

If Words Could Talk

Written by Pat Putnam
Sunday, 03 April 2005 18:00

I have long been a collector of cleverly constructed strings of consonants and vowels that form a brilliant paragraph or a singular sentence, lines sculpted by other newspaper or magazine fight writers, some of them in eras past, about boxers who were either ancient or deceased by the time I witnessed my first fistfight for money. With just a handful of carefully placed words, they converted legends into flesh and blood, and flesh and blood into legends. More than a half century ago, John Francis Kieran, a former City College of New York and Fordham University shortstop, who once penned gems for the New York Times, wrote: "Schmeling will go down in heavyweight history as the man who won the championship lying down and lost it standing up." Lines like that should not be relegated to dusty bins in newspaper morgues.

When I landed my first newspaper job, at *The Miami Herald* shortly after the Korean War, my heroes, at least the ones that coaxed poetry from the keys of something called a typewriter, were Red Smith, Jimmy Cannon and Jim Murray, three fellows who knew their way around a saloon and the English language. Early on, I just studied their work, and that was fine. The problem came when I decided it was time to graduate from just reading them to trying to write like them. I figured nobody would notice.

One day, Eddie Pope, then *The Herald* assistant sports editor, beckoned me over to his desk. "Who," he said, his voice dripping with Georgia honey, "are you today?"

"Huh?" I said, brightly.

"Are you Red Smith today?" Pope said, with a little less of that Georgia honey coming through. "Or perhaps you are Jimmy Cannon? No, I'll bet today you are Jim Murray. Is that it; are you Jim Murray?"

I never liked multiple-choice tests; the odds are 2-to 1 against you if you guess. While I was trying to figure out a safe answer, Pope suddenly reverted to the southern charm of a drill instructor at Parris Island. "For the next year, you will knock off this literary musical chairs crap," he snapped. "You will write everything straight, right out of journalism school 101. No more trying to be clever. No more one-liners. No more trying to imitate other writers. You got that?"

"Edwin," I said.

"What?" he growled.

"I never went to journalism school."

Fortunately, when it came to disciplining me, Pope had a very short span of attention. I slipped out of the penalty box about three weeks later. But I had got the message. Red Smith was Red Smith. Jimmy Cannon was Jimmy Cannon. Jim Murray was Jim Murray. And I was stuck with being me.

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I was remembering that one-sided exchange on June 12, 1981 when Red Smith, a smattering of other writers and I were leaving the Pontchartrain Hotel in Detroit to walk to the Joe Louis Arena, where Larry Holmes would soon dispatch Leon Spinks in eight minutes and 34 seconds. It was a 1,000-meter walk, or about as far as a Korean War Marine sniper could reach out with a Springfield 1903A4 rifle and be reasonably sure of a kill.

Red was 75 years old at the time. Without thinking, I reached out with my right hand and snagged his Olivetti typewriter. My own was carried with my left hand.

“You don’t have to do that,” Red protested mildly.

“Yes, I do, Red,” I said. “First, it gives me balance. But more importantly, someday somebody is going to say to me, ‘You couldn’t carry Red Smith’s typewriter’ and I am going to say, ‘Screw you, I already did.’”

He laughed, gently.

“Then Rocky hit Joe a left hook and knocked him down. Then he hit him another hook and knocked him out. A right to the neck knocked him out of the ring and out of the fight business. The last wasn’t necessary, but it was neat. It wrapped the package, neat and tidy. And old man’s dream ended. A young man’s vision of the future opened wide. Young men have visions; old men have dreams. But the place for old men to dream is beside the fire.”

Red Smith wrote those lines after Marciano knocked out Louis in 1951. I don’t know how many times I have read them, a dozen, two-dozen, more. I read from the collection mostly after midnight, alone on a Saturday night in a hotel somewhere in the world, facing a long night of writing about a fight I had just witnessed while facing a Sports Illustrated-imposed Sunday deadline of 8 a.m. New York City time: 8:01 a.m. Sunday morning, EST or EDT. If the story was not in New York, you could bet the house that some angry editor would be telephoning my hotel room with threats to kill my children.

(“Please, God, let the hotel catch on fire....”)

“As a kid, Ray (Robinson) danced for pennies and played craps for dollars in the streets of Harlem. He wasn’t a high school drop out because he never made it that far. He led the neighborhood in hocked watches he won in “amateur” fights all over New York and New England. But he never made a police lineup or a hot list. He never drank. He came full of the wine of life. He was raised by his mother and two adoring sisters, and it was a reverend who first jerked him off his knees in the ghetto where he crouched over an altar of dice and marched him to the gym and told him to make life his dancing bag.”

Jim Murray wrote those words for the *Los Angeles Times*, where he was the lead sports columnist from 1961 until his death in 1998. As it was with Smith, Murray was one of my go-to guys when my brain needed a jolt of literary genius, even if it was someone else’s. Their words read in the dead of night were the batteries I used to jump-start the cold engine in my head. Another was Jimmy Cannon, a nasty ex-drunk with the feathery touch of a talented if jaded

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poet.

Cannon wrote this about the first Rocky Marciano-Jersey Joe Walcott fight:

"The terrible concentration of Marciano was obvious now. Continuous failure discourages the coldest of men. The trainer demanded he throw the right, and then throw it again and come back with it as soon as he could. The blood would flow faster from the gashes every time he missed because Walcott would duck the punch and then hit back with combinations. And he would glide around the ring, like an acrobat advising an audience he had just finished a difficult trick. In the 13th round, Walcott went to the ropes and eased off them. The right that filled his mind with darkness was like all the others. But this one crashed against his jaw, and Walcott resembled a bird flying into a wall. Slowly, he crumpled, sinking down into the well of his personal night."

Damn!

There were others, columnists, essayists, beat writers, and most of them "instead of going home, spent their time in bars soaking up boxing lore," as Cannon once commented. Here are a few of that lot:

"The first of the several million dollars Dempsey made fighting were sparse and hard-won. As a hungry kid, he'd mosey into a rough Western bar and make an odd deal with the bartender. Was some big bully lousing up business at the bar? Nine times out of 10 some big bully was indeed. Well, Harry (later Jack) would say he would take care of the big bully provided the bartender passed the hat around among the regular customers after the fistfight. He once explained a certain complication:

"The tough guy always was looking for a fight when he came in the bar. Sometimes I started the conversation, sometimes he did. Sometimes the bartender would give me a big buildup. But one thing was always the same: I looked and sounded like something the tough guy could have eaten for breakfast. Sure, by today's standards I probably looked real tough---broken nose, maybe a sweater instead of a shirt, boots, half-shaven head, a few scars. But, of course, everybody looked tough in a Western saloon. What made those guys willing and ready to fight me was, first, my weight, and, second, the fact I was obviously still a kid. But the real clincher came when they heard me talk.

"I sounded like a girl.

*"I didn't hit like a girl, though..." - **Bob Considine***

*"Another marriage occurs to me, that of another champion, wise-shouldered, sparrow-legged former heavyweight champion Bob Fitzsimmons. It was his second. Bob had been married to a famed circus performer, and had her portrait painted in tights and spangles and the painting hung in a place of honor in the living room. It was till hanging there...the portrait of her predecessor...when the new bride came home with Ruby Robert. The lady never did get over that scrape on her sensitive feelings and their marriage didn't last long." - **Jack Kofoed***

"The greatest fight of the century was a monologue delivered to twenty thousand spectators by a smiling Negro who was never in doubt and who was never serious for more than a moment at

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*a time. As a fighter Jack Johnson did not show himself as a wonder. He did not have to.” - **Jack London***

*“At the time, boxing was illegal in Ohio, but Tex Rickard prevailed upon Anthony Drexel Biddle, a Philadelphia socialite with an affinity for the bizarre, to gain the support of the Ohio Ministerial Assn., whose membership write hundreds of letters to Gov. James M. Cox (later a defeated Presidential candidate) in support of the bout. Heaven obviously was asked to wait. Anyway, Rickard caused a contractor named Jim McLaughlin to build a 90,000-seat wooden arena on the shore of Maumee Bay. Tickets were scaled from \$60 for a ringside seat to \$2 for the privilege of sitting on lumber so green, resin exuding from its pores stained thousands of pairs of trousers. Local dry cleaners named McLaughlin their man of the year. July 3, 1919, the eve of the fight, was a furnace. Heat reaching 100 degrees scorched Ohio and when Battling Nelson, an oft-punched former lightweight champion, went to the arena to scout the scene, he came upon a huge vat filled with ice-cold lemonade. Stripping down to his underwear, he plunged into the vat. In the process of coming clean, he increased the content. Refreshed and relieved, he pulled on his clothes and left the arena. The next day the temperature soared to 112 degrees at ringside. Only 19,650 customers turned up. Rickard, like Battling Nelson, took a bath, having guaranteed Willard \$100,000. Many of the fans drank the lemonade in which Battling Nelson had bathed himself. Nobody died.” - **Barney Nagler***

*“It never was Harry Wills but another Negro fighter that Jack Dempsey feared, he says in his new book, "Dempsey, By The Man Himself," as told to Bob Considine and Bill Slocum. ‘Sports writers...even say I was the greatest fighter of my century,’ the old Manassa Mauler says. ‘They said I feared no man. The hell I feared no man! I was afraid of Sam Langford, who was a smaller heavyweight than I was. I knew he would take me out.’” - **Francis Stann***

*“Years later, after he had become a permanent part of the legend of the Twenties, there were limousines, country estates, a society life, lectures at Yale, seats on the boards of a dozen corporations. He was photographed with presidents and kings. Letters arrived from George Bernard Shaw and Somerset Maugham, and a son was elected to the United States Senate. But in the beginning, for Gene Tunney, it was a cold-water flat on Perry Street, and he never forgot it.” - **Pete Hamill***

*“The first time Ezzard Charles boxed J. J. Walcott, Charles won on points and his manager, Jake Mintz, fainted in the ring. When the fighters met against Friday night, it was Ezzard who swooned and Mr. Mintz remained upright. This is my idea of the perfect partnership----always one man on his feet to count the house.” - **Ring Lardner***

*“Joe Frazier was in the oak-paneled living room of the big house on Brewton Plantation when the blow fell. A mockingbird was singing from a Tupelo gum outside the open window, and the faintest of breezes stirred the Spanish moss festooning the live oaks. Summertime, and the living was easy when the radio brought word that the heavyweight champion of all creation was no longer champion in Oklahoma. ‘Oklahoma?’ Joe Frazier said. ‘Where’s that at? I don’t recall no fights there.’” - **Red Smith***

I always finished with Red.

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More later.