

Bill Gallo ... More than he bargained for

Written by Robert Mladinich
Sunday, 05 February 2006 19:00

Bill Gallo's only ambition in life was to be a newspaperman. As a youngster growing up in New York, his best memories are when his immigrant father Frank took him to his job as a reporter for the now defunct Castilian newspaper *La Prensa*.

"I loved the smell of the ink and the atmosphere of the newsroom," said the now 83-year-old Gallo, who recently celebrated his 65th year with the New York *Daily News*, where his award-winning cartoons appear five days a week and his sports column appears on Sunday.

"My father died when I was 11, so it was a short-lived relation," he continued. "But he left an impression on me."

Gallo began his career as an 18-year-old copy boy in 1941. The only time his career at the *Daily News* was interrupted was during World War II, when he served in the Marine Corps and saw action in, among other places, Iwo Jima.

One Marine Corps citation praises Corporal Gallo for "his cool, efficient and unceasing devotion to duty...[while] engaged in the hazardous task of locating, deactivating and removing mines, aerial bombs and unexploded ordnance."

Since returning to the *News* in 1945, his career has been a whirlwind. Having always had a passion for boxing, he wrote about and became friends with scores of champions and colorful devotees of the sweet science.

Gallo and Dolores, his beloved wife of 56 years, dined on many occasions with Jack Dempsey, Rocky Graziano and Ray Arcel. Among the legions of others he was or is friends with are Muhammad Ali, Paddy Flood, Larry Holmes and Gerry Cooney. He has nothing but praise for all of them.

When asked why grown men, many of whom are in their seventies, act like awestruck children when discussing Dempsey, Gallo has the perfect explanation.

"We are a country of heroes, and Dempsey was the perfect hero," he said. "He was a hobo who began fighting in the back of bars where a hat would be passed around. He overcame so many barriers, both as a fighter and as a man.

"He stayed a hero until the day he died," Gallo continued. "Walking down the street with him was like walking with the Pied Piper. I once went to a fundraiser for Sugar Ray Robinson with him and Joe Frazier at Sunnyside Gardens. Frazier was the champ at the time. They started two autograph lines, and Jack's was three times as long as Joe's."

Gallo said that few athletes ever captured the public's imagination the way that Dempsey and

Bill Gallo ... More than he bargained for

Written by Robert Mladinich
Sunday, 05 February 2006 19:00

Babe Ruth did. It had as much to do with the times, as it did with their larger than life personalities.

“Back then, being heavyweight champion was more prominent than being President of the United States,” he explained. “But Jack was a very intelligent man. He said that losing to Gene Tunney was the best thing that ever happened to him. The long count made him more than he was. He told me, ‘I was a champion, but the long count made me an idol.’”

Gallo says that Graziano also had an abundance of charisma. “He was a rough stone, but he was smart enough to know that he had to change his street ways,” said Gallo. “He knew how profitable it could be to be nice. He used to tell Jake LaMotta, his good friend, that it was nice to be nice, but I don’t know if Jake took the advice. Rocky was a straight shooter, a salt of the earth guy.”

Gallo describes Arcel as one of the most decent men he had ever met in any business. “He was the most honest guy I knew in such a crooked sport,” said Gallo. “Being so honest nearly cost him his life, and he retired from the game. But he was a sucker for a real good fighter. When he got the opportunity to train Roberto Duran, he couldn’t turn it down.”

(Arcel was once nearly killed after being beaten with a pipe for refusing to cooperate with mobsters who had become a ubiquitous presence in the fight game).

Gallo has scores of tales to recount about Flood, who ran the fabled Gramercy Gym on East 14th Street in Manhattan. “When I was on the boxing beat, he would feed me stories,” said Gallo. “A lot of them were either exaggerated or B.S., but they were all entertaining. Because of him I was the first one to write about the picture ‘Rocky’ and I was the first to report (after his death) that John Belushi had trained at the Gramercy. Those were big stories at the time.”

Another big story had to do with his relationship with Ali. Being the patriotic old Marine that he is, Gallo was initially disturbed by Ali’s refusal to be inducted into the armed forces to serve in Vietnam. That all changed when Gallo visited the war-torn country as part of a USO tour in 1969.

“I spoke to hundreds of Marines and soldiers over there, and it radically changed my thinking,” said Gallo. “I could see Ali’s viewpoint and realized what he was doing was not cowardly. We didn’t belong there. There was a lot of killing for no reason. We would have gained nothing from victory.”

Of the more modern boxing characters, Gallo has immeasurable respect for Holmes and Cooney. Holmes even presented one of his belts to Gallo, who has it hanging prominently on his office wall.

“Holmes was a good workman in the ring, and he had a lot of integrity outside of the ring,” said Gallo. “When he and Cooney fought, you couldn’t help get excited about that fight. For good reasons or bad, if Cooney had won and he didn’t get involved in the stuff (drugs and booze) he

Bill Gallo ... More than he bargained for

Written by Robert Mladinich
Sunday, 05 February 2006 19:00

could have transcended the sport. He had a Max Baer-type of personality and the public was ready to embrace him.”

The last time that Gallo got excited about the fight game was when Oscar De La Hoya was on his way up. “He really got me going,” said Gallo. “He had all of the elements for greatness, but fell short. I suspect that he started thinking of [protecting] his face.”

Although Gallo seems to be eternally optimistic about most matters, he believes that the current state of boxing is abysmal. He is not so sure if it can salvage itself.

“Boxing is boxing when a good heavyweight heads it,” he explained. “There is not a good heavyweight in sight. In order for boxing to be successful, it has to generate more fans than boxing fans. The last heavyweight that people got excited about was Mike Tyson, and that was 20 years ago.”

Although he has been plying the trade he loves for his entire adult life, Gallo still gets excited about his work. When he shows up at his office each morning, he often has no idea what he is going to draw for the next day’s newspaper. Usually by early afternoon, however, the next day’s drawing is done.

“My mind is on the news all the time,” said Gallo, who was inducted into the International Boxing Hall of Fame in Canastota, New York, in 2001. “I don’t worry about not being able to come up with an idea. There is so much to say in this world.”

One of his personal favorites shows a man in bed with his wife, with news of a racetrack robbery clearly evident. The wife asks her husband (the robber) how he made out that day. He responds that he finally broke even.

Gallo speaks to Joe Public with his drawings, and it is a job he takes very seriously. On the surface his cartoons might appear lighthearted, but they carry a message and an image that most often lasts a lot longer than the news item itself.

“I try to relate every major news item to a cartoon,” he explained. “They give me this space so I feel obligated to say something, not just draw a picture. I consider myself very fortunate. I don’t know many people in the world who can say that they’ve done exactly what they wanted. I’m doing it, and I wouldn’t change anything for all of Trump’s money. I always felt like the richest guy in the world.”

Besides his wife and his work, Gallo’s two sons and his extended family, which includes four grandchildren, bring him the most joy in life. Son Greg is the executive sports editor of the *New York Post*, and Bill heads Steeplechase Racing in Maryland.

“They were great boys and they are great men,” he said. “They are more than I ever dreamt they could be. Those two boys are my greatest accomplishment.”