

The next generation ...

Written by Robert Cassidy Jr.
Sunday, 25 June 2006 19:00

So where did I go wrong?

On July 1, Showtime's ShoBox series will offer up a fight card that features a battalion of second-generation pugs. James McGirt Jr., Jorge Paez Jr., Stephan Pryor, Ronald Hearn and Chazz Witherspoon will all be in action on the Lou DiBella-promoted card from the Little River Casino in Michigan.

Even a casual boxing fan will recognize those surnames. McGirt, Paez, Pryor, Hearn, Witherspoon – is this a 1980s flashback or what? Did I just wake up with a mullet? Was that Duran Duran on the radio? Sorry, Roberto, or any of his offspring, has nothing to do with this card. Thankfully, neither does Simon Le bon. Or, for that matter, Simon Brown.

Back to business.

The ShoBox card will mark the first time in boxing history that the sons of four former world champions will fight on the same card. Two of them will actually meet in the ring. If Buddy McGirt against Aaron Pryor was one of your dream matches, ShoBox brings you the next best thing – middleweights Buddy Jr. (11-0) vs. Stephan Pryor (10-1).

All the kids are matched competitively. Tommy's son, Ronald Hearn (8-0) meets Hector Hernandez (8-1-2) in another middleweight bout and Paez Jr. (9-0) meets Armand Horn (13-1) in a lightweight contest.

The main event features Chazz Witherspoon (12-0), the young cousin of former heavyweight champion, Tim, against Mike Alexander (11-0) in a 10-round heavyweight bout.

ShoBox has become the sport's premiere launching pad for young talent. This card is no different.

But for these kids, the fighting may be the easy part. Surely they are talented, the genetics would seem to guarantee that. The hard part may be the expectation – either imposed by the media or themselves – that they will live up to the standards set by their famous fathers.

That can be a helluva burden.

If there is one consolation to the fame game, it is that none of these fathers will be living vicariously through their sons. They've all had their own brilliant careers. And it seems the sport is saturated with the offspring of boxing royalty. Aside from the ShoBox card, there's also Howard Davis' son, Dyah Ali Davis (7-0) and Julio Cesar Chavez Jr. (26-0-1).

So what ever happened to Bobby Cassidy Jr.?

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I was taught the rudiments of boxing – jab, right cross, left hook – in a very perfunctory manner. It was prefaced by, “Do this if the schoolyard bully bothers you.” It was sound instruction, even if my execution of said instructions was not exactly sound. But hey, ever since I could walk, my father was trying to put a baseball glove on my hand rather than a boxing glove.

I was persistent. I always tried to talk my father into allowing me to box. I even snuck off on my own and trained for a few months at a local gym. But my words were always countered by stronger words.

“Boxing is the life I chose,” my father would tell people. “I didn’t want that for my sons.”

The translation was, boxing is too tough. Long before McGirt used the quote on a conference call, my father would tell me, “You can play baseball, you can play basketball. But you don’t play boxing. It’s not a game.”

I was effectively steered away from participating in boxing, but I always loved the sport. I grew up collecting baseball cards and issues of Ring magazine. OK. Perhaps that’s the first clue that I was going to be more geek than gladiator.

Still, it is natural to want to follow in your father’s footsteps, even if those footsteps lead you into the toughest sport on the planet. So, I was curious what these Dad’s had to say about their sons.

In one interview, McGirt said, “I didn’t want him to get the urge.”

And later, he added, “I wanted him to play basketball. I truly thought he could make it to the NBA... He told me he was having a baby, I said you gotta turn pro and take care of him... I bought the first few months of pampers.”

Hearns had this to say, “I am very proud of him. He has come a long way in a hurry, and is learning how to punch correctly. He’s a little bit too anxious to make things happen.”

Now the sons:

Ronald Hearns: “It’s an honor to have our fathers pave the way, and now we have the opportunity to pave our own way and get out of their shadows.... Everyone expects me to go out there and expects the same things, but once you see me out there, you’ll see the similarities.”

Jorge Paez Jr. “I was there as a kid when my dad won a world title, and remember that I also wanted to be a world champion. I am working very hard to be the best fighter possible... There are a lot of people that have expectations because of my father and what he did. It is great that he is my father. I am proud of what he did.”

Buddy McGirt Jr.: “I was brought up in the sport, it was around me my whole life, it grew on me and I loved it.”

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McGirt and Hearn both played college basketball. I played college baseball. Doesn't that count for something? It apparently does not. But there is one connection from my past. Referee Tony Perez (Ali-Frazier II) actually umpired one of my games. True story. It goes like this:

First baseman John Pirrone: "See that kid playing second base, his name is Bobby Cassidy. His father was a boxer, ever hear of him?"

Tony Perez: "Bobby Cassidy was not a boxer ..." Now, Pirrone thinks I'm a complete liar. But after a pausing for effect, Perez finishes by saying, "He was a FIGHTER."

Now I'm the most popular guy on the team, and also expected to be the toughest.

See. Those are the kind of expectations all these kids will have to live with throughout their careers. But, as McGirt said, I too was brought up in the sport. It was around me my whole life.

So what happened? I guess if you had seen me execute that jab-right cross-left hook combination in the basement, you would understand why I write about boxing. Let's say I was more savvy than savage.

Just when I was feeling good about myself, I read this: "In a sense, a boxing son is like the son of a basketball coach," said ShoBox analyst Steve Farhood. "Those kids are usually point guards and are always mature and court-savvy. The kids we are going to see on ShoBox grew up in boxing gyms."

Farhood was my first boss in the business of boxing journalism. Since he spent years reading my copy, he knows damn well that I am savvy, if not mature. He was on assignment for ShoBox when I fired off an e-mail asking him to analyze whether or not I am better off as a fighter than a writer. The next morning I opened the inbox to this:

"As for why Bobby Cassidy makes a better writer than a fighter, I have a unique perspective," Farhood wrote. "I saw Bobby fight in a smoker on Long Island in which he did quite well. Good jab, rhythm, etc. Made his Dad proud. Then about five years later, I saw him spar a round with Roy Jones Jr. for a cover story in The Ring. He didn't do as well. By the time young Cassidy pulled the trigger on his right hand, Jones was eating lunch in the cafeteria. Bobby tried as best he could, but had been overmatched by his editor (me). I don't want to say Jones was taking the session lightly, but during the three minutes they sparred, Roy made two cell phone calls, read the sports section of the New York Daily News, and clipped his toenails. And he didn't get hit once. I'm sure Bobby would've done better against a less talented opponent, but I retired him immediately after that round. Like Joe Frazier after Eddie Futch pulled the plug in Manila, young Cassidy was initially resentful, but he'll come to thank me for it – probably after he wins his first Pulitzer."

So maybe Dad was right all along. Still, I did follow in my father's footsteps in a sense. I'm in the sport of boxing and I still love it. But I don't fight, I write. And the ultimate difference is that while all these juniors are out pursuing championship belts, about the best belt I'll ever wear is that nifty Father's Day gift my kids got me from Macy's.

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But hey, there's still hope for Bobby Jr. Jr.