

BRUTE IX: That Is The Newspaper Biz

Written by Kaelan Smith
Sunday, 01 March 2009 19:00

In the second week of July 2008, nearly two months after watching Mike Simms survive his six-round ordeal with Derrick Harmon, I received word that there was another fight scheduled at the Red Lion. Mehrad, the co-founder of White Tiger Productions, to whom I'd given my number at the May 15th fight, had called to tell me that Stan "The Man" Martyniuk was fighting on the last day of July. I had seen Martyniuk fight on the Simms card, and still had fresh in my mind the terminal right hook he'd infected Matt Mauler with two months before. I told Mehrad I would certainly make it.

I called the Red Lion. The events coordinator had denied me a press credential for the previous fight on the basis that I worked for an online publication, and I'd had to attend as a cochon payent, to borrow from A.J. Liebling—the Ben Jonson of the American prize ring. With the service charge, the ticket had cost \$86.00. I had paid for it martyrly—as Socrates drank the hemlock. On the phone this time, as I had in May, I asked to be transferred to whomever handled the media credentials. "That's Mark Wilkie," the woman said. She transferred my call. The phone rang and rang, and no one answered, immediately or eventually. I left a message to the effect of, "This is Kaelan Smith from The Sweet Science. I'm looking for media credentials to the July 31st fight." I did not get a call back that day.

But a few days later I got an email from Mark Wilkie himself. He'd heard, perhaps from reading the article in which I'd mentioned it, that I'd had to pay for my last ticket. He apologized for any misunderstanding, and added at the end of his letter, "I work for University Capitol Mangement, which owns the Red Lion. I'm in the courtyard across from Tokyo Fro's in the University Village Shopping Center, and would be happy to buy you lunch at your convenience."

I wrote him back immediately. A day later we spoke on the phone and made plans to meet on Thursday, the 24th of July, at his office.

"What sort of food do you like?" Mark asked.

"I'll eat absolutely anything."

"There's Chinese, Japanese, and American, of course."

"I could tolerate some Japanese," I said.

"Shall we do Tokyo Fro's?" he asked. "I'm in the same complex."

"That sounds fine."

I had never eaten there, but back in May, after Stan Martyniuk had won his fight and was standing with Mehrad, Gerrell, and I in the gallery while we looked after Mike Simms, he'd gone up to one of the round card girls—a lovely thing in a black dress by the name of Angela. "Don't

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you work at Tokyo Fro's?" he'd asked. She did indeed. He'd see her there. He certainly would. Now, with a lunch planned for Thursday, I thought I might see Angela there, too. It is nice to have your lunch brought by a beautiful girl. It makes, regardless of the quality of the food or the company, for a pleasant meal.

On the Thursday designated, I drove to Tokyo Fro's. The side of the restaurant opens onto a courtyard, and the tables on the patio there were vacant. It was not a fine day for sitting outside. The state of California, some time in June, had caught fire, and no one had figured out how to de-conflagrate the territory, so that everywhere was the haze and smell of smoke. I'd heard from a friend who'd recently flown in from Boston that from above the entire Central Valley looked hemmed in by fog.

At the rear of the courtyard, as Mr. Wilkie had described, were the headquarters of University Capitol Management. I went inside. In the center of the office, which had been demarcated into three cubicles, I asked a man sitting at his computer where I might find Mark Wilkie. He indicated with his head the rear of the building, where, as he gestured, a large man appeared. "Mark?" I asked. "I'm Kaelan Smith, from the Sweet Science."

"Good to meet you," he said, and came to shake my hand.

He seemed almost shy. And then I realized I had seen him before, two months before in the foyer of the Red Lion Hotel, giving instructions to the ring girls. I'd described him as "a heavy man who, it appeared, had difficulty tucking in his shirt." I knew, now, that he'd read my articles, and I wondered if he'd recognized himself in it. "It's good to meet you, too," I said.

"These are our offices," he said.

"Yes," I said.

"You received the check I sent you?"

"I did indeed." The previous Monday I'd gotten a check in the mail in the amount of \$86.00. "Thank you so much for the reimbursement."

"Shall we do lunch?" he asked. "We agreed on Tokyo Fro's?"

"Absolutely." I noticed, as he talked, that he was missing one of his incisors, and that when he spoke he tried to hide the gap with his upper lip.

We walked back into the heat and crossed the courtyard slowly, as if Mark wanted to show me the grounds around his office. "It is a nice courtyard," I said.

"It's nice to be close to things," he said. I agreed.

At the door to the restaurant he opened it and stood, hunched forward perhaps self-consciously, waiting for me to go in. The restaurant was cool, with high ceilings where the

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heat could gather, and a stained-concrete floor. Along the eastern edge was the sushi bar. At the hostess' podium was a girl in a short, black dress. I looked around and noticed that, in fact, all the waitresses were dressed in bantam clothes—tiny skirts and shorts and tank tops—and not, I determined, because of the temperature outside. Their audience was largely male. I searched briefly for Angela, but realized that I did not remember what she looked like. It was no matter, though; the restaurant was filled with her facsimiles.

“How many?” asked the hostess.

“Just the two of us,” said Mark.

“For the bar?”

“A table.”

We followed her to a table against the wall and she waited for us to sit before depositing the menus. “Can I start you with something to drink?” she asked. Mark looked at me.

“A Diet Coke would be fine,” I said.

“Sure.” She smiled and then looked at Mark.

“An iced tea,” said Mark.

When she'd gone I asked Mark if it would bother him if I took notes. He said that I was to be his guest. I took out my pad and pen. “I'm working on an article right now,” I began, “about boxing's relationship to mixed martial arts.” I had come to terms in recent weeks with the fact that, in order to bring some attention to what I was writing, I would have to expand my oeuvre to include some discussion of MMA, which had, in the last few years, outgrown boxing. I do not mean that it is a larger organism, but it has expanded more rapidly, and it is on the verge of gaining credibility as a sport. “As a promoter of boxing,” I went on, “what do you think organizations like the UFC are doing to your business? How has MMA become so popular, and what can you learn from it?”

“I think,” said Mark, “with television, the WWE, and that kind of marketing—shorter rounds, more instantaneous action on the ground—the audience might have been built that way.”

I was not sure Mark had given much thought to the issue before this, so I said, “The other question I'm trying to answer is, when the current boxing crowd is gone—if that audience demographic is older—is there another wave of troops behind them?”

“That's the question,” said Mark. I'm not sure he'd asked himself this question either, and he seemed a little forlorn pondering it then, sitting across from me. “You know,” he continued, “people show up, but not in the big numbers that they used to. Sacramento was a hotbed for boxing.” He then added quickly, as if he'd just misrepresented his own business, “But it seems like right now, there are more people coming out and wanting to promote boxing in this town.”

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“I was at the May 15th fight at the Red Lion,” I told him, hoping, I suppose, to reassure him. “It was pretty full. Sacramento is a good town for sport. If we’d have gotten a baseball team in the 1990s when the National League expanded, we would have sold out more games than the Indians after they built the Jake.”

Mark smiled, looking confident again. “There was the ESPN Wednesday Night Fight over at Arco, and there have been a couple fights over at Raley Field.” And then his tone changed again. “You know, the problem is, I look at the sports section now, and there’s nothing in there about boxing. There used to be a boxing beat every Wednesday in the Sacramento Bee. But the sports writer that covered boxing for them, Jim Jenkins, is no longer with the paper.”

“That is, of course, the newspaper business.”

“Right,” said Mark. After this we both paused, as if we had tacitly agreed to observe a moment’s silence for the death of the newspaper.