

Don't Bleed For Me Bayonne

Written by Robert Ecksel

Saturday, 06 November 2004 18:00

There are lots of good films about the fight game, but I'm a *Raging Bull* kinda guy. *Raging Bull* has pride of place at one end of the spectrum.

Rocky

dominates the other.

Rocky

is the brainchild of Sylvester Stallone, actor, director, producer and whatnot extraordinaire. According to legend, Sly was a starving artist in a coldwater flat at a loss for words and at a loss in the world when he caught a fight on closed-circuit that changed his life. It was no ordinary fight. It was for the heavyweight championship of the world. Broadcast from Cleveland, Ohio on February 14, 1973, the bout featured the reigning champion, Muhammad Ali, defending the title against a challenger named Chuck Wepner.

According to the bookies, Wepner had a snowball's chance in hell of beating the champ. Ali was the greatest heavyweight since Marciano, but he was something else, sui generis, in a class all his own. His ring intelligence evoked Joe Louis. His killer instinct echoed Jack Dempsey. He was suave in the squared circle like Jack Johnson. He was the pugilist's pugilist, a religious leader, a peace activist in a time of war. Ali tore across the cutting edge of history, floating like a butterfly, stinging like a bee.

By contrast, his opponent, Chuck "The Bayonne Bleeder" Wepner, was a liquor salesman by day who trained in a North Jersey gym by night. Wepner was a contender in the 1970s and earned his shot at the championship the hard way. He had more than 147 fights, amateur and pro, during his long career and it nearly all came together in Cleveland.

Chuck Wepner was born February 26, 1939 in New York City. He was raised and continues to live in Bayonne, in a spotless apartment with a water view. I was eager to know about Wepner's fight with The Greatest, but thought it best to start from the beginning.

"I was into sports," Wepner told me. "I boxed a little bit at the PAL when I was younger. I was nine, ten years old. Then I started playing a lot of basketball. And when I went into the Marine Corps I boxed, because there was extra liberty involved. You got the weekend off when you were on the boxing team. I was the military airbase champion. When I got out a couple of years later they talked me into going into the Golden Gloves in Bayonne. And I went to the New York Golden Gloves and won the heavyweight championship there and I turned pro and the rest is history."

Wepner turned pro on August 5, 1964 against "Lightening" George Cooper and punched his way through the ranks. Chuck Wepner won some fights and lost others, but he could dish it out and suck it up like there was no tomorrow.

In 1966 he fought Buster Mathis Sr. in Madison Square Garden. "He was a pretty good fighter," Wepner said. "He stopped me on eye cuts. He was a tough guy. He weighed 300 and

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something pounds and he had beaten Joe Frazier in the Olympic trials and he fought against Joe Frazier for the championship and he ran out of gas and got stopped in the late rounds.”

Wepner had six fights in '66, three in '67, six in '68, and five in '69, including a slugfest with a contender in the Caribbean. “I fought King Roman in Puerto Rico - beat him in Puerto Rico - and I got robbed,” said the champ. “I had him down once, chased him out of the joint, and they gave him a split decision. That’s what happens when you go to Puerto Rico and you fight Joe King Roman who’s from Puerto Rico.”

The next big name on Chuck Wepner’s dance card was Big George Foreman. “He stopped me on cuts,” Wepner said, repeating what was to become a refrain throughout his career. “He didn’t knock me out. They stopped the fight. George was a tough guy. He was right out of the Olympics, a tough kid, and he beat me. He surprised me actually. I didn’t think he’d be that tough and he was that tough and they stopped it in the third round.”

Speaking of tough, the next guy Wepner fought was former heavyweight champion Sonny Liston on May 29, 1970 in Jersey City. Liston and Foreman were two of the hardest hitters in heavyweight history.

“Yeah, they were,” agreed Wepner, “especially Sonny. George was sort of a roundhouse kid just coming up. That was before George retired and made his comeback. But with Liston everything was short and, you might say, right to the point - unfortunately. But with Liston I was in the fight early, but he closed both my eyes and they stopped it in the tenth round.”

Wepner was fighting the best heavyweights in the world in those days. He was in the mix. But Wepner, like most men in his line of work, was too resilient for his own good. And the Bayonne Bleeder bled.

“After that fight I seriously considered retiring,” Wepner recalled. “I got fucked up in there pretty bad and I thought maybe I should pack it in rather than sustain permanent injury or something that would disable me. I talked it over with my manager, we took some time off, and I decided to give it another shot. And things turned around for me. I learned a little more defense. I learned to slip punches. And a few years later I would up getting a shot at the title.”

That shot was against Ali.

“They call him The Greatest, and I think all-around as a boxer and a puncher and all-around fighter, Muhammad Ali was the best I fought,” Wepner said. “He was a very hard guy to hit with more than one good punch. I pressed him the whole fight. We thought he’d get tired. He did get tired, but unfortunately he had enough in his tank and by the thirteenth round I was pretty exhausted myself. And in the fifteenth round - from a punch that ordinarily wouldn’t have bothered me - he caught me with a glancing blow on the side of the neck and head. I went down and got up and Tony Perez asked me where I was and I told him and he stopped the fight. There was nineteen seconds left to go. He said he just didn’t want me to sustain permanent damage, because I looked pretty exhausted - which I was - but he could have let it go the last nineteen seconds.”

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Ali may have been The Greatest, but he was no textbook fighter.

“The big thing with Ali was his jab,” observed Wepner. “He had the crisp combinations. He would move around and stick that jab and get off a one-, two- or three-punch combination and then move. That’s why Ali was never knocked out. He didn’t stand and trade too much. He would move and then hit you with a combination and move on. He was very fast and very quick. And what people didn’t realize is that Muhammad Ali had a great ability to absorb punishment and slip punches. Even when you landed them, he was moving away, to the left, to the right, so you weren’t really landing the punches solidly. He was never knocked out. He was stopped by Larry Holmes and lost some decisions. But he was never knocked out.”

The fight with Ali was Wepner’s *Rocky* moment and small fries everywhere rejoiced. Among them was an unknown named Stallone. Because of Chuck Wepner’s gutsy performance, Sly found his inspiration, wrote a boxing screenplay, and became a star.

And now, many years and many films and many hundreds of millions of dollars later, Chuck Wepner’s attorney, Anthony Mango, is suing Stallone on behalf of the Bayonne Bleeder.

I spoke with Wepner’s lawyer and he told me that “the suit is based upon the fact that Stallone uses Chuck’s name in a promotional manner. For example, two years ago they came out with a *Rocky*

25th anniversary DVD that was repackaged and boxed as a 5-disc set which contained

Rocky 1

through

Rocky 5

. And Chuck’s name figured prominently on the packaging of those DVDs. That was something that was done without Chuck’s consent - and of course without compensating Chuck. That gives rise to what is called the right of publicity action, which basically means that a person’s name cannot be used for commercial purposes without their consent. That’s what Stallone is doing.”

Sly has been sly a long time. “He wrote a part into *Rocky 2* for me and I went to Philadelphia and read for it twice in front of them. Ching Webber,” Chuck Wepner said. “Thirty-two lines in the script of *Rocky 2*. And nineteen days before final casting he cut me out.”

The two men will settle their differences in a court of law. Wepner is a heavyweight. Stallone is a lightweight. May the best man win.