

Fifty-Eight Years Well Spent

Written by Bernard Fernandez
Monday, 24 August 2009 19:00

Everyone has a story to tell. It's just that some are more compelling than others.

During his nearly six-decade career chronicling that curious facet of the human condition known as sports, Jerry Izenberg has written literally thousands of enthralling stories about athletes both celebrated and unknown. But Izenberg, now the "columnist emeritus" for the Newark Star-Ledger in North Jersey, a designation probably bestowed by his longtime employer because Jerry is now semi-retired and living in Henderson, Nev., has never recited a tale quite like this one.

His own.

In *Through My Eyes: A Sports Writer's 58-Year Journey*, Izenberg's remarkable recollection of a life that has allowed him more first-person brushes with history than those experienced by *Forrest Gump*, Jerry explains how he, through his immigrant father, became as infatuated with the games people play as any latter-day couch potato with a remote control and a subscription to NFL Sunday Ticket.

Big deal, you might say. Nobody wants to learn about reporters' personal lives, right? Except that they might if every reporter had a back story that traced to a time when Ellis Island still welcomed the world's huddled masses to these shores.

Jerry's father, Harry Izenberg, was 7 when he accompanied his father, pregnant mother and two siblings to America to escape the anti-Semitism of Eastern Europe. Not that the daily grind was much better in the gritty Newark neighborhood where the family settled; young Harry's schoolmates ridiculed his Old World clothing, his accent and his ancient religion. Then one day, the outsider was invited to fill a lineup vacancy for a playground baseball game. Holding a bat for the first time, Harry swatted one over the admittedly nearby fence and, he told Jerry many years later, "at that exact moment, I became an American."

Regardless of our background or occupation, each of us has role models whose example is so exemplary that we seek to take for ourselves some of that which we have come to admire. For Jerry Izenberg, his body of work has been influenced to varying degrees by such friends, mentors and professional acquaintances as Stanley Woodward, Donald Newhouse, Red Smith, Shirley Povich, Frank Graham, Jimmy Cannon, Dick Young, Al Laney, Blackie Sherrod, Jack Murphy and Edwin Pope.

So, too, is it for me, a child of decidedly different circumstances who came of age in New Orleans, in the segregated Deep South. Last month marked my 40th year as a sports writer, well short of the time put in by Jerry, but my approach to the job I still cherish has been as colored by giants of the press box as was his. I read and assimilated the stuff cranked out with skill and attention to detail by Peter Finney, of the New Orleans Times-Picayune, the aforementioned Edwin Pope, of the Miami Herald, Lee Baker, of the Jackson Daily News, Stan

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Hochman, of my paper, the Philadelphia Daily News, and, of course, Jerry Izenberg. There are others, too numerous to mention, but you get the drift. The best of our curious fraternity write the truth as they have the light to see that truth, they write it eloquently and do so without regard for whether the positions they take are at the moment popular.

This ostensibly is a boxing column, and there is much in Jerry's latest book--his 10th--that details his ongoing fascination with that sport. He recalls the third Muhammad Ali-Joe Frazier fight thusly: It was "fought on a blazing-hot day in Manila, in a furnace of an arena ... no air-conditioning ... no clinches ... no pause on the nonstop treadmill of violence that held the entire building in its grip."

As round after round of the drama unfolded, Jerry took note of the rising crescendo of sound, which he describes as "an a capella chorus of collective human exclamation, part disbelief, mostly tribute--a battle hymn for two warriors who stood and threw lightning bolts at each other."

Ali is a friend of long standing to Izenberg, who frequently had the sort of relationship with the people he wrote about that is impossible in today's atmosphere of blogs, paparazzi and general mistrust. The closer we in the media try to get to truths that extend beyond the final score, it sometimes seems the further away we get from seeing the real faces of those whose images are distorted by the sort of 24/7 blanket coverage that doesn't allow for anything other than surface interaction.

Of the Ali Jerry knew, as few do, he writes, "He never met a hand he didn't want to shake, a woman he didn't want to hug, a child he didn't want to kiss. He loved giving attention as much as he loved getting it ... It didn't matter whether they were rich or poor, black or white, celebrity-famous, blue-collar weary or welfare poor. It didn't matter what language they spoke, what God they worshipped, what gender they were. Even when he walked among the ultra-elite, Ali was a head taller. I saw his personality outshine the star quality of Frank Sinatra and the Beatles."

But, for me, the hidden gems of Jerry's autobiographical journey might outstrip even those of the familiar gems. My knowledge of cowboys was limited to Roy Rogers and John Wayne movies, but Jerry took me to a different place with his account of a grizzled bull-rider named Freckles Brown, whose life was lived in 8-second (or less) snippets.

Freckles, Jerry notes, had a body that was "an X-ray in progress." He entered his first rodeo in 1937 at 16, his last at 53 in Tulsa, where he had the apparent misfortune of drawing a beast named Tornado, which "in a 14-year career had come out of the chute 220 times with a man on his back and before that night not one of them had made it to the 8-second horn." Tornado was a "1,600-pound ball of muscle and rage, ready to swat (Freckles) off as if he were the last horsefly of summer."

But Freckles "wasn't going to let the strongest, meanest bull on Planet Cowboy beat him ... and he didn't." He made it to the horn, his last and best ride, whereupon he walked away, bow-legged, to retirement at his modest ranch in Soper, Okla.

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Freckles died in 1972, but, thanks to Jerry, even the rodeo-ignorant among us can appreciate who he was and what he did.

I have known Jerry Izenberg for 20-plus years, far less than some, but it has been my privilege to have him consider me a friend and colleague. His career dedication to looking beyond the obvious, and finding meaning in the places in others' hearts and souls that so many miss or never seek out, continues to be the beacon that all of us should set our courses by.