

For A Few Years, He Was The Greatest Manager Who Ever Lived

Written by Ron Borges

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On his final days on earth, Vinnie Vecchione did what he always wanted to do but never had much luck with. He drew a crowd.

Vecchione was the definition of a small-time boxing guy, yet he never focused on that. He focused not on being small-time, but on being a boxing guy. If you said that, it was good enough for him because what could be better than that?

He was never the world's greatest trainer and as a fighter, well, he knew where to buy a good cigar. But he was a boxing guy all the same and, for a few short years in the 1990s he was the greatest manager who ever lived.

That's not because he had some stable full of talent or because he directed the career of a Hall of Fame fighter like Joe Louis or Sugar Ray Robinson or Marvin Hagler and took them to great heights.

A lot of guys could have managed Sugar Ray Leonard or Roberto Duran in their heydays. How many guys could have managed Peter McNeeley to one of the highest-profile, highest-grossing fights of the 90s?

Honestly, the answer is one. The guy who did it. The Man In The Hat.

Vecchione was the kind of guy you see in the movies. He was not the leading man but the guy in the background you watch and then say, 'I've seen that guy before. Who is he?' He was a character actor but more than that he was a character, the kind you find in boxing and at the race-track and really no place else.

He was once a small time mobster in a scally cap, a nub of a cigar always clenched in his teeth as if he knew someplace where you could buy them half smoked. He once got shot in a drive-by, some galoots forcing his old Oldsmobile Cutlass off the road and pouring lead into him over some grievance or other. When the police found him with several bullet holes in his shoulder he assured them "it was a case of mistaken identity."

When Vinnie would tell the story of how difficult it was convincing a big-name promoter to help him bring along McNeely until Al Braverman hooked him up with Don King, he used to say, "I called all the big promoters. It was like knocking on deaf ears!"

That was Vinnie Vecchione, who passed away a week ago at the age of 64, loyal to the end to his wife Judy, his kids and his fighters. That's why they were all there at a funeral home in Braintree, MA. Tuesday night. They were there to celebrate a guy they said they loved because they knew he loved them back.

Love is not something you see that much in boxing. At least not once the dollars appear and

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the sense disappears. But Vecchione had it for his fighters even when he was putting them in deep water and praying they could swim.

He didn't always get them paid and he didn't always get them wins and, in the end, he got all of them into fights that got them beat but every one of them knew he was in their corner. Every one of them knew he was trying to do the best he could to get them the fight that would change their lives.

Trying even when it cost him his shirt, which with McNeeley it did many times.

For five years the two of them traveled America, fighting in Arkansas, Missouri, Mississippi, Oklahoma, Louisiana. Fighting in high school gyms, dark, dank armories, dog tracks, horse tracks, small-time casinos and hotel ballrooms. McNeeley fought and Vecchione stuck to a vision only he could see. They were in it together.

"They said I was nuts but I knew what I was doing," Vecchione said once and he was right.

What he was doing was getting McNeeley victories in backwater places few people knew existed. Getting him victories off TV. Getting him victories that left him with a 36-1 record with 30 knockouts and no fingerprints by the time he finally got him what he believed he would all along – a night with Mike Tyson.

Tyson was just coming out of jail and King was looking for a less than formidable opponent but one with a good record and a saleable personality to match him with. Vecchione had gotten McNeeley the record and the kid had the personality on his own. They sold themselves to King and he sold the fight to America - \$50 million in pay-per-view sales, sold-out MGM Grand Garden Arena. Big-time Saturday night.

But how did it happen?

"Most people thought he was nuts," Boston promoter Al Valenti recalled. "He held out for that one big night and he got it. From that respect, Vinnie Vecchione pulled off one of the greatest coups in boxing history. The minute that check cleared he should have been named manager of the year."

That check was for \$700,000 (less about \$100,000 that went back to Braverman) to be the B side in Tyson's first fight after three years in prison. When Vecchione turned down \$65,000 to fight Joe Hipp, it was because he believed one day he would get Tyson. When he turned down \$100,000 to fight Tommy Morrison at a time when McNeely said, "We didn't have 75 cents between us," it was because he believed one day they would get Tyson.

If Vinnie Vecchione was a dreamer at least he dreamt big and in 1995 his dream came true. He hit the big time and so did McNeeley. For a few weeks they became cult heroes, especially the day McNeeley said he was going to wrap Tyson "in a cocoon of horror."

It didn't turn out that way but so what? They got there.

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When they did and it all turned black in 89 seconds, Vecchione showed again who he really was. He leapt into the ring after his fighter had been down twice and was pinned on the ropes and being pummeled and stopped the fight. His scally cap never looked bigger than it did when he hopped between the ropes and got between Tyson and McNeeley, a trainer looking out for his man.

Later King was irate and the Nevada commission threatened to hold up Vecchione's end of the purse but The Man In The Hat couldn't care less what any of them thought then because he'd never cared before.

"I saved my kid's ass," Vecchione would say later. "I pissed off King and Tyson because they didn't get their bucket of blood but I did my job."

He did it so well RING magazine named him manager of the year in 1995. If the Boxing Writers of America had any sense they would have too but they opted for the Levin brothers who ran the career of Roy Jones, Jr. Big deal. They got Jones a few wins. Who couldn't? Vinnie Vecchione got Peter McNeeley 36 wins in 37 fights, a crack at Mike Tyson and a \$700,000 payday. Which job do you think was easier?

The money didn't last long of course and by the end life was tough for Vinnie. His beloved Judy was battling cancer, money was tight, there was no health insurance and a pile of bills. Finally, there was a heart attack that stole him away before it was really time to go but he'd at least counseled folks on how things should be run. As always, The Man In The Hat had a plan.

He told his son and one of his closest friends to be sure they did him one favor when it was over. "Sell tickets to my wake," he told them.

If they had The Man In The Hat would have cashed out big one and wouldn't that have made him laugh?