

George Kimball and the Four Kings

Written by Ronan Keenan
Thursday, 17 July 2008 19:00

“It’s a skunk.”

A tattoo of a foul smelling animal accompanied with the inscription “Born To Raise Hell” probably doesn’t feature on most Pulitzer-nominated writers’ arms; but George Kimball doesn’t play to stereotypes.

As he relaxes on a couch in a snug Dublin bar, Kimball looks the picture of contentment. Yet it turns out he is not completely at ease. “I wish there was somewhere to sit outside,” he remarks.

It seems puzzling that he wants to be out in the elements on a typically damp, overcast Irish day. A renowned fondness for pubs once led him to list his postal address as The Lion’s Head in Greenwich Village. But Kimball hasn’t taken a drink in nearly two decades. His desire to sit outdoors may imply he has finally seen one saloon too many.

Kimball was at the center of the 1980s boxing scene and meticulously covered the quartet of Ray Leonard, Marvin Hagler, Thomas Hearns and Roberto Duran as they revitalized the sport by offering a diverse mix of personalities and skills. Likewise Kimball, author of *Four Kings: Leonard, Hagler, Hearns, Duran and the Last Great Era of Boxing*, has tackled with zest challenges as tough as the book’s protagonists.

Having spent 25 years as a sports columnist with the Boston Herald, he retired in 2005 and set about compiling his inimitable fightgame experiences in a single tome. But the process was far from straightforward, emulating the unbounded nature of his vivid life.

The son of a career military officer, Kimball was born in Grass Valley, California 64 years ago, but spent little time in any one location.

“I grew up all over the world,” he recalls. “I was born in California, but spent a lot of time in Kentucky. I lived in Texas and Taiwan. My freshman year of high school started in Maryland and ended in Germany.”

While his residence regularly changed, Kimball’s staunch support for civil rights was unyielding. Activity in anti-war protests resulted in a half-dozen brief stints in jail during his youth, with a few additional visits attributed to offences involving marijuana, alcohol and punching a police officer who was refusing to help an ill woman.

“They were mostly overnight stays,” he says. “At the time when I was protesting against the Vietnam War, I was in such a minority position. I was viewed as protesting against America and the constitution.”

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“Yet many years later when I was living in a suburb of Massachusetts a state-wide anti-tax rule was implemented. But due to some towns’ small budgets the law meant the casualties were school teachers, cops and firemen. School programs were being cut and it was devastating for the town. Some of us went out to try and get an override on the rule. I’d been on a lot of these demonstrations, but I looked around and realized that for the first time the cops and I were marching together.”

On the literary front Kimball’s endeavors were just as radical.

From the mid-1960s he began contributing to the arts-orientated Village Voice and The Phoenix, produced poetry fit for the Paris Review and penned an erotic novel Only Skin Deep that chronicled the “adventures” of a high school girl in Kansas.

Kimball also shared the same agent as the eminent Hunter S. Thompson and ultimately played a notable role in the gonzo pioneer’s career. Prior to the release of The Hell’s Angels, Thompson signed a two-book contract with the publisher Random House, unaware of how popular the novel would become. Thompson had little interest in honoring the deal to write a follow-up book for relatively nominal compensation, so he looked for a way to escape the obligation.

“He unsuccessfully tried to break the contract by giving the publisher an old novel, The Rum Diary, he wrote ten years earlier that had already been rejected by everybody,” reveals Kimball. “But the agent then sided with the publisher by withholding the foreign rights contract to The Hell’s Angels.

“I thought this was wrong so I stayed late in the office, photocopied the foreign rights contract and gave it to Hunter and his lawyer as ammunition for their case. Nobody could ever figure out who the mole was. In the end he somehow got out of the contract.”

Kimball also wrote for Rolling Stone, but his defiance for freedom of expression saw the relationship end on an acrimonious note.

“[The editor] Jann Wenner rewrote an article I did on a band and ultimately changed my opinion on the subject. I told him, ‘That’s not right. Either you do not run it or you put your own f**king name on it and take mine off’.”

Kimball’s subsequent duty as a sports writer saw him cover everything from superfigths to the Superbowl, leading him to form the theory that “great fights produce great writing”. And his work has certainly adhered to that mantra.

The central characters in Four Kings effectively engaged in a nine fight series against each other, and Kimball was immersed in the action, taking readers from ringside to the dressing rooms and beyond. The initial meeting between Duran and Leonard marked the start of the era, while their rubber match in 1989 drew to a close an episode that helped invigorate a sport which was struggling to recover from the retirement of Ali and a dilapidated heavyweight division.

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Kimball believes a number of factors conspired to aid boxing during that decade, most notably major player strikes in baseball and football and a period of geopolitical calmness. But it was the fighters' willingness to engage freely with both each other and the writers that makes it a fondly remembered age.

"Today, pay-per-view sales are all that matters, but building the live gate was key back then, so the fighters were much more accessible," he notes. "I used to travel to the fight venue a week beforehand, now it's just one or two days before the fight. The writers and fighters don't know each other as well today. In the 1980s you'd be sitting next to the fighters in a swimming pool, sitting beside them in a bar or at a blackjack table."

Kimball has covered the biggest sports stars at close quarters over the years; from sharing a sauna with Joe DiMaggio, playing golf with Michael Jordan, to having George Foreman preside over his wedding ceremony. And his privileged access to the Four Kings led to a variety of amusing anecdotes.

Kimball reports: "The most memorable pre-fight moment [before Leonard's fight against Ayub Kalule] in Houston came after [promoter Bob] Arum's publicist Irving Rudd trotted out what was supposed to be an authentic African witch doctor, ostensibly to boost the chances of the Ugandan-born Kalule by casting a spell on Leonard. It was a cheap publicity stunt that appealed to the basest stereotypes and at least one African-American on hand was prepared to denounce it as such. Outside the hotel Rock Newman – later the manager and promoter of Riddick Bowe, but then a Washington-area sports radio personality – staged an impromptu press conference to decry the 'witch doctor' and all that it implied.

"Newman was wearing white trousers and a white dashiki, and as he stood berating the 'witch doctor' he was suddenly set upon by a flock of angry crows, who without warning swooped in from the sky and attacked Rock with such ferocity that he was forced to flee in terror."

For Kimball, compiling the material for Four Kings was not a straightforward task, made all the more difficult given his efforts to deal with terminal cancer of the oesophagus. He was diagnosed with the illness just two months after retiring from the Boston Herald, but his indomitable edge remains at full health.

"There was one time when I really needed to sit down with Ray [Leonard] before completing the book," he recalls. "I was supposed to get a flight to L.A. for it, but there was a complication with my treatment and I had to stay at home in New York. So I said I'd catch him the next time he was on the East Coast.

"Then later it turned out Ray was doing a show on The Food Network in Charleston, South Carolina. I still had the ticket for the L.A. flight, so I tried to change it to go to Charleston, but the nearest I could get was Jacksonville, Florida and Ray was leaving Charleston the next day. So I flew to Jacksonville on the Sunday, rented a car, drove to Charleston, met Ray for several hours, drove back to Jacksonville and was home in New York in time for Monday Night Football."

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But there were times when Kimball just couldn't defy his condition.

"There were a couple of periods when I was really flat out," he admits. "This spring I was in hospital and couldn't finish proof-reading the book, so I had to get Tom Frail of Smithsonian Magazine and [boxing writer] Michael Katz to finish the proofing. If there are any mistakes in Four Kings, blame them."

Despite being retired from his full-time post in the U.S. print media, the 1986 recipient of the Nat Fleischer Award for Excellence in Boxing Journalism continues to write a weekly column for The Irish Times and contributes to a number of publications, writing on both sports and literature. And even though he is considered an "old-time" print writer, his opinions on the current state of the boxing are not typecast to any peer group.

He believes the Internet is the future of boxing writing; has no interest in the boxing versus MMA debate ["I just don't think about it"]; and doesn't believe a title awarded by a magazine will improve the sport ["Four sanctioning bodies is more than enough."].

While Kimball would be excused if he decided to take a more leisurely approach to writing, his schedule remains hectic. He was in Dublin for the launch of Four Kings and American At Large, a collection of his columns from The Irish Times, and will then travel to England to cover the British Open golf tournament. "I'd also love to fit in the Andy Lee-Willie Gibbs fight in Limerick that weekend," he adds.

After a while Kimball reveals why he wants to leave the bar, and it turns out there is something that hinders his enjoyment of life.

For the last few years he has had to cope with the widespread smoking ban that forces him to disrupt his contentment in pubs and indulge his beloved Lucky Strike cigarettes outdoors. Regardless, it takes more than inclement weather and heath concerns to dampen Kimball's vigor.

"It's stupid licensing laws that keep me from smoking more than I do. My doctor says smoking will decrease my life expectancy by about 1.5%. Anyway, I'm not going to live long enough to get lung cancer," he quips. "I'm not in denial or pretending [my illness] doesn't exist, but I'm not going to let it affect the way I live. If anything, it has made me a little more diligent.

"You don't have the excuse to do something tomorrow. You don't know how many tomorrows you've got."

George Kimball's attitude to life can most likely be defined by a night thirty years ago when he decided the rebellious skunk tattoo would be a suitable decoration for his arm.

"I wanted to do a story about getting the tattoo for The Phoenix," he says. "So I decided I'd have to get it done like everyone else does. That means being absolutely s**t-faced and waking

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up the next day and saying 'Oh no, look what I've got for the rest of my life.'

"If I was going to get it done, I was going to do it properly."

Four Kings: Leonard, Hagler, Hearns, Duran and the Last Great Era of Boxing will be launched in the U.S. this fall.

American at Large is available for sale on Amazon.co.uk and good book stores in Ireland, with all royalties from sales going directly to the Children's Medical and Research Foundation of Our Lady's Hospital, Dublin.

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