

## **Fifty Blows (A Fighter's Thoughts About Turning 50)**

Written by Pete Wood  
Tuesday, 19 July 2005 19:00

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I just turned 50 and I can't say I'm happy about it. I look in the bathroom mirror and see a thin gray hair sticking out my left nostril. That saddens me. The gray tufts of hair curling at my temples upset me. My flabby chest and soft gut depress me.

Fifty blows.

But when I think about my former sparring partners at Bufano's Gym in Jersey City—Jimmy Hargroves and "Wildman" Bill Carlson—I feel lucky. They'll never see 50. They're dead. Jimmy died of Sickle Cell and Bill wrapped himself around a tree in a motorcycle accident.

Two other sparring partners come to mind—welterweight Richie Villanueva and middleweight Bobby Kitchner. They're dead, too. Suicides.

Back in 1971, all five of us shared a burning dream—winning a New York Golden Gloves title. Our reverie unified us. But what started out as a burning dream quickly became a day-to-day lump in our throats as we trudged up the stairs into the gym to fight each other. Nevertheless, we stuck with it and our dream ended up as our salvation.

At least for me.

Boxing might not be theology, but when we fought each other every day in the gym, our souls kind of touched.

Jimmy, Richie and I made it to the finals that year, but I'm the only one left to talk about it.

1971 was a tough year. Hundreds of talented ruffians crawled out of the slums and city projects ready to rumble. Three boys with that same burning dream, Vito Antuofermo, Eddie Gregory and Leroy Jones, kept fighting.

Truth is, at 19, after the tournament, I hung up my gloves. It was a relief to quit such a lousy sport. I was sick of getting punched. I was sick of the stress. I wanted out. Maybe I didn't need boxing anymore. I was entering my 20s, soon to leave my dysfunctional family, and boxing had absorbed my anger and rage.

But once I quit boxing, it was like something important was subtracted out of my flesh. My blood never pumped quite as fast. And nothing since has ever seemed so vital.

### **My Twenties**

I'm still boxing. I enter Fordham University and the classroom is my new arena. The adjustment to college is difficult. My brain is almost paleo-mammalian. The anger and rage that were my strengths as a boxer are now my liability.

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The muse of violence works in the ring, but not on a college campus. Now I need to study.

Quickly, I learn how to hit the books instead of people. But it's a catch-up game. After so many years of perfecting my left hook and ducking right hands, I must accept the fact that in the classroom arena, I am strictly second string. My untrained brain and stuttering tongue aren't as potent as my fists. Getting verbally bitch-slapped by a witty thinker is always a concern.

For the next four years, fear hides beneath my armpits. I endure college. I am a retired middleweight quietly hiding in the back seat of a classroom, nervously chewing the inside of my cheek and praying not to be called on. While struggling with Spinoza and wrestling with Rousseau, I arrive at a horrible thought: As a boxer, I was physically tough because I was mentally weak.

The size of my biceps was really the size of my weakness and fear.

With envy, I watch the flourishing boxing careers of Antuofermo, Gregory and Jones, all three are beginning to enjoy national, and international, prominence. Vito has already won, defended and lost the European light middleweight title in Berlin, Milan and Rome. Eddie, (now Mustapha Muhammad) has metamorphosed into a fearful light heavyweight contender with a 20-1-1 record. And Leroy is an undefeated heavyweight, 17-0 with 10 knockouts.

Me? I'm 24. I quietly graduate Fordham with a Communications degree. But what to communicate, or how to communicate, I have no clue. For whatever reason, I fear the white-collar arena. College did not help me find confidence. The thought of accepting a job where I would be expected to match a colleague's verbal blows and dodge a boss' purple ego in a sterile office environment terrifies me.

My first job is at Lincoln Hall Boy's Reformatory. I counsel young boys suffering from shell-shocked childhoods, or bad genes. These angry, confused boys remind me of my dead sparring partners—and myself. At this point in their miserable lives, they're embracing rage and frenzy but have no burning dream. Boxing appeals to a small select group of angry and confused people. Perfect for reform school boys.

So, one night, in front of a TV set, we watch Mustapha fight for the light heavyweight title against Marvin Johnson. Mustapha wins an 11th round TKO. I point out to these surly juvenile delinquents the transforming quality of his powerful dream: Mustapha, a former purse-snatcher, is now a world champion.

Another evening, we are eating sandwiches in front of the TV. We're watching Vito fight for the WBC and WBA titles. He pounds out a decision over Hugo Corro. Vito, once an incorrigible street thug (he once bit a New York City cab driver in the chest so hard his teeth met) is now the middleweight champion of the world.

There's a third transforming drama. We watch Leroy wallop Mike "Hercules" Weaver to win the vacant NABF heavyweight title. Leroy was a high school dropout.

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A purse-snatcher, a thug and a dropout—all world champs!

My transforming dream arrives, soon after, in the form of a telephone call.

“Are you Pete Wood?”

“Yeah.”

“The guy who won The New York Golden Gloves middleweight title?”

“Well, I should have won,” I say, “but I lost.”

Hesitation. “What was your record?”

“Fourteen and one.”

“I’m chairman of the United States Committee—Sports for Israel. We’re looking for a kid to represent the United States, as first alternate, in the 1977 Maccabiah Games held in Tel Aviv, Israel. All expenses paid. Interested?”

“Well, yeah. Sure.”

“You still got that hard left hook?”

“Yeah,” I smile.

I’m 27—nine years out of the ring—but people still remember my left hook.

Secretly, I have always flirted with a comeback. This is my chance. I’m in decent shape, only a few pounds over the middleweight limit; I’ve been running, doing push-ups and sit-ups. Shadowboxing in the mirror, I look good—damn good.

I drive to the training camp in Albany State University to scout the fighters. Walking on the campus, I feel confused. I feel more like a college student than a boxer. In truth, the taste of leather isn’t something I look forward to anymore. I know I can never match my 18-year-old levels of speed and aggression. My rage and anger are gone, dried up at the source, withered and lifeless. Aristotle and Henry Thoreau and Eric Fromm have diluted it for me. I am a paper tiger.

I decline the offer.

Depressed and lost, I drive back to the reformatory.

I realize that a kid who made a big noise in his youth needs to find a new instrument to play.

## **My Thirties**

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I'm still boxing. I'm alone in my room, jabbing out words and punching out paragraphs. My prose is awkward and crablike, like my boxing. But by 35, I've written and published a novel called *To Swallow A Toad*. It's about a young, unconfident boy shellshocked by his dysfunctional family. One day he walks into a boxing gym and falls in love. He embraces his training and finds salvation in the ring. More precisely, he finds an antidote to life ... The New York City Golden Gloves.

I'm writing a few articles for *The Ring*, *Boxing Illustrated* and *Commonweal*. It's more rewarding to punch out art with a pencil than to thump out anger with a glove.

My thirties are an excellent blend of youth and maturity. My brain is not as paleo-mammalian. There's emerging stability and self-knowledge and no gray nostril hair—yet.

I'm now teaching English. Me, becoming a teacher. I feel like a criminal returning to the scene of the crime. But I'm successful.

Meanwhile, Vito, Mustapha and Leroy are still boxing—but each one has already lost his title. All three have been beaten by younger opponents. They are now beginning their slide down the fistic ladder. Boxing is a young man's game.

I begin to wonder about the other boxers who had reached the finals in Madison Square Garden in 1971. What's happened to them? Where are they now? What are they doing?

Is there life after boxing?

At 39, I find myself back in a gym sparring.

Maybe one more fight, I whisper.

One day, while sparring without headgear, I'm in with a light heavyweight who nails me. I feel a warm trickle run down my cheek. I'm cut.

In the hospital, I watch the doctor stitch my left eye with a thin black thread. I sense his disapproval—me, a 39-year-old English teacher still sparring.

"Why are you boxing?" he asks.

I shrug. I must admit, getting cut after a 20-year layoff is stupid. It's like getting shot the last day of the war.

### **My Forties**

I'm still boxing. Am I a middle-aged adolescent stuck in another decade? I'm still running and sprinting to ever other telephone pole—when I'm not injured or lack the time. But I'm no longer a middleweight. I'm more like the heavyweight I swore I'd never become. A pound a year. Metabolism.

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There are still mornings when I wake up from the recurring dream: I'm in the Madison Square Garden dressing room stepping into my green trunks. I'm ready for my boxing comeback. I hop into the ring. The bell rings. I left hook my way to one last victory. The crowd cheers.

One day while shadowboxing on the high school track, I'm offered a job coaching at the Youth Bureau, a local boxing gym in White Plains.

I ask myself: At 44, do I really want to introduce this crazy sport to a whole new generation of confused and angry kids?

Yes. For all its shortcomings and danger, the ring is a perfect kind of sanctuary, a precious counter-world to the chaotic world that exists outside of it. The ring is less verbally brutal, less economically unfair and less politically abusive.

Besides, I've rubbed souls with some of my best friends in the ring.

One afternoon an angry, muscular kid walks into my gym. "I wanna fight," he says.

"Why?" I ask.

"Just do," he shrugs.

I look into his sad eyes and see myself reflected back. He's not much of a talker and when I get him into the ring he moves so sweet.

I discover he's a 22-year-old middleweight, a converted southpaw and former drug addict. He has the burning dream ... the New York City Golden Gloves.

After five fights he wins the title. After 26 years, I'm back in Madison Square Garden, raising his hand in the middle of the ring.

The champions of my childhood, Vito, Mustapha and Leroy, are now long retired. I see them making appearances at local restaurants and selling their boxing gloves on eBay for quick cash. Vito's flat-nosed, battered face gets him bit parts in movies, TV and, most recently, on *The Sopranos*

. Mustapha has become a first-class boxing trainer. I don't know about Leroy.

Boxing is a young man's sport. There are no comebacks at 50. But I'm currently making one; I'm writing a second novel.

It's about the burning dream—boxing.

Tomorrow, I turn 50. I look at my aging face in the bathroom mirror, my flabby chest and soft gut.

"You're getting old," snickers a thin gray voice.

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I know that miserable voice. It's the thin, gray hair sticking out my left nostril.

With my forefinger and thumb, I reach in and pluck him out.

"I'll be back," he sneers.

I turn on the water and flick him down the sink.

"I'll be back," he snivels.

"No you won't." I smile. I shadowbox.

Boxing—my theology, salvation and sanctuary.

I keep punching.