

Tough Guys and Lou Volpe

Written by Robert Mladinich
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In the early fifties middleweight Sonny Lou Volpe was one of the most popular fighters in New York. Nearly all of his bouts took place in such fabled venues as Madison Square Garden and the St. Nicholas, Sunnyside, Ridgewood Grove, Eastern Parkway, and Fort Hamilton Arenas.

Although one official record lists his ledger as being 7-3-1 (2 KOs), Volpe says that he engaged in 17 pro bouts.

A strange thing occurred when he fought Chico Vejar at St. Nick's in October 1951. Volpe hit the canvas in the first round. As he arose, a fan in the crowd rang a bell.

Referee Ruby Goldstein thought the round was over. Ringside officials ordered the boxers to continue fighting. Vejar hurt Volpe again, but Volpe hung on until the end, losing a hard-fought 10-round decision.

"Chico was a good kid and a good fighter," said the 73-year-old Volpe. "I had him cut on the top and bottom of his eye. But he was a tough guy. Tough guy."

Although Volpe tangled with a lot of other popular local fighters while fighting professionally from 1950-52, his most notable opponent as an amateur was Johnny Saxton

The two squared off in the finals of the New York City Golden Gloves and Saxton, who went on to become the welterweight champion of the world, won a decision.

Forty-one years ago Volpe joined Teamsters Local 817. He is now employed as a transportation captain in the motion picture industry. He is in charge picking up all equipment, as well as cast and crew members, and delivering them to movie and television sets.

Among the vehicles he is in charge of are a 54-foot makeup trailer, the Honey Wagon, which is a trailer with ten rooms and bathrooms, and the grip, camera, electrical, set dressing, and special effects trucks.

When "The Valachi Papers" was being filmed at Sing Sing penitentiary in Westchester County in the early seventies, Volpe used to pick up the film's star, Charles Bronson, at his Manhattan hotel each morning and bring him back there at night.

Having done similar duties before, Volpe knew that the hard and fast rule was not to talk to the stars.

"After a few days, Charlie asked me why I never talked to him," recalled Volpe. "I told him it was the rule. He told me he had a four-bedroom suite at the hotel and there was nobody to talk to there either. We started having coffee together and talked everyday."

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Volpe learned that Bronson had served time for armed robbery in his youth. As a result, Bronson had empathy for the few inmates he came in contact with during the filming.

“He used to slip the fellas ten, twenty dollars when he could,” said Volpe. “He was a good guy. And a real tough guy.”

Other films and television shows that Volpe has worked on include “The Godfather,” “Raging Bull,” “Streets of Gold,” “The Devil’s Advocate,” “Dead Man Walking,” “Working Girl,” “Oz,” and “A Bronx Tale.”

While working as a technical adviser on “Raging Bull,” he learned that his aunt resided in the same Little Italy building as director Martin Scorsese’s parents.

When asked if star Robert DeNiro was as good of a fighter as some press reports indicated, he said “Bobby’s an actor, not a fighter.”

While filming “Working Girl” in the late eighties, he went out for a few beers with the star, Harrison Ford. They were at Pete’s Tavern in the Gramercy Park section of Manhattan.

An obnoxious drunk kept harassing Ford, who was a good sport about it. Not long before Volpe was about to interject, Ford blasted the guy with a terrific right hand. “Tough guy,” said Volpe. “Tough guy.”

He describes actor Ben Gazzara, who is about the same age as himself, as “a tough kid,” and says Frank Sinatra, with whom he worked on “The Detective” and “Contract on Cherry Street,” recognized the fact that he was not a tough guy.

“Frank loved fighters,” said Volpe. “He liked to talk like a tough guy, but used to say ‘I know I can’t fight, but I can make a phone call if I have to.’”

While working on “A Bronx Tale,” the beginning of which took place in the fifties, Volpe lent some of his old fight posters – where he was listed as the main event – as well as several action photos, to the producers for authenticity. You can see them throughout the film in the bar that is run by Chazz Palminteri.

“I fought many main events in many small clubs that are gone now,” lamented Volpe. “So are the posters and the photos. They all disappeared off the set when we were done shooting.”

Volpe was born, raised and fought out of the Hell’s Kitchen section of Manhattan. His parents were strict Italian immigrants. His father used to go up to the roof of the family’s tenement building and whistle for his three sons, Lou, Ralph and Francis, to come home.

If they didn’t return promptly, they would get the strap. One day the brothers didn’t hear the whistle because they had made their way to the local PAL center, which was run by an ex-fighter named John DeFoe.

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Their father tracked them down there, and DeFoe convinced him to let the boys participate in the boxing program.

Within days Volpe was in the ring against a kid named Tommy Higgins. When he emerged victorious, he was rewarded with a certificate to buy a new pair of shoes. He proudly handed it to his father, who asked when he was going to fight again.

Volpe was such a natural, he soon embarked on a five borough tour and turned pro in September 1950. Less than two years later his career came to an abrupt halt when he suffered a detached retina in a bout with Jackie O'Brien at St. Nicholas Arena in April 1952.

It was a rough affair. Volpe knocked O'Brien down twice in the fifth round, but was also penalized for hitting O'Brien when he was down.

On several occasions Volpe had hoped to make a comeback, but he kept having trouble with the eye. It eventually ended his career.

"For a long time I had ants in my pants," he said. "But maybe it was for the best."

For several years Volpe ran a South Bronx saloon called Sonny Lou's, and then got married to his wife Ann more than 50 years ago. They have four children.

Son Ralph works with his father in the Teamster's, as a transportation co-captain. Louis is in construction, Ann Marie is an attorney, and Susan works with her husband in the construction business.

"I did with my life what I wanted to," said Volpe. "And things worked out."

Asked how he'd like to be remembered by the boxing community, Volpe, who is a member of New York's Ring 8, Veteran Boxers Association, was unequivocal in his response.

"Tough guy," he said. "Tough guy."