

The Life and Rhymes of Don Majeski

Written by Mitch Abramson
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The first piece of real estate Don Majeski ever bought was a gravesite at St. Mary's Cemetery in Astoria, Queens. It cost him \$2,000, quite a bit of money, but at least he could stop worrying about where he would be buried.

Fatalists are rampant in boxing, and Majeski, a man who greets disaster with a brush of his hand, is a cynic in a business full of cliff-jumpers. In boxing, the glass really is half empty.

"You hear all these horror stories about great old guys in boxing who died broke and had to be buried by someone else," Majeski said. "At least now I'll be able to bury myself."

Don Majeski is a fight agent. Fight agents are a tenuous group who come in many shapes and sizes. Take Johnny Bos, who dresses in fur coats, wears enough chains to be considered a direct relative of Mr. T, and is so good at making fights it has allowed him to scratch out a living in boxing.

Majeski is a bit different from Bos. Majeski works with fighters by choosing their opponents, pushing them politically with the sanctioning bodies, and selling their television rights to cable networks. He also cuts deals in all-night diners at five in the morning, flies around the country on impulse because it means closing a deal, and he has been hired by everyone from Don King to Butch Lewis. Along the way, he has blown a few million dollar deals, had his electricity shut off because of unpaid bills, and rebounded to become ubiquitous in a business that eats people and spits them back out into 9 to 5s.

As a sign of his success, he recently bought a house in College Point, Queens, which for a traveling salesman like Majeski is the same as being handed the keys to the city.

"In this game, you never wake up secure," he said. "It's like being an actor - no matter how successful you are, the poverty line is right there," he said, pointing to a spot just below his chin. "This is not a structured business. You're living by the seat of your pants. You're always hustling, trying to come up with an idea of how to make money."

Majeski wakes to go to work when most people are picking up their lunch tabs. The first thing he does is make calls to his contacts around the world. Those calls lead to more calls and soon he is picking up clients at the airport and crashing important meetings. The day is an endless game of solving problems, chasing deals and having dinners that seem to bisect with the morning after. His clients include the promoter Wilfred Sauerland, InterBox, a Canadian based company, and Gym Promotions, a German outfit and all their fighters.

"You get a call from a promoter from Canada who wants you to buy ringside tickets for someone," he said. "Then you get a call from a promoter in France saying: 'You know, we filed for this income tax return on this fighter who fought here two years ago and we never got these back. Can you follow up on this for us?' Then somebody calls you up saying: 'We're looking for

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information on the original Joe Walcott.' Then you look up something for them. Things just pop up and you react."

Majeski, an almost scholarly-looking nebbish, defies the image of the cigar-chomping street hustler who makes his living strong-arming and greasing the right people. That's an outdated stereotype gleamed from the 1950s. Majeski, 52, is slightly built and boyish and can sit back and talk about almost anything, from the theater to zoology to politics. His speech is a rapid cadence of hops and skips, almost breathless in its delivery. If he was in politics (Washington politics) he could filibuster for hours.

According to people who know him, Majeski is an expert at lobbying sanctioning bodies on behalf of fighters. When Oliver McCall defeated Lennox Lewis to win the WBC heavyweight championship in 1994, Majeski went to the WBC and convinced its president, Jose Sulaiman, to let Lewis fight an eliminator bout against Lionel Butler for the opportunity to challenge McCall again. Lewis TKOed Butler and beat McCall and Majeski cut a deal with Lewis that gave him a percentage of his earnings every time he fought.

"If I had one person to turn to as a source of information in boxing, Don Majeski would be that person," said Greg Juckett, the editor of *Boxing Digest*, which Majeski has written for on occasion. "There are guys who know boxing history, and there are guys who know up-to-the-minute stuff about what is going on. Don is a cutting-edge boxing guy. He knows all the current movers and shakers, all the people in the European and Canadian boxing scene. He simply knows everyone."

Majeski grew up in Elmhurst, Queens in the early 1960s. At first, the ever curious Majeski had designs on becoming a zoologist, but that changed when he saw Muhammad Ali defeat Sonny Liston in 1964. Everything became background noise after that.

"I would say to my teacher in high school, 'I want to become a boxing promoter. Can you teach me?'" asked Majeski. "They didn't know what to say. I wrote an essay on [former heavyweight champion] Ezzard Charles on my algebra Regents exam because I knew nothing about algebra. But I knew a lot about Ezzard Charles."

Majeski got his start, if you can call it that, selling fight programs outside Madison Square Garden in the mid '60s. By the time he was in high school, he was working for Burt Sugar, who had just taken over *Boxing Illustrated* in 1970.

Majeski swept the floors and wrote the obituaries. He spoke a little Spanish, so Sugar made him his Latin American correspondent, flying him all over the world to cover fights. With his mother working for the airlines, Majeski flew for free, and it was on these trips that he began making the contacts that would set the stage for his career in boxing.

"I said, 'This is for me. I'm in this business for the duration.' That was the epiphany for me."

Majeski was hanging out at nightclubs with fight manager friends while he was a student at Queens College. He switched to Hostos Community College where he took a job as a cashier at

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a café across the street from Yankee Stadium. His first week there, a newspaper offered him a plane ticket to cover Ali-Foreman in Zaire; Majeski told his boss the café business would have to wait and off he went to Africa. It was the closest he ever came to holding down a traditional job.

Majeski has worked in New Mexico and Australia for Don King and Butch Lewis. He has been to the old Madison Square Garden on 49th Street and to Gleason's Gym when it was in the Bronx. He has traveled to Nat Fleisher's office at Ring Magazine and to Teddy Brenner's office in the Garden. He has observed firsthand how boxing has changed from a loosely organized social club to a fairly conventionally run business.

"They were remnants of an old era," Majeski said of how it used to be in boxing. "I would go to Gleason's and someone would say: 'Hey Don, what are you doing, nothing?' Then go write a press release and handle this club fight."

Now, he says, the people who run boxing have law degrees and doctorates and accents that don't quite fit in this proletariat sport. They are television executives who rush to work so they can check their stock quotes. It's a world Majeski has adapted to but one he wishes was more like the old days.

"When I have an early meeting and I get down into the subway, and I look at all the people fighting and killing themselves to get on a train, so they can get to an office ten minutes late, so their boss can rake the hell out of them and dock their salary - if I had to do that for forty years, I would be a dead man."

At least he has the gravesite in Astoria.