On a recent Tuesday PROOF magazine hosted what its editors described as “an evening of readings and photography with a punch.” The photojournalism magazine, which is published twice a year, had just released its sports issue.

Among the stories was a behind the scenes report by occasional TSS contributor Peter Wood on one of Lou DiBella’s popular Broadway Boxing club shows, as well as a sensational feature on Chuck Wepner by James T. Campbell.

A prohibitive underdog against Muhammad Ali in a 1975 title fight in Cleveland, Wepner, who was known as the Bayonne Bleeder in deference to his hometown and his propensity to bleed as if stabbed with a shank, became the muse for Sylvester Stallone’s “Rocky” character.

To date, the “Rocky” franchise has grossed $3 billion. Until a recent lawsuit initiated by Wepner was settled, Wepner had not seen a dime of it.

Wood and Wepner, as well as Peter Spanakos, who, like Wepner, is a 1964 New York City Golden Gloves champion, were in attendance for this grand event, which took place in the basement room of the Cornelia Street Café in New York’s Greenwich Village.

Although Spanakos was not the subject of a PROOF story, his presence only enhanced and enriched the already interesting legacies of Wood and Wepner, both of whom charmingly regaled the non-boxing audience with their tales of fistic derring-do.

Like so many boxing stories, Spanakos’ saga is not easy to categorize. The son of Greek immigrant parents who ran a small restaurant in downtown Brooklyn, he and his twin brother Nick were set upon daily by local gangs.

“One day it was the Italians, the next day it was the Irish,” said Spanakos, who although pushing 70 is still incredibly fit. “We had to learn how to fight for survival.”

Their father, a stern taskmaster, did not believe in sports as an outlet for any of his children, regardless of the reasons. It was important to him that his kids spend whatever hours they were not in school working in the family business as either bus boys or dishwashers.

“In my family, if you weren’t a doctor, a lawyer or an accountant you were a failure,” said Spanakos, who, along with Nick became two of the most celebrated amateur boxers in United States history.

As a member of the 1960 Olympic team in Rome, Nick roomed with Cassius Clay, who later changed his name to Muhammad Ali.

Wood and Wepner, on the other hand, came from altogether different but equally inauspicious

beginnings. Wood's birth father, Guy Wood, was a noted songwriter whose credits include "My One and Only," which was made famous by Frank Sinatra, and "Till Then," which was a number one hit by the Mills Brothers in the forties. It was later recorded by The Hilltoppers in the fifties and a doo-wop group called The Classics in the sixties.

Peter's personal favorite, "Shoo Fly Pie and Apple Pan Dowdy," was written in the fifties and recorded by, among others, Red Foley and Dinah Shore.

Guy Wood's career was on the fast track, says his son, when two words stopped it in its tracks. "The Beatles," he proclaims. "Once they came along, my father was an overnight anachronism."

Guy had an office in the Brill Building in Manhattan's Tin Pan Alley, and his eclectic group of friends included boxing champions Jack Johnson, Jack Dempsey, Benny Leonard and Mickey Walker. Dempsey's restaurant was within walking distance of his office.

After his parents' divorce in the early sixties, Peter Wood's life quickly went into a downward spiral. His mother remarried a man who Wood describes as "cruel and cold." Equally cruel and cold were Woods' new step-siblings, several of whom took delight in torturing animals.

One of five children from his original parents, Wood became frightened, embittered and full of rage. He sought refuge through boxing.

A celebrated amateur, he made it to the finals of the 1971 Golden Gloves finals at Madison Square Garden. While boxing, which he describes as having an "ugly beauty," gave him "the ability to become a man," his siblings did not fare so well.

One brother became a heroin addict while still in high school. Another brother, who had been voted "Most Friendly" at school, attempted suicide. A sister who was the captain of the cheerleading squad has been in and out of mental institutions, while another sister became a prostitute.

If not for boxing, proclaims Wood, who is now 54 and a high school English teacher, life would not have turned out so well for him. He has no doubt that he would have hurt himself or others.

Wood trained at Bufano's Gym in Jersey City. Even in the early seventies, which is now a bygone era, the facility was a relic. Among the popular fighters Wood trained alongside were professional heavyweights Brian O'Melia, who was a schoolteacher, and Wepner.

At 6'5" tall and about 225 pounds, Wepner was the biggest, strongest and roughest fighter in the gym.

While Wood was much too small to tangle with Wepner, even in a controlled sparring environment, he trained regularly with the smaller O'Melia, who even then was considered one of boxing's truly nice guys. O'Melia was also one of Wepner's regular sparring partners.

It was through the association with O'Melia, Wood told the assembled audience, that he has an indirect fistic link to Ali.

"I punched O'Melia in the nose," he explained. "O'Melia punched Wepner in the nose, and Wepner not only knocked Ali down in the ninth round, he punched him in the nose plenty. As pathetic as that might seem to you, it is very important to me."

All of this is, and more, is chronicled in Wood's two autobiographical books. "Confessions of a Fighter: Battling Through the New York Golden Gloves" and "A Clenched Fist: The Making of a Golden Gloves Champion" were either released or re-released this past February by Ringside Books.

Although he has a tough façade and an intimidating physical presence, it is quickly apparent that Wepner is an emotionally accessible man. His eyes always well with tears when he talks of his late mother, and he is blindly loyal to anyone he considers a friend.

He is also as standup as they come. Two decades ago he was caught transporting cocaine and sentenced to ten years in prison. When his attorney suggested he become a snitch, he fired him.

He served several years before being released into the Intensive Supervision Program. It was friends in the law enforcement community who got him the break. Wepner has always loved cops, and is quick to attend any charity function on their behalf.

"They realized what I did was an aberration," said Wepner, who began boxing while in the United States Marine Corps. "I was very lucky."

Although Wepner does not give the impression that he was ever consumed by anger, he fought as if his life depended on it. In amassing a record of 35-14-2 (17 KOS) against the most formidable opponents of his era, including Ali, Sonny Liston and George Foreman, he was known as much for his resiliency as his unique style of brawling.

Before one fight, he was warned by referee Joe Cortez that none of his repertoire of dirty tricks would be tolerated. "C'mon Joe," Wepner jokingly pleaded. "You just took away my entire arsenal."

With the exception of the Ali fight, Wepner, a quintessential blue collar champion, never trained full time for a fight in his life. He was always working one, two, sometimes three jobs to make ends meet.

That was why he couldn't contain his excitement when he knocked down Ali in the ninth round. He went back to his corner and told his trainer Al Braverman, a grizzly bear of a man, to "start the car and go to the bank. We're going to be millionaires."

Braverman was not so sure. "He's getting up," Braverman responded, obviously impressed by the champ's quick recuperative powers. "And he looks pissed off."

Ali stopped an exhausted Wepner in the waning seconds of the 15th and final round. By almost going the distance with the man many consider the greatest champion in history, Wepner has been known as the real-life “Rocky” ever since.

Having never forgotten where he came from, he still lives in Bayonne, directly across the street from a high school where he fought several pro bouts. He is on the board of his condominium complex.

His body is rock hard and his mind mentally sound. He and his third wife Linda seem made for each other. The subtle affection they display provides proof that lasting love really does exist, even the third time around.

That was evident on this night in the basement of a hip Greenwich Village club where Wood and Wepner were “playing” to an appreciative crowd. If one’s imagination was vivid enough, it could have been 1960 and the main attraction a young, yet-to-be discovered folk singer like Bob Dylan.

Instead it was two fighters who are inexplicably linked by a sport that rarely allows for such happy endings.

Wood told the crowd that it was his late father’s birthday. If he was alive, Guy Wood would have been 95 years old. Because it was such a special occasion, Wood awkwardly but eloquently sang a few verses from “Shoo Fly Pie and Apple Pan Dowdy” which, he reiterated, had long been his favorite.

<<<Shoo Fly Pie and Apple Pan Dowdy

Makes my eyes light up

And my tummy say howdy

Shoo Fly Pie and Apple Pan Dowdy

Never get enough of that wonderful stuff>>>

Watching Wepner made one realize that sometimes even the toughest of men have the tenderest of hearts. He gingerly stroked his wife’s hand, with his mind, perhaps even his heart, lost in the simple beauty of the moment.

Maybe he was thinking of the fact that he met his own father just once. Charley Wepner, who was a police officer, showed up on the night his son won his coveted Golden Gloves title. Could Wepner have been musing about all the memories that he never accumulated as a son, and then comparing them to his collective memories as a man?

Maybe he realized how good such an unforgiving sport like boxing had been to guys like him and Wood. Both were ultimate underdogs who, when all was said and done, came out on top.

Wepner was too busy with well-wishers to respond to such questions. And Wood is too classy and respectful to even speculate what Wepner might have been thinking or feeling.

He conceded though that fighters are so unpredictable, only a fool would try to categorize them.

Because Wood wears his emotions on his sleeve, it was clear that this event would forever hold a special place in the heavyweight heart that pulses through his still close to middleweight body.

“Boxing was my unhealthy way to a healthy life,” he assailed. “Boxing saved my life. It doesn’t get any simpler than that.”

Check out Proof magazine’s web site: proofmagazine.com

Peter Wood’s books can be purchased at: ringsidebooks.com