

Memories With Mladinich: Henry Wallitsch

Written by Robert Mladinich
Saturday, 31 May 2008 19:00

As the president of the Veteran Boxers Association, Ring 8, in New York, former heavyweight Henry (Henny) Wallitsch of Astoria, Queens, gets to do what he enjoys most: hanging around fighters and assisting them when necessary.

Boxing is in the 73-year-old Wallitsch's blood, even though he didn't start fighting in the ring until he was a teenager.

"I didn't really like boxing as a kid until my brother-in-law took me to Sunnyside Gardens to watch the fights," said Wallitsch, whose parents were of Austrian descent.

"The place was packed and there was a lot of smoke and noise. I had a few hot dogs and a beer and then the ring announcer introduced Tony DiBiase from Astoria and the crowd went crazy. What an adrenaline flow I had. I told my brother-in-law, 'I want to be a fighter.'"

Wallitsch relinquished his role as leader of a gang called the Midnight Boys and began training with zeal. He was a very adept student who early on could hold his own against much more experienced fighters.

"I was very good at boxing until you hit me on the chin," said Wallitsch, who at 5'11" and about 185 pounds was a small heavyweight even by the standards of the day. "Then I'd go cuckoo, nuts, and not use all that I worked on learning in the gym."

In his very first year of Golden Gloves competition, 1957, Wallitsch was forced to compete in the open division. He didn't make it to the finals, but he had already beaten the fellow who won the novice class where Wallitsch believes he belonged.

"Back then the game was crooked and corrupt," he explained. "I had to fight a lot of gorillas (bigger men), and because I was small I had to fight dirty."

Between 1957 and 1966, Wallitsch compiled a deceptively nominal record of 13-13 (1 KO). Among the behemoths he squared off against were the 6'6" Ernie Terrell and the 6'8" James J. Beattie (twice).

He also battled local heroes like Franco De Piccoli in Italy and unbeaten Carl Baker in Jamaica. He won a decision over Baker, who went into the fight with a 7-0 record.

"If there was a cruiserweight division back then, I would have been the champ," said Wallitsch. "Everywhere I fought, I sold the place out. I was a crowd pleaser."

One newspaper called Wallitsch's 1958 battle royale with Bobby Halpern the bloodiest fight in the history of the fabled St. Nicholas Arena.

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Whenever there was a dull fight at St. Nick's after that, the fans would scream, "Bring back Henny and Bobby," said Wallitsch. "Bobby got a six inch cut and there were bloody footprints in the ring. Halpern got the decision, but I still think I won. We were told we might have a rematch at Madison Square Garden, but Bobby went to jail a few weeks later, and I got bleep."

(Halpern went on to serve 17 years for charges that included robbery, kidnapping, assault and grand larceny).

Throughout his pro career, Wallitsch admits to drinking heavily. He said that matchmaker Duke Stefano often called him hours before a show to see what condition he was in. If he was capable, Wallitsch would often race to the arena and lace them up.

"When I fought Bob Stallings in my last fight, I was whacked," said Wallitsch. "I was down about 10 times, but I fell down 7 and was knocked down 3. Before the fight I was drinking shots of whiskey and balls of beer."

Wallitsch, who stopped drinking in the early 1980s, augmented his income by working as a sparring partner for some of boxing's biggest names. He earned \$50 a round for the work he did with Floyd Patterson, but only \$15 a round for Ingemar Johansson. He said Johansson was not only frugal, he was afraid that everyone involved in boxing was mobbed up.

"He was not a trusting guy, but he trusted me more than most people," said Wallitsch. "He once got a new Buick from a dealer and he let me drive it to show him around."

Patterson, asserts Wallitsch, was one of the nicest men and finest champions that he ever met. "I'd go away to training camp with him, and he treated everyone so well," said Wallitsch. "Floyd was all class, a great man. I loved him. He never really hurt me, but he threw so many punches, he bounced my head back quite a bit."

Wallitsch remembers sparring for about a week with a young Jerry Quarry during what was one of Quarry's first trips to New York.

"They gave me \$7 a round to work with him, but I gave it back to them," said Wallitsch. "I had just made a ton of money in Floyd's camp and figured the kid needed it more than me. He was a good, clean-cut kid, very polite and respectful."

After his retirement from the ring, Wallitsch got into the bar business in a big way. For decades he ran topless joints, gay clubs, singles spots and even a country western place. He made piles of money, but often found himself in trouble with the law for protecting his interests.

"In those days if the cops came to your place, someone had to get locked up," said Wallitsch. "I didn't want my bouncers to get arrested, so I'd take the pinch myself. I was on a first name basis with the cops. They were doing their job and I was doing mine. We got along fine. No hard feelings."

Wallitsch also did quite a bit of acting and modeling, much of which stemmed from his

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friendship with former middleweight champion Rocky Graziano.

There was no better friend in the world than Rocky," said Wallitsch. "He was a dear, dear man."

Wallitsch also worked as a steamfitter, where he ran a bull gang that brought heavy equipment to the top of tall buildings. He went on to become a union shop steward before being injured on the job at the Met Life building in Manhattan.

What he thought was going to be a \$5 million settlement was whittled down to \$100,000.

I had one lawyer and Met Life had 50," he said. "It wasn't a fair fight."

Although Wallitsch has led a colorful life, one nagging regret is not spending more time with his family. He now lives on Long Island with his son David, a court officer, who talks openly about how much he missed having his father around during his formative years.

"Now when I come home from work and see my father playing with my son, it makes me feel great," said David. "I am glad that my son will get to know his grandfather. It's a beautiful thing."

Another beautiful thing is how committed Wallitsch is to helping boxers through his association with Ring 8. As a member of the executive board I have bore witness to his kindness and generosity on many occasions, but one incident stands out in particular.

A former world champion had come to the board meeting with hat in hand to pay his rent. The boxer started to tell a long, sorry tale but was immediately cut off by Wallitsch who wanted to spare him any further indignity.

"Just tell us how much you need, Papa," said Wallitsch to which the ex-fighter replied \$700.

"Write him a check for \$1,000," ordered Wallitsch after getting unanimous approval from the board.

He later dismissed my comments about how delicately he handled a difficult situation, especially for the fighter who had squandered millions.

"That's all we are about, boxers helping boxers" Wallitsch said of Ring 8. "That's why we're here. That's what we do."

Anyone wanting to make a tax-deductible donation to Ring 8 can do so by mailing a check to:

Veteran Boxers Association

Ring 8

c/o Waterfront Crab House

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