

About Facing Mike Tyson

Written by Robert Mladinich
Monday, 20 November 2006 19:00

In the just published book “Facing Tyson: 15 Fighters, 15 Stories,” author Ted A. Kluck interviewed 15 boxers who faced the once mighty Mike Tyson.

Kluck is a terrific interviewer who managed to draw raw, emotionally honest material from nearly every one of his subjects, which included Sammy Scaff, Marvis Frazier, Jose Ribalta, James “Bonecrusher” Smith, Pinklon Thomas, Tyrell Biggs, Tony Tubbs, Buster Mathis Jr., Lou Savarese, Lennox Lewis and Kevin McBride.

The chapters devoted to Frazier, Biggs, Ribalta and Mathis are especially poignant because the fighters are shown to be as powerful as they are vulnerable. The fragility of life is glaringly apparent when speaking to all of them.

Even Kluck’s efforts to speak with subjects who were not cooperative are recalled with great color. Mitch “Blood” Green and Peter McNeeley both thought their stories were worth much more than Kluck was rightfully unwilling to pay – which was nothing.

Every subject is shown to be all too human. While it would be easy to portray many of them as losers to Tyson – as well as in the game of life – Kluck brilliantly depicts them as the multi-faceted, complex human beings that they – and we – all are.

Like all good journalists Kluck avoids stereotyping, even when it would be so easy to do so. The reader can’t help but root for these fighters as they face the daunting challenges of life in much the same fashion as everyone else.

Some are lucky enough to have their senses and their finances intact, while others dangle precariously between fame and obscurity.

Scaff, he says, “strikes me as the kind of guy who is at peace with his boxing career in terms of what he did and didn’t accomplish.”

He describes Green as a “living rap video stereotype. Gold teeth. Check. Jheri curl. Check.”

“As a writer,” he adds, “I am acutely aware of the fact that I am treading on the very thin ice of racial stereotype, but Mitch Green looks like the kind of guy who would kill you for your Nikes and throw the shoeless body in the dumpster. This makes me uneasy.”

He writes a brilliant chapter about the recently widowed Marvis Frazier’s disparate life as both his own man and the son of an imposing ring legend.

The chapter on Ribalta, who seems like a genuinely nice, simple man, is especially touching. Ribalta now works as a guard at a school for troubled kids, who often tease him by saying Tyson knocked him out so they can too.

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“I keep to myself the idea that there is perhaps nothing worse than being mocked by schoolchildren, and then realize that is probably why Ribalta fought for a living and I didn’t,” muses Kluck.

When I met Bonecrusher Smith at the Hall of Fame induction ceremonies in Canastota, New York, several years ago, he was hawking telephone cards in a multi-level marketing business along the lines of Amway.

Things haven’t changed much since then. When Kluck visited with Smith, the former titlist was trying to sign up travel agents to work in his down line. Kluck described Smith as a “born salesman,” but still refused to fall for the pitch. Smart move!

Kluck accompanies Thomas and his family to Medieval Times, which he describes as “a suburban Florida institution of faux ponds, a faux castle, and faux fight scenes between knights and warriors.”

Along the way, Thomas vividly describes the demons of his past, most of which were attributed to heroin and crack cocaine addictions.

However, at one point, when a photo is taken of the revitalized Thomas and his family, Kluck writes that for the second it took to snap the camera the Thomases are “the perfect American family.”

The immensely likeable Biggs is very introspective and articulate, even though life after boxing has not been particularly good to him. You realize what an intelligent and artistically talented fellow he is and can’t help but wonder if he would have been better suited for less dangerous pursuits.

Although you can experience the high level of frustration Kluck must have felt when dealing with Holmes’s inept PR man, you can’t help but laugh as he recounts it here. Many boxers and their flacks are notoriously unreliable, but Jay Newman takes that ineptitude to an even grander level.

Kluck is behind the scenes for the 47-year-old Tubbs’s 2005 fight with Jason Waller in Indiana. As part of the entourage, Kluck couldn’t help but get caught up in the deception that those closest to Tubbs perpetrated. Hours after the fight is over, Kluck describes catching Tubbs’ eye, nodding, and telling him “good fight” one last time.

In-depth interviews with Mathis Jr., Holyfield, Savarese and McBride also provide eye-opening profiles. If you think that all that can be written about these subjects has already been written – think again.

Kluck masterfully weaves profiles of all of these men, adeptly relating all he writes about them to their fight(s) with Tyson. It is no easy task, but Kluck does a commendable job.

As wonderful as the vast majority of the material is, there were numerous mistakes that

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distracted from the overall effectiveness of the book.

The errors began on page three when Kluck described Jeff Fenech, who was training Tyson, as a former lightweight champion of the world. Fenech never held the lightweight title, but he did hold several lighter weight titles.

He spells Peter McNeeley's last name two different ways on two different pages, and also misspells the last names of former New York City mayor Rudy Giuliani and country singer Kenny Rogers.

He writes that Tyson fought Jesse Ferguson in Detroit, but the fight actually took place in Troy, New York. On one page he says that Lennox Lewis won Olympic gold in 1998, while two pages later he gets it right with 1988.

These criticisms might seem petty, but they are annoying. What makes them so frustrating is that they detract from a book that is otherwise first-rate.

Should the book ever have a second printing, all can be rectified with some rudimentary editing and fact checking.

All in all this book is a must-read for boxing fans, as well as armchair psychologists who might wonder what makes a fighter tick.