

He Danced with the Cinderella Man

Written by Robert Cassidy Jr.
Monday, 25 July 2005 19:00

It was the day of the fight and Charley Gellman had no boxing shoes. The Great Depression was looming, Gellman had no money, and he would have climbed into the ring wearing just a loincloth if the purse was right.

Someone at the West New York Playground in New Jersey suggested that Gellman go to the Braddock household and see if they had a pair of boxing shoes for this fledgling four-round middleweight.

“Braddock lived on Hudson Boulevard. It wasn’t too far,” recalled Gellman. “I went to his house to ask him if I could borrow his boxing shoes. He gave them to me, but they were too big. So he took some newspaper and stuffed it into the tip of the shoes so they would fit. And that’s what I boxed in that night.”

Gellman, who now lives in Valley Stream, New York, grew up in New Jersey and hung around some of the top fighters of the era. He is 88 years old and began boxing in his teens to help support his family. Yet, after each fight, Gellman stocked away a little bit of the money away so he could someday attend college.

“My father was a carpenter building houses, but then everything went bad in 1929,” said Gellman. “We almost lost everything. This was the height of the Depression. He tried to get a union job but the unions practiced anti-Semitism, so he just took odd jobs which was barely enough to get by.”

So Gellman boxed in what he calls “bootleg” bouts just to bring some extra income into the household. He began training while in his teens at Joe Jeannette’s Boxing Gym in West Hoboken, New Jersey. He attended high school with Jeannette’s nephew, Franklin, and they played on the same football team. That’s when he wandered into the gym run by the great Hall-of-Fame heavyweight.

“Great fighters used to come through that gym,” said Gellman. “Every once in a while Jack Johnson would come in or Sam Langford. There was Charley Phil Rosenberg and Jimmy Braddock. Joe Jeanette was my trainer and he told me, ‘I’ll let you fight up to a point and then I’m going to stop you. You’re not going to be a champ, but you are smart enough to make it in the world on your own.’ I wasn’t going to argue with the great Joe Jeanette. I learned all about his career at the gym. He never got a title shot, but as far as I could tell he wasn’t bitter about it. He was a quiet man and didn’t talk much about that part of his career.”

Jeanette was right about Gellman. He wasn’t going to be a champion in the ring, but he would champion the cause of boxers for the rest of his life. He would go on to earn a doctorate in business administration and became the director of three New York City hospitals. During his tenure, a fighter was never turned away because they lacked money or insurance. It didn’t matter if they were a four-rounder or a champion – Gellman made sure they had a bed if

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needed.

Gellman has been inducted into the New Jersey Boxing Hall of Fame and was awarded the first Harry Markson Humanitarian Award by the Boxing Writers Association of America. He is also the Chairman of the Board of Ring 8, New York's chapter of the Veteran Boxers Association.

In the early 1970s, while Executive Director of Jewish Memorial Hospital in Manhattan, he helped provide proper medical care for Mickey Walker after the Hall of Famer was found on the streets. He was sleeping in the gutter and the place sent him to a city hospital. He was registered as "Unknown derelict."

"Imagine, Mickey Walker, twice champion of the world, as an 'Unknown derelict,' said Gellman. "His estranged wife contacted me and I told her to take him up to Jewish Memorial Hospital. It was pitiful to see him when he came in. He was suffering from Parkinson's disease, anemia and hardening of the arteries of the brain. I wanted to cry. When he was under our care, he'd get 200 letters a week. Some people would put a dollar or two in the envelopes. They'd write that their father or grandfather had seen him fight. I set up a fund for his personal needs and we raised about \$2100. I couldn't see letting him down when he needed someone. I wanted him to live out the rest of his days with dignity. Not like some bum."

When Walker was healthy enough, Gellman arranged for him to live the remainder of his days in a nursing home in Perth Amboy, New Jersey, not far from where Walker grew up in Elizabeth. Whatever medical expenses weren't covered by the state, Gellman paid for out his own pocket.

No such charity would be required for Braddock. After living on the dole during the Depression, Braddock wound up becoming heavyweight champion of the world and is the subject of the motion picture, Cinderella Man. Gellman recently appeared on an ESPN documentary about his boyhood friend.

"Braddock took a shine to me," he said. "He got a kick out of my father because my father never liked the idea of me being a fighter. He'd say, 'Pop, don't worry about it. He'll be all right.'"

After leaving Joe Jeanette's Gym, Gellman began training at the North Bergen Social and Athletic Club and that's where he would spar with Braddock. It was a clubhouse type atmosphere, with a broken down ring and one heavy bag. There was a bar in front and sometimes the bartender would come back and spar. There was a poolroom inside, but Gellman said that he and Braddock came strictly for training. Other New Jersey fighters, such as light heavyweight champ Gus Lesnevich and Al Ridgeway, who fought Kid Chocolate, also trained there.

"I'd go the full three rounds with him and give him a good workout," Gellman remembered. "He was taller than I was. He was bigger. Sometimes he'd pull his punches and sometimes he didn't. But I worked with him pretty well. They had athletic mats on the floor because in those days the fighters would wrestle each other to gain strength. I sparred and wrestled with Braddock. I'd run with him at 5 o'clock in the morning along the train tracks.

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“Jimmy’s biggest attribute was that he could take a punch and he had guts. You didn’t knock Jimmy Braddock out so fast. Sure he got beat a few times, but you had to be ready to beat him. He was a plodder. He walked after you, threw his punches and took his shot at winning.”

Braddock may or may not have been a great fighter. But Gellman insists the former heavyweight champion was a great person.

“Was Jimmy Braddock a great fighter? No. But he kept up with the top competition of his time,” said Gellman. “He fought everyone and in some of those bouts he got by on sheer guts. I knew Jimmy Braddock all my life. We grew up together. He never had a bad word to say about anybody. I found him to be as fine a man as I ever met in boxing. I thought of him as family.”

And when it came to family, the Gellman’s were anti-boxing. Like most Jewish boxers at the time, Gellman boxed under an assumed name because he knew his parents wouldn’t approve.

“My father didn’t want me to box, but I was 17 years old and my mother was running up tabs in the grocery stores,” said Gellman. “I had to do something and I was getting pretty good at fighting. So I took the name of Chuck Halper, because we had a distant relative, Lou Halper, who boxed. I’d fight or I’d sweep the gym just to get a couple of bucks.”

Then, one summer night in 1933, at the West New York Playground, Gellman’s secret was found out.

“I was fighting that night and Braddock was in the main event,” he said. “That afternoon my father was at the barber shop and he was reading the fight poster and he saw my picture next to the name of Chuck Halper. He said to the barber, ‘That’s a picture of my son.’ And the barber said, ‘Didn’t you know he’s been fighting?’ That night I’m in the ring and he comes charging down the aisle with a 2-by-4 and climbs into the ring and says, ‘My son’s not fighting!’ Well, there was almost a riot. We all got out of the ring and we smoothed things over and I fought after the main event. I won by first round knockout and walked home with my father.”