

Talking Boxing with Angelo Dundee

Written by Luca De Franco

Sunday, 10 September 2006 19:00

Thousands of people work in the American boxing business, but the ones who really count total about fifty and they all know each other. One of them is Angelo Dundee. Probably, he is the only one liked by all the others. I met dozens of top guys in New York, Florida and New Jersey and nobody ever said a bad word about the legendary trainer. That's because Angelo always treated everybody with respect and got it in return. The Philadelphia-born Hall of Famer always accepted the fighters for what they were and worked a way to develop their talent at the highest level:

"I managed every kind of fighter and I understood very quickly that every human being has his own approach to life. I didn't try to change them. I just asked them to follow my advice inside and outside the ring, to be sure that they were 100% the day of the fight. I can proudly say that I became friend of every boxer I worked with. Some of them have a special place in my heart, like Muhammad Ali, Willie Pastrano and Ralph Dupas. When somebody told me that our business relationship was over, I just wished him the best and he kept no bad feelings for me. As a matter of fact, even the fighters who worked with me for a short time salute me with enthusiasm when I meet them at the big events."

Every boxing fan knows the names of at least the majority of the fifteen world champions managed by Angelo Dundee. It couldn't be any different, because some of them are legends like Muhammad Ali, Ray Leonard, George Foreman, Carmen Basilio, Willie Pastrano, Ralph Dupas, Jose Napoles and Ultiminio Ramos. Others have won a legitimate heavyweight title (Jimmy Ellis and Pinklon Thomas) and a few more made history in their own nation (like Olympic and world light heavyweight champion Slobodan Kacar).

The boxing community praises Angelo also because he could get the maximum out of average fighters. One of them was Johnny Holman, a heavyweight who fought from 1947 to 1957 building a record of 27 wins (17 KOs), 17 losses and 1 draw. His most famous bouts were against Ezzard Charles. The first fight took place on April 27, 1955 in Miami. Johnny Holman was considered a big prospect, but had his share of losses and his managers wanted to test him. Chris Dundee proposed a fight against Ezzard Charles: ten rounds, at the Miami Beach Auditorium. Charles had a record of 81-12-1 and was believed to be at the end of his career (instead, he was active four more years). The night of the fight, Joe Louis was in attendance; he was Holman's idol and Angelo knew it. When Charles started beating up Holman, Angelo wondered what he could do to motivate his man. So, he went to the Brown Bomber and asked him to tell something to Holman. Joe Louis looked into Holman's eyes and yelled: "Do you want to be KOed in front of all these people? Wake up and fight!" Holman fought with a ferocity never shown in his previous bouts, knocked down Charles in the 9th round, assaulted him again forcing the referee to declare the TKO. Angelo was smart enough to find a solution that nobody else would have imagined; but then, on June 8, 1955 in Cincinnati, Charles got revenge, by beating Holman on points.

Angelo Dundee's unique ring savvy made him listened by his boxers. The only time that

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Muhammad Ali didn't follow his advice was for the fight against pro wrestling legend Antonio Inoki. I call it a fight because that's what it was. If it was a "work" (using a typical expression of the wrestling people), Ali and Inoki would have studied a spectacular choreography. Instead, the match turned boring with Inoki on his back for most of the time. Why? This is what Angelo told me:

"It's very simple, Inoki knew that one of Muhammad's punches would have been enough to end the fight. Staying on his back, Inoki didn't run any risks and he could kick Ali's legs. When the match was over, Muhammad's legs were full of hematomas and he had to go to the hospital. I wouldn't have accepted the bout because Ali could make the same money and get the same worldwide publicity through boxing, but Muhammad wanted to do it badly. As a matter of fact, he helped sell the fight, putting up a great show at every press conference. I think that Ali's claims that he would knock out the Japanese wrestler convinced Inoki not to get into a brawl. On that occasion, I had a proof of how small the world is because the referee was Gene Le Bell. His mother was a boxing promoter based in Los Angeles: Aileen Eaton. She was a good woman and Gene is a good guy. I want you to meet him, if you ever to go Los Angeles."

Another legend Angelo worked with is Russell Crowe. The actor wanted Angelo in his corner when he played James J. Braddock in "Cinderella Man." Angelo spent a lot of time with Crowe in Australia, following his training and advising him on how to be a credible boxer. Let's hear it from Angelo:

"I told Wayne Gordon to follow Russell's day-by-day training. They exercised together and sparred in the ring. Wayne is an excellent trainer and knows how I work. He did a great job with Russell. I gave Russell all the info he needed to be convincing as James J. Braddock: how he should move in the ring, how he should talk, what a boxer does in certain situations and so on. We became close friends and went out many times. Once, we went to the gym where Anthony Mundine was training. He was so excited to know me that he went back to the ring and gave a beating to his sparring partner. But he didn't recognize Russell! When he realized that the man with me was Russell Crowe, he called all the newspapers to apologize. Later, Anthony and Russell became friends. This story may sound strange to most people, but you have to realize that Anthony comes from a boxing family. His father Tony built a record of 80-15-1 and challenged world middleweight champion Carlos Monzon losing by KO 7. I knew Anthony's father and grandfather. They always talked to him about me and that's why Anthony was happy to meet me."

Angelo Dundee's greatest accomplishment is that everybody was always happy to meet him.