

Rest In Peace, Joe Rollino

Written by Robert Mladinich
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While the world's best pound-for-pound fighters interchange on a regular basis, few people can dispute the fact that Joe Rollino was the world's strongest man for many years.

Although only 5'4" tall and about 155 pounds, the 103 year old Rollino, who as Kid Dundee says he had about 100 fights as an "armory boxer" in the 1920s, is still quite a specimen.

Not only is he physically agile and loose, he is mentally lucid and sound. His memory is nothing short of astounding, especially when you consider that he fought at about 122 pounds, often against boxers weighing 50 pounds more than he did.

"I was a good boxer and I could take a good punch," he said. "Fighters would hit me in the jaw and I'd just look at them. You couldn't knock me out. If we got in a clinch, no one could move me because I was so strong."

Because Rollino was so often matched against much bigger fighters, he says that Harry Greb, a natural middleweight who often fought and beat heavyweights, is his favorite fighter of all time.

"Greb beat some of the best heavyweights in the world, like Gene Tunney and Bill Brennan," said Rollino. "He weighed as little as 152 pounds. He was unbelievable."

Rollino also believes that Joe Gans was the best lightweight of all time, and that includes Benny Leonard and Roberto Duran.

"Mayweather wouldn't have lasted two rounds with Tony Canzoneri or Barney Ross," said Rollino, whose opinions are as strong as his arms. "He's a flake. The old-timers fought 30 times a year. Could Mayweather fight that often?"

He also has great fondness for Mickey Walker and says Sugar Ray Robinson was "a great welterweight, but he was not so great as a middleweight."

Rollino's love affair with boxing started at a very young age. It reached its apex in 1919, when as a 14 year old he says his brother took him to Toledo, Ohio, to see Jack Dempsey knock out the gargantuan Jess Willard.

"It was the most exciting fight I've ever seen, and I've seen a lot of them," said Rollino. "Dempsey came out like a wild animal, but he was the best fighter in the world. He beat a lot of guys that were bigger than him. The only fighter who came close to him was Harry Greb."

It is hard to believe there is someone alive who personally bore witness to a battle as epic as Dempsey-Willard. But the more you speak to Rollino, as well as the scores of friends and colleagues who attended his March 19 birthday bash at a Brooklyn eatery called the New Corner, you realize he is not a man prone to hyperbole.

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He is the patriarch of the Old Time Barbell and Strongmen, an organization consisting of men, some in their '70s and '80s, who can still bend steel nails or railroad spikes with their bare hands, rip books in half from the binder side, or twist quarters with their teeth and thumbs.

"I was always very strong," said Rollino, who produced a photo of him at 10 years old. He is extremely muscular but not the least bit freakish looking as he throws a medicine ball around like a softball.

He grew up to have 20 inch neck affixed to his short and squat frame. A pupil of Warren Lincoln Travis, the 1920s Coney Island strongman, Rollino once raised a carousel with 14 people on it. He also utilized nothing more than a pinch grip to do hundreds of pull-ups on a 2x4 beam, and once used his back to lift 3,200 pounds.

During this time he billed himself as the Strongest Man in the World.

"Joe is the real deal," said Pete Spanakos, who along with his brother Nick ruled the New York City and national Golden Gloves tournaments in the 1950s. Nick went on to represent the United States at the 1960 Olympic Games in Rome. While there, he roomed with Cassis Clay, who later changed his name to Muhammad Ali.

If you believe that someone as muscular as Rollino could not box effectively or with any degree of fluidity, think again. When asked to show his form as a boxer, the centenarian Rollino shadow-boxed beautifully. He threw combinations with aplomb, parried imaginary punches, and dipped like a man 80 years his junior. After his one minute display of fistic derring-do, he was not even the least bit winded.

To say he is a physical marvel, would be a gross understatement.

"If he told me he was 75, I would have said he looked great for his age," said the extremely fit Arthur Perry, 61, a retired NYPD detective who boxed in the NYC Golden Gloves in the mid 1960s. "When he started shadow boxing, I couldn't believe my eyes."

As much as Rollino enjoyed boxing, he was more drawn to what was once called "the iron game" because of the relative purity of that business. This was long before steroids were in vogue, so those who toiled in the small but close-knit community had good reason to be proud of their accomplishments.

"There was a lot of corruption in boxing," said Rollino, a lifelong vegetarian who still has all of his own teeth, eats oatmeal every morning and walks several miles a day. "I was introduced to this world at the age of 10, so I've been going at it for over 90 years."

Four decades ago Louis "Arms" Leccese, now 61, was a youth on the fence, who could have gone either way if fate didn't intervene. He had developed an affinity for arm wrestling, and Rollino took him under his wing. Leccese wound up winning the national AAU title in the early 1970s.

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“He trained me on a lat machine with a chain,” said Leccese. “We started with 25 pounds, snapping the weight down like it was someone’s arm. We finished up at 225 pounds. No steroids in those days, this was all legit.”

While Rollino’s exploits as a strongman are well chronicled in Coney Island lore, there are other aspects of his life that are a bit more cryptic. The more than 20 revelers in attendance all wore T-shirts that read “The Great Joe Rollino” and all waxed poetically about what a positive impact he has had on their lives.

Many of the men, who are now in their 70s, say he was like a father to them. He guided them through tough times, and enabled them to focus on esoteric achievements.

Rollino grew up in South Brooklyn. His mother being a vegetarian was as unusual in those days as the young Rollino’s superhuman strength. For Brooklyn kids back then, Coney Island was the world. The impressionable Rollino grew up fast amid the fellow strongmen, bearded ladies and other assorted performers.

“I loved the life,” said Rollino, who still lives in Brooklyn with a niece. “For a young kid, it was the greatest place on earth.”

Boxing was huge in those days, so it was natural that someone as strong and athletic as Rollino was drawn to it. Living life healthily became second nature to him. To this day, he has no ingestible bad habits.

Rollino was too young to serve in World War I, but he saw enough action in the Pacific Theater in the Second World War to be awarded three Purple Hearts, a Silver Star and a Bronze Star. He still carries shards of shrapnel in his legs.

“He’s got so much shrapnel in him, you could sell him for scrap,” quipped Spanakos.

Rollino seems like a fellow who is always happy, but his demeanor turns grim if you ask about any immediate family. It is believed that when he entered military service, he had a wife and at least one child. When he returned several years later, he was a man alone. He offers no explanation, other than to say with extreme firmness that it is not a subject that is open to discussion.

What he will talk about is his years as a longshoreman, standing up to union goons, and even getting a small part in the 1954 film “On the Waterfront” as a “winch man.” Much to his chagrin, his fleeting moment of celluloid fame would up on the cutting room floor.

When not on the docks, he was active in the Iceberg Athletic Club, which was founded in 1918 and is quite different from Polar Bear clubs whose members take one quick, annual winter ocean dip.

The Iceberg members actually swim in the ocean three or four times a week, and attribute the habit to enduring good health. It is called “winter bathing.”

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The water temperature, they insist, is often warmer than the air temperature. If they stay in for 5 or 10 minutes, they believe the cold water kills germs that fester inside one's body. All agree that since they started winter bathing, they have not been sick.

"When you come out of the water and put your sweatshirt back on, you feel like you're 10 years old," said Daniel Leahy, a Staten Island native who is now a Vermont mail carrier. He started winter bathing in 1986.

Rollino, who can't remember the last time he was ill, said he winter bathed for nine straight years without missing a day. "Rock pile to rock pile, 220 yards in Coney Island," he said, to which an elderly pal joked that he had "the first known case of shrinkage."

You could spend days with Rollino and talk about nothing other than iron men and boxing. Unlike some elderly curmudgeons, most of whom are significantly younger than Rollino, he is not skeptical, cynical, angry or resentful.

He seems determined to live life to the fullest, and he still looks forward to each new day with eagerness and enthusiasm. He used to derive a lot more joy from boxing, but is still happy to weigh in on matters related to the sweet science.

Of all the current or recent fighters, he believes that Julio Cesar Chavez would have been best suited for the demands placed on a boxer in the 1920s and '30s. And as far as today's crop of heavyweights, he says they are not even worthy of mention.

The best heavyweight of all time, he reiterates, was Dempsey, followed by Marciano, Joe Louis, Ezzard Charles, Tunney and Joe Frazier. When asked if he mistakenly left Ali out, he said he did not.

"Maybe I'd put him around ninth," he opined.

When asked why he was defying conventional wisdom, he was adamant in his response. "There were a lot of fixed fights," he said. "Do you really think he knocked out Sonny Liston? Ten cops couldn't knock Sonny out with bats. How could he knock him out with a cosmic punch?"