

Arnie Brower: Life Can Be Crueler Than Boxing

Written by Robert Mladinich
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Arnie Brower has the kind of quintessential New York face that looks vaguely familiar to nearly everyone he encounters. The shock of hair on his head, easy grace, welcoming smile, and regal white moustache make him look more like an aging Hollywood hunk than a onetime heavyweight prospect. The only evidence of his boxing career, which lasted from 1961-75, is the slightly splattered nose that, depending on the light, sometimes seems as wide as it is long.

Brower was never a world beater but he was good enough to be trained by Charley Goldman, who a decade before he started working with Brower had guided Rocky Marciano to the heavyweight championship of the world. At one point, Brower, whose nickname "The Jewish Bomber" garnered him no shortage of New York press, was undefeated in 15 fights, nine of which he won by knockout.

Even in the sport considered by many to be the most sordid of all, Brower was a breath of fresh air. He had graduated from the University of Connecticut with a degree in zoology. As the school's social chairman he had hosted the Connecticut governor and the Miss Israel beauty pageant winner when they visited the campus. As enigmatic as the clean-cut, well-spoken Brower's involvement in boxing was, he made no secret of the fact that once his sporting career was over he planned on embarking on more cerebral pursuits.

"The papers made a big deal over the fact that I was Jewish," said Brower, now 64 and a Manhattan resident. "There was plenty of pressure just being a boxer, so I tried not to let it bother me. What I liked about going to the gym was that everybody was equal there."

Although many of Brower's fights took place in the New York area, including several at the old Madison Square Garden, he was not averse to taking fights on the road. He laced them up throughout New England and as far away as Miami, Detroit and Paris, France. He sparred regularly with the murderous punching future light heavyweight champion Bob Foster, earning ten dollars a round. He more than held his own against Foster, who often pleaded, "You gotta stop hitting me in the ribs."

Brower's biggest fight was against Tom McNeeley at the Boston Garden in February 1965. Four years earlier, McNeeley had unsuccessfully challenged Floyd Patterson for the heavyweight title, and 30 years later his son Peter would face Mike Tyson. McNeeley stopped Brower in the tenth round.

"At that point I think I lost a few fights in a row, so his manager figured he could put a name on his record by throwing him in with me," said McNeeley. "He was tough and determined and really tried to win. But I had way too much experience for him. It was a matter of too much, too soon."

"That was the worst fight of my career," said Brower. "Mentally and emotionally I was under a lot of strain. Looking back, I could've handled things better. But nobody knows how to do that when

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they're young."

Retiring from the ring for good with a record of 26-6-2 (17 KOs), Brower moved to Los Angeles where he ran a lucrative tool company, selling and renting everything from engine hoists to hydraulic presses. After the breakup of his first marriage, which produced a daughter who is now a high school principal and with whom he has no contact, he and the woman who would become his second wife moved to Montana.

Like modern-day homesteaders they bought a house near Missoula and got a 100-year lease on their land. They bought a horse, Brower sold real estate, and things were wonderful even though Brower jokes, "I was the only white man on the reservation and one of the only Jews in the state."

"Arnie is the most atypical Jewish guy you'll ever meet," said boxing historian Mike Silver, who as a teenager was a diehard fan. "He's a walking contradiction, and he defies anybody's perception of convention."

After a bitter divorce from his second wife in 1990, Brower left the Big Sky country and moved back to New York. As anonymous as he was broke, but still blessed with good looks and the body and athleticism of a man 30 years younger, Brower found himself battling crippling depression as he floundered through the city's labyrinthine social services system. He lived on the street when it was warm, and in shelters when it was cold.

Social services enrolled him in an automotive trade school, where he met some new friends who introduced him to crack cocaine. Now in his early fifties, Brower became an unlikely addict. "The friends that introduced me to it were black and the first few times I tried it, it had no effect," he said. "They used to joke that the drug was only made for black people. But after two weeks I got high and it was an instant cure for my depression. I never felt happier in my life."

As Brower soon learned, the highs were no less intense than the lows, which started to come with alarming frequency, especially when he couldn't find the wherewithal to get himself a fix. Moreover, he found himself traveling to places he never could have imagined to feed his habit.

"Buying drugs is not like shopping at Woolworth's," he explained. "For a while it was hard convincing dealers I wasn't a cop. I've been in cop (buying) lines in the ghetto, hellholes, places anyone in their right mind wouldn't go. But I have an addictive personality. I always liked walking a tightrope, living on the edge. When I trained, I overtrained. When I worked, I overworked. When I got involved with crack, I went over the edge."

What makes Brower's story so inexplicable is the fact that he's not slurring his words or walking on his heels. He is vigorous and alert and his body is still lithe and muscular. He downs several vitamins a day and works on keeping himself fit. At first glance no one would take him for an ex-pug or a senior citizen with a monkey on his back.

"I'll beat this someday, I know I will," Brower, who sometimes delivers flowers and liquor for local merchants in his Upper West Side neighborhood, says soulfully. "I always thought you had

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to be crazy to be in the ring. If you think surviving in the ring is tough, surviving in the ghetto is even tougher. It makes sparring with Bob Foster seem like kid stuff.”