangers in other sports, and people die and get hurt in football, hockey, and car racing, too. As athletes we know the risks when we step into the ring.”

The old man says, “There’s gonna be dangers but you can do all right if you learn the skills, stay in shape, leave the ladies and drugs alone, and take boxing as a profession and not as a game. It ain’t nothin’ to play with.”

Ricky Young, wearing black boxing gloves now, was at the heavy bag, and began to pound it. The old man was nearby. “Stick it to it,” he urged, “stick hard.”



THE TWIN TEMPLES OF BOXING

November 20, 1982

DUK KOO KIM WAS the youngest of five children born to the H.Y. Kims, rice and ginseng farmers in the Kan Wan-Do province of South Korea, 100 kilometers east of Seoul.

When he was 14 years old Kim left school to seek his fortune in the capital city. He worked as a shoeshine boy and sold chewing gum and newspapers before he took a factory job two years later.

In 1976 at the age of 17, tough and willing, Kim began an amateur boxing career. After a 29–4 record, he turned professional in 1978. He won the Orient and Pacific Boxing Federation lightweight title last February. Sometime afterward he signed to fight Ray “Boom Boom” Mancini for the World Boxing Association lightweight championship.

His take would be \$20,000, the largest purse he had ever earned. For the son of Korean farmers, it represented a king’s ransom. Last Saturday in an outdoor ring at Caesars Palace in Las Vegas, Nevada, in a bruising fight, Mancini scored a technical knockout of Kim in the 14th round. Kim, though he took tremendous punishment, struggled to his feet after the knockdown that prompted the finish of the fight. But he was carried from the ring on a stretcher and taken to a hospital. Shortly, he underwent a 2½-hour operation for a blood clot on the brain. He never regained consciousness. On Thursday, at the age of 23, Duk Koo Kim died.

The ring, as often pointed out, has always been the refuge of the underprivileged. It is a law of economics that the banker’s son does not become a prizefighter. From Kim’s history it seems that boxing was the only way he could strive to attain in material advantage what he could not as a rice and ginseng farmer, a shoeshine boy, a factory worker.

There was danger, he understood, in fighting. A couple of days before the Mancini fight, it was reported, Kim had written “Kill or be killed” in Korean on a lampshade in his room. When he entered the ring, he was considered in excellent physical shape. He was obviously prepared for what he considered a risk worth taking.

Boxing is the most primitive, forthrightly animalistic sport there is. It is filled with horror and beauty and the most fundamental simplicity.

Hemingway treasured a remark by Jack Britton, which he thought “summed up the metaphysics of boxing.” Britton beat the stylish Benny Leonard in 1922 for the world welterweight championship.

“How did you handle Benny so easily?” Britton was asked. “Benny’s an awful smart boxer,” Britton said. “All the time he’s in there he’s thinking. All the time he’s thinking, I was hitting him.”

Why do men do it? Jack Dempsey, the great heavyweight champion of the 1920s, was a savage fighter. He had come out of the rocky mining country of Manassa, Colorado, and spent several years as a hobo. “When I was a young fellow I was knocked down plenty,” he once said. “I wanted to stay down. I couldn’t. I had to collect that two dollars for winning or go hungry. I had to get up. I was one of those hungry fighters. You could hit me on the chin with a sledgehammer for five dollars. When you haven’t eaten for two days you’ll understand.”

Poor kids with great dreams are rapping the bags and skipping rope in boxing gyms in America and elsewhere. They see no way to become a doctor or a lawyer or a corporation president. But it’s possible—however unlikely—that with talent and muscle they can become a fight champion of the world and get rich and famous.

It is a truism, sometimes reduced to a cliché, that boxing draws from members of the underclass until they reach accepted status. In America, Irish immigrants at the turn of the century were often excluded from school and job opportunities, and they produced the greatest fighters, followed in time by Jews and then Italians and blacks and Latins.

On the other side of boxing are the spectators, who pay the money for which the boxers fight. To them, knowing or not, the basic one-to-one conflict demonstrates, perhaps, primeval courage.

“Now,” said Aeneas, in Virgil’s *Aeneid*, “whoever has courage, and a strong and collected spirit in his breast, let him come forward, lace on the gloves, and put up his hands.”

The fight, as seen by Albert Camus, was the practice of a sacrificial rite by “low-brow gods.” Attending a small club fight in Oran, Algiers, Camus, once an amateur fighter himself, observed how even the fans were “sweating ferociously.” He wrote: “Every dull thud on the gleaming chests echoes in enormous vibrations through the very body of the crowd, who along with the boxers themselves, give the fight their all.”

He added, “These rites are a bit trying, but they simplify everything. Good and evil, the winner and the loser: at Corinth, two temples stood side by side—the Temple of Violence and the Temple of Necessity.”



BARNEY ROSS: UP FROM MAXWELL STREET

1977

CHICAGO—*Barney Ross, the former lightweight and welterweight champion of the world, died today at age 58 in his Lake Shore Drive apartment. The funeral will be held on Friday, at the Original Weinstein and Sons Chapel.*

A student of the Talmud who turned to prizefighting, Barney Ross was regarded as one of the toughest champions.

Outside of the ring, moreover, his heroism on Guadalcanal and his victory over a narcotics habit brought him further recognition as a man who had never been knocked out and had never quit.

—The New York Times
January 18, 1967

BARNEY ROSS WAS BORN Barnet David Rasofsky on December 23, 1909. His parents, Isidore and Sarah, always called him by his Yiddish name, Beryl or Beryle. His mother was a woman of 5'2", but his father was almost 6'0", stood erect as a soldier, and wore a pointed, reddish-brown beard with sideburns, which he clipped and combed but never shaved, in accordance with Orthodox Jewish law.

Ross' parents decided to leave Brest Litovsk, Russia, after a howling mob during a pogrom broke into the synagogue in which he was praying, smashed the mahogany doors of the Holy Ark, spat at and tore up the holy scrolls while Isidore Rasofsky begged them in vain to stop.

Isidore Rasofsky came to America in 1903 without his wife and first-born son. He began teaching in a Hebrew school on the Lower East Side of New York. It was not lucrative. He gave it up to begin selling vegetables

and groceries from a pushcart. He worked one hundred hours a week and in two years was able to send for his family, who came over on a dirty cattle boat.

Two years after Barney was born, Sarah Rasofsky's uncle in Chicago wrote that there was a small grocery store for sale in Chicago's Maxwell Street ghetto. "At least in a store we won't be out in the street in the wind and snow," reasoned Isidore Rasofsky. In March 1911, they moved to Chicago.

"Rasofsky's Dairy" would be recalled by Ross in later years as "a hole in the wall, that when we had more than four customers they'd be jammed up against the shelves and the pickle barrels." The family, which now included five sons and a daughter, lived in a tiny, dingy apartment across the street. There was one bedroom and another small room, little more than a glorified hallway. There was just one window. Ross would remember that the air was always stale.

Pneumonia and TB were rampant and the free clinic on Maxwell Street was usually packed and had a monumental waiting list. "Fire," recalled Ross, in his autobiography, "was another terror. I can't remember a week when we didn't have at least three big fires in the neighborhood. The old wooden buildings used to burn like tissue paper... The fire barn was on Maxwell and Jefferson, and every time we kids heard the fire bell, we'd run like crazy to the barn and watch the firemen harness the horses to their engines with their hoses... Every time a fireman burned to death trying to carry women and children out of a blazing tenement, we used to take off from school and form a kids' brigade at the funeral."

Discipline was strict in the Rasofsky residence. Any misbehavior and Pa Rasofsky brought out his cat-o'-nine-tails. "Unless you are punished," he told his children, "how will you be able to follow the right path, to know that you must not break God's laws, and to earn God's blessings?" The children cried, but they also felt loved and saw that their parents put away what little money they earned for education. Pa Rasofsky used to say in Yiddish, "We'll get our happiness from enjoying the good fortune that will come to our children."

Barney's parents felt shamed when he came home from the numerous street fights that he had. "Pa would collar me and let fly with that cat-o'-nine-tails whip," said Ross. "It was no use trying to tell him I hadn't picked a fight, that I fought only in self-defense. Pa's mind was made up

that I had disgraced my heritage by descending to the same level as the other ‘bums’ and ‘tramps.’

“As far as Pa was concerned, anybody who lifted a hand in anger or violence against a stranger was committing a shameful sin. Pa believed that physical force was something you used only to discipline your children or punish them for breaking the hold law... Once when somebody told him about the great Jewish boxing champ, Benny Leonard, Pa’s face turned blood red: ‘What shame this Leonard has brought on his father and mother!’”

Barney’s father added, “The religious man, Beryl, prizes learning above everything else. Let the atheists be fighters, the *trubeniks*, the murderers—we are the scholars.”

At 7:30 on the morning of Thursday, December 13, 1934, Isidore Rasofsky was murdered in his grocery store on Jefferson Street just south of Maxwell.

“That morning,” recalled Ross, “Pa was in the store early getting the milk, butter, and cheese perishables ready for the breakfast trade. In the Jewish ghetto, and in the poor Italian and Polish slum districts just north and west of the ghetto, few families could keep food overnight in their ratty little wooden iceboxes. So as soon as they got up, they’d run to the local grocery to buy what they needed. Ma would go into the store a little later, after she’d given us breakfast.

“‘Did you *daven* yet, Beryl?’ Ma wanted to know when I sat down to eat. ‘Did you say your prayers?’

“‘Holy smoke, Ma, I forgot,’ I answered.

“‘Less than a year after your Bar Mitzvah and you’re forgetting already! From you I don’t expect such things, Beryl. *Daven!*’”

He recited his morning prayers from memory.

When he finished breakfast, Barney went to his father to get carfare to high school (Medill) and to get a cheese sandwich for lunch. His mother called, “Tell Pa to watch out for the *gonovim*.” She was concerned about people who came into the store early, when her husband was busy with his morning chores, and tried to steal food stuffs. Barney yelled back okay.

“I went bounding down the steps two at a time and nearly collided with one of my chums, little Jackie Broad,” said Ross. “‘I was just coming for you, Barney,’ he said. ‘Hurry up. Something’s happened at the store.’ His face was chalk-white. An unreasoning fear suddenly clutched me.

“A crowd was gathered in front of the store. I ran across the street, screamed, ‘Let me in, let me in.’ Pa was lying on the floor his face twisted in agony. Blood was pouring down the front of his white apron. Frantically, I tore open the apron. His shirt, money belt, and *tzitzith*—a small praying shawl which Pa wore day and night—were torn and soaked in blood. ‘Pa, Pa,’ I cried. His eyes, which had been staring into space, suddenly focused on me and recognized me. ‘It’s all right, Beryl,’ he mumbled. ‘Don’t tell Mama... the shock...’ His eyes closed and his words trailed off.

“Two men rushed forward to hold my father’s head up off the floor till the ambulance came. One of them accidentally kicked something hard across the room. It was a revolver. I stared at it open-mouthed. Suddenly, there was movement behind me and I heard a hysterical cry. It was Ma. She tried to grab Pa, but some neighbors held her back. Now the noise of the people outside the store sounded like a mass roar and there was a squeal of automobile brakes. Ambulance attendants hurried in with their stretcher and lifted Pa up tenderly. The blood was still dripping from his body.”

His mother continued to shriek. Neighbors called a taxi and tried to pack the family into it. Barney refused to go. “I’ve got to find ’em,” he said. “I wanna kill ’em with my bare hands.”

There was one witness, a Mrs. Farbstein, and the police were questioning her. She said two young men who knew Isidore Rasofsky carried a few dollars in his money belt tried to stick him up. They had come in under the guise of buying lox and bagels. They asked if they could warm their hands at his potty stove.

“Sure, go ahead,” he said.

Mrs. Farbstein said she didn’t like the looks of the boys and told Isidore Rasofsky that, but he motioned her off with a smile. “By you, every stranger is a trubenik,” he said.

She had gotten only a few feet outside the door when she heard a shot. In their fright, the perpetrators ran out without taking any money at all and dropped the revolver as they fled.

No one was sure what they looked like. But the cops fanned out in the teeming neighborhood, and people came streaming from the tenements to see if they could help. Barney and several of his friends grabbed up sticks and lead pipes and began a hunt.

“On one corner, a peddler whose pushcart had been knocked over by the fleeing punks pointed in the direction of Roosevelt and Halsted,”

wrote Ross. “Like madmen, we ran to the intersection and got more contradictory gestures and directions. A block away, there was a culvert which lay rusty and unused and led to a wooden area. A kid shouted at us, ‘They went into the opening... I saw ’em!’

“We ran to the culvert and I squirmed inside. It was so dark I couldn’t see a thing. ‘Come outta there,’ I yelled, and began to curse. Jackie pulled me out. ‘They’re not gonna listen to you, Barney. We’ll stand guard on all sides of this thing and grab ’em when they come out. They can’t stand there forever.’”

The watch eventually ended there when sign of the two culprits never materialized. Isidore Rasofsky remained unconscious in Jewish Hospital for 32 hours. He awakened once, put a hand on his rheumatic shoulder—grown weak from the dampness of the Maxwell Street flat—which had bothered him for years, and whispered, “It doesn’t hurt anymore.” He rubbed his beard and muttered, “*Shema Yisrael* [Hear, O Israel].” A few minutes later he died.

“I couldn’t cry,” wrote Ross. “The tears wouldn’t come. My cousin Rose came up to console me, then looked at me in surprise because I wasn’t showing grief. She started to say something and stopped when she realized that I was in a blind fog. She put her arms around me and mumbled soothingly, ‘For a while it’ll be terrible without your pa, but you’ll get over it, and your life will be just the same.’

“But it was never to be the same. Everything that happened to the Barnet Rasofsky who became Barney Ross happened only because of that senseless, stupid murder on Jefferson Street.”

Most of the money the family made by selling the dairy was used for Isidore Rasofsky’s funeral. Ma Rasofsky was then sent off to stay with her husband’s blind mother in Connecticut. The youngest children went into an orphanage; the older boys took an apartment.

The death of his father embittered Barney. He lost faith in religion. The anger welled up in him and he took it out often in the streets. Once, he tried to avoid brawls—no more. And he found that although he was four inches shorter than the average 14-year-old and weighed less than a hundred pounds, he was so fast and agile on his feet, so quick with his hands, that he was a superior street battler.

He quit school. During the week he hauled heavy ashes in the ghetto. On Sundays he worked as a “puller” and barker for a dry-goods store

on Maxwell Street. "I used to scream 'Get your bargains! Get your bargains!' And I'd try to outshout the other barkers as well as the peddlers on the street selling the same thing. If one of my rivals started yelling, 'Best woolen sweaters, \$1.39,' I'd immediately howl, 'Best cashmere sweaters in the whole world, \$1.29,'" wrote Ross.

Barney by his own admission was developing into a real troublemaker. He said he was "spitting fire." When the neighborhood was quiet, he'd goad his friends into going into rival racial neighborhoods and getting into gang fights, of which he was now a loving and vicious participant.

He remembered that one of his neighbors had been Samuel "Nails" Morton, a natty racketeer, who had been kicked to death accidentally by a horse in a riding incident in the same year Pa had been killed. On impulse one day, Ross went to Morton's friends "Two Gun" Altarie and Frankie Yale, sometimes spectators at gang fights, and asked them for work. They discouraged him because he was "a rabbi's son." He insisted. They told him to "Go down to see Capone at his club." He did. Al Capone said, "You got no business getting mixed up in the rackets. You couldn't be a hood if you wanted to."

But Capone capitulated to Ross' pleadings. He gave him odd jobs to do, such as buying his cigars and sending him for new packs of playing cards because he couldn't stand cards that were even a little worn or thumbed.

"My career as a messenger-boy there ended abruptly one morning when Capone told me it was time for me to stop hanging around his place and time to 'get off the streets.'

"Here's a twenty," he told me. 'Buy your family something and go back to school or get a job.' When I started to protest he gave me a hard look and said, 'Look, I told you something. Now beat it before I get mad.'"

Ross says he accepted this and acknowledged that he was not meant "to be bad." "Too much of what Pa and Ma had taught me through the years was still inside me," he said.

One of the fellows from the neighborhood, Jackie Fields, had become a professional boxer, and his career was watched closely by his old friends. Soon, more and more of them began going to gyms. Barney was one. His talents were quickly recognized. He soon became the top amateur for his weight in Chicago. He had changed his name to Ross because his name was now appearing in the papers at times and he didn't want his mother to find out. He chose Ross, being so close to Rasofsky.

One day Capone and his pals came to see Barney train. "I been hearin' about you," said Capone to Barney. "Who ever thought a skinny runt like you could do all right for himself in the ring? I wanna see a neighborhood kid make good and get ahead. If you're fighting at Howard's gym Saturday night, I'll buy out the whole place. Tell your pals they can come as my guest."

After that, said Ross, Capone and his lieutenants were always in attendance at Barney's fights.

Ross' mother, back living in Chicago, was distraught at her son the fighter. But he eventually convinced her that it was a worthy occupation. As a symbol of her acquiescence, she sewed a Jewish Star of David on the inside of his boxing trunks.

"I took it to Rabbi Stein and he made a blessing over it," she said to him. "Now I want you to wear it every time you fight so you'll have protection from God." He wore it in the ring from then on.

Ross became a Golden Gloves champ, turned pro, won fight after fight. He grew cocky, neglected training, lost, got a lecture from Capone one night ("Take it from me, you're a goddamn dunce"), straightened out, won enough money to get the youngest of the Rasofsky kids out of the orphanage, brought the family back together under one roof.

"Beryl," his mother said to him, "Pa is looking down on you and he's very proud of you."

A few weeks later, on June 21, 1932, Barney Ross beat Tony Canzoneri, "with 13,000 fans screaming for the kid from the ghetto," to become the world's lightweight champion and also the junior-welterweight champion.

Ross also rediscovered religion and would read the Talmud and other religious books even in training camp. He got married.

He was fighting championship fights and winning. He went on to win the welterweight title and gave up his other two titles. He was earning more than he ever imagined, "and I played with it as if it were a box of new toys." He became a sucker for loans to "friends" and a target for race-track touts. The money drained. Fortunately, the big fights nights eased that pain. But the "gambling curse" had taken about half a million dollars from him.

On May 31, 1928, he lost his welterweight title to Henry Armstrong in one of the bloodiest, bruisingest champion fights on record. It went the full 15-round distance. And Ross got the worst of it. He could hardly

raise his arms for the last several rounds and the punishment he took was merciless. “My mouth was torn and ripped to a pulp... It was agony to breathe.” Ross begged the referee not to stop the fight, and the referee did not. “I wanted to go out a fighting champ, and on my feet,” Ross said.

Ross left the ring, stumbling up the aisle, hanging onto his trainers. “Funny, I thought,” he wrote, “I don’t hear any shouting. I don’t even hear talking. How come they’re not raising the roof for the night, the new champ? I saw faces, faces, faces, and they were all looking at me, not up at the ring, and in the whole arena, 35,000 people were sitting in silence. And then I suddenly realized that this unbelievable, fantastic silence was the most wonderful tribute I had ever received. It spoke louder, a thousand times louder than all the cheers I had heard since the day I put on a pair of boxing gloves and won my first fight...”

Ross retired. He opened a cocktail lounge in Chicago that was a money-sapper. He got divorced, met a showgirl, fell in love. Just when they planned to get married, the war broke out. Ross joined the Marines.

He eventually landed on Guadalcanal. “Jap machine-gun and rifle bullets were raining all around us [in the foxholes],” wrote Ross. At least 20 bullets ricocheted off a log he had found, and those bullets hit his tin helmet. By night, he had fired 350 rounds of ammunition. His hand was burning from it. Out of bullets, he began to throw grenades.

“The bugs and malarial mosquitoes were around now too, and crawling in my hair and taking nips.” He was thirsty, hungry, fatigued; it started to rain. “The dampness and the mud underneath cramped my feet and a chill went through my body. I felt terrible pain...” He began to dream of his girlfriend, Cathy, his family, his “ghetto pals,” wondering if they’d ever see him again. Suddenly he was snapped out of his reverie. The Japs were back and firing again, this time just 30 yards away. “The firing went on all night.” All he had left were 21 grenades, and he threw all of them just before dawn, after he had been in the hole about 13 hours. He began saying the Shema Yisrael prayer over and over. Not long after, the firing miraculously stopped, he said. He was found later by a medical soldier and taken to an aid station. He was burning with fever. And he discovered that overnight his hair was turning gray “just as Pa’s hair had once turned white in a Russian pogrom.”

He had malaria. He was taken to the Ifati field hospital.

He had sharp pains throughout his body. His ears rang. He had migraines. He kept vomiting. He had dysentery. Since his night in the shell hole, he had lost 30 pounds. “To help fight the pain, the corpsmen gave me half-grain Syrettes of morphine. The morphine lifted me out of the snake pit and let me climb high in the clouds.

“I was supposed to get the morphine only in case of emergency, but the corpsmen were well-meaning fellows and, when they saw me in agony, they gave me extra shots... I came to depend on those shots the way a drowning man depends on a life preserver. When I couldn’t get them I felt like jumping out of the window.”

He returned to the States, and he found that, still, the pain subsided only when he was drugged.

“I became so wild for dope I was ready to tear up the town to get it.” He began injecting himself with dope, using a syringe and an eye dropper. He lied to friends that he was using his money for investments. But it all went for dope. “The pushers were bleeding me for every penny I had. I was spending up to \$500 a week on it. I ran up debts of tens of thousands of dollars.”

In Hollywood one night, he almost collapsed. He was taken to a doctor. He told the doctor he needed an injection—some morphine.

The doctor said he’s seen too many cases like his not to know a dope addict. He advised him go to the U.S. Public Health Service addiction hospital in Lexington, Kentucky.

Ross began to think about it, particularly since he was losing the woman he loved—his new wife, Cathy. He checked out of the hospital and decided he would have to do it. He was assigned to a “withdrawal” ward.

“The withdrawal gave me the miseries, because the limited amount of morphine [they kept cutting his dosage daily] wasn’t enough to kill the cramps and the sweats. I soon learned where the expression ‘kick the habit’ came from. When the drug quota was progressively cut down, I got spasms in the muscles of my arms and my legs actually kicked.” He had nightmares of fighting the Japs in the mud at night, of his father’s murder.

Three months later, on January 12, 1947, he was released from Lexington. He was reunited with Cathy. He was joyous. One sour note, however, was that he learned that John Garfield had decided to quit his plans to film *The Barney Ross Story* because of Ross’ drug addiction. Garfield had decided instead to make a “fictitious picture” of a boxer

and to call it *Body and Soul*. Ross, however, realized \$60,000 from that in a legal suit because of the amount of material used in the movie from Ross' life.

Ross became a kind of crusader against drug addiction. He testified about his experiences before a Senate committee in Washington, talked with kids around the country. He also worked as an entertainment promoter and helped arrange the personal appearances schedule in the late '50s of an up-and-coming singer named Eddie Fisher.

The *Times* obituary on Ross added, "In recent years, Ross was frequently present at major fights hired to do promotional work. A small round man with gray hair, chain-smoking cigarettes and softly talking of the years when boxing was more important and its heroes were hungrier."

He was elected to the Boxing Hall of Fame and earned a rating in the top 10 welterweights of all time.

However, many of the friends that had flocked around him when he was champ had deserted him. One who did not was Ira Colitz, a boyhood friend of Ross' from the Maxwell Street area. It was Colitz, an insurance executive and onetime state senator in Illinois, who befriended Ross both with financial and emotional support. In his last days, Ross moved from New York back to Chicago, lived in a fine Lake Shore apartment due to Colitz's benevolence.

Colitz recalls that the two of them were walking to a hospital in which Ross was scheduled for a checkup, and Ross said, "It's almost over, Ira. I've got the Big C."

"Naw," said Colitz, "you don't have it."

"I know I do, Ira. No use fooling anybody. And I'm past the age when I should be trying to fool myself.

"Ira, do me a favor. Don't forget. When I check out, make sure you give my business to Hershey."

Hershey was one of the Weinstein brothers who owned a funeral parlor in Chicago and was a longtime friend of Ross'.

Ross died on January 18, 1967. On January 20, the body of Barnet David Rasofsky, known to the world as Barney Ross, lay in an open coffin among the throngs of flowers and mourners in the funeral parlor of his friend, Hershey Weinstein.

Barney had gotten his favor.

XI.

A FAMILY AFFAIR



***ROCKY MARCIANO JR.
AND THE SON OF KID GAVILAN***

November 22, 1983

AT THE DOWNTOWN ATHLETIC Club yesterday, Rocky Marciano's son was introduced to the son of Kid Gavilan.

Each was there to honor his father at a noontime news conference for the "Salute to Boxing Greats" that would take place a few hours later at dinner.

The son of Kid Gavilan is Gerardo Gonzalez Jr., 31 years old and a Manhattan mail handler. His father's real name is Gerardo Gonzalez Sr., but he boxed and became welterweight champion under the name Kid Gavilan.

"I know how it must have been for you," said Kid Gavilan's son. "I had to live it, too."

"What's that?" asked Rocky Marciano Jr., who is 15 years old and a 10th grader at St. Thomas Aquinas High School in Fort Lauderdale, Florida.

"I grew up in the Bronx, and I had to fight on the streets," Gavilan's son was saying. "When someone found out who my father was, they'd want to see how tough I was. Especially fathers. They'd point to me and tell their sons, 'There he is, go get 'im.'"

Young Marciano laughed. "That never happened to me," he said.

"It didn't?" said Gonzalez, his eyebrows arching in surprise.

"No, but it happened once to my sister," said Marciano. "This was before I was born. She was in the first grade, and my father was the champ

then. A boy in her class went up to her and said, 'Are you as tough as your dad?' He popped her, and broke her nose.

"She came home, and Dad showed her how to use her dukes. She went back to school, saw the kid, and belted him. Broke his nose and chipped his tooth, too."

Marciano's son was flown up from Florida by the Downtown A.C. to present an award named for his late father, who retired as heavyweight champion in 1956, to Gene Fullmer, former middleweight champion, while Gonzalez came up from Miami, where he is recreational director of a city park.

Young Marciano, wearing a blue suit with blue vest, a white shirt open at the collar, and a gold boxing-glove pendant with a diamond in the center, was asked if he had ever been in the ring.

"Just to wave," he said, with a smile, "but never with the mitts on, no.

"One day I'd like to try it. Just to get an idea of what my father experienced, just to get a little taste of it."

Rocky Marciano was killed in a plane crash in Newton, Iowa, on August 31, 1969. His son was one and a half years old at the time. Young Rocky, with his broad face and thick frame, bears a striking resemblance to his father.

Another similarity, which the son is quick to point out, is that he is a catcher on the junior varsity baseball team and a guard on the football team. His father also was a baseball catcher—"his first love"—and an offensive lineman, a center, in football.

"I've never felt any pressure being the son of my father," he said. "Sure, my coaches expect more from me, but I'm glad they do. I think people do better if you expect more from them. And I always go all out. My father did, from what I understand.

"He was supposed to have trained harder than anyone else, sparred more rounds. And people tell stories that when he ran on the beach, he'd run 14 miles in the sand!

"I'm so proud of my father. He won all 49 of his professional fights, 43 by knockout. No one's ever been undefeated heavyweight champion before. Larry Holmes is undefeated now, but he's still fighting, still can lose. And when they had that computer all-time heavyweight championship series, my dad won it by beating Muhammad Ali. I think he knocked him out in the 13th round. They actually sparred about 70 rounds for the

cameras, and I understand that Dad hit Ali so hard in the arms that he broke blood vessels, and Ali took off.”

Rocky Jr. said that one reason he’d had no problems in school from other kids about his father was that “nobody knows who Rocky was.”

“Their fathers tell them,” he said. “That’s all they know.” And all he knows, of course, is what he hears and reads. “I try to read everything I can about him,” said Rocky. “And then I talk to my sister, Mary Anne, about him—she’s 16 years older than I am—and my grandmother.”

Rocky Jr.’s mother died of cancer five years after his father’s death. He was six-and-a-half. He now lives with his maternal grandmother, Elizabeth Cousins.

“My father didn’t have a will, because he never thought he’d die so young; he was a day short of his 46th birthday,” said Rocky Jr. “And we just got a few bonds and stocks. Not much. There are reports that he hoarded money in shoeboxes. If it’s true, we’ve never found them. He made something like \$3 million from boxing and afterward. But he was casual about money. Once, he and my sister went to a movie, and Dad had a brown paper bag with him. He put it under his seat, and forgot the bag. Luckily my sister remembered to take it. In the bag was \$40,000. Dad grew up very poor during the Depression, and maybe he didn’t trust banks.

“One of the things I ask my sister is, ‘What was Dad like, personally?’ And she says he was gentle. That sounds funny, for being the knockout puncher he was. But I liked that.

“And my grandmother tells me that she and my dad played practical jokes on each other. He wore a toupee in his later years, and when he went on *The Ed Sullivan Show* my grandmother put itching powder in it. My father was dying up on the stage.

“But she was getting back at him. She hated blood, and so after a fight he’d put ketchup on his face and then go to her house.”

Was there anything about his father that disappointed him?

“Yes, I wish he had lived longer,” said Rocky Jr. “I wish I had known him.”



MARCEL CERDAN JR. AND THE SHADOW

May 1970

A LONGER THAN FULL-LENGTH mirror on the wood-paneled wall and Marcel Cerdan Jr. (always *Junior*) jiggles in front of it, flicking short combinations with distended pinkies, lightly toe-dancing in black sweat socks and black adidas and one wonders what he sees when he looks into the mirror.

He believes in visions and mysticism and superstitions. In dreams before nearly every bout, he says he sees the ghost of his father, the former middleweight champion who died in a plane crash in the fog-drenched Azores mountains in 1949. He still wears his father's wristwatch before every bout (his father wore two wristwatches as a superstition, too, and the discovery of one of them denoted that he was not one of the plane's survivors) and carries with him the blood-stained trunks Cerdan wore when he beat Tony Zale for the title 22 years ago.

And in Paris, before each fight, young Cerdan kisses the photograph on the gravestone of Edith Piaf, sentimental chanteuse, who was his father's mistress in an internationally known love affair.

Before the mirror his wrinkled forehead begins to fill with sweat in his training quarters at the Concord Hotel here in the Catskill Mountains, as he prepares for a welterweight fight against Donato Paduano in Madison Square Garden. Does he see his father in the mirror? Or his father's son?

Or does he see just Marcel Cerdan Jr., 26 years old, 5'7", an unlikely looking prizefighter except for the nose as flat as a peppermint leaf and a stern, intense countenance.

There is a boyish look about him, and only when he tugs on the head-gear and peers out with dark eyes is pugnacity hinted.

His skin is pale as an Irish schoolboy's and not very hairy. Neither his arms nor legs ripple with muscle. His waist is undefined and he wears a rubber belt during workouts to keep it trim as possible. He pinches his tummy a lot after workouts, the way a baker does with dough. His legs are knock-kneed.

Reputation as a puncher does not precede him, as it did his father. But sparring with blood-red gloves he demonstrated quickness of hand and leg and head-bob that moved Johnny Condon, the Garden's natty publicity man (and not altogether impartial), to note, "He doesn't look like a fighter who can't fight. I saw his old man, and he couldn't move that way."

In France, Cerdan senior is still revered. Frenchmen supposedly are "daring" young Cerdan to be, if not equal to his father, then simply outstanding.

"I idolize my father more than anyone does," said Cerdan Jr., through a translator. "I will never be as good as my father, no. It is unfair to ask anyone to be as great as him. But I must be very good."

As an amateur he won 37, lost two, drew one. Since turning pro at 21, he is undefeated in 47 fights, with one tie. He has been charged with "not having fought everybody."

Paduano, also undefeated, is "somebody." If Cerdan wins, "maybe then my people will accept me."

The memory of his father is all around. Not far from here (at Evans Lodge), his father trained for the Zale fight and hid Miss Piaf and her lady friend in a cold, dank, deserted bungalow for fear of scandal, and each night sneaked food under his jacket in the dark of the moon to his inamorata.

At the training table here, Johnny Condon had somehow located a button, like a campaign button, with a face that resembled closely that of Marcel Cerdan Jr.

"It must be 25 years old, that button," said Johnny.

"Hoooo," said young Carden, eyes growing wide, "Papa." And he pinned it on his jacket.

. . .

Marcel Cerdan Jr. lost to Donato Paduano by decision. Three years later, he was a retired boxer.



THE FIGHTING FRAZIER CLAN

October 29, 1983

THE SETTING FOR THE news conference for the television film *We Are Family*, about the fighting Frazier clan, was held yesterday afternoon in an elegant, chandeliered room in the St. Regis Hotel.

As befitting the occasion, the patriarch of the family, Smokin' Joe Frazier, the former heavyweight champion of the world, showed up in stylish apparel—a gray pinstriped suit, a gray pinstriped vest, and no shirt.

That is, his chest was bare, except for two gold pendants that nestled among the bristles.

“How come no shirt today, Joe?” someone asked.

“Too warm out,” he said. Now that he mentioned it, it was an unseasonably clement day.

Besides that, Joe Frazier needs fewer habiliment than in former times. He is thicker of neck and heftier of breadbasket than when he was the champion 10 years ago.

He now weighs about 250 pounds and fought at around 215. He is, though, still active in pugilism.

He is the manager and trainer for six members of the family, all but one of whom are undefeated. The best known of them, Marvis, his 23-year-old son, with a 10–0 record, is fighting Larry Holmes for the heavyweight championship November 25 in Las Vegas.

Marvis resembles his father in the face, though he's taller and leaner. Like his father, Marvis appeared in modish attire with a pinstriped suit, a brown one, and two gold lavalieres. But Marvis wore a shirt, for some reason.

The other Fraziers hadn't yet arrived.

Mike Cohen, who was running the news conference, said, "There's going to be a lot of Fraziers on the undercard with Marvis, but how many, I don't know."

Someone asked which of the other fighting Fraziers were expected at the St. Regis.

"Three others," he said. "There's Mark, a junior-welterweight, who is 4-0 and Joe's nephew; Rodney, a heavyweight, 10-0, and Joe's nephew, and," said Cohen, "Hector and Joe Jr."

"That's four," it was mentioned.

"Hector's fighting name is Smokin' Joe Jr.," said Cohen. He is 4-0. Hector is Joe's other son; Joe has five daughters.

As it turned out, Mark and Smokin' Joe Jr. showed up, but Rodney didn't, and no one knew where he was.

Perhaps Rodney was still celebrating his victory last month over Smokin' Perkin. No relation.

"But he ain't smokin' no more," said Frazier. "We took the name back."

Rodney is kin because he is the son of Joe's sister Rebecca, one of Joe's 12 brothers and sisters, and Mark is the son of Joe's brother Tommy.

The two other Frazier fighters not in attendance are Bernard, son of Martha, Joe's sister, who is 4-1, and Joe Smith.

"Smith? Who is Smith?" someone asked Joe Frazier.

"An in-law," replied Joe. "He hasn't made his pro debut yet."

Marvis Frazier was being questioned about his credentials—only 10 pro fights—in challenging a veteran like Holmes for the heavyweight title.

"People don't understand what the Frazier camp is like," said Marvis. "I've boxed some tough fighters, like Mike Dokes and Tex Cobb and Jimmy Young and Pinklon Thomas—and Joe Frazier. Yeah, Pops gets in the ring now and then.

"And I know how to fight Holmes. Pops showed me. I'm gonna stick him and move on him and whirl him and stick 'im again. My time has come."

Did he get this chance because he's Joe Frazier's son?

"I'm his son, all right, but he don't punch for me and he don't get hit for me and he don't get up at 4:00 in the morning for me," said Marvis.

"But he does keep me pumped up. One time I was having a tough go of it and in my corner after the seventh round he says, 'Want me to take the three rounds for you?' I laughed and said, 'No, I got it, Pops.'"

Someone from Total Video, the syndicate that will show the film that is scheduled for television in January, put his arm on Marvis' shoulder and said to a few of the newspeople, "Can we borrow Joe Jr. for a few minutes?"

Shortly after, Marvis was asked if people often call him Joe Jr.

"Sometimes they do," he said.

What do you say?

"I say, 'How ya doin'?"

Nearby, Joe Frazier said of Marvis, "The kid is smart. He hits you from any position, any angle."

What does Marvis do best?

"Hurt people," said Joe. "With either hand." Frazier, who is in the corner for each of his fighting sons and nephews, said that, no, he wouldn't send any of them into the ring if he didn't think they were capable of winning.

He was asked, does he ever feel the punches when the lads are hit?

"Nah," said Frazier. "I don't feel nuthin'."

In another part of the room, Smokin' Joe Jr. said, "We don't have disagreements with my father. He's the master. That's what we call him. He's not only been the heavyweight champ of the world, he's been the Olympic gold medal winner. He wasn't a guy who just came and went. He's been and stayed."

Mark Frazier said, "He always tells us, no matter what you do, be the best at it. If you're going to be a fighter, be the best fighter. If you're going to be a bum, be the best bum. And we listen to Uncle Billy."

You mean Uncle Joe, it was suggested. "No, sometimes we call Uncle Joe 'Uncle Billy.'"

Well, there are a lot of people in the family, it's easy to confuse...

"We've always called him Uncle Billy."

Why?

"I don't know, but we have."

Joe Frazier was asked about it.

"I was called Billy since I was a boy," Joe said, "You see, Daddy had an A-model Ford. And it was dependable. And I was always dependable."

But what does that have to do with the car?

"The car's name was Billy."

XII.

***BEYOND THE
ROPES, WHERE
TRAINERS AND
PROMOTERS
RESIDE***



CUS D'AMATO'S GYM

November 7, 1985

NIGHTTIME, AND THE WALK up the poorly lit, steep, narrow wooden staircase to the shadowed area on the third floor seemed long. The street noises grew muffled and the creak of the stairs became louder.

The climb Tuesday night in this old building at 116 E. 14th Street to the Gramercy Gymnasium at the top of the stairs—quiet now, because it is just past closing time, 8:00 PM, and the punching, skipping, snorting fighters have gone home—brought to mind the words of Cus D'Amato.

“Any kid coming here for the first time who thinks he wants to be a fighter, and who makes the climb up those dark stairs,” said Cus, “has it 50 percent licked, because he’s licking fear.”

Cus D'Amato, the sometimes strange, usually sweet, often suspicious, invariably generous teacher and philosopher and boxing manager and trainer, owned this gym for some 30 years, and, when young, slept in a cot in the back with a police dog for a companion. Printed on the front door was the name GRAMACY, misspelled by the painter.

It was here that one returned to recall the celebrated days of D'Amato, when he was the most successful handler of fighters in the world.

It was here that D'Amato, short, thick-chested, bushy-browed, nearly blind in one eye from a childhood accident, did battle with the mob-controlled elements of top-level boxing in the 1950s and '60s. It was here one time that a pair of head-knockers with sideways noses approached D'Amato about one of his talented young boxers. “We’re in,” one of the visitors told D'Amato, declaring themselves his partner.

D'Amato looked at them and stuck out his hand. "You can start here," said D'Amato, hacking one hand at the fingers of the other, "and you can cut off my hand piece by piece—but you're out."

The head-knockers and their sideways noses retreated down the stairs.

It wasn't just that D'Amato didn't want to share his fighter with creeps, but D'Amato believed he could not show weakness to his fighters. He had to set an example. He was also motivated by his hatred of the corruption that was inherent in professional boxing. Inside, the large room is like a small barn, containing two boxing rings with drooping ropes. There are a few heavy punching bags hanging from the ceiling, and, resting on a rubbing table, is a medicine ball with blue stuffing oozing out, a medicine ball that D'Amato might have slammed into a fighter's stomach 20 years before.

The smell of sweat in the gym seems embedded in the woodwork. On a bulletin board, yellowing newspaper clips. There is, however, a freshly penciled notice on lined paper. It reads:

"Cus D'Amato. Funeral Services Thursday, 8:30 AM, Catskill, New York." It went on to give driving directions.

Cus D'Amato died Monday night of pneumonia at Mount Sinai Hospital in New York City. He was 77 years old. And in his old gym the legacy of Cus D'Amato is seen with the medicine ball, with the odd shriveled speed bag that is filled with sand and hangs from the ceiling so that a fighter must learn to slip and dip as he walks by, or get conked, and Cus' legacy is felt through his accomplishments.

"His memory is still alive here," said David Bullock, a caretaker of the gym, who now sleeps here as Cus once did. "Look at what he done. He took two of the boys who came up those stairs, and made champs out of 'em—world champs."

He referred to Floyd Patterson, who became the youngest man to win the heavyweight championship, at age 21, in 1956, and José Torres, who won the light-heavyweight title in 1965.

D'Amato and Patterson had developed a father-son relationship that was even closer than the close relationships D'Amato had with most of his fighters. Then came an estrangement.

In later years they reconciled. And last year Patterson said that he would change nothing in his life except the time he was apart from D'Amato. "It turned out," said Patterson, "that whatever Cus said, worked out to

be true.” D’Amato had insight into human nature. “People who are born round don’t die square,” he said, denoting that the basic character of someone doesn’t change. He asserted, “No matter what anyone says, no matter the excuse or explanation, whatever a person does in the end is what he intended to do all along.” And he said, “Heroes and cowards feel exactly the same fear. Heroes just react to it differently.”

D’Amato had some odd ways. He rarely revealed his home address because he feared snipers, and he never married because he believed a wife might be duped by his enemies into doing him in. But he was principled to the teeth, and so honest that the strangest thing that could befall a fight manager befell Cus: he filed for bankruptcy in 1971. Historically, it is the fighters who go bankrupt and their managers who walk away flush. But there is no record of any of his fighters having problems while he was handling them. Torres, in fact, recalls that he earned close to \$1 million in his career, “and Cus never took a penny.”

As Cus got older, and had fewer fighters, he began to spend more time in the mountains, where he loved to fish. And about 10 years ago he moved to Catskill, where he opened a boxing club for teenagers.

One troubled youngster who found his way there, Mike Tyson, had talent. He and D’Amato became so close that D’Amato became his legal guardian. Tyson, now 19 years old, credits D’Amato with changing his life, and he is now one of the brightest lights among rising heavyweights, with a pro record of 11–0, and eight knockouts. Developing a fighter like Tyson, D’Amato said not long ago, “makes me excited, makes me feel like a young fella.”

D’Amato always worried more about the well-being of his fighters than anything else. Once, shortly before a big fight, José Torres, normally a model citizen, was arrested and was taken to the precinct house, where he phoned D’Amato at the Gramercy Gym.

“Cus,” said Torres, embarrassed and apologetic, “I’m in the police station. I got into a street fight.”

“José,” said D’Amato, with concern in his voice, “did you keep your chin down?”



ANGELO DUNDEE: ALI'S MUSE TAKES A BOW

November 22, 1974

CRITICS QUESTION WHO REALLY wrote Shakespeare's stuff—Marlowe? Ben Jonson? Queen Elizabeth even? Shakespeare himself? Similarly they ponder about the true culprit who limns Muhammad Ali's doggerel.

Recently, new info about the Ali folio has been uncovered.

Angelo Dundee, Ali's trainer, claims now that his amanuensis in more ways than one is Muhammad.

"Don't get me wrong," said Dundee, sitting behind the ever-jangling phone in his Miami Beach Auditorium office, "Muhammad writes most of his stuff himself. But I began it."

Angelo then related how it was when Ali first began learning how to screw an eight-ounce glove into someone's nose.

"When Muhammad first began training under me, before he had any pro fights, I'd give him a five or a 10 dollar bill and he'd be giving it out as soon as he got it," recalled Dundee. "He's the softest touch in the world. I tried to keep him on a stricter budget.

"He'd say, 'How 'bout a five, Angie,' and I'd say, 'No. take this—a deuce to keep you loose.' And that's how his poetry began. It really became a thing when he started fighting."

Ali began predicting the rounds of his victories through his self-proclaimed poetry. One of the earliest was when he fought aging Archie Moore.

"Old Archie Moore will fall in four," declaimed Ali.

And Ali was true to his word. Afterward, Moore was asked how he felt about such a happenstance. "I had a headache," said the rocked Moore. Moore had a strong enough hold on his senses to make overtures to become Ali's trainer. But Ali stuck with Dundee, who was respected for his way with fighters if not always for his way with words (cf. deuce-loose).

The two talk a quirky language other than rhymes. "Dollies" is "dollars," for example, and when Dundee tells someone, "Don't take firsties from Ali, never," this means: "Wait a while and Ali will give you a different answer the second time around."

"The best example," said Dundee, "was before the first Liston fight. At the weigh-in, Ali seemed to go berserk, calling Liston a big ugly bear and things like that. A doctor took his pulse and said it was so high that Ali might not be in his right mind.

"But he was, I can assure you of that. You'd have an abnormal blood pressure if you jumped around and screamed, too. A half-hour later he was on a stoop fooling around with some neighborhood kids. And his blood pressure was checked. Normal. It had been a ploy to scare the bully."

Dundee said he has seen Ali frightened only in airplanes. "He hates to fly," said Dundee. "I remember once we were on a rocky flight and he sat there with his hands clasped and he was praying. No fooling. Praying. And a little 11-year-old kid sitting next to him patted him on the shoulder and told him not to worry.

"Another time we got off a plane in Kingsman, Arizona, because the ride was so bad. We had to make an appearance in Phoenix. Ali was refereeing an exhibition bout with Zora Folley," Dundee continued.

"We got a guy to drive us through the desert. An eight-hour trip. Dust. Possibility of storms. Snakes. Getting dark. It was scary for me. Muhammad? He stretched out in the back seat, stuck his feet out the window, and went to sleep."

Possibly, some of the greatest courage Ali has demonstrated is his willingness to spout his rhymes. Dundee recalls, though, when an English student in a California university came to Dundee and said Ali had stolen one of his poems and that he was going to sue.

"Go ahead and sue," said Dundee, "but you'll be embarrassed."

"Why?" asked the student.

Dundee put his arm around the student and whispered in his ear, "Because the poem stinks."

(For historians of literature, however, Dundee insists that Ali wrote the poem with his own stubby pencil.)

And now that Ali is back at the top as heavyweight champion, we once again focus on the fighter and his manager of the last 14 years, and see that they are a happy and winning combo. Why? Ali, inimitably, sums up his feelings for Dundee:

“He’s got the connection and the complexion to get the right protection, which leads to good affection.”



MUSHKY SALOW WOULD NEVER CALL COLLECT

June 3, 1968

MORRIS “MUSHKY” SALOW, CONTROVERSIAL manager of Bob Foster, who recently lifted the light-heavyweight boxing crown from Dick Tiger, was returning a long-distance telephone call to a reporter. The reporter wanted to accept collect charges, which offended Mushky.

“Hey, what’s going on? I don’t do this,” he said. “I always pay my own way. I never called collect in my life, even in the old days when I was broke and had to wait a day to get coins for the call.”

The reporter said that Mushky had no choice, charges were already accepted.

“Well,” he said, resignedly, “the battleship is sunk. No sense in saving the row boat with a half a buck.”

Mushky (he pronounces it “Mooshky”) became a news story himself when he got into hot water with the New York Athletic Commission prior to the fight. The commission denied him a managerial license and also ordered him out of Foster’s training camp in Grossinger, New York. The commission asserted that Salow, 49, had “close associations with nationally known gamblers” and that he had a “long string” of arrests and convictions that made him a “habitual gambler.”

“It must be emphasized,” said a commission source, “that we are not singling Mr. Salow out or persecuting him. We turn down about three or four prospective fight managers each month because our investigations uncover gambling associations.”

When Mushky was asked why the commission turned him down, he said “I got no idea.” He was told what the commission’s statements were.

“All right, all right,” he said, “so I been pinched a few times, but only for shooting craps. Do you know anyone who never shot craps? Even the commissioners have done it. The only reason they didn’t get pinched is they ran faster.

“Listen, I ain’t shot craps in 15 years. I haven’t been to a race track in years. Is this a habitual gambler?”

When was the last time he was arrested?

“Who the hell remembers?” he said. “It was a long time ago. Maybe a dozen years. I don’t keep a clipping file on it.”

(Commission records show that, among other times, he was arrested, convicted, and fined on five counts in 1947 for operating a gambling house in Hartford, Connecticut, his hometown. He was also arrested in 1954, 1955, and as late as 1961. The latter charge was for “violation of [Connecticut] state policy laws”—which could be either for numbers or booking bets. There is no record of conviction on that arrest.)

“Listen,” he said, “I’m the only guy living who’s done everything constructive for boxing and nothing destructive. I took Teddy “Red Top” Davis when he lost 47 flights, more than anyone else in the history of boxing, and managed him to a featherweight title fight with Sandy Saddler. (In 1955, Davis lost a 15-round decision to Saddler.)

“Then there’s Bobby Foster. Eight months, already, he was working in a bomb factory. He had quit fighting. Then he came to me and asked me to handle him.

“Now I’m the champeen of the world. That’s not bad, is it? There oughta be more guys like me in the boxing business. Then it would be a better business. Least I know my business, do them commissioners know theirs? Not only should they give me a license, I oughta get a medal, too.”

(The commission stated that Salow, on his application, made a “material misrepresentation.” It said he denied he had ever been arrested or convicted of a crime. Though he had only been involved in misdemeanors, said the commission, they are still crimes; that misrepresentation would be enough to refuse him a license.)

“New York is the only state that has refused me a license,” said Salow. “Aw, listen, so I done some gambling. But what about my war record on

Guadalcanal? I lugged a machine gun on the front line. Does that count for nothing? That should cover up other things I've done in the past."

(A commission source replied to that contention. "Because a man once fought in the war," he said, "does not make it acceptable for him to rape your wife.")

"Look," said Salow, "I'm not plinging anyone. Knocking isn't my business. Foster does that with his fists. I'm champeen, ain't we? That's all that counts.

"I'm happy now. I accomplished what I've always wanted, a champeen-ship. I been in the fight game since I was 14, when I boxed as an amateur. As a fighter I was a helluva runner. Like the fastest reindeer you ever seen. So I found an easier way to make a living—managing fighters.

"Now I'm contented. And listen, you mark my words, Bobby Foster is gonna be the heavyweight champeen within a year, as sure as God made little green apples. And I ain't singing Mammy.

"You can bet your sweet potatoes on that."



RAY ARCEL: “THE MEAT WAGON

November 1, 1988

A BANTAMWEIGHT NAMED CHARLIE Phil Rosenberg, preparing for a title fight against Cannonball Martin on March 20, 1925, suffered through a stern regimen enforced by his trainer. Rosenberg, having ballooned to 155 pounds, had three months until the fight to shed 37 pounds and get down to the 118-pound limit.

This trainer was dogged. He went everywhere the fighter went and did everything the fighter did. He did roadwork with him, he prepared his meals, and even slept in the adjoining bed.

“I’d sleep with one eye open,” recalled the trainer, Ray Arcel.

One night Arcel heard Rosenberg get up to go to the bathroom.

“What are you doing?” the trainer called.

“Just going to gargle some water,” said the fighter.

Arcel got out of bed. “Go ahead,” he said, “but I’m watching your Adam’s apple so you don’t swallow.”

Rosenberg later promised, “After this fight I’m going to kill Arcel and throw myself into a tub of ice water.”

Not only did Rosenberg make the weight limit, and win a decision from Cannonball Martin, but he commuted the sentence on Arcel.

Which was a good thing, for Rosenberg, for Arcel, and for the numerous other fighters that Arcel would train.

For 65 years, Arcel handled some 2,000 professionals in that sweet and sweaty occupation, including 20 champions from Frankie Genaro, a flyweight, in 1923, to Barney Ross and Jim Braddock and Tony Zale and Ezzard Charles and Kid Gavilan and Roberto Duran.

Arcel finally threw in his towel and relinquished his bucket in 1982, after helping train Larry Holmes in his victory over Gerry Cooney in 1982. Last August 30, Arcel turned 89 years old—his energy, his wit, his natty dress with plaid sport jacket and brown suede shoes belie that age—and on Thursday night at the Downtown Athletic Club, the Ring 8 Veterans Boxing Association will honor him not as its Man of the Year but, appropriately, as its Man of the Century.

Arcel, who grew up around 106th Street in Manhattan, boxed as a youth, then became a trainer. He recalls working as far back as 1917 in fight clubs so small they were hardly more than “cigar boxes.”

“Everybody smoked,” said Arcel. “If you stood in the back of the arena you couldn’t see the fight because the smoke was so thick.”

Training fighters became for Arcel an art and a science. He believed that boxing was a matter of “brains over brawn.” He always said, “when you lose your head, you lose the best part of your body.”

And training was such a challenge, he says now, “that I must’ve been absolutely crazy to do it for all those years.”

There was Rosenberg’s death threat—“but I ignored him,” said Arcel—and there was a fighter like Tony Janiro, a talented welterweight.

“Tony was so handsome,” said Arcel, “that girls chased him everywhere. He didn’t run too fast from them, either. I couldn’t keep him in training. I remember we stayed at a hotel in midtown in which a woman hand-operated the elevator. The elevator had a strange way of getting stuck. Tony caused more delays in the service than the Otis Elevator repairmen could handle.”

For 10 years Arcel had a nearly father-son relationship with Roberto Duran. “But no one can explain that ‘no mas’ fight,” said Arcel, of the Duran–Ray Leonard welterweight title fight in November 1980. “No one really knows all the things that go on inside a fighter. But I was terribly upset when Roberto quit the fight, and it took me a long time to get over it—if I ever have.”

One of Arcel’s favorite people, as a fighter and as a man, was Joe Louis. Arcel never trained Louis, but did handle 14 of Louis’ opponents, and carted so many of them out of the ring that he became known as “The Meat Wagon.”

“It was about the fifth or sixth fight I had against Louis, and when I took my fighter—might’ve been Nathan Mann—to the middle of the ring

for instructions, Joe looks at me and says, ‘You here again?’ I burst out laughing.”

As a man fully of this century, Arcel of course went through its racial upheavals. He remembers trying to get hotel rooms for black fighters like Ezzard Charles and Jimmy Bivins, a Cleveland heavyweight.

In a hot summer in the early 1940s Arcel and Bivins went to Washington for a fight. The hotels in Washington were segregated, and those for blacks weren’t air-conditioned. Bivins’ hotel room, Arcel found, was like a “hot box.”

Arcel returned to his hotel and told the manager, who knew him, that he had come to town with his valet, and wanted the valet to stay with him.

“He laughed,” recalled Arcel. “He said, ‘C’mon on, Ray, you don’t have any valet.’ I told him the story and said he had to help me out. He said, ‘Well, he can only eat from room service, but you can only order for one. You’ve gotta hide him in the bathroom when the food comes. And when the waiter comes back for the dishes, hide him again. As for you, you can eat in the coffee shop.’

“We were there for four days, and the comfort and air-conditioning was worth the hotel’s Rules and Regulations.”



AL SILVANI: THE HOLLYWOOD CUT MAN

October 20, 1984

MUSTAFA HAMSHO, HIS GREEN robe gleaming under the lights of Madison Square Garden, danced the challenger's dance in the ring while he and a crowd of about 16,000 waited for the middleweight champ, Marvelous Marvin Hagler, to appear.

A white towel covered his head and a craggy finger waggled a few inches in front of his nose. The finger belonged to Al Silvani.

"Remember," instructed Silvani, "keep on rollin' that body."

Silvani, stocky in a black windbreaker and with a lofty head of pepper-and-salt hair, is the trainer for Hamsho and for Rocky Balboa, among many others. Like Rocky, Hamsho now was a decided underdog.

He had fought Hagler three years before and was stopped in the 11th round, and was forced to repair to a hospital for 55 stitches.

In some ways, Silvani has grown to fame as a savior of lost causes.

It was Silvani who dramatically knifed the swelling under the challenger's eye in the first *Rocky* film that allowed the never-say-die hero to see again and thus finish the fight against the champion, the villainous Apollo Creed. "I did it with a vial of blood in my palm, so when I cut the eye I pressed the vial and she squirted out," Silvani recalled.

Silvani had trained some 25 real champions, such as Nino Benvenuti and Rocky Graziano and Henry Armstrong, and some make-believe champs like Paul Newman in *Somebody Up There Likes Me* and Barbra Streisand in *The Main Event* and Sylvester Stallone's gladiator in all three film renditions.

He has also been the official palace boxing instructor for the King of Siam and for the country of Thailand, and the Danish Olympic team, as well as a Hollywood assistant director, technical adviser, and character actor, playing as many as 15 roles in a single film.

Silvani, it was once said, wears so many hats, that piled on top of each other they would create an airplane hazard.

But now his attention was riveted on his fighter.

Silvani has been with Hamsho for more than a year. Hoping to use his nearly 50 years of experience in the ring—Silvani is 74 years old—the Hamsho people called Silvani shortly before Hamsho's bout against Wilfred Benitez in July of last year. Under Silvani, Hamsho won 12 of the 12 rounds of the fight. Hamsho's next and last bout before tonight was a fifth-round knockout of Rocky Shakespeare—no relation, presumably, to either Balboa or the Bard.

Silvani wasn't around the only previous time that Hamsho challenged Hagler.

"I studied the films and Mustafa's movements," said Silvani, "and he tried to jab with his head up too high. He needed the weave movement."

Silvani said that Hamsho is an eager learner, and a dedicated fighter. "He is in great condition," said Silvani, "and that's 90 percent of it."

Hamsho's body might have been in excellent shape, but his face isn't, or not after meeting a profusion of Hagler's hooks and uppercuts.

Hamsho began bleeding within a minute of the first round last night. Silvani thought it was a butt by Hagler. "I was shocked to see a cut so soon," Silvani said later.

Between rounds he took the cotton swab from between his teeth and hurriedly applied it to the cut, which was just over his fighter's left brow.

But there was another sign that Silvani hadn't liked. His fighter was starting to look up in the ring—*It's dangerous to stand up so straight*, Silvani thought. And he cautioned Hamsho about it as he gave him a gentle nudge into the ring for Round 2.

More blood in the second round and Hagler is getting stronger. Early in the third round, Hamsho is rocked by a right hook and collapses to the canvas. Silvani is sitting back in his chair, his lips pursed tightly. Hamsho gets up, then is dropped again, begins to rise, falters, and referee Arthur Mercante leaps in and signals that the fight is concluded.

Silvani climbs into the ring and assists his fighter to the corner. In the dressing room afterward, he applies an ice pack to the right ankle of Hamsho, who sits curled on a dressing table.

“After the second knockdown,” says Silvani, gently, almost in a whisper in the quiet locker room, “Mustafa twisted the ankle. He’ll be all right. He’s been fighting for 10, 12 years, and there comes a time when you’ve had enough. And he had enough tonight.”

It was in 1941, Silvani recalled, that another eager but quite thin young man came to Silvani and asked if he’d teach him how to box. Silvani had spent most of his days in Stillman’s Gym, and was training the heavy-weight contender Tami Mauriello, and didn’t know who the skinny guy was. He asked what he did for a living. “I’m out of work right now,” said Frank Sinatra. Sinatra had just quit the Tommy Dorsey band and had not yet signed with Paramount Studio.

“First I got him on a decent diet,” said Silvani. “Chicken and fish and prunes—it’s the world’s greatest laxative. Before this, Frank was eating mostly sandwiches with mayonnaise—terrible. But that’s the way entertainers are, eating late at night and whatnot.”

It was through Sinatra that Silvani got involved with Hollywood. Sinatra had asked him to move with him to California. And the two worked out regularly. In 1946, Mauriello got a title shot against Joe Louis and asked Silvani to come back to New York to train him. He did, but not without problems. “It turned out,” said Silvani, “that I had a boxer who wanted to be a singer and a singer who wanted to be a boxer.”

Silvani would continue to live in two worlds, that of leather and that of celluloid. It seemed he was everywhere.

As a character actor, he reached his apogee by playing 15 parts in *The Greatest Story Ever Told*. He was, among other roles, a Roman soldier, beggar, shepherd, and rabbi. When Max von Sydow, who played Christ, was dragged to the Crucifixion, the man with hammer and nails was Silvani. Von Sydow looked at him and exclaimed, “Oh no, not you again!”

There was a retake.



PERFORMANCE OF A LOQUACIOUS (DON) KING

August 19, 1987

THIS WASN'T SIMPLY A news conference announcing yet another world's heavyweight championship fight—in this case, Tyson-Biggs—this was a Donald King news conference, with a dais of about 20 straight men, all with the astonishing ability to stay awake, as neologisms, solecisms, hyperboles and references, half-references and tortured literary, historical and biblical allusions from John Paul Jones to the Bard of Avon were flung about by King at a dizzying rate.

This stunning display took place yesterday at lunchtime in the grand ballroom of the Grand Hyatt, where each table was striving to go aloft with a batch of red, white, and blue balloons that read, “Don King: Only in America.”

King, the promoter with the understated hairdo, announced that “HBO is telecasting this to the whole universe of this nation.”

He said that Mike Tyson had come “360 degrees around, and that’s the triangle of life.”

He saved his most lavish encomiums for Donald Trump, with whom he has entered into a partnership for this fight. The contest will take place at Trump Plaza in Atlantic City on October 16.

King mentioned the great “Oedipuses” that Trump the real estate magnate had built. He started off about “that guy in Russia, what’s his name?” King turned to Trump, who said it softly. “Gorbachev!” said King. “That’s right. He asked Donald to redo Russia personally. Oh, woo! Leningrad is spinning in his grave!” “Lenin!” someone shouted. “Lenin!” repeated

King, triumphantly. He next spoke about “touching the hem of the great man”—Trump—and that he was so lost for words to define this man that he had to make up a new one—“telesynergistic”—“that will go into the lexicons and dictionaries and what have you.”

What does telesynergistic mean? It has something to do with a kind of genius that, said King, “can make two and two add up to 10.”

A number of the boxers—and sportswriters—in the audience looked at each other. That’s how they did arithmetic in school and no one ever wanted to touch their hem.

As here and there heads in the audience began to fall into their potatoes, Mike Tyson showed why he is the heavyweight champion of three alphabets—the WBA, the WBC, and the IBF.

Tyson is undeterred regardless of the obstacles. As King’s tongue rolled, so did Tyson’s mouth. He ate his roast beef and creamed potatoes and broccoli with left-handed aplomb. In fact, even when he was first introduced, he stood up, fork still in hand, then sat back down, and continued his assault on the vittles while King continued his assault on the language.

Eventually, the two fighters were asked to say some words.

This fight might even be more interesting than King’s oration, but history will be the judge of that.

Biggs and Tyson are undefeated. Biggs, the Olympic gold medal winner in the super-heavyweight division in 1984, is 15–0 with 10 knockouts. Tyson, 31–0 with 27 knockouts, won a decision from Tony Tucker for what this promotion calls the undisputed heavyweight championship of the world.

Earlier, Lou Duva, Biggs’ trainer, had talked about his fighter’s heart and courage, how he came back from a broken collarbone suffered in the fourth round against David Bey and went on to win. And there were allusions to some “troubles” Biggs had had the last few years. That included drug and alcohol dependency, and treatment at a rehab center.

Now Biggs, in gray businessman’s suit, discussed fear, because people have called Tyson “invincible,” he said.

“I fear God—he’s the only being I fear. Mike Tyson is 5'8", 220. I’m 6'5", 225. From the way it looks, I should be the favorite. As far as being invincible, on October 16 I’ll prove that wrong.”

Now King breathlessly introduced Tyson, “the king, the ruler, the trumpets should be blaring,” and mentioned something about his being

the new elixir of life, or was it ambrosia? Anyway, Tyson dragged himself from his own plate. He wore a painter's cap with the name Taurus on it with the bill turned up, a T-shirt, and black training pants—this is his businessman's suit.

"It's amazing how much disrespect I get since I won the championship," he said. "Everyone's talkin' about how they're gonna beat me up." He suggested that this was not good for those people's health.

A question came from the audience pertaining to Michael Spinks. How can this be an undisputed heavyweight title match when he has yet to be beaten?

"Spinks has no belt," said Tyson. "If he fights Tony Tucker and beats him, I'll have the fight."

Biggs had said Tyson was 5'8"—he's actually listed at 5'11½". Did Tyson think he was tall enough?

"Tall enough to be the champion of the world," Tyson said.

Won't a tall fighter like Biggs give you trouble?

"I beat Green, I beat Ribalta, I beat Tucker, they were all about Biggs' size. Maybe I haven't done my homework, but I don't see him being any different."

There was more give-and-take before King could stand the shadows no more. He recaptured the microphone, and added some concluding remarks, at some length, to be sure.

Suffice to say that there was one word put into practice by the fighters that is not in Donald King's teeming vocabulary.

The word is "terse."



ARUM IS PROVEN RINGMASTER

April 7, 1987

BOB ARUM WAS ON the crowded platform at the weigh-in in the auditorium at Caesars Palace this morning, and he was hollering and waving his arms at one of his assistants. “Where’s Marvin?” Arum shouted. “Still taking the exam,” came the reply.

“Forget the exam! Do the exam later! C’mon, we’re waiting!”

Sugar Ray Leonard had already stripped down and was standing on the scale. Marvelous Marvin Hagler and his retinue still hadn’t shown, apparently because of the final medical examination for the two men who would be slugging each other that evening for the middleweight title, and for the few bucks that went with the fight—\$11 million for Leonard and a minimum of \$12 million for Hagler.

Within minutes Hagler had climbed the platform, and Arum, in black sweater, light-blue slacks, and gold-rimmed glasses, perched over the champion as he removed his “War II” baseball cap, his T-shirt, jogging pants, socks, sneakers, and, finally, his dark glasses. All that remained were his beard and Kelly-green briefs.

Leonard weighed in at 158, and Hagler at 158½.

Arum, hooking his hands inside his waistband, allowed himself a smile, the kind of smile that is accompanied by a purr.

Why not? After five months since the signing for the fight, the man who came from Brooklyn, who went to Erasmus Hall High School, New York University, and Harvard Law School, and who worked as a taxation expert on Wall Street, for the District Attorney’s office in New York City, in the Justice Department during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, and who until 1965 had no interest in boxing—in “two guys

clubbing each other over the head”—was about to make a profit for himself of somewhere between \$3 million and \$6 million.

Leaving the weigh-in, and returning to his suite in Caesars, Arum was accosted by several people along the way.

“Bob, hate to ask you this at the last minute,” the man said.

“So why ask at the last minute?” said Arum.

“But I need a ticket...” “I can’t do it.”

“You could do it like that,” the man said. “Can’t do it,” said Arum.

Someone else said to him, “Las Vegas closed circuit is sold out.”

Arum clapped his hands. “That’s great. I think New York is nearly sold out, and I hear Baltimore and Washington are going off the wall.”

Someone from Glasgow, Scotland, told him that the promotion was not so hot there. “Tight with a buck in Glasgow, huh?” he said.

He’s had some promotions when “it’s been a sweat, when you don’t know if you’re going to sell any tickets the day of the fight. But not this one.” No, he had already made back the \$27 million, the break-even figure, and was into profits.

He’s had some terrific promotions, including the second Ali-Frazier fight, the Hagler-Hearns fight, the first Leonard-Duran fight, and several others that he did with Muhammad Ali, with whom he started.

The first time he ever got into a fight dealing was when he worked for the Justice Department in the Southern District of New York, and headed the taxation group that held up the purse of the first Patterson-Liston fight, because of reported illegalities by one of the promoters, Roy Cohn.

“Liston came to my office,” Arum recalled. “He was owed about \$160,000 for the fight. He was a real scary, tough-looking character. And here I am a little pipsqueak behind a desk in horned-rimmed glasses. Liston says to me, ‘Hey, you so-and-so, where’s my money?’

“I said, ‘I’m an assistant United States attorney, behave yourself.’

“He was a coward. He said, ‘Oh no, I didn’t mean it.’ He finally got his money.”



KING AND ARUM IN SCUFFLE

April 7, 1987

DON KING AND BOB Arum, the rival promoters, engaged in a pushing and shoving match at the end of the Sugar Ray Leonard–Marvelous Marvin Hagler middleweight title fight last night.

With the ring crowded and the fans waiting for the decision, King, who was just a spectator at the bout, moved along press row and headed for Leonard’s corner.

Arum, who promoted the fight, caught King from behind as King started up the steps to the ring. He tugged at the jacket of King’s tuxedo, tearing a pocket, and succeeded in getting King back down the steps. Security guards separated the two and no punches were thrown. Arum later said that King pointed to his pocket after they were separated and said, “See what I got here?”

Arum said King was pointing to a handgun, which he said was taken from King by security guards.



FREDDIE MENNA'S LOST ART

February 1969

ALMOST SINGLE-HANDEDLY, FREDDIE MENNA is trying to revive the lost art of fight managing. It is not an easy thing to do, even for someone with the creativity, the endurance, and the will of Freddie Menna.

Freddie and Rocky Graziano, both former middleweights, are partners in the Physical Arts gym in Freeport, Long Island. They are old friends and have boxed over 4,000 rounds together. Freddie, stocky, dark-haired, and a bit sad-eyed, runs the place.

"We got quite a stable here, me and Rocky," said Freddie. "Twenty fighters, and four or five of 'em are college kids. That's unusual, y'know. They got pretty fair brains. What I mean is, they can talk without the words banging into each other.

"Managing ain't so easy as you think. I don't know, sometimes I just can't control fighters. And poof—they are gone. Some of 'em could have been the greatest fighters in the world, and the world covers a lot of places.

"There was one they brought to me. I looked at him. 6'2", 210. Irish. Beautiful build. Fantastic. They told me the Jets wanted him. He was All-Suffolk County in football and basketball and whatnot. Looks like he could be the greatest of all time.

"I don't know nothing about football but they said he was terrific. Could run the 100 in 9.1 in full uniform. Like I said, I don't know football but I imagine that is pretty good. Well, we put the kid in the corner to see what kind of chin he got, what kind of guts he got.

"You never know until they get the real thing. Some of 'em once they get hit turn yellow in a hurry. Like these karate guys who kick like mules and then get into a real battle on a dark street and they run like a thief.

“Well, there was no one for this guy to fight this day. So my trainer, Gene Moore—the best in the business—he says to me, ‘You.’ ‘Me?’ I can still handle myself okay, but the guy looked like some giant. Well, I did. We get into a clinch. He picks me up like a toy. I finally get down, step one foot back, and counter with a left to the chin.

“‘Oh, my god,’ he says. And he falls to the floor. There went my \$1 million.

“Believe it or not, there’s one thing you can’t do with fighters. That’s give ‘em money. I had one guy, 6’5”, 240. Imagine! ‘Oh, my goodness, here is my Great White Hope,’ I said to myself. He was all-American, too. On my say-so the Royal Candle Company of New Jersey paid him \$150 a week to train—that’s the biggest candle company in America. So? He turns out to be a lush. His first fight he gets knocked out in the first round. It hurts me more than it hurts him, the lush.

“I found another champion on a schoolyard, playing basketball. He was a 19-year-old, 6’3”, 200. Gorgeously built. He looked very terrific. But he was a Black Muslim and wouldn’t fight white guys. Then I had a German heavyweight who thought he was Max Schmeling. He had two brains. Once he knocked out a Negro and then spit on him. It caused a riot. He’d say to his wife, ‘I’m handsome. I’m nice, huh?’ Then he has a fight and got knocked out, and I broke three smelling salts trying to wake him up.

“Another time I had this real clean-living fellow. Oh, was he something! The next Marciano. I’m all enthused. We trained for six months, and one day he comes to me and tells me he’s going to be a priest. I begged and pleaded with him that he could not do this to me. I told him about the bees and the birds. But he says, ‘The Lord is closer to me.’

“But there was another guy I had, you never seen nothing like it. I cannot even describe what this guy looked like. A walking mountain. And he said he’s not scared of nobody. He would pound his chest like Tarzan.

“His first fight, I take him to Scranton. The bell rings and he takes two steps and falls. He wasn’t even hit. He fainted.”



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

IRA BERKOW, A SPORTS columnist and feature writer for *The New York Times* for more than 25 years, shared the Pulitzer Prize for national reporting in 2001 and was a finalist for the Pulitzer for commentary in 1988. He also was a reporter for the *Minneapolis Tribune* and a columnist for Newspaper Enterprise Association. He is the author of more than 20 books, including the bestsellers *Red: A Biography of Red Smith* and *Maxwell Street: Survival in a Bazaar*, and, most recently, *Autumns in the Garden: The Coach of Camelot and Other Knicks Stories*. His work has frequently been cited in the prestigious anthology series, *Best American Sports Writing*, as well as the 1999 anthology *Best American Sports Writing of the Century*. He holds a bachelor's degree from Miami University (Ohio) and a master's degree from Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism, and has been honored with distinguished professional achievement awards from both schools. In 2009 he was inducted into the International Jewish Sports Hall of Fame and also received an Honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters from Roosevelt University in Chicago. Mr. Berkow lives in New York City.

