

Memories With Mladinich: Billy Miske Had A Hall of Fame Heart

Written by Robert Mladinich
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Although Dick and Bill Miske are both in their seventies, they vividly recall the family Christmas story that becomes more and more important to them with each passing year. Neither of them was even born in 1923, when their grandfather, heavyweight contender and 2010 International Boxing Hall of Fame inductee Billy Miske, surprised his family with, among other things, a baby grand piano and a new couch and chair to complement their modest but loving home during some tough financial times.

Billy Miske, who hailed from Minnesota where he was known as the St. Paul Thunderbolt, had paid for those presents with the \$2,400 purse from his last fight, a fourth round knockout of the highly respected Bill Brennan that occurred just seven weeks earlier in Omaha, Nebraska.

Later on that Christmas Day, after reveling in the joy of his family, which included three children, the 29-year-old Miske called his manager, Jack Reddy, and told him he was dying. Reddy rushed to the house, where he immediately whisked Miske off to a local hospital.

One week later, on New Year's Day, 1924, Miske, died of Bright's disease, a kidney ailment that he had been diagnosed with in 1918.

At the time of the diagnosis, Miske was told to immediately stop fighting and given five years to live. However, because he had amassed about \$100,000 in debt from a failed car dealership, he fought 30 more times.

During the post-diagnosis phase of his career he more than held his own against the likes of such champions and contenders as Jack Dempsey, Harry Greb, Battling Levinsky and Tommy Gibbons. Prior to the diagnosis, he had tangled with esteemed champions Jack Dillon and Kid Norfolk.

His final ring ledger was 72-15-14 (33 KOS), which included 63 newspaper decisions, meaning no official decision was registered at the time.

Although Miske was sick enough to have only been eating boiled fish in the months leading up to his final fight, he was determined to earn enough money to make what he expected to be his last Christmas a memorable one for him and those he loved.

"My grandfather had to know that was going to be his last Christmas," said Dick Miske, who was employed as a corrections officer at the Ramsey County Work House for 30 years.

"All through my life, whenever we'd go to my grandmother's house, we'd see the couch and the chair that were the last presents Grandpa bought for the family. The whole time I grew up, that baby grand sat in my grandmother's house. It was all part of the family history."

Prominent local journalist Jake Wegner, who is writing a book on Minnesota boxing history, has

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done a lot to keep Miske's name alive as a Hall of Famer. He is also in the process of trying to retrieve the baby grand from the nursing home it had been bequeathed to.

At the time of his death, Billy Miske had squeezed an awful lot of living into his short time on Earth. An American of German descent, he was born in Minneapolis in 1894. His father Herman had been a St. Paul policeman for many years.

Miske began fighting as a middleweight, but is best remembered for his many bouts as a heavyweight. He fought the great Jack Dempsey three times. His third round knockout loss to his good friend Dempsey in September 1920 was the first heavyweight championship fight to ever be broadcast on the radio. It was also the only time Miske had ever been knocked out. There is a famous photo of Dempsey helping carry Miske to his corner after the brutal stoppage.

That Miske even continued fighting after his terminal diagnosis is testament to his fighting heart. Determined to support his family and pay back the debts that he had accumulated, he told his wife that his ailment was nothing more than "some kidney trouble."

Nothing could have been further from the truth. The ailment was enough serious enough to make him ineligible to fight in World War I, but his grandson said he more than made up for it on the home front.

"He wasn't able to go to war, but he did a lot of benefits for the Red Cross," said Dick Miske. "We still have a framed statement and a Silver Cup from the Red Cross thanking him for his service."

Miske even traveled to Hollywood where he boxed an exhibition with movie star Douglas Fairbanks Jr. to raise money for the war effort. A year later, when another of Miske's sons was born, he was named Douglas. There has always been speculation by the family that he was named in honor of the celluloid hero.

By all accounts, Billy Jr., who was born in 1917, had a wonderful relationship with his father for the short time that they were together. After his father's death, the youngster was shipped off to boarding school. He later embarked on his own professional boxing career, amassing a record of 16-10-1 (13 KOS) between 1937 and 1940.

His son, also named Bill, was a St. Paul patrolman for 35 years. He believes that a back injury suffered by his father while working for the telephone company hindered his boxing success. He said that his dad suffered from the pain of either botched or crude surgery for decades, until his death in 2000.

Although they grew up as members of a prominent fistic family, neither Dick nor Bill Miske had much interest in the sweet science. They were well aware that their grandfather had been a top-tier boxer during a particularly tough era, and that he had displayed an inordinate amount of courage and decency both in the ring and in his personal life.

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But coming from rock-solid, Midwestern stock, those qualities are so common they don't even stand out. It is only as one gets older, and realizes that in many quarters those qualities are an anomaly, that they are fully appreciated.

Of course they were aware that their own father, Billy Jr., had tried his hand in the ring with mixed success, but like so many children of achieving parents and grandparents it was not until later in life that the magnitude of their familial accomplishments became so clear to them.

Bill Miske sounds genuinely mournful when he talks about all of the years he visited his grandmother's Lake Johanna house and took the story of the baby grand, as well as the couch and the chair, for granted.

During the last decade or so, however, he has become interested enough to really delve into his family history. He and so many other family members are now incredibly mindful and prideful of the travels and travails of their fighting family and the glorious fistic legacy that they left behind.

He, along with other family members, couldn't be more thrilled about Billy Miske being a member of the International Boxing Hall of Fame class of 2010 inductees. He was voted in, along with Young Corbett II and Rocky Kansas, in the Old-Timer category.

"If I had more of an interest earlier, I would've gotten more information from my grandmother," said Bill Miske. "I really regret that it took so long, but in the past few years I've become really interested in learning everything I can. Now I can't learn enough."

In deference to their grandfather and great-grandfather, Bill and Dick, along with Bill's son, Joe, have all had boxing gloves with a thunderbolt through them tattooed on their bodies by famed local artist Don Nolan. Written are the words 'St. Paul Thunderbolt.'

"It's hard to put my finger on why we had it done," said Bill Miske. "The older you get, the more you think about and appreciate the past. It was something that we just had to do."

The Hall of Fame induction weekend is scheduled for June 10-13, 2010. For more information, log onto: www.IBHOF.com.