

Some Fights Are Tougher Than Others

Written by Bernard Fernandez

Wednesday, 29 October 2008 19:00

If the touching tale of Bernard “The Executioner” Hopkins and Shaun Negler seems vaguely familiar, maybe it’s because it is. In “Pride of the Yankees,” the 1942 film classic starring Gary Cooper as Lou Gehrig, there is a scene in which Babe Ruth, a phalanx of photographers and reporters in tow, visits the hospital room of a sick child. As flashbulbs pop and sportswriters scribble, The Babe promises little Billy he will hit a home run for him that very afternoon in the World Series.

Then Ruth and the media horde departed, leaving Billy in the company of his true baseball hero, Gehrig. With no one else in the room but a newspaperman friend of Gehrig’s who stands silently off to the side, the Iron Horse tells the kid he will smack two homers for him later in the day. Then he goes out and delivers on his vow, in essence fulfilling a private contract between kindred spirits who neither sought nor relished the spotlight.

Maybe it happened that way, maybe it was just some screenwriter’s flight of fancy to forward the romanticized notion that the quiet, selfless Gehrig was a modest maker of miracles.

Sixty-six years after Cooper, as Gehrig, declared himself the luckiest man on the face of the earth, life has imitated art, with a couple of plot twists. Shaun Negler, very much a real person and no figment of anyone’s imagination, was cast as little Billy, but the publicity-loving Hopkins – who, like Ruth, never came across a microphone or a camera for which he would make himself unavailable – played the unfamiliar role of Gehrig.

Oh, one more thing: in “Pride of the Yankees,” little Billy pulls through; it is Gehrig who contracts a fatal disease and dies young.

You’d think there would be a Movie of the Week to be made from this authentic tale of heroism and sacrifice, in which a sports star and a teenager afflicted with a terminal illness form a bond that supersedes their individual circumstances. But the particulars are so unlikely, so incredible, that even Hollywood might take a pass.

“If you told somebody Shaun’s story, they wouldn’t believe it,” Hopkins said of his dedication of his Oct. 18 bout with Kelly Pavlik, made without fanfare, to the gravely ill teenager. “But whatever you believe in, whomever you bow your head to, his life is proof that we should never question God.”

Did B-Hop, aware of his young fan’s determination to live long enough to see the pay-per-view bout in Atlantic City’s Boardwalk Hall, fight with the relentlessness of a man determined to make Shaun’s final days happy? Did Shaun, whose parents had been told three months earlier that the younger of their two sons had no more than two weeks to live, will himself to survive long enough to see his role model’s greatest triumph in the ring?

Hopkins probably is right. This sort of saga is just too fantastic to be believed, unless you

Some Fights Are Tougher Than Others

Written by Bernard Fernandez
Wednesday, 29 October 2008 19:00

subscribe to the theory of a higher power intervening. Are prayers ever truly answered? How far can any human being hewn of flesh and blood advance solely on heart, guts and want-to?

Michael and Renee Negler, parents of Shaun Negler, think they know just how much of a triumph of the spirit their son, who died on Oct. 23, achieved in the face of amazingly long odds.

“As far as I’m concerned, Shaun beat cancer,” Renee said. “Cancer did not beat him.”

Added Michael: “I will always believe that Shaun held on as long as he did because of Bernard Hopkins. He refused to give in to death until he saw Bernard fight one more time.”

How Shaun Negler, amateur boxer and idolizer of Bernard Hopkins, came to form a special friendship with the 43-year-old ring legend is inspirational stuff. It starts out with the then-16-year-old being diagnosed with Ewing’s sarcoma on May 30, 2006, which resulted in the amputation of his left leg below the knee at Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia.

“I was sparring, getting ready for a fight,” Shaun recalled in April, when I first met him. “I twisted my ankle. The swelling went down, but then I twisted it again. I underwent an MRI. That’s when I found out I had a big tumor in my leg.

“We know a lady who worked at the same place as Bernard’s lawyer (Arnold Joseph). We asked her if she could set something up. She got (Joseph’s) e-mail address and sent my story to him.”

Joseph contacted Hopkins, who was moved by how much devotion a young fan whom he had never met had for him.

“I would never blow anything like that off,” Hopkins said two days before he squared off against Joe Calzaghe on April 19. “I’m sure there were other things I could have done that day. But there was a kid who was losing his leg to cancer. So I told Arnold to set it up. I know what it’s like to fight battles that nobody thinks you can win.”

B-Hop met and talked with Shaun for more than an hour before presenting him with an expensive, limited-edition “Executioner” watch that quickly became Shaun’s proudest possession.

“I had known about Bernard, but I didn’t know Bernard until that day,” Shaun said. “There we were, just talking like regular people, when he said, ‘I got something for you. Then he gave me the watch. I couldn’t believe it.’”

Shaun also couldn’t believe it when he was selected by the Make-a-Wish Foundation, whose mission is to fulfill the dreams of very ill or dying children. And what Shaun wanted more than anything was to be at ringside for the Hopkins-Calzaghe fight, for which he and his entire family – Michael, Renee, brother Mike Jr. and sister Brittany – were flown to Las Vegas, all expenses paid.

Some Fights Are Tougher Than Others

Written by Bernard Fernandez
Wednesday, 29 October 2008 19:00

During a hour-long audience with Hopkins in his hotel suite at the Planet Hollywood Hotel and Casino, the fighter and the kid got to know each other better.

“When they told me you wanted to see me, my eyes got real watery,” Shaun told Hopkins.

“He started crying,” Michael interjected. For a moment, it looked as if Hopkins also might get a bit misty.

“People who have everything they were born with can take that for granted,” Hopkins told Shaun, who had been fitted with a prosthesis. “Here you are, a young guy without a leg. It would be easy to understand if you were bitter and angry, but you’re not. You see this as a challenge that you accept and can overcome.

“Some people squander their talents in so many ways. For them, it’s always coulda, shoulda, woulda. They have that mindset. You’re an inspiration to me, man. Here I am, about to fight Joe Calzaghe. But other people are fighting bigger fights, more important fights. You’re facing a much bigger fight.”

Even then, the cancer had reached Shaun’s brain. He was undergoing chemotherapy, which caused his hair to fall out, and there was a spot on his rib that had yet to clear up. Part of his treatment involved drinking a ghastly tasting concoction that made him nauseous.

“Doing chemo is very hard,” Shaun acknowledged.

“I can’t even imagine,” Hopkins said.

Home-schooled for two years, the better to protect him from infections he might contract through prolonged contact with others, Shaun said he hoped to box again, and to attend college.

“I’m a very strong person,” he said. “Bernard has helped make me strong. I think of him when I do my chemo.”

“That’s right,” Renee noted. “I have to tell Shaun, ‘Do it like Bernard would do it. You’re in training, like Bernard. He wouldn’t quit, and neither can you.’”

Hopkins lost a split decision to Calzaghe, in the process relinquishing his *The Ring* magazine light heavyweight title to the Welshman. The Neglers returned home in the hope that Shaun would continue his battle with cancer, which his doctors had said was in remission.

Except that the cancer, more aggressive than ever, returned and continued to spread. Michael and Renee were informed in no uncertain terms that Shaun wouldn’t make it, that all that was medically possible had been done and that they should prepare themselves to face the inevitability of their son’s death.

That’s when Michael contacted me. Could I possibly get in touch with Bernard Hopkins and

Some Fights Are Tougher Than Others

Written by Bernard Fernandez
Wednesday, 29 October 2008 19:00

inquire if he was available to speak to Shaun just one more time?

Hopkins not only spoke to Shaun, he arrived, unannounced, at a family gathering where he spent five hours with Shaun, talking boxing and sharing each other's hopes and dreams. B-Hop even allowed Shaun to drive his \$150,000 Bentley up onto the curb.

Maybe that's when Shaun, aware that Hopkins' bout with the favored Pavlik had been announced, determined that he would cheat death long enough to see his favorite fighter in action just one more time. Maybe that's when Hopkins decided that he needed to reach back in time and fashion a shocker of a victory to rival his beatdown of Felix Trinidad in 2001, because there was more riding on the outcome than another seven-figure purse or even the embellishment of his legacy.

The fighter and the kid text-messaged each other in the weeks to come, forging a bond that transcended anything either had experienced before. They drew upon each other's strength, finding inspiration in fights already won and those that lay ahead.

Blind in one eye, in near-constant pain and barely able to move, Shaun's final wish came true when he was able to see Hopkins' bout with Pavlik, even making his hero's signature cross-armed "X" sign at the television screen before the bell for the first round sounded.

"Shaun was alert and awake throughout the fight," Renee said. "At 1 o'clock (Sunday morning), we took him upstairs. When we went back later, he had sort of slipped away. He never really regained consciousness.

On Thursday, less than five full days after what proved to be his final happy moments, Shaun Negler passed away in his sleep.

To his credit, Hopkins said nothing at the postfight press conference about the dying kid whom he had come to regard as "like my own son." He might still be silent were it not for the fact that the Neglers believed that Shaun's story might serve as a guidepost for other sick and dying children, and their parents, that death is not necessarily tantamount to defeat. There are heroes all around us in everyday life, not just Lou Gehrigs and Bernard Hopkinses, but sick kids who remind us that courage comes in all shapes, sizes and ages.

Shaun was laid to rest on Wednesday. Bernard Hopkins served as one of his pallbearers, and in the casket the gloves and hand wraps he wore for the Pavlik bout were placed.

"Having something of mine that will be with Shaun forever means a lot," Hopkins said. "I think about him every day. He was my biggest fan. And you know what? I'm his biggest fan, now and always."

*photo courtesy of the Negler family