

Goodnight, Sweet Prince

Written by Springs Toledo
Friday, 10 April 2009 19:00

April 12, 1989. I was a teenager loitering in the lobby of the old Boston Arena on St. Botolph Street watching the ticket takers and looking for an angle. A friend of mine from the neighborhood was scheduled to box that evening. I had promised him that I'd be there. I skipped a class and stood up a date to fulfill that promise, realizing too late that a full heart finds no complement in empty pockets. No ticket. No money to buy a ticket. Out of the corner of my eye I saw a push broom leaning against a wall and a light bulb flicked on in my head. I ducked around the corner, untucked my shirt, grabbed the broom and swept my way past the ticket takers like an ordinary janitor.

In a hot minute, I was sitting alone in the balcony looking down on a fight crowd that fulfilled every stereotype. I could smell the cologne and the cheap cigars. There weren't enough civilians to count on two hands, swamped as they were by characters right out of the David Goodis novel "Shoot the Piano Player." Ex-pugs and wiseguys, bent-nosed and pot-bellied, were accompanied by dowdy wives or sleek girlfriends, while cops lingered strategically. South Boston had a contingent there, half-cocked in Celtics shirts. They sat loudly in clusters, all hands on plastic cups spilling foam. Assorted hustlers, pickpockets, hoods draped in gold from Columbus Avenue, middle-aged gamblers, and loan sharks milled and murmured sideways through clenched teeth. If I didn't know better, I'd have thought toothpicks were handed out in lieu of ticket stubs.

A tuxedoed announcer sporting an unconvincing toupee emerged from the mob and climbed the steps into the ring. Heads turned away from conversations as he reached up for the microphone and then into his breast pocket for an index card. He read an announcement:

"Boxing has just lost its greatest practitioner. Sugar Ray Robinson... died today at the age of 67..... we will join fight fans around the world for a 10 bell count in homage to the fallen champion."

A stunned silence prevailed at once.

Ray Robinson was gone. The original Sugar, whose saga of blood and elegance lasted twenty-five years and 200 fights, whose record at his pink Cadillac peak was 128-1-2 with 84 knockouts. Ray Robinson: the standard by which all great fighters are measured. The idol of Muhammad Ali. The god of the hardboiled fight crowd. Metal chairs raked the floor as we all stood up. Hats were doffed out of respect –one unsuspecting baseball cap was slapped off by a gnarled hand behind it. A phlegmy cough was muffled.

In a few moments, the lights were turned down, except for one illuminating ring center. I was standing by my pilfered broom hypnotized by the surrealism of the moment. I blinked and saw Robinson himself standing there in the spotlight, bowing to this reverent crowd, turning gracefully on those dancer's legs, flashing that movie star smile. Alone with his glory.

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The bell tolled its tribute as cigar smoke wafted up like incense.

As the last clang echoed with the cheers of decades past, Sugar Ray Robinson's smiling ghost spread his arms to embrace a world that bore witness to his greatness ...and faded away.