

Bernard Fernandez: Growing Up in Orleans Parish

Written by Robert Mladinich
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Had Bernard Fernandez ever given any thought to his future while growing up in the Orleans parish of New Orleans, he probably would have envisioned himself becoming a cop. His father, Bernard Sr., was a New Orleans police captain who had fought professionally as a welterweight under the name Jack Hernandez.

To this day the 58-year-old Fernandez's prized possession is a framed fight poster of an August 1944 main event between Archie Moore and Jimmy Hayden in San Diego.

"My dad was in the semi versus Jimmy Hatmaker," said Fernandez. "He was in the Navy at the time and on leave from the South Pacific."

The fight was declared a technical draw in the first round after a clash of heads prevented it from continuing.

Although several other members of Fernandez's family were also cops, the intervention of Sister Camilla, a very astute eighth grade teacher at St. Stephen's School, dramatically changed the direction of Fernandez's life. The year was 1961.

"She told me that there was going to be a citywide essay contest for eighth grade students where the top prize was one dollar," recalled Fernandez. "With that amount of money you could buy 100 baseball cards back then. Second place was fifty cents."

Five weeks later a school assembly was held after Fernandez won the contest. Fernandez, whose nickname was Stormy because he was born during the great New Orleans hurricane of 1947, still remembers vividly what Sister Camilla told him that day.

(The storm was so intense it put the first floor of Lakeshore Hospital underwater. To make matters worse, Fernandez's mother endured nearly four days of labor. One of many running family jokes is had Fernandez been a girl he would have been named Gail).

"Stormy, you have a gift," Fernandez recalled her telling him. "I think you should be a newspaper reporter."

From that day on, Fernandez believes that his fate was sealed. "Writing was probably the only thing I was really good at," he said. "I was hooked."

A steady path soon led to him working as a copy boy at the New Orleans *Times Picayune* while still in high school. After studying journalism at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, he worked as a reporter at the *Mouma Courier* before moving on to the *Miami Herald*

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and the now defunct
Jackson Daily News
in Mississippi.

Since 1984 he has been the boxing writer at the *Philadelphia Daily News*, and from 2001 until earlier this year he served as the president of the Boxing Writers Association of America (BWAA). He has fond recollections of each and every one of those stops in his career.

“At the *Times Picayune* I was stringing, and once in a while I’d get a byline or a four-line story,” he recalled. “All of the sportswriters there were very encouraging except for one. All he would tell me is that it’s all crap and the newspaper business stinks.”

When Fernandez shared those experiences with the editor, he received an invaluable lesson about the enormity or the deadening of the human spirit. That lesson is clearly evident to this day, in the way he writes, the way he lives his life, and in the benevolence he has toward aspiring and fledgling journalists.

“He told me that the reporter didn’t have a wife, didn’t have children, his parents were dead, and all he had was this job,” said Fernandez. “And he’s scared to death that someone will take it from him. I told myself then if I ever achieve something, I will never be like that.”

When Fernandez went to work at the *Miami Herald* he was all of 23 years old and full of youthful exuberance. “I thought they’d see how great I was and give me Edwin Polk’s job,” he said. “I should have been more patient.”

Next stop was Jackson, where Fernandez covered Southeastern Conference sports and eventually became president of the Mississippi Sportswriters Association. It was while there that he covered his first live fight, the September 1978 rematch between Muhammad Ali and Leon Spinks at the Superdome in New Orleans.

“That was about as big as it could get back then,” said Fernandez. “That fight had historical significance, plus it was in my hometown. I was honored to be able to be there.”

Since arriving in Philadelphia, Fernandez primarily covers boxing but occasionally writes about the Phillies and the 76ers. However, he says, “My heart, first and foremost, is in boxing.”

While covering a February 1990 match between Vinny Pazienza and Hector Camacho in Atlantic City, Fernandez told several of his colleagues from other media outlets that he was going to Tokyo the following week to cover Mike Tyson’s seemingly easy title defense against Buster Douglas.

“Most of them said, ‘What the hell are you going there for?’” he laughingly recalled. “The fight’s going to be over in two rounds.”

Fernandez says that his reasons were simple and they wound up being somewhat prophetic. “Mike was like the Tiger Woods of boxing” he said. “Wherever he went, you had to go. But all

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those people were telling me what a waste it was to cover a fight 14 time zones away.”

Not only did Fernandez witness firsthand one of the biggest upsets in boxing history, Tyson-Douglas served as a harbinger for the equally thrilling first bout between Julio Cesar Chavez and the Philadelphia-born and bred Meldrick Taylor that occurred the following month. That was the memorable fight that was stopped in Chavez’s favor with just two seconds remaining in the 12th and final round.

“Those two fights are the most memorable of my career,” said Fernandez. “I’d come a long way from watching the Gillette Cavalcade of Sports when I was seven, eight years old. Back then I was probably the only kid in fifth grade whose favorite fighter was Carmen Basilio.”

In November 2001 Fernandez was asked by Tommy Kenville, the former Secretary/Treasurer of the BWAA, if he’d be interested in becoming president of the organization. At the time the BWAA, which had once been a highly regarded sporting institution, had become a floundering anachronism.

“After a lot of thought, I said I’d do it but I wasn’t going to be a caretaker and continue to do things the way they were done in the past,” said Fernandez. “I said I was going to put a wrecking ball to it and bring it into the 21st century.

“While boxing itself might be best served by going back to the way it was in the forties and fifties, the BWAA didn’t have to be stuck in the forties and fifties.”

Under Fernandez’s watch, the BWAA tripled its membership, created a website and a member’s directory, and put to rest the perception of it being mainly an East Coast entity by actively recruiting many West Coast writers.

The logo was also modernized and the Barney Awards were established. Named for esteemed boxing scribe Barney Nagler, the awards are annually presented to BWAA members for a variety of categories such as event coverage, feature writing, photography, and investigative reporting.

More than anything else, Fernandez is proud of the Barneys. “We all like validation,” he said. “A lot of fine work was being done by boxing writers that wasn’t being recognized. We needed to honor that great work.”

In 2005 the BWAA held their annual awards dinner at the Mandalay Bay in Las Vegas, on the eve of the sensational first fight between Diego Corrales and Jose Luis Castillo. Having traditionally been a New York-based event, having the dinner in Las Vegas, coupled with the excitement of what was later named the BWAA’s Fight of the Year, was extremely rewarding.

“So many people came up to me and said it was their best weekend of boxing ever,” said Fernandez. “That meant a lot to me.”

The 2006 event is scheduled for this weekend in Las Vegas, on the eve of another potentially

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memorable battle between Oscar De La Hoya and Ricardo Mayorga. Next year's dinner will be held at the Borgata in Atlantic City.

What also means so much to Fernandez is the love of his family. He and his wife Anne Marie have been married for 37 years. Another running family joke is that they got married in the third grade.

Sons Randy and Kevin are police officers in different Louisiana police departments. Both of their daughters, Melanie and Amy, live in the Philadelphia area.

The past few years have been extremely challenging for the entire family. Ann Marie's brother Jude suffered a stroke on August 29, the same night that Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans. He lapsed into a coma and died on September 5, his 47th birthday.

Fernandez's mother Alice was diagnosed with kidney cancer. Because she lived by herself in New Orleans, Fernandez and his wife convinced her to move to Philadelphia six weeks prior to the hurricane. When she moved north, it was determined that she had another form of cancer. She passed away on October 2.

"Both died in close proximity to Katrina," said Fernandez, who still has scores of other relatives living in that ravaged city. "My wife and I were very depressed. I couldn't focus on anything. Suddenly going to games and to fights seemed insignificant. Some days I could barely pull myself out of bed. As much work as I always put into the BWAA, I couldn't do it anymore. For the benefit of the organization, I stepped down."

Fernandez believes that the BWAA is in very good hands under its new president, Tim Graham. "Things always benefit from new and different ideas," he said. "I'll serve as an advisor for the transition, but when this year's dinner is over I'll be like General Douglas MacArthur and fade away."

One thing that hopefully won't fade is the lessons Fernandez imparts on the scores of schoolchildren that he visits with regularly. Powered by his own sense of altruism as much as the lesson he inadvertently learned from the negativistic reporter at the *Times Picayune* so many years ago, he would like nothing more than to inject the same measure of enthusiasm for writing in tomorrow's journalists that he had at their age.

"I might have five, six, seven years left as a writer," he said. "In this business, one day you have a byline, the next day you don't. Newspaper journalists are like sand castles because they are very impermanent.

"This is how I give back. If one kid takes from me something like I took from Sister Camilla, it will help them. And then they can pass it on to the next generation."