

The Fight For Justice For Billy Collins

Written by Ron Borges
Monday, 31 March 2008 19:00

Maybe you remember the little things because the enormity of the larger one that caused all the pain is just too much to fathom, even 25 years later. Why else would the ring on her finger stand out so?

You don't really remember Billy Collins, Jr. as clearly now as you do his sad-eyed mother, Bettye, sliding her wedding band nervously up and down her ring finger over and over again as she tried to talk about her lost boy.

You remember the tear drop that rolled down her cheek when she said, "I asked him when he got home from New York, 'Why didn't you tell your daddy to stop the fight?' He said, 'Mama, I'd of died in that ring first.'"

Even though a coroner's report says Billy Ray Collins, Jr., age 22, died from too much alcohol and too much speed 24 years ago last month on a backroad in Tennessee, his parents know otherwise and they still want to prove it. They know he died at Madison Square Garden on June 16, 1983.

You don't remember any more how bright the lights were that night at the Garden either. You just remember the darkness after a guy named Panama Lewis conspired with a possibly unsuspecting journeyman fighter named Luis Resto to beat the life out of Collins that night. When that day began Billy Collins, Jr. was a proud dreamer of a kid from Antioch, TN., undefeated in 14 fights and sure it would always be that way. Until Resto left him half blind after Lewis removed two of the four ounces of horsehair padding added to his boxing gloves to soften the blows in the locker room before they left to fight.

Resto always denied he knew anything about it and Lewis still proclaims his innocence. They continued to do that even after they were convicted 3 ½ years later of two counts of second degree assault, conspiracy and fourth degree criminal possession of a weapon (Resto's hands) with Lewis also convicted of tampering with the outcome of a sporting event.

Each was banned for life from boxing and sentenced to prison for their actions, actions that sentenced Collins first to half-blindness due to a torn iris that could not be repaired and later, his friends and family still believe, to death by his own shattered mind.

On the evening of March 7, 1984 Collins, by now both destitute and depressed, drank too much Jack Daniels and then drove his 1972 Olds Cutlass into a concrete abutment at 68 mph, hitting an aged hackberry tree and flipping over into a dried up creek bed that bore his family's name off Old Franklin Road, not far from his parents' house.

Collins knew those winding roads well. He used to run them every day back when he'd been a fighter with enough talent to go 101-9 as an amateur and 14-0 as a professional in just 15 months of prize fighting. The world will never know what he might have become because he

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was dead before he ever had a chance to really live. Technically he died in the bottom of that creek bed, but his widow, Andrea Collins-Nile, who was 18 at the time and pregnant with their child, believes Resto destroyed her husband's eyes and broke his spirit. She believes he really died nine months earlier when they led him from the ring surrounded by fans of Resto hollering "Toro! Toro! Toro!" at a guy who couldn't even see them because his head was already swelling into what would resemble a gargoye's face.

Behind him his father remained in the ring, hollering like a mad man that something was wrong with Resto's gloves.

"Hey! All the padding is out of the damn gloves!" Collins' father is heard on a television microphone yelling after he'd gone to shake Resto's hands and felt bare knuckles through the leather. "It's all out!"

Resto is heard to reply, "Huh?" as he looks desperately across the ring at Lewis.

"Commissioner...Commissioner!" the father continues to yell as he tugs at Resto's arm. "No padding! There's no damn padding!"

The father had learned of this only after the fight was over and the light-hitting but slick boxing Resto had surprisingly beaten his son into a misshapen pulp so grotesque his sister was unable to recognize him four days later when he returned home until she saw their father walking behind him. Perhaps part of the reason for that was that his head was so swollen he couldn't fit a baseball cap on it and the skin around his nose had cracked from the swelling.

"Everyone's mouth dropped when he walked off that plane," recalled his boyhood friend, Mark Young, not long after Collins' death. "His forehead was swollen over the top of his sunglasses. You couldn't put your finger between them and his face, it was so swollen. It looked like them glasses was made on his face."

Collins had been beaten half to death. Or maybe all the way, depending on how you want to look at it. Officials from the New York State Athletic Commission impounded the gloves and they were turned over to a police lab after they first spent a night in a car trunk and then were examined by their manufacturer, Everlast, who found half dollar sized holes cut into each palm on the inside of the gloves.

Through those holes someone, most everyone believes Lewis, removed half the two ounces of horse hair padding inside each glove. According to people who know about such things, with half the padding gone those gloves became lethal weapons, magnifying the force of each of the soft-hitting Resto's blows tenfold.

Later Collins' father, who had trained him, managed him, dreamed with him and loved him since he was a boy, would sit on an old sofa in a five-room house made of old cinder blocks as his wife slid her wedding ring up and down her finger and he would say, "I never realized what was happening. Maybe if Ray (his son went by Billy Ray, same as he did) had said 'bare knuckles' I'd of gotten the message but I didn't think of that. Why would I? Ain't there no honesty

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left in the world?"

Not that night there wasn't. At least not in Madison Square Garden, where Lewis had refused to glove up Resto when ordered to do so by a commission official named Pat Giovenelli. The official left to get chief inspector John Squeri to force Lewis to do as instructed. It took him 15 minutes. By the time he returned the gloves were on. As things turned out, they were also locked and loaded.

This Thursday at Jack Dempsey's Pub on W. 33rd Street in midtown Manhattan, Collins' widow, along with film maker Eric Drath, who has completed a documentary exploration of what happened that night, and attorney Marc Thompson, will hold a press conference to not only announce the film but also participate in a dramatic re-enactment of the crime in an effort to get the 25 year old case re-opened with the Federal Court of Claims against the State of New York.

Whether they have a case or not remains to be seen, but Thompson believes he has new evidence uncovered during the filming of "Cornered" that will buttress the argument that the state inspectors failed miserably in their most important job – protecting the safety of the combatants they oversaw that night.

The original civil case ended in a hung jury that grew confused over the wording of the athletic commission's exact responsibilities when it came to examining the gloves before the fight, despite the criminal convictions of Resto and Lewis.

While Collins' name long ago faded from the fight scene, Resto and Lewis are still around the dark edges of the sport. The former has lived for the past 10 years or more in the basement of a gym in the Bronx, while Lewis still works off the books with fighters like Zab Judah and Mike Tyson.

No longer allowed in the corner, where he once plied his trade with world champions like Aaron Pryor and Roberto Duran, Lewis has worked in various gyms in New York, Las Vegas and Miami despite his alleged banishment from the sport. As banishments go, Panama Lewis has gotten off light.

In the weeks and months following the incident, three hearings were held and each got worse for Resto and Lewis. Lewis and fellow corner man Pedro Alvarado, who signed for the gloves, were banned from boxing for life in New York because they were responsible for their safekeeping. This despite testimony that Alvarado had left the locker room, some claiming because he didn't have the stomach for what Lewis was up to but also lacked the courage to turn him in.

Resto was suspended for a year but ultimately served 2 ½ years in prison and never fought again. He still lives in that 20 by 12 foot room in the basement of the Morris Park Gym in the Bronx, a room no bigger than the jail cell he once occupied.

Billy and Bettye Collins still live in the same concrete block house outside of Nashville where they raised Billy, Jr. to become a fighter who would not quit, even on a night when he told his

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Dad between rounds that it felt like his opponent “had a rock in his glove.” They’ve taken down all the pictures and trophies their son won though. It’s not a boxer’s house any more.

Now their former daughter-in-law is trying to fight one last round for all of them while a New York film maker who briefly worked representing fighters known mostly as “opponents” is finishing what he called this week “a sad tale, but one of redemption.”

Drath has a particular fondness for Resto, who he feels is more a victim of circumstance than a duplicitous co-conspirator in what happened that night, although other knowledgeable boxing men have no doubt he at the minimum knew once the fight began that his gloves were not right and that the damage he was inflicting was way out of proportion to his punching power.

It was Drath’s chance meeting with Resto after he began to workout at the Morris Park Gym that led him to explore a tragedy that would become his obsession.

“Here was this broken and torn man shouldering guilt akin to murder,” Drath says of Resto. “He was so weighted down by grief I couldn’t understand it. This guy didn’t seem capable of masterminding the darkest crime in the sport.”

He read over 3000 pages of trial testimony, reams of newspaper copy of the time, scoured the police records, tracked down detectives and commission officials involved in the investigation as well as nearly all the participants, hung out at Victor’s Café, a Cuban club where Lewis and Resto went after the fight and often frequented, pursued leads about possible gambling involvement and even examined the gloves themselves before finally taking Resto and a film crew to confront Lewis.

“Panama denied it the whole time,” Drath said.

In the end, Billy Collins and his family are clearly victims who may still have a case against the state of New York. Luis Resto may be sympathetic to some but not to others.

As for Panama Lewis? Well, redemption ain’t for everybody.