

Boxing Hall's Selection Sweet as Sugar

Written by Randy Gordon

Thursday, 17 February 2005 18:00

“Congratulations on your selection to the Boxing Hall of Fame,” I said to the voice on the other end of the telephone.

“Why are they going to take an impression of my fist?” asked the voice. “I never hit anybody?”

I laughed. The answer from the voice—who will be inducted as a non-participant on June 16—on the other end of the phone was funny. It was funnier than he intended it to be.

“You never hit anybody?” I said/asked incredulously. “You’ve got to be kidding! You’ve probably thrown more punches at guys than all the other inductees combined.”

The voice—which belonged to Bert Sugar—roared with laughter.

“You’ve got a point there,” Bert said. “I guess I have.”

I was there for many of what might be termed “Bert’s Brawls,” which were really more adolescent pranks and antics than brawls. But they were all understandable, excusable and, for the most part, harmless. After all, Bert is truly the world’s oldest teenager.

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“Hey, kid, I put away copies of the new issues of *B.I.* and *The Ring* for you,” said Lou, owner of the candy store/card store/soda shop down the block. “

B.I.

” was short for

Boxing Illustrated

While working as a disc jockey on the all-night shift at Top-40 radio station WGBB on Long Island during my college years, I would make the slow nights go faster by reading *B.I.* and *The Ring*

whenever I played some of the longer songs (“Hey Jude,” “Stairway to Heaven,” “MacArthur Park”). For years I enjoyed

The Ring

, but I found them growing stale, colorless and tired, especially after the death of its founder and soul—Nat Fleisher—in 1972. In addition, their insistence in calling Muhammad Ali by the name he had left behind—Cassius Clay—annoyed me. I took to reading the more alive and vibrant *B.I.*

The magazine carried the charisma and flamboyance of its outspoken editor, who had no problem in doing what sportscaster Howard Cosell called “telling it like it is.”

The editor was Bert Sugar. Bert Randolph Sugar.

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One warm Spring night in 1979, I was sitting at home, editing stories for Stanley Weston's boxing magazines—*World/International Boxing*—for which I had been an Assistant Editor since 1974. The phone rang. My wife answered it.

"There's someone on the phone named Sugar Randolph, or something like that," she said.

My eyes opened wide in amazement.

"What did you say his name was?" I asked.

"Sugar Randolph," she repeated.

I thought for a moment, then asked her, "Could his name be Bert Randolph Sugar?"

"Yes, that's it! Who is he?" she asked.

"He's just the best boxing writer in the world," I replied.

I rushed to the phone.

"Hello, Randy," said the man who would soon become my boss, my mentor and one of my closest friends.

"I don't know if you've heard, but I recently purchased *Ring Magazine*. I'll be taking over the editorial reigns in June. What I'd like to know is do you have any interest in becoming my Associate Editor?"

I had to think Sugar's question over...for about a second!

"Yes! Definitely yes!" I told him.

The Ring magazine, once known as "The Bible of Boxing," had been to purgatory in the past few years, getting itself mired in a ratings scandal in the ill-fated "U.S. Boxing Championships" in 1976-1977. During the last half of the seventies, *The Ring* put out magazines with covers and content which ranged from pathetic to childish to scandalous and embarrassing.

"You're the guy I want to help restore *The Ring's* luster and respect," Sugar told me. "I want *The Ring* that we publish to be, quite simply, the best boxing magazine ever put out."

Quite frankly, from the moment our first issue (*Oct. '79*) hit the stands, it was that, and more. That's not something I believe. That's something the sales figures showed us. That's something fans the world over told us: young fans, middle-aged fans, older fans - ones who started reading *The Ring* 45 years earlier.

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The magazine quickly went from being tired and old to being young and sleek. It was one of the greatest transformations in the history of magazine publishing. From cover to content, *The Ring* looked different. It

was
different.

The world of boxing magazines and boxing publishing would never be the same again.

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Ring Magazine was always noted throughout the publishing world for its logo, in which the capital "R" and its right "leg" flowed to the right and upwards in an egg-shaped tail. Inside the egg were smaller capital letters, "ING." Above the "ING" and part of the end of the tail was the word "The." Two small boxing gloves sat at the bottom of the left "leg" of the "R."

Boxing Illustrated

was still an outstanding magazine. So were the magazines of Stanley Weston. But

The Ring

was unparalleled.

Its covers were once as respected as the covers of *Time* and *Newsweek*. During the last half of the seventies,

Ring

put out magazines with covers and content which ranged from pathetic to childish to scandalous and embarrassing. When you talked about boxing, you wanted to know who was on the cover.

But then came the scandal of the "U.S. Championships." Fingers were pointed at ABC-TV, which televised the series. Fingers were pointed at Don King, who promoted it. But most of the fingers were rightfully pointed at

The Ring.

At the time, a young, rebel writer out of Sunnyside, Queens, New York, named Malcolm "Flash" Gordon put out a sizzling-hot underground newspaper called "*Tonight's Boxing Program*." His publication was must reading for everyone in the business. He sold them by subscription, but mainly sold them at arenas on fight night. Incredibly, he attended fight card after fight card up and down the east coast, from New York to New Jersey, from Maine to Massachusetts, from Pennsylvania to Virginia, Washington D.C. and beyond.

Tonight's Boxing Program

was the first to expose the tournament and its ratings scandal.

Flash Gordon began blasting ABC-TV for allowing such a tainted tournament to be aired. A young ABC producer picked up on Flash's weekly exposes and brought his information to ABC's Executive Producer, Roone Arledge, and to ABC's top sportscaster, Howard Cosell. That young producer was quickly elevated in the ranks at ABC, became their on-air boxing analyst and today, Alex Wallau is President of ABC Sports.

Flash Gordon didn't stop at ABC. His publication continually referred to Don King as "Dung King." As for *Ring Magazine*, Flash began calling it "Wrong Magazine." Its #2 man, Johnny Ort,

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was constantly called Ort/Bought/Caught in
Program
Boxing Championships” eventually imploded.

Tonight's Boxing
. The “U.S.

ABC survived the stench of the tournament. So did Don King. *The Ring* did not. Its ratings, once revered and respected in the industry, now were scorned and laughed at. The magazine, under the guidance of founder Nat Fleischer’s son-in-law, Nat Loubet, went down for the count.

That’s where Bert Sugar comes in. Along with three business partners, Bert purchased the magazine, along with The Ring Publishing Corporation. When I told him over the phone that I’d love to work for him, I did so in the total belief that if anybody could resurrect the dead *Ring Magazine*, it was him. I was right.

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One of the many changes and innovations Sugar brought to *The Ring* was “Democratic Ratings.” An international panel of up to 100 boxing writers and personalities voted for their choice of the top-10 contenders in every division. Their ballots were tabulated and the results shown in the next month’s issue. The ratings were far from perfect, but they were better and certainly more honest than the ratings of any of the sanctioning bodies.

Ah, yes, the sanctioning bodies. Almost monthly in his editorials, Bert took on each of the sanctioning bodies. None of the “Alphabet Soup” organizations escaped his wrath and venom. His journalistic attacks paved the way for other boxing writers to begin questioning the ratings and business ethics of the sanctioning bodies.

In one of his columns, Sugar called the Vice-Chairman of one of the sanctioning bodies the “Chairman of Vice.” Confronted by the man in Las Vegas, Sugar nearly threw his drink in the man’s face. But after thinking twice, Sugar decided “not to waste a perfectly good glass of scotch.” He downed the drink and threw his fists instead.

But Bert Sugar didn’t fight others nearly as much as he fought those who attacked boxing.

The American Medical Association (AMA) was one of Sugar’s favorite targets. The AMA frequently called for boxing’s abolition through its own publication, the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA). Sugar pointed out how JAMA used boxing as a whipping boy. He told the world how JAMA heaped lavish praise and accolades on a certain pharmaceutical company while putting another pharmaceutical company down.

“Normally, there would be nothing wrong with doing that,” wrote Sugar, “except that the company JAMA was putting down had just pulled its advertising from them and the company they were building up had become one of JAMA’s top advertisers. Let those who live in glass houses not throw stones.”

And talk about prophetic. While attacking many of the do-nothing state athletic commissions in

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the June 1981 issue of *The Ring*, Sugar wrote, "...if the commissions don't do something—and soon—to clean up boxing's act, somebody will have to clean up their act." This, nearly two decades before Sen. John McCain began hammering on the doors of Congress and the White House to pass a Federal Boxing Bill.

Sugar attacked incompetent and dishonest officials, executives, promoters, matchmakers, managers and even journalists. His list of detractors was long and extensive. Yet his list of admirers was even longer.

I am among the latter.

Boxing is an incredibly exciting sport to watch...to write about...to read about.

Sugar's prose over the years only emphasized this fact. When he sat down at his typewriter (I believe he still uses a typewriter!) it was like a concert pianist about to perform (minus the cigar).

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As Sugar's sidekick for the better part of five years, I can tell you that the internet doesn't have enough megabytes to handle all the outrageous and funny stories I can tell you about Bert.

Here are but a few.

At a press conference in New York City in the summer of 1980, New York Daily News columnist Dick Young came up to me and asked, "Randy, does Bert Sugar *always* wear that hat? I know you room with him on the road, and that question has been gnawing away at me."

"Yes," I told him. "Bert *always* wears his hat. He takes it off only when he changes hats. Otherwise, he *always* has it on."

"Even when he sleeps?" inquired Young.

"Even when he sleeps," I told him.

Young soon found out for himself.

I informed Bert of my conversation with Young, and he said he'd play along if Young ever asked him about the hat.

Young soon got the answer he was looking for up close and personal.

It was October 1, 1980. Bert and I were in Las Vegas, Nevada, along with a gazillion other journalists for the Larry Holmes-Muhammad Ali heavyweight championship bout.

I was watching television in our room when I heard a knock at the door. I looked through the

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peephole. It was Dick Young.

Bert was in the shower. I pushed open the bathroom door. "Bert. Psst! Bert!" I called to him in a hushed voice.

He looked out from behind the shower curtain.

"Dick Young is at the door," I said, pointing to the door. "Wanna' do something? Put your hat on."

Bert smiled a devilish smile.

"Get me my hat and cigar," he said. Then he yelled, "I'll be right there."

I ran to the dresser and grabbed his black fedora and a new, unlit cigar. I handed them to Sugar, who had stepped out of the shower and walked to the door. He put on the hat and stuck the cigar in his mouth.

"Who's there?" he asked.

"It's Dick Young, Bert."

Sugar opened the door.

Young's eyes nearly popped out of his head. Standing in front of him, wearing only his trademark hat and his birthday suit, along with a cigar, was Bert Sugar.

"I don't believe it!" he said. "I just don't believe it!" Looking stunned, he turned and headed toward the elevator.

The next day came Young's column, called "Young Ideas." It was all about the heavyweight fight which would take place hours later. Three-quarters of the way into the column came Young's dot-dot-dot items in "Fight Camp Confidential," with tidbits of boxing camp info.

Then came the last line of his column. Since none of the readers saw what we saw, few could really appreciate the line and Young's humor.

The line read, "And yes, Bert Sugar *a/ways* wears his hat!"

On another night in Las Vegas, I was having dinner in an expensive restaurant with Bert. I pointed across the room to the door. Don King had just walked in. Sugar decided to attract King's attention. Rather than raise his hands and wave at King, Sugar picked up a large dinner roll from our table.

"Bert, what are you gonna' do?" I asked. He smiled. Then he let the roll fly. I watched its flight. Like a long field goal, it seemed to have the height and distance. Then it went wide right . . . -

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and directly into a man's filled soup bowl. Like a meteor from outer space slamming into the ocean, there was a soup tsunami all over the unsuspecting, shocked man and his dinner partner.

"Whoops!" Bert exclaimed. "Sorry, I was aiming at him," he said, pointing to Don King. "Missed." King and Bert roared with laughter. Then Bert offered to pay for the man's dinner, but the guy didn't have Sugar's sense of humor, and rejected the offer.

Bert liked throwing food. In 1982, there was speculation that Sugar Ray Leonard was going to make an announcement that he wanted to fight middleweight champion Marvelous Marvin Hagler. Some reports said he was going to offer a fight to Hagler—who desperately wanted the fight—while other reports said he was going to retire. Leonard's announcement was turned into one of the biggest press conferences of all time. With over 15,000 fans piled into the Civic Center in Landover, Maryland, Leonard stood in mid-ring and teased the fans, media and Hagler before making his announcement.

"A fight between me and Marvin would be a great fight," said the once-beaten superstar. The crowd roared. Hagler smiled. Leonard paused, before continuing.

"Unfortunately," he said, "it'll never happen."

Leonard made headlines by announcing that a fight would *not* happen. Following the press conference, I headed to a bar with Bert.

Bert saw a friend of ours, boxing writer George Kimball, on the other side of the bar. Bert picked a peanut out of the finger-snack bowl and tossed it at Kimball. This time, unlike the Las Vegas roll-tossing incident, Bert's food missile was on target. The peanut hit Kimball. Kimball quickly returned the fire with several peanuts of his own.

Not to be outdone, Bert took a handful of peanuts, let them, and they pelted Kimball like buckshot. Sugar laughed loud. Then Kimball took his entire bowl of peanuts and heaved it. Peanuts landed in both of our beers.

Bert jumped up and grabbed a large potted palm from the floor. He then ran after Kimball with it. Kimball jumped off his stool as Sugar chased him around the bar.

Minutes later Bert was explaining to the Landover Police Department why he was chasing a man around a local establishment with a potted plant. Somehow he talked his way out of a summons.

Bert Sugar has spent more than the last half of his life in and around boxing. He has given the sport his unconditional love, constantly fighting to mend the ills which ail it.

Prior to entering the world of boxing, Sugar attended law school. He was a top advertising executive. He had his choice and pick of careers. I, for one, am glad he chose boxing. We all should be glad he did so.

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Bert once told me that boxing is a great sport to watch, to read about and talk about. But he said the best thing of all was to write about it. He said there is nothing better in the world of sports than great boxing writing.

Over the decades, Bert Sugar has proven - beyond a shadow of a doubt - that he is not just a great boxing writer, but one of the best to ever come along.

Boxing is lucky to have him.

The International Boxing Hall of Fame welcomes him with open arms . . . and a plaster mold exclusively for his fists!