

Jersey Jones - Hall of Famer?

Written by Jim Brady

Thursday, 10 February 2005 19:00

Recently the late Jersey Jones, the former associate editor of *Ring* magazine, was named to Boxing's Hall of Fame. Jones was a nimble writer who covered New York City for decades, well into the 1960s, but how does he warrant inclusion into the Hall of Fame, when he simply wrote with "handcuffs" on?

While many lapped up *Ring* like it was holy writ, Jones helped make ratings at the "Bible of Boxing," while he managed fighters, most notably Dick Tiger. Sure, Tiger deserved to be the number one contender, and eventually became middleweight and light heavyweight champ, but how many fights would Tiger have got in Madison Square Garden if Jones hadn't pulled his punches in his *Ring* dispatches?

Do you think Nat Fleischer, the editor of *Ring*, would have kept his ringside seat if he revealed how corrupt the sport still was in New York, well after the imprisonment of Frankie Carbo and Blinky Palermo? For instance, at the time Tiger was coming into prominence in the early sixties, young fighters like Allen Thomas had to kickback 10% of their fighters purses to a so called "New York manager who they never met," just to get a fight in the Garden. This is the way the "Red Light District of Sports" worked. Jones didn't cause it, and neither did Fleischer, but to say that Jones didn't benefit from it is preposterous.

"Everybody got their envelope in those days," recalled the late Lew Eskin in 1990, who started at *Ring* as a naive 16-year-old writer in the 1940s. "Before a fight you'd go to your seat and you'd just find it there. Everybody took. How much you got depended how important you were."

W.C. Heinz, the great sportswriter, agreed. So did Irving Rudd, the Runyonesque PR man who did a stint in the mid 1940s at *Ring*, and later claimed "Fleischer could be gotten to."

Well, Fleischer was a good man who loved boxing, but to claim that he fearlessly rooted out gangsters is absolute B.S. In 1947, the New York District Attorney finally investigated Mike Jacobs, who then ran the Garden, and concluded Jacobs was "totally controlled by Frankie Carbo." Yet you never read that in *Ring* because Jacobs was one of Fleischer's best friends. Fleischer was nothing but a propagandist when it came to Jacobs. It was always "Uncle Mike" this or "Uncle Mike" that. At least Fleischer didn't write, like Red Smith did, that "Carbo was the benevolent despot of boxing."

Carbo was about as benevolent as cancer. In 1960 the Kefauver Commission finally put this murderous hit man out of business, but Jack Bonomi, the New York investigator attached to the Manhattan prosecutor's office, sadly discovered that most of the influential sportswriters in the country were on Carbo's payroll. Bonomi wanted to indict them, but concluded that would alienate the newspapers they worked for and destroy public support for the clean up.

Writers who belong in the Hall of Fame are Dan Parker, or Jimmy Cannon, who took on scum like Carbo and Palermo. Not Jones, who was a facile, well connected whore. Is Red Smith in

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Canastota? He shouldn't be, though he was the "finest stylist of his generation."

The ethics of the times were a bit different. Sportswriters, especially in the pre union days, were broke and always on the take. The legendary Dick Young often got a suit of clothes from the Brooklyn Dodger's owner Walter O'Malley, but pumping up the Dodgers was a long way from whoring or ignoring Carbo.

Boxing is a brutal racket, but is it fair that a heavyweight champion, Sonny Liston, who couldn't even read or write, owned just 12% of himself? What about the Garden main eventers, who ended up punch-drunk, fighting for a just fraction of their purses in boxing's "Golden Age?" It wouldn't have happened if more boxing writers would have had some guts.

And it's still going on today.

These days, the credo of the Boxing Writers Association still seems to be: "We Peddle Our Ass for a Press Pass." It's probably inscribed in Latin.

A real writer, and a real man, one who did more for boxing than anyone in recent memory, was Jack Newfield, who just died. Newfield wasn't even a boxing writer, but during stints with the Village Voice and New York Post, he had a great social conscience.

Newfield was born in Brooklyn in 1938. "Jack never forgot where he came from," said *The Nation* magazine's Victor Navasky, who publishes the hardest hitting weekly in America. "Everything Jack wrote was on the behalf of the dispossessed."

Who in sports are more 'dispossessed' than prizefighters?

Unlike Bert Sugar, who after thirty years of self promotion is now being called a "legend," Newfield, who was shy and unassuming, quietly won an Emmy in 1991 for his PBS expose, "Don King: Unauthorized." He also wrote the memorable book *Only In America: The Life and Crimes of Don King*

Newfield's heroes were Martin Luther King and Sugar Ray Robinson. He called boxing "my guilty pleasure," but he never sold out, nor would he be intimidated.

King pulled his press credentials, but Newfield, a portly grandfatherly gent, showed up to a Mike Tyson press conference and a notorious street killer nicknamed "Death Threat" sidled up to him and whispered "Get the hell oughta here, Jack, or we'll kill ya."

Newfield did and wrote about it. He also chronicled promoter Joe DeGuardia's alleged double dipping when he handled Lou DeValle, the New York light heavyweight.

Newfield reported that another death threat came in the *Post* office from someone named "Alan Ross," who called himself DeGuardia's attorney, and who, in the words of Newfield and his writing partner Wallace Matthews, had a "suggestion" for the reporters: "You should slit your

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wrists for what you wrote - or else someone will do it for you. Would you like me to do it for you? I'll come and do it." (editor's note: It should be noted that DeGuardia denied knowing the caller and that no additional follow-up on the incident was published.)

Though Newfield was dying of cancer, he still fought the good fight. Newfield never engaged in public theatrics like Sugar, but his last great piece on the sport he loved - "The Shame of Boxing" - ran in *The Nation* a couple of years ago. This piece was a classic and probably did more to alert indifferent lawmakers to the fact that boxing needs to be cleaned up than anything anybody ever wrote.

Jack Newfield belongs in boxing's Hall of Fame.

Not Jersey Jones.