

RIP, Vinnie Vecchione

Written by Michael Woods
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In a sport filled with characters, people who found themselves in, and constructed situations that the most fertile novelist couldn't come up with, Vinnie Vecchione stood out. In the boxing world, that is saying something.

That scally cap perched on his head, with that Mona Lisa smile holding in a stogie and secrets of a life filled with hijinks, some legal, some less so, Vin was a pretty fair football player in high school; worked as a construction laborer; found then that he had a knack for numbers and exploited that, before he set eyes on an amateur boxer with a 10-10 record who he sensed could go somewhere in the red light district of sports.

Vinnie knew this district like the back of his hand, as he soaked up the finer points of the game from Massachusetts promoter "Subway" Sam Silverman in the early 70s. And when others saw that crude but willing banger named Peter McNeeley, Vinnie saw a hitter as strong as an ox with a sterling attribute that could make them both money, namely his pale complexion.

Vecchione, the 1995 manager of the year who guided the Massachusetts pug McNeeley to a Aug. 19, 1995 fight with Mike Tyson, in Tyson's first fight after a stint in prison, died of a heart attack on July 2nd.

He'd been busy in recent years caring for his wife, Judy, who'd been battling cancer, and his own health was in decline. He complained of a bad back, sciatica, and contemplated seeing a doctor who might be able to lift the pain that made it hard for him to stand and walk for long periods, but mostly, he oversaw the care for Judy, and neglected his own maladies.

He came down with a fever on Thursday, and was taken to a Massachusetts hospital by son Shane Beals. The end came quicky, Beals said. He took his last breaths, and just like that, a complicated, amusing, existence, that really could only be found in this red light district of sports, came to an end. Vecchione celebrated his 64th birthday last week, and had joked to friends that he was under the impression that he'd turned 65. He did the math in his head, and re-did it, and discovered he was in fact 64.

Services will be held at McMasters Funeral Home in Braintree on Tuesday from 5 to 8 p.m. Beals had a chuckle on Friday when he pondered the turnout to see his pop off. "We'd talked about this a couple weeks ago," Beals said. "Vinnie told me that when he was gone, he wanted me to sell tickets at his funeral."

Now, lest anyone think this was some lunkheaded goombah who lucked his way into a payday with a tomato can with connections, no, Vin was a picture of persistence, who truly deserved that manager of the year award. He and McNeeley did their thing for five years, traveled with suitcase in hand from Armory to VFW Hall to high school gym, as Vinnie built McNeeley's record into an eye popping 36-1, good enough to throw up on a marquee and draw the eye of the average sports fan on the fence on whether or not to buy the Tyson fight. And if someone

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came to him and wondered why McNeeley's record was built on a foundation of no hopers, Vinnie would launch into a defense of the kid that sounded plausible, but was delivered as he wore that tiny hint of a grin, which told you he knew exactly what he was doing; and so you really had to admire his audacity, and tell him he had a point when he protested that all the managers and promoters were doing the same thing he was, only with a higher budget. And no, he was not dissuaded when wisecrackers dismissed McNeeley as a joker with short pants on; or when the two men had barely enough money to eat after a bout, after Vinnie gave a generous envelope to the loser; or when he traveled to Italy in 1974 on short notice as a favor to a friend and fought in the main event, under the name of his 26-0 prospect, so the show wouldn't fall out.

Persistence was probably his strongest trait as a businessman, a persistence some would deride as delusional and could border on the ridiculously stubborn. He didn't see it that way. If one ear turned away as he spun a yarn about a plan or a plot, he'd tip his cap in the direction of the deaf ear, and amble off to find another willing mark who perhaps wondered about this man's history, and past associations, and stories of gunshot wounds inflicted by grumpy business partners. Most would come away with a certain fondness for a guy who sometimes strayed out of the gray area of lawfulness, but did so with such a charm and perpetual twinkle in his eye, that he was hard to dislike.

To the end, as Judy's condition varied, he held out hope that she'd work her way off the ropes and prevail, and that one of his ever-present plans would work out. Such commendable, instructional stubbornness.

We talked over the years, and I have a phone message saved that I will treasure, and listen to tonight.

"I love ya," he said, a couple days after I'd listened to stories about his apprenticeship with Silverman, and how two billion people saw the Tyson-McNeeley fight, and how it grossed \$100 million dollars, and how it was the biggest pay per view in history, and other stories I'd heard a couple times before but never tired of, "and I'm not gay!"

Love you Vinnie, and I'm not gay!