

An Elegy for The Toy Bulldog

Written by Pete Wood
Friday, 14 April 2006 19:00

The man whom this article is about is dead. He was a fighter. That's why I want you to read it...

...I am nine. It's my weekend with Dad, we're in the kitchen eating dinner and he's talking fights, telling me about the colorful fighters of his generation. I hear the cheering crowds and I smell the smoky air in far off arenas. I see Jack Dempsey, The Manassa Mauler, getting punched so hard in The Polo Grounds he's flying out of the ring only to scramble back in to knock out Luis Firpo, The Wild Bull of the Pampas. I see angry Jack Johnson climbing off the canvas and belting double-crossing Stanley Ketchel so hard that Ketchel's two front teeth are snapped off at the gum-line; one tooth is found later embedded in Johnson's glove. I see the great lightweight champ, Ad Wolgast, The Michigan Wildcat, stumbling around the sanitarium. I shiver when I see his nurse rocking the punch-drunk champ to sleep. He calls her "Mama."

I smile at my favorite story – Mickey Walker, The Toy Bulldog. He was a tough welter and middleweight champion in the 1920s and Dad says his rugged face was the kind that would give a Marine sergeant pause in a bar fight. He was a scrappy Irishman so fierce he beat heavyweights – men 100 pounds heavier than himself. I see The Toy Bulldog slugging Jack Sharkey, a heavyweight champion, to a highly contested draw. The Toy Bulldog is the personification of: It's not the size of the dog in the fight; it's the size of the fight in the dog.

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I'm now 10. It's another weekend with Dad. We're walking down 42nd Street in New York City. Dad's a struggling songwriter and his small office is on Tin Pan Alley, next to Jack Dempsey's Restaurant. He's taking me to Dempsey's for cheesecake!

As we walk, Dad's telling me his boxing stories. In my mind, I'm seeing Battling Siki, the colorful Senegalese champ, prance down the street with his pet lion tethered to a leash...

...Pow! Pow! Pow! I'm hearing gunshots as 27-year-old welterweight, Al "Bummy" Davis, dies on the sidewalk in a pool of blood in 1945, gunned down by mobsters...

...I'm watching Lorenzo Pack, a black heavyweight in the 1930s, getting thumbed in the eye by Two Ton Tony Galento at the Convention Hall in Philadelphia...

"Look!" Dad suddenly points to a man wearing a gray overcoat. He's standing on the corner of 8th Avenue. His slick, gray hair needs cutting and he needs a shave.

"Excuse me," says Dad, walking up to him, "may we have your autograph?"

The man smiles, takes my father's pen, and kneels down beside me. "Ello, laddie, what's yer name?"

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“Peter.”

I watch the pen dance upon the paper. His scarred face is squinting with concentration and he’s writing a long time. When he hands back his autograph, I read: To my friend Peter – Mickey Walker. Below his autograph is a sketch of a toy bulldog.

After Mickey Walker retired from the ring, he reinvented himself as an artist. He gained acclaim as a primitive oil painter, and in 1953 authored an autobiography entitled “Will To Conquer – A Great Champion Speaks From the Heart.” But his true artistry was within the ring. It’s there that he attained elite status. Boxing historians rate him with Sugar Ray Robinson, Joe Louis, Muhammad Ali, Jack Dempsey and Benny Leonard. Bert Sugar’s book, “Boxing’s Greatest Fighters,” rates Mickey Walker behind Jack Johnson, as the eleventh greatest fighter of all time.

* * *

I’m now 23. Twelve years have passed. I open the Daily News and read that The Toy Bulldog is found lying in a Brooklyn gutter. Walker is sent to the Jewish Memorial Hospital where he’s cleaned up and tucked between two white sanforized sheets. There isn’t much more they can do for him. He’s suffering from Parkinson’s disease, arteriosclerosis, low blood pressure, amnesia, anemia, and he’s 73 years old. He’s also alcoholic and punch-drunk.

I go to the hospital to visit The Toy Bulldog. The receptionist tells me Mr. Walker is resting in a single room in the geriatric ward. I buy one dozen red roses (though I’m sure his room is already full of them) and ride the elevator up. There are so many questions I want to ask this boxing immortal.

When I reach his room, I knock on the door. “Hello? I walk in. “Mr. Walker?”

He’s sitting up in bed. “Oy! ’ello, laddie!”

“You probably don’t remember me,” I say softly, “but when I was ten you gave me your autograph.”

“Ah, me boy! I remember ye! On 42nd Street, right?”

“You remember?”

He nods.

Suddenly, I’m ten again, with my dad walking down 42nd Street. “Mr. Walker, do you mind if I ask you a few questions?”

“Oy! Course not!” He looks around his clean, brightly lit room and grins. “I be going nowhere.”

“Mr. Walker, who was your toughest fight?”

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“Oy! Tiger Flowers! No...maybe ‘twas Harry Greb.”

“Who hit the hardest?”

“Bejesus, what a question! Well, ‘twas Sharkey. What a right hand!” This is great! I’m talking to the great Toy Bulldog, a boxing immortal! “What was your best boxing move?” I ask.

“Ah, ‘tis secret!” he winks. “‘Twas a feint to yer midsection – right to yer kisser!”

Of course this conversation never took place, it was only in my mind. I step into a dimly lit room. Inside is a thin man lying in bed. His arms and legs are gently wobbling; his head tremors. Is this the correct room? Is this sad, flesh-colored thing the great Toy Bulldog?

I walk closer. I look at the man’s flat nose. I shiver. It’s still a rugged face that would give a sergeant pause in a bar fight.

“Hello,” my voice cracks.

He looks up.

“Mr. Walker, my dad I are fans...and I just wanted to give you these.” I hand him his 12 red roses. He doesn’t reach for them, so I place them on the metal tray attached to his bed. Under his all-over-the-place nose I spot a smile. His eyes moisten. He tries to lift himself up, but can’t. He tries to speak, but can’t. However, under his flat nose I read his lips, he’s trying to say, “Beautiful.” And they are. But, sadly, they’re only ones in his room.

I no longer want to ask him who his toughest fight was, or who hit him the hardest. I’m trespassing and I want to leave. But before I do, I lean over, reach in, and touch his hand. Each of his once powerful fingers is now soft and swollen like sausage.

“Good night, Mr. Walker,” I say, turning to leave. But suddenly I remember something. Something important. This something might put a smile on his face. I reach into my briefcase and pull out a framed piece of paper protected under glass. I hold it up for The Toy Bulldog to see. His autograph.

His moist eyes are blank. Does he remember who he is?

I close the door and leave. This boxing immortal is now a harmless old man lying in a bed with white sheets, red roses, and moist eyes. I want to take him with me to Jack Dempsey’s Restaurant. We’ll sit at a table by the window and laugh as sunlight streams down upon our faces. We’ll talk Greb and Sharkey and Flowers and order juicy steaks with plenty of onions and mashed potatoes and we’ll top it off with cheesecake.

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If The Toy Bulldog died in the ring after a fight one night in the 1920’s, he would have died a

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hero, a martyr. But the eleventh greatest fighter of all time died in 1981 between two white sanforized sheets in a hospital bed – a pug. A lousy forgotten pug with a dozen red roses by his side.

That makes no sense at all.

It's so unfair.

What a crazy sport.

(Peter Wood is a 1971 New York City Golden Gloves middleweight finalist. He is the author of the boxing novel, "To Swallow A Toad." His boxing memoir, "A Clenched Fist—Confessions of a Former Fighter," is seeking publication.)