

Jay Edson, A Hall Of Fame Friend

Written by Rick Folstad

Saturday, 16 January 2010 18:00

For seven years, Jay Edson and I would meet every few weeks for lunch in Naples, Fla. and talk about boxing. We'd talk about the craziness of Aaron Pryor, the humor of George Foreman, the frightening power of Earnie Shavers and the remarkable talent of Muhammad Ali.

Jay knew them all.

We would sit in a restaurant of Jay's choice and after ordering, he would clasp his hands together and rest them on the table in front of him and smile that big, toothy grin of his. He would fidget with the large, gold ring with the diamonds in it that he always wore. It was a gift from Philippines President Ferdinand Marcos, who gave it to Jay when Jay volunteered to step away and allow Carlos Padilla Jr., a Filipino, to referee the Thrilla in Manila between Ali and Joe Frazier. Jay was originally assigned to referee the fight.

As we sat there waiting for our meal, Jay would tell me secrets about certain fighters, managers and promoters that I couldn't write about - personal behaviors, antics and infidelities.

Or he would tell me stories. One of his favorite was how he was the guy who smuggled little 3-foot-7 Eddie Gaedel into a St. Louis Browns game in 1951 so Gaedel could go to bat for Bill Veeck's Browns team. Jay met Veeck when they shared a hospital room and Jay talked the maverick owner into hiring him to work for his club.

After lunch - Jay always insisted on buying, though I did pay for a few meals - he would take me out to his car, open the trunk and hand me a couple boxing posters or a boxing T-shirt or ticket stubs from a world title fight. We'd shake hands and plan to meet for lunch again when we could both get away.

If I needed something from him on the record - a prediction, an inside scoop or just an opinion - I could call him at any time of the day, anywhere he was, and he would give me what I needed.

"And you can quote me," he'd say from the locker room of Oscar De La Hoya, or from ringside at Caesars Palace.

Even when I moved from Naples to Colorado with my wife and son, Jay and I kept in touch. We were a good match. I wrote about boxing. Jay was boxing.

A referee for 49 world title fights, Jay was working as boxing coordinator for Bob Arum and Top Rank when he went to see a doctor in October 2001 because he was losing weight. That's when he was told he had pancreatic cancer. They gave him eight, maybe 10 months to live.

Turns out he only had two.

I was lucky. I got the chance to see him just a few days before he died in early December 2001.

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We hadn't seen each other for several months, but talking to him on the phone, I could sense he wasn't doing well. He was planning a trip to Honolulu - he loved Hawaii - in just a few days, but he didn't sound like Jay. So I drove to Naples that afternoon from our new home in Jupiter, Fla., to have dinner with him at a restaurant.

Sitting in the restaurant that night, we talked about dying - how his cancer sometimes roared up and caused him pain and robbed him of his memory - but we also talked about living. That's when he told me he was looking forward to attending the Paulie Ayala versus Bones Adams fight on Feb. 23 in Las Vegas.

"I can still sign the paychecks for Top Rank," he said, his toothy grin making a brief appearance.

I dropped him off at his home that night and after hugging him and saying good-bye to his wife Georgia, I drove back to Jupiter.

Four days later, on the day he was supposed to fly to Hawaii, Georgia called me. Jay had died at home. He was 77, hoping against the odds that he would see 78.

Earlier this week, the Florida Boxing Hall of Fame announced its 2010 inductees, and one of Jay's friends and favorite fighters is on the list: Muhammad Ali.

Other living inductees named to the FBHOF and who will be honored June 25-27 in Tampa, are former top contenders Gomeo Brennan and Frankie Otero; women's boxing pioneer Barbara Buttrick; trainer/managers Dan Birmingham and Al Bonanni; promoters Phil Alessi and Don King; historian Enrique Encinosa; Commissioner Don Hazelton; and non-participants Bob Alexander and James "Smitty" Smith.

Posthumous inductees are former world champion Willie Pep; top contenders Yama Bahama, Bobby Dykes, Tommy Gomez and Elmer Ray; 1932 Olympic Gold medalist Eddie Flynn; and non-participant Lou Viscusi.

And Jay Edson.