

He would sit in the corner at Kronk, a boxing shrine on McGraw Street in the midst of a hard part of Detroit, and not say a word unless he had to. If you didn't know him, and most people didn't, you never understood how important Walter Smith was... but Emanuel Steward knew.

"I got famous because of Walt's dedication and focus," Steward said Thursday from his Detroit office a week after he watched them put the 94-year-old Smith in the ground. Steward has seen too much of that lately. He's seen his old friend and training partner Luther Burgess go. Then he saw the original Kronk Gym go, a victim of Detroit's failing economy, although he's still trying to resurrect the old building.

Now Walter Smith has joined them at the end of the line, and when it happens we all move up one slot on the conveyor belt of life. Too often when guys like Smith pass not enough people notice because he was never one for being noticed.

He was not the driving force behind Kronk. That has always been Steward. He was not the chief architect of Thomas Hearn or Hilmer Kenty or Jimmy Paul or Michael Moorer or Milton McCrory, who are still the best of Kronk's long roster of fighters. But he was a foot soldier in it all, without whom life would have been more difficult for Steward and maybe impossible, because Walter Smith was the rarest jewel in boxing. He was a guy you could trust.

"I trusted him completely," Steward said of his long-time cornerman. "He was a loyal person. He'd see some promoter or manager talking to one of our fighters and he'd tell him 'Leave that alone. That's Emanuel's job.'"

"No one could get to him to make a deal behind my back by offering him money. That was important to me because as I started to get more fighters I couldn't train them all effectively, especially when I was traveling. I always knew Walter would keep things running. He didn't give too much instruction, just a few little things, but those guys (Kronk's fighters) depended on him so much."

At his funeral at Shield of Faith Ministries in Detroit, Hearn was among the many Kronk fighters who gathered to honor a man few people in boxing knew. They were there because he was always there. There for them, especially in the wee hours of the morning that are so important to, and so hated by, most fighters.

"Walt made you want to train hard," Hearn recalled at the funeral. "He'd come by the house for roadwork early in the morning. He'd blow his car horn once and if you didn't respond he'd come up and knock on the door. If you wanted to sleep in, you couldn't. Walt was always there."

Steward confirmed that, saying, "I never, never had to get up and take a guy running."

He also never had to worry about whether that roadwork had been done. No matter how big a

RIP, KRONK ROCK Walter Smith

Written by Ron Borges

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star you became at Kronk - and some of the biggest in boxing entered that starry world through Kronk's famous red basement door – Walter Smith was waiting for you in the morning. When the sky was still slate gray and there was work to be done that no one would ever notice unless you didn't do it, Walter Smith was there.

“He kept things together for me,” Steward said. “So many guys I've been involved with – (Sugar Ray) Leonard, (Marvin) Hagler, (Oscar) De La Hoya – they'd never know who he was. Walter was always low key. He never wanted to be seen. You can't find a picture of him with Tommy in the ring after a fight. He'd work the corner and then take his stuff back to the locker room.

“Walter was quiet, so some people thought he was a mean person. He was slow to get to know but once he knew you he was a great and loyal friend. When Teddy Blackburn (one of boxing's best photographers) would come to the gym the two of them would disappear. All you'd hear was two guys telling stories about boxing.”

If he felt like it, Smith had plenty of stories to tell. Steward first met him when Steward was just a 14-year-old amateur fighter learning what would become his trade at the famous Brewster Gym. Smith had long ago been a stablemate of Joe Louis back in the 1930s and was spending his working hours at a Chrysler plant in Detroit. His free time was split between his wife Carrie and their family and his other family, the kids trying to make something of themselves in boxing.

After Smith retired in 1975 he began spending more time at Kronk, which was then still known more for its amateur program. Steward would see him there watching day after day, not saying much but a word or two to a young fighter who needed it. And one day it dawned on him. There was a resource here being under- utilized.

“Things were picking up and once the pros like Tommy and McCrory and Hilmer Kenty got going I asked Walter if he could help me in the corner,” Steward said. “He's been with me ever since. The only way I could make it as a manager and a trainer was because of Luther and Walter. Walter kept the thing together for me. He was my most reliable guy.

“It's unusual to have someone with you so long in boxing. It hurts a lot to see those guys gone. It was very unique what we had. Walt told me once that when he left the plant he was 66. He used to say, ‘I never thought the best part of my life was just starting.’”

A little part of what that life was for everyone associated with the phenomenon that became the Kronk Gym disappeared last week and boxing is a lesser place for it.