Someone had to give Don King his first big break in boxing, and that person is Don Elbaum.

He's an elfin guy, seasoned and wizened, one of the fight game's great rogues. He's made a few friends over the years, as well as a few enemies, but Elbaum has lived and breathed boxing forever.

Don Elbaum was born in Cincinnati, Ohio and grew up an only child in Erie, Pennsylvania. He's still pretty spry, so I asked if he played sports when he was young. "I actually played piano," Elbaum told me. "My mother played some concert piano with both the Cincinnati Philharmonic and the Erie, PA Philharmonic, so I was playing Beethoven and Bach and jazz when I was six years old."

But a lifetime spent tickling the ivories was not in the cards for Don Elbaum. When he was eight his uncle, a New England street fighter named Danny Greenstein, took him to see Willie Pep fight in New Bedford, Mass. It changed the little boy's life.

"When I saw Willie Pep," Elbaum remembered, "Paulie Jackson trapped Pep in the corner and I remember Jackson threw like a hundred punches - I'm sure it was probably like twenty or thirty or so - and Pep just slipped and blocked and Jackson never hit Pep with one shot. I was just sitting there with my eyes wide open and I told my uncle, 'That's the most beautiful music I have ever seen or heard.' I said, 'That's all I'm going to do from now on.'"

Elbaum's father, like his uncle, also had the hots for the game, and encouraged his son to pursue the dream. Don Elbaum started boxing when he was thirteen. "I faked my age and fought my first amateur fight when I was fifteen - which I won, luckily, by the way, because I was getting the sh** knocked out of me." Elbaum kept fighting because "there was no question in my mind that I was going to be lightweight champion of the world by the time I was 21. I was going to be the next Benny Leonard. There was no question about that." Elbaum laughed. "I guess I was wrong."

Before he quit the amateurs, Elbaum had 50 fights, winning 40 and losing 10. "My plus as a fighter was an incredible chin - I think I got staggered twice in my life - and I was in incredible condition." The old black magic of boxing was weaving its spell on a rambunctious teen. Elbaum said "I became mesmerized with the sport. I saw with these old-time fighters - the Dempseys, the Joe Louises, the Benny Leonards, the Bob Montgomerys - and these guys used to run in like army boots and they either used to run on the sand or on a hill." So Elbaum "got some army boots and I started running, 5:30 in the morning, 2-2½ miles a day, five days a week, sprints, running backward, in sand, up hills. When I was 13, 14, 15, I could box 15 rounds and I never got tired."

Don Elbaum began his matchmaking career the same year he started boxing amateur. Also at the age of 15, he tried to join a carnival. "I flipped over the boss' daughter and left for the

carnival," Elbaum recalled with a grin, "and my folks were going nuts. Then at the age of 16, I went to see a Wild West show in Warren, Pennsylvania - Wild Bill whatever it was - and after the show I went down there, started talking to the owner, and joined." Because he could ride a horse, because he had moxie, Elbaum had himself a neat little summer job. "I was an Indian. I was the only 16-year-old white Indian. Everyone else rode bareback, but I couldn't, so I rode with a western saddle. I had a shotgun and I was robbing the stagecoach and I'd get shot."

Sounds like perfect training for the fight game.

That year Elbaum visited Chicago with his father: "We went out to see his family there and I went to a gym and I met Jack Hurley, who was involved with Billy Petrolle and Harry Matthews. He was impressed with just the way I was talking and he watched me box and he said to me, 'You can box. You've got a great left hand. If you're ever interested in turning pro . . . being you're Jewish and all that, that could be a plus.' But I promised my folks I would go to college. That was part of the deal. I eventually went to four of them and never lasted a week in any of them. They wanted me to get an education, but I hated school. School's just not my thing."

School may not have been Elbaum's thing, but he got his high school diploma when he was seventeen. "My date for the prom was a 26-year-old divorcee," Elbaum recollected. "We did not go to the prom - it's a long story - and two days later I moved to Chicago."

There was a little more action in Chicago than in Erie, PA. Elbaum began promoting fights when he was 18 and was a promoter in demand for many years. He did a fight with Sonny Liston. He did a fight with Floyd Patterson. Elbaum did fights.

He was promoting a card in Buffalo in the early '70s when he got an important call.

Elbaum remembered it well: "I'm at the Buffalo Auditorium and it's about five o'clock. The manager of the place and a couple three other people were there as I was setting up the show. Then I had a phone call in the office. The manager said, 'Don, it's for you.' I said, 'Who the hell knows I'm here?' I pick up the phone and it's Clarence Rodgers."

Rodgers was an acquaintance from Chicago, "a prosecutor who used to go to my fights at the Cleveland Arena. He was one of the few people who never asked for seats. He always bought. And this guy would buy ten, twenty, thirty seats! And once in a while we would just happen to bump into each other and we'd have a drink or two. I think we had a couple of dinners together."

Elbaum recalled the conversation. Rodgers said, "Don, I'm in my office with a fellow by the name of Don King. Don is putting together a show for a black hospital that is going under and he wants to raise money for it and he would like to talk to you."

Don Elbaum took the call. That's when he heard Don King on the line: "'DON EL-BAUM!' I mean I think the whole building heard it," Elbaum said. "The phone must have jumped a mile from my ear. And he says again: 'DON EL-BAUM!' Then he tells me he's running a show in Cleveland for a black hospital that's going under: 'You don't want it to go under, do you?' I said 'I guess not.' He said, 'I'm bringing Cassius Clay in to do an exhibition. But I can't do a show in

Cleveland without DON EL-BAUM!' Then he asks, 'How much do you charge?' I said 'Five-thousand. I want half up front.' Within a minute he had me down to $1500. So he says, 'When are you coming back?' I said 'I'll be back Monday.' He said, 'Don, you're coming back tonight, because we're not leaving the office until you get back here.' I told him I'm staying through the weekend."

Then Clarence got back on the phone. "He said, 'Don, listen to me. I cannot leave this office until you get here. If you don't come 'til Monday we are staying here and sleeping here 'til Monday.' I said, 'What are you talking about?' He said, 'You understand what I'm saying?' I said 'Are you serious?' He says: 'I'm dead serious.' Eleven o'clock that night I'm back there in his office. That's where I first met Don King."

King had nothing to do with boxing at the time.

"He was a major numbers guy that was a bit of a fight fan," Elbaum said. "But you gotta understand. He's one of the greatest promoters God ever created. And he's one of the greatest con men and hustlers God ever created."

King's ability to almost always get his way is a mark of the man, and I wonder if Elbaum can reveal Don's secret.

"There's an intimidation there," Elbaum said. "But I'll tell you one thing: if you argue with him, you fight with him face-to-face, he will back down. I've seen that three times very strongly. If you start screaming at him, it's just *boom!* He's in tough when he's in front and in charge, and very few people have the balls to go head to head with him. But when they do, he'll scream and call you this and that. If you scream back and stay on him, then all of the sudden - forget about it - I'm seeing the guy like a lamb. I mean, just backing off. But he intimidates you. Plus he's got the gift of gab that no one's got. Whatever he has just made him what he is today."

We all know what King is today. What was he yesterday?

"He was already a millionaire before boxing. And the intriguing thing is when he came out of jail they gave him his share of $3 million. He came out of prison - and he had $3 million. But the interesting thing is, the period of time I was with him, all of the sudden I started seeing what he was like. But with me, the roughly year and a half I was with him, or close to that, everything he said he would do financially he did. I told him I needed $5000 - no ifs, ands or buts, it was in my hands, no question."

What, then, was the problem with DK?

"He started screwing other people and that's what turned me off. He tells people that he left me. Forget it. I walked away from him. He'll argue this, but I just started seeing what he was doing. A couple of incidents happened which turned me just so off."

Elbaum has been around and has put on fight cards everywhere.

"I've done Cleveland," he said. "I've done Vegas. I've done Atlantic City. I've done Florida, New Orleans, California. I did the first show in 100 years in Aspen, Colorado in 1993. I had a card in Denver. I've done Canada, Montreal, Toronto, Paris. I mean I've taken fighters all over the world. I've been involved in co-promotions in Argentina, Jamaica, Puerto Rico, Dominican Republic . . . everywhere but Mars."

In some ways it sounds like the life.

"One of my biggest 'faults' is money has never been my God," Elbaum said. "I enjoy life pretty much. A couple of people have said, 'You should be a multimillionaire.' I just shake my head and leave it at that."

Boxing has had more than its share of ups and downs over the years. I wondered what Elbaum thought about the way things are.

"I tell people it's the worse I've ever seen it," Elbaum replied, "but it is so bad that it is good. By that I mean, take any talent - I don't even mean he has to be a talented fighter, but you'll get someone with charisma - and they do come along - and, boy, boxing's back on its feet. And, by the way, no matter how bad it is, look at the numbers that they do for the De La Hoyas and Mike Tyson."

Tyson haunts every boxing conversation, just as he seems to haunt boxing itself.

"Tyson is still the biggest draw in boxing. I mean he's like - forget about a train wreck - he's like a goddamned bomb," Elbaum said. "I mean people are there to see him get killed. But a hot exciting kid with charisma that you can't believe can turn things around. An Arturo Gatti comes along? I mean this is fantastic. There's going to be another Micky Ward, just an exciting club fighter who rose to the occasion. But a De La Hoya comes along, a Gerry Cooney comes along, a Duane Bobick comes along, and all the sudden people are tuning in and watching."

Most insiders agree. We build the future on the ruins of the past.

"Boxing will never die. As long as there are two people on earth, it will be here now. I have all *The Ring* magazines from 1942 on. There's always been 'boxing needs, boxing needs.' Alright, it's got the roller coaster. I mean when a Rocky Graziano comes along? Forget about it. Sugar Ray Robinson comes along? Wow! The greatest description of boxing - and I love this - is that it's the red-light district of sports. But, you know, the red-light district always intrigues people," said Elbaum intriguingly. "It's like I don't want to be seen going there, but I wanna be there. Boxing has that kind of underground feel to it."

Elbaum has been in the game since he was in knickers, so I asked if he had any advice for fighters, promoters and matchmakers starting out.

"Let's start with the fighter. If they've got talent and they're willing to dedicate themselves, they've got an opportunity - unless they're the CEO of a miniature Fortune 500 company -

they've got an opportunity to make a tremendous amount of money and be set for life. But outside of maybe some of these crazy salaries, the NFL and some of these superstars, there's no business you can make that kind of money and make it to the top like you can in boxing. There's such a select few. There's fewer boxers than there are guys trying to go into football or trying to go into baseball. It's not like 10,000 to 1. I mean in boxing you've got a shot. If you're a manager or promoter, you've got to have some money behind you because, man," Elbaum said, "you can blow your brains out. Just don't get conned by everybody and it can be very rewarding."

Don Elbaum is right. Boxing can be very rewarding.