

## The Hard Life and Times of Micky Ward...MLADINICH

Written by Robert Mladinich  
Thursday, 13 December 2007 19:00

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It has been rumored that a theatrical movie called "The Fighter" will soon go into pre-production for release in the summer of 2009.

It will be directed by the brilliant Darren Aronofsky, who also directed the lauded 2000 film "Requiem for a Dream," and will star Mark Wahlberg as junior welterweight Micky Ward and Brad Pitt as Dickie Eklund, Ward's troubled half-brother.

It does not appear that the film will be based on the terrific book called "Irish Thunder: The Hard Life & Times of Micky Ward," which was written by former ESPN anchor Bob Halloran and recently released by The Lyons Press.

It is hard to imagine that the screenwriters could depict Ward's topsy-turvy life and career any better than Halloran did.

Growing up in Lowell, Massachusetts, a once lively and robust town that had fallen on extremely hard times by the 1970s, Ward saw many of his friends and family fall prey to the lurid temptations of the streets.

One of the town's most prominent victims of the drug scourge was Eklund, a sensational amateur boxer who, in 1978, took a legend-in-the-making named Sugar Ray Leonard the 10 round distance in a pro bout in nearby Boston.

Ward, who was 12 at the time, worshipped his brother and would eventually be trained by him when he turned professional in 1985.

Unfortunately, Eklund's immense natural talent was wasted when he became addicted to crack. Not only was he in and out of trouble with the law, he was one of the "stars" of a 1995 HBO documentary called "High on Crack Street."

The hard-hitting but extremely sordid film chronicled the daily lives of several Lowell crack addicts. Eklund immodestly lit up a crack pipe on camera, with the smoke swirling around his head like an ominous halo.

He smirked at the camera and twitched his eyebrow purposefully, as if gloating about his "good fortune."

Although Eklund always had his kid brother's interest at heart, and was a damn good trainer when he showed up at the gym, he would prove to be a very distractive influence in Ward's life.

One night Ward was arrested for interfering with the arrest of Eklund for a relatively minor offense. During the fracas, a policeman cracked Ward on the hand with a nightstick. That injury incurred by Ward would plague him throughout his career.

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In the summer of 1996 I met with Ward on the day before he fought a rematch with Louis Veadar of Providence at the Foxwoods Resort in Connecticut. The interview had been set up in advance, and Ward was aware that on the same weekend I would also be visiting Eklund at the Massachusetts Correctional Institution at Plymouth, where he was serving at least eight years for robbery.

I had a good relationship with Joe Lake, an advisor to Ward, as well as with Ward himself. For some inexplicable reason, however, the gruff and crass Al Valenti, who was Ward's promoter at the time, didn't want me speaking to the fighter. He wouldn't tell me why and responded to all of my inquiries by muttering obscenities.

The Internet was not yet in existence and the Ward/Eklund article was for "The RING" magazine, which was the most widely read boxing publication around. With Ward on yet another comeback trail, Valenti's downright nastiness and uncooperativeness was hard to fathom.

When Ward failed to make weight on his first try, I followed him into the steam room where he obligingly gave me a good interview.

Over the years Ward had a lot of people around him who seemed to hinder his career more than they helped him. Besides Lake, another stable influence was Mickey O'Keefe, who was then a Lowell police sergeant and the owner of the Lowell Boxing Club.

He and Ward seemed to be joined at the hip, but their relationship hit rocky waters years later when Sal LoNano took over as Ward's manager of record.

Ward finally managed to attain a measure of ring immortality on the basis of his three-fight series against Arturo Gatti. He finally retired in 2003 with a record of 38-13 (27 KOS).

He is the type of fighter whose legend will only grow larger as more time goes by. He was always a stand-up guy, whether it was in the ring as a boxer, in the streets where, if provoked, he could be a tremendous street fighter, or when dealing with his very large and dysfunctional family.

During his nearly two-decade boxing career, Ward was betrayed by many people and Halloran's book is quick to name names and back up those assertions with cold, hard facts.

In a sport that is virtually devoid of happy endings, Ward has somehow managed to come out on top. Despite his breathless battles against Gatti, he seems to have his faculties intact. He bought a house on the good side of town and is living a simple but seemingly happy life.

Although the social dynamics in Lowell have changed somewhat, he is a local icon for all of the right reasons. He has always been, and continues to be, a guy that you want to root for.

Not only was he a gladiator in the ring, his loyalty to others, especially Eklund and many people who did not deserve such devotion, is well known in boxing circles.

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If Ward's story was nothing more than a boxing saga, this book wouldn't have been written and a movie wouldn't be in the works.

But "Irish Thunder" is as much about boxing as it is about family, loyalty, devotion and betrayal set against a backdrop of the world's two dirtiest businesses: boxing and drugs.

While the book reads like fiction, it is all true. It is hard not to like Ward, but the book will only make you like him more. The book is as compellingly powerful as one of Ward's vaunted left hooks to the liver.

Ward was a fighter who was hard to keep down. "Irish Thunder" is a book that is hard to put down.

It is available at all bookstores and on Amazon.com and BarnesandNoble.com.

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### **brownsugar says:**

Watched the DVD at 3am this morning. Bale did an excellent job transforming himself into a screen worthy image of the heroic thief yet petty crackhead (Ecklund). Set in a declining middle class community where the scum mingled with the 9 to 5'ers was extremely compelling stuff. The movie was a mixed bag as far as consistency but I enjoyed it and was disappointed the story didn't continue until his retirement. There was so much going on that I wanted to see all the loose ends tied up. I've seen plenty of Showbiz Moms portrayed, but never a Boxer Manager Mom who had become so jaded by the world of boxing that she wasn't the least bit horrified at the sight of her own son being beat to a pulp as long as it paid the bills. That's right up there with Richard Pryor being raised in a Brothel. ... What are the odds of someone growing up in a family like Wards' ?? Extraordinary circumstances... Good Piece EM,.. I see that you truly paid your dues... your journalistic skin must be thick as leather by now.

### **brownsugar says:**

I watched the Ward vs Neary fight on youtube.. during the fight Lampley say "this is like one of those movie fights"... Later Lampley says that Ecklund was good for Ward after he was released from prison and resumed training Ward.

### **admin says:**

Admission: I have not yet seen "The Fighter." I admit I should be punished. Maybe tomorrow night, after the kids are in bed, I'll run up to the Pavilion in Park Slope, and catch the last showing. I'm ashamed.

### **brownsugar says:**

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Make sure you catch "True Grit" while you're there awesome western. And next time properly research your work...lol

### **Editor Mike says:**

Man, both movies are playing at my movie house. Which, btw, had a bedbug scare a few months ago, so I'm skeeved to go there!