

Mike Quarry in life and death

Written by Robert Mladinich
Tuesday, 18 July 2006 19:00

I was deeply saddened when former light heavyweight contender Mike Quarry, 55, passed away on June 11 from pugilistic dementia.

For the past 11 years I had chronicled the Quarry family for various publications. I was always a big fan of Mike's, as well as his older brother Jerry, who was quite possibly the most popular heavyweight in history to never win a title.

Jerry passed away in January 1999 from the same insidious disease that would eventually claim Mike.

I became personally associated with the Quarry clan back in May 1993. Having just returned to the boxing beat after a ten-year hiatus, I journeyed to Las Vegas for the Lennox Lewis-Tony Tucker heavyweight title fight. It was there that I encountered Jerry in the audience.

After introducing myself, Jerry could not have been more gracious. He was a good storyteller and regaled me with boxing tales for well over an hour.

Over the next few years I heard that Jerry wasn't doing well, that his mental faculties were fading fast.

While in Anaheim, California, covering a boxing extravaganza featuring WBC/IBF light flyweight champion Humberto "Chiquita" Gonzalez and a young Marco Antonio Barrera in separate bouts in the spring of 1995, I decided to look up both Mike and Jerry.

From the press room I called information to get Mike's phone number, and was thrilled when he answered the phone. He was living in nearby Diamond Bar and working as a landscaper at a church in La Mirada. He seemed excited to have me visit him at work the next day.

He also gave me Jerry's number. At the time, Jerry was being cared for by a non-boxing brother, James, who lived in Hemet, which was a small desert town on the way to Palm Springs. Yet another brother, Robert, who also boxed professionally, was serving time in state prison.

Accompanying me to see Mike was esteemed photographer Teddy B. Blackburn, with whom I had embarked on many similar pursuits. Along for the ride was another East Coast writer, who I was meeting for the first time.

It was obvious from the get-go that Mike, then 44, had seen better days. His once boyishly handsome face had amassed slabs of scar tissue, his eyelids were hooded, his nose was battered, and his blue eyes were dim and sad.

Yet he was extremely humble and pleasant as he spoke candidly about his past, present and future with a tremendous degree of introspection.

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“I was always Jerry’s younger brother,” he said. “I could never accomplish anything on my own. It was like that since we were children, in the ring and out. Jerry was a great brother, though. He always took care of me.

“When we were teenagers he had so many girlfriends and I was like a tagalong,” he continued. “Jerry would always have them kiss me to make me feel good. He will always be my big brother. When we were boxing, I got so many breaks because of him.”

Mike fought professionally from 1969-82 and retired with a record of 69-13-6 (17 KOS). A masterful boxer, he was 36-0 when he challenged Bob Foster for the light heavyweight title in June 1972. Mike took the fight to Foster, but was knocked cold by a left hook in the fourth round.

“I did very good for three rounds,” said Mike. “I was doing the Ali shuffle and making him miss. In the fourth he hit me with a left hook that ranks with the best of all time. People say he got lucky. But he was a great champion and I truly believe that luck happens when preparation meets opportunity, when you get paid back for all those extra miles you go.”

Years later I spoke with Foster at the International Boxing Hall of Fame in Canastota, New York.

“That was the only time I was concerned I might have killed somebody,” he said. “I hit him with a left hook and his eyes weren’t moving. Then they moved in his head and I only saw white. I said, ‘He’s dead.’ My manager said, ‘Business is business.’”

Mike also beat Mike Rossman in one out of three of their encounters, as well as the respected Tom Bethea and Gary Summerhays.

Among the notable fighters who defeated him were Chris Finnegan, Yaqui Lopez and Bunny Johnson.

Jerry, who had tangled with the likes of Muhammad Ali (twice), Joe Frazier (twice), Floyd Patterson and Ken Norton, campaigned from 1965-92 and retired with a record of 53-9-4 (33 KOS).

All of the brothers had begun boxing shortly after they learned to walk. They had no choice. Their father Jack, a crude man who had HARD LUCK amateurishly tattooed on his meaty fingers wouldn’t have it any other way.

As a youngster Jack relied on his fists more than his wits as he traveled the American West, riding the rails, sleeping in labor camps, and in his words “cutting (fighting) the queers off of me.”

Jack died earlier this year. However, I interviewed him and his son Robert several years ago at the Bakersfield, California, nursing home where Jack was residing. He says that he encouraged Jerry to fight as much as he discouraged Mike not to.

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“Michael was too weak, was always sick as a child, and had a crooked arm from falling off a monkey bar,” he said. “He had a lot of guts and never let you know if you were hurting him.

“I kept telling him you can’t just make guys miss and win fights,” he continued. “Someone once told me he was such a good boxer, he could go through his career without getting hit. Well, that sure turned out to be wrong.”

Whether or not Jerry and Mike had a genetic predisposition to pugilistic dementia, which is similar to Alzheimer’s, is open to conjecture. Robert, who is 17 years younger than Jerry, compiled a 9-12-2 (6 KOS) while fighting as a heavyweight from 1982-92.

Now in his early forties, he is back in prison and suffering from a host of maladies. “My nerves impulses are erratic and my left arm shakes all the time,” he said. “Whether or not it was caused by boxing really doesn’t matter. I took an aptitude test and tested at the college level in everything. My perception comprehension is good, but I talk slow, my arm shakes, and I’m named Quarry. It’s hard to get past the stereotype.”

Perhaps alcohol and drug abuse was a major contributing factor to the demise of Jerry and Mike. But regardless of how it happened, it was obvious that both brothers were traveling to very dark places when I met them.

Making things even sadder for Mike was the fact that, in 1995, he was desperately trying to keep the disease at bay.

He was happily married to a woman named Ellen. She was a marriage counselor who cared greatly for him. She wholeheartedly supported him as he went through a laborious mental rehabilitative process.

“I needed help with my short-term memory,” he admitted. “My thoughts didn’t synchronize well. I would drive my wife to church, forget where I took her, and [try to] pick her up at the Anaheim Hilton. I couldn’t remember anything. It has gotten better since taking classes, but I’m still no rocket scientist.”

Mike had been urging Jerry to take similar classes, but his big brother would have none of it.

“I just wish that I could help him, but he resists,” said Mike. “It seems like our lives were lived forward and learned backwards.”

Mike said that he had made \$40,000 for fighting Foster in 1972, which was good money back then. However, on the day I met with him he was lamenting the loss of a lawn edger that belonged to the church. He explained how he would have to pay for it, but was grateful that the church would only take a little bit out of his check each week until it was paid off.

Ever since that visit I have been lamenting over something as well. On several occasions Mike had suggested that we take him out to lunch. I had planned on doing that all along, but the East Coast writer that accompanied Blackburn and I couldn’t get out of there quick enough.

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At the time I was very annoyed with him because I was so happy to be spending time with Mike and really wanted to buy him lunch. As much as it would have made his day, it would have made my day even more.

The writer was fidgety as he rolled his eyes, suggesting in no uncertain terms that he wanted to leave. I remember thinking how insensitive he was, that he could only be around fighters who were on the upswing and would relegate them to the scrapheap once they were past their prime.

For years I harbored a degree of resentment toward him, as well as a degree of sadness for not buying Mike lunch. There were countless occasions when I told friends that one of my greatest regrets in boxing was not treating him to lunch.

Years later I found out that the writer was not turned off by the fact that Mike was obviously troubled. What bothered him most was his belief that Blackburn and I were denigrating him by – among other things – posing him in front of a lawn mower with a boxing glove on.

When that was brought to my attention by a third party, I could see the writer's point. While I didn't necessarily agree with that assessment, it was a valid one. Now I felt as though I had another thing to lament over.

At the same time of my visit with Robert and Jack, I drove to the cemetery in nearby Shafter where Jerry is buried. There was a photo of Jerry on the gravestone. Etched under his name was "The Great White Hope" and "The Best of All Times."

Mike is now lying in an adjacent grave. His stone is yet to be placed there, but I can't even begin to imagine what it will say.

In life Mike was the first to admit that he could never escape Jerry's shadow. Sadly, things were not destined to be any different in death.