"Listen, I got a story for ya!" Anthony (Rip) Valenti sounded excited, but that wasn't unusual.

Every time the octogenarian boxing promoter called to relay the details of his latest project there were two things I could count on him telling me. One was that this was the biggest story yet. The other was "Ya gotta get this in the paper right away, 'cause I ain't giving it to nobody else -- yet."

By the early summer of 1982 I'd been dealing with Rip for a while, so I knew enough to listen to what he had to say before I phoned the composing room with orders to stop the presses.

"Never happened before in the history of the Boston Garden," I could hear him saying on the other end. "All three of them!"

"All three of them?" I asked. "Don't tell me. You've got Magda, Eva and Zsa Zsa coming to Boston?"

"Naw. The Roach kids," he said. "Freddie, Pepper and Joey. They're all gonna be back here, and fight on the same card."

As amateurs, the three brothers had achieved almost legendary status in New England boxing circles, winning everything from Silver Mittens to Golden Gloves titles. Even their mother had followed them into the family business. When her sons headed out West to turn pro, Barbara Roach underwent a seamless transition from AAU volunteer to professional judge. At a time when female judges were a rarity, she was already the best in Massachusetts -- of either gender.

Freddie, the oldest, had just turned 22. He had turned pro at 18, signed on with Eddie Futch, and moved to Phoenix, later relocating with the Hall of Fame trainer to Vegas. Rip had continued to nurture a relationship with Freddie. In January of '81 he brought him back to the Garden, where on the undercard of the first Hagler-Obelmejias fight he beat Joe Phillips to win the New England featherweight title that had once belonged to Willie Pep. A month later he'd flown Freddie and Futch back for a headline performance on an ESPN card he staged at the old Hotel Bradford Ballroom, the site of today's Roxy.

By early '82 his brothers had followed Freddie to Las Vegas. Pepper had already had a couple of fights that spring. If memory serves, Rip had hoped to have 20 year-old Joey turn pro on his Boston show in June, but Joey beat him to the punch and made his debut in Vegas a couple of weeks earlier, fighting a guy named Alex Silva to a draw at the Showboat.

Although they enjoyed something of a local following, Rip Valenti didn't think for a moment that the three Roach brothers were going to fill the Boston Garden. Back in those days big fights were routinely shown on closed-circuit television, and in boxing venues like the old Causeway

Street building were often augmented by live cards that might attract a few thousand extra customers.

Larry Holmes was defending his heavyweight title against Gerry Cooney at Caesars Palace that night. Joey, fighting as a pro for just the second time, made short work of Joe Vanier, knocking him out in the first round. Pepper did his part, outpointing Jaime Rodriguez in the six-round co-feature. But in the main event, Freddie, who had come into the bout 26-1, had his problems with Rafael Lopez, a decent prospect from Pawtucket, and wound up on the wrong end of a unanimous decision.

It was the first and last time the Roaches ever fought together on the same bill, though they came close: On Nov. 10, 1983, Marvelous Marvin Hagler won a come-from-behind decision over Roberto Duran at Caesars. Joey Roach fought a six-round draw with Manny Cedeno in one of the undercard bouts, while Freddie dropped a 10-round decision to his old nemesis Louie Burke in another. Pepper didn't fight that night because he had a scheduled bout at the Showboat a week later.

Pep had by some accounts been the more promising amateur, but by the time he turned pro he seemed to have lost interest. He retired after less than two years as a professional with a 7-2-1 record.

Joey Roach's amateur career had begun memorably, if inauspiciously, ten years earlier at an outdoor arena in Lynn, where he was matched against another Massachusetts 10 year-old named Micky Ward in the 50-pound class. Nobody emerged with bragging rights that evening. A thunderstorm blew in across the harbor and the bout was rained out midway through the second round.

Joey, though, shared the same card with Freddie on several other occasions. The handwriting may have been on the wall in late 1985 when, at the Hollywood Palladium, he faced '84 gold medalist Paul Gonzales. Joey had lost just one of ten fights, while Gonzales was fighting for just the second time as a pro, but the Olympian won eight of eight rounds on all three cards. The next year he got knocked out by a guy (Mauro Diaz) who was 1-7-1. He never boxed again, finishing up 8-3-3.

An ESPN fixture from the network's inception, Freddie was a popular draw, but as has been well documented since, he spurned Futch's advice and overstayed his welcome, continuing to fight until 1986. He finished with a record of 39-15, but the fights he engaged in over those last couple of years may well have sown the seeds of the Parkinson's Disease he would encounter later in life.

The brothers remained close even after going their separate ways. As has been recounted in painful detail elsewhere, they had shared not only their boxing experiences, but an abusive childhood at the hands of their father as well. Paul Roach might have been the driving force in turning his kids into successful boxers, but by most accounts he wasn't averse to using each of them as punching bags along the way.

One can only assume that there were some lively scraps around the Roach household while the three were sharing their boyhood home in Dedham, but they loved one another as only brothers can.

While Freddie and I saw one another regularly over the years, I occasionally ran into Joey and Pepper too. The first time I saw Joey after he'd stopped boxing he grinned and told me he was working as a telemarketer.

"Who'd buy anything from you? Over the phone?" I kidded him.

That's how much I knew.

Once he stopped boxing Freddie worked as an assistant trainer under Futch, and then, after Eddie's automobile accident, took over as head trainer for a few of his boxers. Next thing you knew he was the head trainer for a couple of world champions, and was regarded as one of the bright young minds in the business.

It was along about that time that Freddie told me Joey had so taken to the telemarketing business that he'd quit his job and started his own telemarketing company.

"I can't believe it," said Freddie. "He's making more money than I am."

Barbara Roach eventually moved to Las Vegas and into the house Freddie had built there. Once Freddie's base of operations became the Wild Card Gym in Hollywood (where he was eventually joined by Pepper), she remained in Vegas, where Joey could look after their mother the way she'd always looked after them.

Just as Freddie went on to become a superstar in his field, so did Joey in his. Freddie won three Trainer of the Year Awards (and already has a leg up on a fourth), but Joey was pulling down million-dollar purses even before Freddie was. He employed over a hundred workers at his telemarketing firm, and owned so many cars he could pick his ride of the day by color-coordinating it with his clothes. He had two college-age kids by his first marriage, and there was no way in hell either of them was ever going near a boxing ring.

A few weeks ago he had told Freddie it was time to relax and enjoy life. He planned to sell his business and retire by the end of 2009.

Last week Joey and his wife Jacqueline returned from a family vacation in Michigan. On Saturday morning Jackie woke up, and when she looked at her husband in the bed beside her, the first thing she noticed was that he had turned a ghastly shade of blue. Joey Roach had, at the age of 47, died in his sleep. Although the cause of death has yet to be determined pending an autopsy, a heart attack is suspected.

It was left to Barbara Roach to break the news to Freddie and Pepper. Freddie, who had been training Manny Pacquiao for his Nov. 14 date with Miguel Cotto, immediately suspended camp.

"She's trying to be a trouper, and Freddie is trying to be strong," said a close family friend. "But you know how close they all were. You can imagine how hard this has hit them."

Arrangements have yet to be finalized pending the autopsy, and while there's no indication Joey had the slightest reason to suspect that his days might be numbered, he had recently addressed the subject in terms that some might find surprising.

"When my time comes," Joey had said, "I think I'd like to be buried back in Boston -- next to my father."