

Dave Jaco Remembers Boxing

Written by Robert Mladinich
Tuesday, 01 March 2005 18:00

A few months ago former journeyman heavyweight David Jaco was holding court at the Oasis Bar in Sarasota, Florida, one town over from Bradenton, where he has resided for the past 19 years. Even though he is 6'6" tall and weighs about 250 pounds, from a distance he looks more like a gangly, loose-limbed basketball player than a former boxer. Still ruggedly handsome at the age of 50, Jaco is a world-class raconteur whose incessant laughter and effervescent personality always draw people to his midst - on this occasion, a short, drunk, well-muscled man was obviously upset with all of the attention Jaco was garnering. As the brooding man sat drinking alone, Jaco was surrounded by friends, some of whom he had met just minutes before, and all of whom were reveling in the free-spirited Jaco's stories of a life well lived.

"Hey big guy, I bet I can kick your bleeping ass," the man screamed at Jaco. As all heads turned toward the aggressor, Jaco gazed into the man's eyes with his megawatt German, Swiss, American Indian and English smile, and politely asked what the hubbub was about. As the man mumbled some more pejoratives, Jaco took matters into his own meaty hands.

"I said 'You're probably right,'" Jaco laughingly recounted. "Of everyone in this bar, you're probably the only guy that can whip my ass. But please don't."

The protagonist lost his steam and quickly retreated. Jaco went back to doing what he does best, which is having a good time. "It takes a better man to walk away from bullshit," he explained. "It wouldn't have done me or anyone else any good to put that guy in his place."

One can only wonder if that man ever realized how lucky he was that Jaco is so mild-mannered. A quarter of a century earlier, with no boxing experience whatsoever, Jaco utilized his rocket of a right hand to often knock out four men a night in Toughman competitions in and around his native Toledo, Ohio. Moreover, he is a veteran of 50 professional fights who, between 1981-94, had fought throughout the United States and in such diverse locales as China, Brazil, Denmark, Hungary, England, Germany, South Africa and Cameroon against such championship caliber opponents and top contenders as Mike Tyson, George Foreman, Buster Douglas, Tony Tucker, Oliver McCall, Tommy "The Duke" Morrison, Mike Weaver, Alex Stewart, Alexander Zolkin, Bert Cooper, David Bey, Jose Ribalta, Elijah Tillery and Adilson Rodriguez.

"If I had been able to train properly, I could have been a lot more than a palooka," said Jaco, who's final ring tally was 24-25-1 (19 KOs). "I wasn't just fighting. I was working, and also raising my two boys on my own. My record might not be great, but I always went down swinging, not running."

Jaco only started boxing at the age of 24, when he was laid off from Interlaken Steel in his hometown. Like so many of his friends, he began working there straight out of high school and just assumed he'd be employed there for the next 40 years. After getting swept up in massive layoffs in 1979, Jaco, who by then had a wife and twin sons, Aaron and Adam, found himself in dire straits.

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At the time the Toughman craze was sweeping the nation and Jaco, who was a natural athlete, was lured by the opportunity for quick money. Before long he developed such a fearsome reputation on the Midwest circuit that no one would fight him. His Toughman promoter, Art Dore, turned him pro in 1991, and Jaco won his first 12 fights, 10 by knockout. In his next bout Dore foolishly matched him with Carl “The Truth” Williams, a sensational amateur who was 10-0 as a pro. The much more experienced Williams stopped Jaco in the very first round.

“Williams was in the prime of his life,” said Jaco. “I was still learning. I shouldn’t have been fighting him, but didn’t know any better. He caught me in the body, and then an uppercut flattened me out. When the fight was stopped between rounds, I remember thinking, ‘What kind of shit is that? If you’re gonna stop the fight, stop it when I’m fighting, not resting.’”

A few fights later, Jaco scored a seventh round TKO over previously unbeaten sensation Donovan (Razor) Ruddock in Canada, but the writing was on the wall. Jaco quickly became relegated to the role of an opponent, losing to Pierre Coetzer in South Africa, Tony Tucker in Monte Carlo, and a young, rampaging Mike Tyson in Albany, New York, in January 1986.

“I got a call a few days before to fight Kid Dynamite (Tyson) for \$5000,” said Jaco. “I said ‘Hell, yeah’ because that was a lot of money to me.” All Jaco remembers of the fight is Tyson firing punches from all directions. “I got up from a knockdown and the ref was waving the fight over. I asked what he was doing, and I reminded him of the three knockdown rule. He said I just used all my knockdowns up. I thought I only went down twice.”

Jaco’s fight against Tyson was his most critical, for more than the obvious reasons. He arrived in Albany penniless, but took his earnings to Florida where he fought gamely to win custody of his sons from his troubled wife. He managed to do so and has never looked back.

“I left a blizzard in Toledo and arrived in Florida where it was 75 degrees,” said Jaco. “I immediately tracked down my kids and took them for a few months. I was feeding them, taking them to the beach to play football and swim. I was being their father, which was more important to me than anything.”

“When I first met Dave, the only thing he was concerned about was his kids,” said local Florida promoter Allan Hill. “He lived, breathed and would have died to get custody of those kids. He’s got the biggest heart of anyone I’ve ever met.”

Years later, he experienced even more joy from the Tyson fight. Because he felt that he was short-changed by the promoter, he snatched both pairs of right hand gloves used in the bout and donated them to the Florida chapter of Project Rainbow, a national charity for terminally ill children. Unbeknownst to Jaco, his new friend Hill had bought them with the intention of giving them back encased in glass at some special time in the future. He recently did so at Jaco’s 50th birthday party. “It was one of the best presents I ever got,” said Jaco. “There are no words to describe what that meant to me.”

Jaco’s nominal record doesn’t begin to describe what a good fighter he genuinely was. What he managed to achieve with relatively no effort—like going the distance with Douglas and

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McCall—is extraordinary. Jaco took the fight with McCall just weeks after McCall was rumored to have dropped Tyson in a sparring session.

Hill, who was his cornerman for that fight, still marvels at Jaco's nonchalance. "I've known Dave a long time and he's the most easygoing guy I ever met," said Hill. "McCall had been a sparring partner of Tyson's, and rumor was he knocked Tyson down in the gym. None of that meant anything to Dave. Forty-five minutes before the fight, he said he was hungry. I told him to wait to eat until later, that we were fighting this killer in less than an hour. Did he listen? Of course not! He ate two hot dogs and drank two large cokes."

"With relish, onions, mustard and ketchup," added Jaco. "I was down about three times, but at one point I hit McCall with a right hand - my money shot - square in the face. Later, his trainer, Beau Williford, told me his eyes were kissing."

Then there was the night in Bakersfield, California, in December 1988 when Foreman hit Jaco in the center of the back as he turned away from a punch. He thought his spinal column was crushed because the pain was so excruciating. "George is a nice guy, but a dirty fighter," said Jaco. "After he hit me in the back, I felt my only chance was to punch with him. But who can punch with George and get away with it? He got me on the ropes, but my head felt like a tennis ball getting whacked around."

The losses aside, Jaco beat a Florida-based Swedish Olympian named Haaken Brock, who was being groomed for stardom by none other than Angelo Dundee. He also blasted out a previously unbeaten Germany-based African named Michael (Big Boy) Simwelu in one round in Düsseldorf in March 1988. Afterwards he celebrated at a local bar, where he was encouraged to go on stage and sing a few songs.

"I drank about a bottle and a half of vodka, and thought I was crooning the crowd," he recalled. "While I was singing, I took a fall and took the band out with me. My head was spinning so bad that I vomited about seven or eight times. Somehow I made it back to my hotel, but slept through my departure time for my flight home."

While living in Florida, where Jaco was first employed as an appliance delivery man but now transports sickly patients to medical facilities, he was very active in his sons' lives. He guided them both to numerous amateur titles, and while a series of injuries precluded Adam from turning pro, Aaron is a red-hot light heavyweight with a 13-0 (4 KOs) record. He has become a major draw in the Tampa area, where he regularly sells out the A La Carte Event Pavilion.

"My boy can fight, and he's a lot more dedicated than I was," said Jaco, who purposely stays out of his son's boxing business, because he thinks that more often than not father/son boxing relationships have negative ramifications. "Down the road I see him making his name by beating someone like Antonio Tarver [who also hails from Florida]. My boy can fight, and he sure can sell out an arena."

Although Jaco incurred 97 stitches, a broken cheekbone, two broken noses and numerous fractured ribs during his whirlwind career, he is very happy with the way things turned out. He

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and his second wife, Wynnah, have four beautiful daughters, Kaleigh, Brittany, Madison and Sydney, who range in age from 6 to 11, and he coaches amateur boxers three times a week at the Manatee County Police Athletic League. For a guy that never got any breaks during his boxing career, he's living a good life now.

"I got my ass kicked, but I kicked some ass, too," Jaco said. "But I have a great wife, great kids, a great job and a new home. I never went to college, but made it through the school of hard knocks. You can't judge a person by the color of their skin, their nationality, amount of education, or the size of the bank account. The best way to judge a man's character is by the size of their heart. I'm not bragging or anything, but what I lacked in skill I more than made up for with heart. I'm very proud of that."