

During Anniversary Week, The Sweet Science honors Pat Putnam for "Lifetime Achievement"

Written by Charles Jay
Thursday, 18 August 2005 19:00

When I first got into this business more than one of my so-called mentors admonished me not to "educate" writers.

I've always questioned the wisdom of that posture.

I have operated on "both sides of the aisle," so to speak, having been both a writer and someone who dealt with writers from within a promotional organization. I can certainly vouch for the fact that promoters understand the writer's potential usefulness to them. After all, publicity means ticket sales and pay-per-view subscribers in the more immediate sense. But this is a view somewhat crippled by myopia. I'm not sure many of them truly appreciate the role of the writer as a crucial part of the entire apparatus; a conduit between the public and the game itself, whose objectivity contributes to facilitating the kind of credibility the industry can't buy, and can best be measured only in the long run.

Writers – in my opinion anyway – have never been properly acknowledged in the general landscape of boxing history, either. For example, comparatively few of them are enshrined in the Hall of Fame. Yet without the writer, who'd be there to document history? Fighters, trainers, managers and promoters chalk up their achievements, then depart the field. Some leave a legacy; most don't. But the writer's work lives forever, and the true impact of the written word has been known, from time to time, to supersede that which happens in a prize ring.

For boxing fans who have waved hello and goodbye to our fortieth year (and some of us won't offer any more details than that, thank you), our initiation into the sport was invariably aided by the luculent pictures painted by those estimable wordsmiths of our respective eras.

They made the "sweet science" even sweeter.

Remember, these were the days before the Internet and the cable explosion; there was no ESPN Classic to take us back in time. VCRs were still a luxury; the big fights were something we saw only on network television or at closed-circuit venues and most of the time only once at that. The kind of instant boxing news and results we have become accustomed to accessing so easily online were not even on the horizon.

Those journalists who were covering boxing, and doing so for a national audience, thus tended to be more important and influential on an individual basis than they are today. Their work helped to shape opinions that would affect the way people looked at the game their entire lives. Only the most perceptive journalists fully understood this, and the responsibility that went along with it.

The evidence shows that no writer has ever taken that responsibility more seriously than Pat Putnam.

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For 27 years, the hard-drinking, hard-driving Putnam's material graced the pages of *Sports Illustrated*, the "magazine of record" for sports. The major fights, figures and flare-ups were his province. Over that period, there wasn't a newsmaker he didn't cover, with, I might add, a considerable degree of poise and precision. He gave us a ringside seat for those bouts that defined at least two generations, with the kind of integrity and ingenuity that could never be manufactured.

Prior to that, he was the boxing writer for the *Miami Herald* at a time when South Florida occupied a critical space in the boxing universe. Chris Dundee was one of the most active promoters in the world; brother Angelo was in the nascent stages of building a legend; the Fifth Street Gym was the place to be, and a brash young stud from Kentucky named Cassius Clay was in the process of rewriting all the rules. It was, in fact, by way of Pat Putnam's hand that the world found out Clay was dropping his "slave name" once and for all. It was not the last time he would have the jump on his colleagues.

Putnam has a way of conveying his erudition without drifting into condescension. A master at capturing the moment, his stories manage to go down as smoothly as three fingers of The Glenlivet. He has few peers in establishing the setting for a piece, and has demonstrated the ability to do more with a colorful subject than any boxing scribe in recent memory. His is the irrefragable imprint of a craftsman at work.

Pat has been more than just a reporter; he is quite possibly the closest thing to an official chronicler of historical events this sport has known in the last half-century.

There is a significance associated with such a position that needs to be respected. Celebrated. Honored. Preserved.

The Sweet Science, as part of the spirit of its mission statement, feels a clear obligation to do just that.

It would be easy for us to modify our approach so as to appeal to a lower common denominator, but that's simply not us. Our commitment is toward establishing a new standard in this field, to elevating the overall level of discourse. And we're not the least bit apologetic about it. To realize an ambition like that, one needs to turn to people like Pat Putnam. Our intention was to introduce him to new boxing fans and reacquaint him with those who had been weaned on his unique brand of virtuosity.

We saw Pat as our "Ted Williams"; a cleanup hitter to punctuate what we felt to be the most formidable "batting order" of writers in boxing annals. The plan included us revisiting his landmark work for SI, which holds up beautifully over time, and to draw upon Pat's vast experience for new material that would captivate us again.

Needless to say, he has supplied all the uplift that was hoped for.

We have come a long way, and are currently in the midst of celebrating the first anniversary of *The Sweet Science*

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. In association with that, we have made the decision to present, for the first time, **"The Sweet Science Lifetime Achievement Award"** to an individual who represents the spirit of accomplishment, excellence and dedication that creates a permanent and positive impression on the sport.

We will bestow that honor, most appropriately, upon Pat Putnam.

Few people have done a greater service to that all-important boxing constituency – the fans. And even fewer have provided a more shining exemplar for those of us who have followed him into the profession.

We're not stopping there. *The Sweet Science* editorial board will be drafting a formal letter to the Executive Committee of the International Boxing Hall of Fame asking that Pat Putnam's name be placed on the ballot so that he may be officially considered for induction in 2006.

It's the very least we can do.

In his June 30 piece for *The Sweet Science*, Putnam fondly recalled the legendary sports columnist, Red Smith.

"I guess after I have written 900 words, I am done," was Smith's characteristically brief explanation of his own particular economy of language.

With apologies to both Smith and Putnam, I've gone somewhat over that threshold. I hope Pat doesn't mind, as it is with the objective of positioning him alongside Mr. Smith in the rarified air.

I have a funny feeling Red wouldn't disapprove.

So send that limo, and put it – and Pat – on an express path to Canastota.

And oh, by the way – make sure it's equipped with a fully stocked wet bar.