

TSS Q 'n A: Angelo Dundee, Living Legend

Written by Raymond Markarian
Monday, 31 March 2008 19:00

Here is one thing, one sure thing in a life filled with uncertainties: 86-year-old Angelo Dundee is as enthusiastic about boxing as he was when young Cassius Clay ran circles around his opponents.

Ever approachable, Dundee was excited to speak with fans and the boxing press when he made a special guest appearance during a pre-fight dinner party before Andre Ward's fight against Rubin Williams in San Jose, Ca. last week.

"Last chance to take pictures with the Great Angelo Dundee," a public relations man screamed.

Now, what do I do, I think to myself. How do I approach him? What can I ask the all-time great boxing trainer that he has not heard before? If I don't say a word, then he's gone and I will probably never see him again. The moment has to be seized.

Angelo is standing in the middle of the restaurant, in a walkway that separates the bar and the dinner tables. I leave the bar area, and take the short walk towards him with eager steps.

Leaning in close to make sure I get his attention, I say, "Angelo, I only have one question to ask you."

"Hey, Angelo needs to go down to the ring and prepare for the fights tonight," the PR man says. "He cannot answer any questions."

"No, no, no, go ahead ask me the question, young man," Dundee said kindly as he was autographing some photos.

The spotlight shines on me as a small crowd gathers. "Who do you think won the fight between Sugar Ray Leonard and Marvin Hagler?" I asked. (This was the only query that came to mind at the time.)

"That's an easy question," says Dundee, who was Leonard's trainer during that controversial fight in 1987. "My guy had his hand raised up at the end of the fight. The funny thing is I am still great friends with Marvin, great friends. We speak very often."

Fast forward five days later, when I conducted an in-depth interview.

Angelo Dundee: It was a pleasure meeting you in San Jose, the promoters out there put on a great show.

Raymond Markarian: Yes, it was a great show. Thank you for taking the time to speak with me. I would like to ask you a few questions if you have the time.

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AD: Anything you want. Fire away. It is not your honor speaking with me. It is my honor to speak with you.

RM: Thank you.

AD: I am ready. Let's do this. Let's talk about nuclear physics. (Dundee laughs hysterically.)

RM: Alright we could do that too.

AD: OK great. I had a great time in San Jose. You see Jackie Kallen is a great friend of mine. I went up there to make an appearance and she asked me to work with a couple of her boxers. And I said I might as well keep practicing so I did it. I was in the corner during two of the fights and both of the kids won. The first kid, (Mike Dallas Jr.) was a good prospect you know why?

RM: Why?

AD: Plenty of amateur fights, that's important.

RM: So in your opinion, amateur fights are the key for a young fighter to be successful in boxing?

AD: Amateur boxing is the key. That is how a fighter will learn the ups and downs of success. The amateur trainers are the best. They take the kids from zero and develop them. That's why guys like me do well because we have a foundation and you go from there. It is a fine line from amateurs to pros.

RM: Do all the best amateurs turn into good pros?

AD: Well the amateur scene is getting better. We have two Olympic kids that won. But in the pros, you have to fight. You have to have it in the ring. All the gymnasium work in the world is not going to make it for you.

RM: Do you still have a desire to keep training fighters?

AD: Well listen, it is easy for me and I love it. I think that you develop something important. You see when you train fighters, you never meet the same guy twice. Everyone has their own fighting style.

RM: What can you tell me about how you liked to motivate fighters? What was your trick?

AD: When you work with a fighter you want to bring out the best in the fighter. It is a big kick because you never meet the same guy twice. The worst concept I hear in boxing is that this guy fights like so and so. Nobody fights like so and so. They all have different balance, different thinking, and different reflexes. That's the joy to work with fighters.

RM: Ok, give me a specific example of how you inspired a halfhearted fighter.

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AD: You know, I had this guy one time. A big guy from Chicago, slow as molasses, his name was Big Johnny Holman. He came to me in Miami Beach and I think his manager wanted to retire him. But I made him fight everyday in the gym. And I would tell him, "John, you're getting faster." To keep him motivated. But all John wanted to do was get a few fights to make enough money to buy a big house with an air conditioner for his wife and family.

RM: So how did you get Big Johnny Holman motivated?

AD: I got him a couple of wins. In one fight, he got hit in the face and fell miserably. Joe Louis was ringside during that fight and I said, "Joe knock some sense into this guy." Then Joe began to scream at him and said, "Man what are you doing down there? GET UP!"

RM: Is that the same Johnny Holman that knocked out Ezzard Charles in 1949?

AD: Yes, Ezzard Charles needed a fight, so they put Big Johnny Holman in. But like I said, Holman was only fighting for one reason, he wanted money for a house. During the fight, Holman was hitting him well with the left hook but Charles was winning all the rounds. So Holman got back into the corner and I said, "John this guy is taking your house away from you! The big house with air conditioner, this guy is taking it away from your wife!" Big John Holman got so mad, he knocked out Ezzard Charles. See, you have to reach a fighter a certain way. But it is different with everybody.

RM: Oh, I see, so you would not use the same method with a more talented fighter?

AD: No, not at all, Muhammad was a superstar. I made him feel that way. A superstar doesn't want to be told 'You do this, or you do that.' I got out of his way personally, and I think we did a pretty good job together.

RM: I agree.

AD: Let me tell you, there is no tougher profession to get into than being a fighter.

RM: Who was your toughest fighter?

AD: I had no problem with Muhammad, he loved to train. But Willie Pastrano, the light heavyweight, was also a fabulous fighter. He was probably the toughest.

RM: Tell me about your book that you wrote with Bert Sugar titled "My View from the Corner."

AD: I spoke with Bert Sugar one day and he asked me. "Hey Angelo, why don't you do a book?" And I say I don't know, I never thought about it. Then Bert told me that he thinks it is going to be the highest selling book of all time. Have you seen the book?

RM: Yes I have.

AD: What did you think of it?

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RM: How could I be disappointed? It is always good to get knowledge from the legends of the sport. I have a question for you.

AD: Anything you want.

RM: What can you tell me about Muhammad Ali that no one really knows?

AD: One of the nicest kids that was ever put on this earth. He was extremely quiet when I met him, believe it or not. I was the one that made him talk. He was the first superstar that talked. Everyone thought I was a mute for 40 years because Muhammad did all the talking. And that's how it should be, you guys don't want to talk to the trainers or managers, you want to talk to the superstar. Ali was a sincere kid. Nobody put words in his mouth.

RM: When was your hardest time training Ali?

AD: The hardest job was when he fought Leon Spinks. You see, Ali was in shape physically for that fight. But you have to get your fighter motivated mentally also. Spinks had seven professional fights at the time. Muhammad said, "Man are you crazy, a guy with seven professional fights is going to beat me? You must be out of your mind."

RM: Trainers and fighters always come and go, who was the most dependable fighter?

AD: The most dependable human being I ever worked with was Carmen Basillo. He used to wrap his own hands for his fights and he would bring his own bag of scissors to the locker room. The first time I worked with him was by accident in Miami Beach. His trainer could not come. So I get in the dressing room and I wrapped his hands. I think he allowed me to do it because the fight was supposed to be an easy fight but it turned out to be a tough fight. Basillo had a few cuts over his eyes. I took care of the cuts. Then he told me, "Ang, you are the first guy to wrap my hands in two years." And I said, "What for?" Then Carmen said, "I used to break my hands all the time." Then I said, "I am glad you told me after the fact." I asked him if he hurt his hands after I wrapped it and he said, "No I didn't." So, I felt good about that. That was the beginning of my eight year working relationship with Carmen Basillo.

RM: What is the most important thing that you learned about boxing?

AD: Being nice. I learned a lot from Ray Robinson. He was smart. When he walked in the ring, he always shook hands with the referee first. So the referee would have a good impression of him. I learned to be nice and Ray Robinson showed me that when he walked into the ring. Ray Robinson was a great fighter.

RM: Thank you for your time, Mr. Dundee.

AD: Hey, I had a great time talking to you. Thank you very much.

Right now, Angelo Dundee is touring the East Coast, visiting MLB ballparks during opening weekend. He said that he would not mind managing a baseball team one day.

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