

Shadowboxing with Dad

Written by Robert Cassidy Jr.
Saturday, 18 June 2005 19:00

I was trapped. I held my hands up near my face as I slowly moved forward. A leather headguard – designed to protect me – kept drooping over my eyes, making the journey that much more perilous. I was confined to this harrowing space by four ropes, each one stretched to make a 16-by-16 foot square boxing ring. I entered this domain voluntarily and would have to fight my way out. No one could come to my aide, particularly the man whose footsteps I was attempting to follow.

My opponent stood before me, but what I couldn't escape, what was really suffocating me, was my father's presence. His reputation loomed over the ring and this boxing gym like a 10-foot pugilistic altar. I, the first-born son of "Irish" Bobby Cassidy, convinced myself that stepping into the ring was not only my duty but my baptism.

But the headgear was too big. It kept creeping down, blinding me as I took my first unsure steps in my father's sport. I was 11 years old and was reluctantly following Patrick Brennan from ringpost to ringpost. Patrick was 14 and the best amateur boxer in the gym. He had just enough experience to differentiate between sparring and fighting.

"Welcome ..." said his left jab, as it pounded against the Everlast logo that covered my forehead.

The headgear drooped again. I pushed it up with my glove.

"... to boxing!" said his right hand as it crash-landed in the exact same spot, finishing a perfectly executed, one-two combination.

My father, standing on the ring apron, encouraged me to "Throw the jab."

I lunged with a left. Patrick pulled his head back as my jab fell far short of its target. He paused in a corner, I tried another jab, but he was gone. I followed, still blinded by my headgear.

"Here I am," laughed Patrick's jab as it again met with the Everlast logo on my forehead.

"Throw the one-two," my father said.

I complied. But the punches were thrown out of parental obedience, not aggression or instinct. I couldn't commit to my punches. My instincts told me that the moment my hands went into motion, Patrick's hands, quicker and stronger, would be crash-landing again somewhere in the vicinity of his favorite target -- the Everlast logo.

I began to wonder: *How long does a three-minute round last?*

I continued to follow Patrick around the ring, my hands sinking to mid-chest, my feet shuffling

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awkwardly, trepidation constricting my muscles.

Patrick paused in a corner. I let go with a one-two that finally landed -- on his gloves. He jabbed. I gathered myself. He jabbed again. I tried to fix the headgear. He jabbed a third time, his fist penetrating my gloves and landing on my nose.

My eyes began to tear.

"Sorry," said Patrick through his mouthpiece.

"Punch!" said my father from his perch on the apron, his voice now rising, his torso leaning into the ring.

His words moved swiftly to my brain and then my fist. Acting on his demand, not my own, my left jab darted forward and struck Patrick on the nose. His eyes didn't tear.

I finally landed a punch, but it didn't feel good. I had hit Patrick out of anger, even though I really wasn't angry with him. I was angry because there were only two of us in the ring, yet I was surrounded. I was surrounded by Patrick's jab, his right cross, my father's reputation and my own expectations.

Patrick deftly pivoted out of the corner. I followed, tossing obligatory jabs into the air, biding my time until these excruciatingly long three minutes came to end.

Ding!

Round over. Back came the tears. The first time I entered a ring, I exited crying. As a young boy who was yearning for paternal approval, I had embarrassed myself and the very name that made me glow with pride.

My father pulled off the headgear and saw me crying. I wasn't hurt physically but my confidence was battered. It was clear to all that the son of the light heavyweight division's No. 1 rated contender was not a chip off the old block. I thought he would be disappointed that I had disgraced him in his very own gym.

There was no sign of disappointment from my father, just a warm smile.

"This isn't a game," he said. "Boxing is a very tough business and that's why I don't want you and your brother to fight."

Despite my failure against Patrick, my fantasy of being a fighter would remain for many years. Therefore, I would head to the basement and hit the heavy bag, round after round after round. I'd fight from my father's southpaw stance and I'd wear his Kelly green boxing trunks. I never lost a fight in the basement.

As a righthander, fighting as a southpaw required practice. I would study my father's fight films

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and rehearse his movements, copying the way he delivered his punches. There was one film that would always serve as a reminder of what boxing is and why I could never confuse this make-believe game with my other sports fantasy of playing shortstop in Yankee Stadium.

The footage was grainy and the frames of the black-and-white 16 millimeter film sometimes hiccupped, accelerating ahead of the action. As worn as the film was, there was no confusing what took place on October 13, 1970 at Sunnyside Garden in Queens, New York.

As the film starts, two men come together at the center of the ring. Johnny Burnside is the man in the white trunks. My father is the man in the dark trunks, which I recognize as the green pair I wear in the basement. At the age of 26 and 163 pounds, my father is near his prime. His wavy black hair is cut short. His back is wide and his torso is funneled into the narrow waistband of the green trunks. Interpreting his body language is like reading an essay in confidence. He arrives at this fight, at every fight, savoring the conflict before him. When it is accomplished inside of a ring, the physical dismantling of another man can be elevated to art. My father was an artist, supremely certain about the beauty – the destruction – his fists were capable of producing.

Burnside, a Golden Gloves champion and unbeaten pro, was touted as the future of the middleweight division. This fight was an important steppingstone en route to being a contender. Burnside would solidify his reputation with a win.

The footage begins rolling by and the action is fast-paced. Burnside is bouncing on the balls of his feet, firing right crosses with an emphatic enthusiasm that illustrates his confidence and determination. My father, in his seventh year as a pro, is calm and patient. He counters with left hands. Burnside, full of youth, speed and adrenaline, is growing comfortable with the pace to which this violent ballet has been set. In the final moments of the fourth round, my father drives home a stiff left hand that causes Burnside's legs to shimmy.

The blow should have served as some form of notice that, in boxing, your future can change with a single punch. But such warnings are often lost on the young and gifted. The fifth round begins with the same pattern. Burnside is moving nimbly, pumping right hands. My father is following. But now his posture changed from studying his opponent to stalking him. A weakness has been exposed and not even Burnside's talent or enthusiasm can save him. It happens, suddenly, midway through the round. A left uppercut – boom -- followed immediately by an overhand left – BOOM! -- and Burnside is moving about the ring like a man who has one foot stuck in a bucket. Another left sends him tumbling backward to the ropes.

I watch the remaining moments again and again. The ropes prevent Burnside from falling. He is lying, motionless, at a 45-degree angle between the third and fourth strand. His arms are down, his chin pointing to the ceiling. My father moves closer to Burnside, his left arm swinging back. This will be the definitive blow of the fight, perhaps the final blow of Burnside's life. There is absolutely no hesitation on my father's part. The left hand starts to come forward when, seemingly out of nowhere, the referee grabs my father's arm. But like a windmill, my father's right arm is also in motion. Its destination is Burnside's head. It is airborne; the referee is unable to rein it in. Somehow the momentum of the referee upsets my father's balance and, luckily, the

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right hand sails harmlessly into the arena's smoky air.

The referee begins to issue a 10-count but stops the fight at the count of five. The camera pans to my father, pacing the ring with his arms raised in triumph. Twice he glances to the corner where they are attempting to revive Burnside.

Johnny Burnside did wake up. He was escorted to his dressing room and wept when he was told of what happened. "I don't remember any of it," he said in the papers.

My father remembers all of it, every frenzied second. The adrenaline rush of scoring a knockout and the sense of satisfaction in derailing a popular young prospect. And yes, the consequences of what could have been if another left hand landed.

"It's not something you think about," he told me when, as an adult, I asked him about the fight. "As a fighter, you can't afford to think about that. You have a job to do. You fight until they stop you. It's instinct. He would have done the same to me."

It was true. His profession did not allow him to contemplate his own mortality or that of his opponent. It was all part of the risk he willingly took in each fight. With two sons growing up in the shadow of his legend, he could certainly afford to think about the dire byproducts of boxing as it related to us. He pondered it often and was unwavering in his belief.

"My sons will never fight," he told people and he stated it with pride.

My brother and I were taught the rudiments of boxing – stance, jab, right cross – in a very obligatory manner. They were prefaced by, 'Do this if the schoolyard bully bothers you.' We were encouraged to compete in all sports but my father simply told us we could not box. He explained that he could not stand to see another person strike us. While that was true, his feelings about allowing his sons to fight went deeper.

"Boxing is the life I chose," he once told someone in my presence. "It's not the life I wanted for my sons. It's a tough, tough game." He paused a second and looked at me, realizing what he implied.

Nothing more needed to be said. He was right. Today, I thank him for that. I thank him for being a warrior. And I thank him for exposing me to a sport where nobility and grace and honor are found in three-minute intervals at every fight card in the world.