

Don't Worry About The Calzaghe Revelations - He'll Be Fine

Written by Frank Lotierzo

Tuesday, 30 March 2010 17:00

Recently there have been reports filtering out that retired former super-middleweight champion Joe Calzaghe 46-0 (32) has been using cocaine recreationally. Since this news has surfaced in the media, some have soured on Calzaghe. But Joe's not the first former champion to go through this stage after retiring from the ring, and he won't be the last.

Most boxing fans are well aware that two of the greatest champions in history, Sugar Ray Leonard and Marvin Hagler, both used cocaine after retiring from their hall-of-fame careers. And the fact that they had more opportunities awaiting them than most fighters do when they retired didn't help them make the transition from great fighter to everyday citizen. Boxing is a sport that tends to attract men who have somewhat addictive personalities. Actually, boxing is the closest thing I've ever experienced to an addiction in my life -- and walking away from it was one of the hardest things I've ever had to do after sustaining an injury while sparring in 1982. For so much of their lives, fighters, if they're real fighters and care about the outcome of the bout (not all of them do), give up and miss out on a lot of things in order to be successful. These are little things that most of us take for granted and don't even consider a big deal. That boxers have to sacrifice isn't news to anyone, but the psychological effect these sacrifices has on them may be.

For most of their 20's and 30's, boxers are watching everything they eat and are always worried about making weight. The ones that are dedicated, and fight below heavyweight, are even conscious of the amount of water they consume. Real fighters don't hang out with their friends until all hours of the night. And the thought of ingesting drugs or alcohol is never more than a thought, assuming they have a career in front of them and a true desire to go as far as their physical skill-set and mental toughness will take them. They're also supposed to avoid sex at all cost -- something they'll tell you is the most difficult of all the things they have to sacrifice.

During their active careers, when they're making all these sacrifices and hoping that fame and fortune will come to them before they retire, they relish thinking of the days when they can eat and do all the things they missed out on. In fact, the thought of these things sometimes helps them maintain their discipline. Ranked fighters and champions often fantasize about what it must be like to be a normal civilian and being afforded the luxury to eat, drink and have sex whenever you want to without thinking inside "I know I shouldn't be doing this, but just this one time won't hurt." It's a never-ending psychological war that they engage in at different stages along the way.

Why do you think a lot of fighters blow up in weight once they're retired? Look at former junior middleweight champ Mike MacCallum: he'd dwarf George Foreman today if they stood side by side. Food was obviously MacCallum's weakness when he was in training. Then there are the fighters who overindulge in drugs and alcohol just because they can do so without guilt once they've hung up their gloves. They may not even enjoy indulging so much, but the fact that they are no longer forbidden from doing it makes them think it's better and more fun than it really is. Again, that's not a blanket statement in regard to all retired former champs and greats -- but it's

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more the rule than the exception.

When fighters are young and on the way up, they're so consumed with making something of their career that they seldom pay attention to what's going on around them. They don't even pay attention to other fighters unless they think they'll have to face them down the road. You'd be surprised at how little they know about boxing's rich history and greats from the past during the time they themselves are trying to make a mark. My first trainer was former middleweight champ Joey Giardello, who eventually sent me to former middleweight contender George Benton. Regretfully, during the time I trained under them, it never once crossed my mind that they actually fought. I didn't think to ask them what it was like to fight during Ray Robinson's era, or about the experience of fighting or training with him (Benton trained with Robinson and Giardello fought him on the downside of his career). No - I was too focused on getting better myself. Joe Frazier gloved me up often before sparring. And never once did I think to myself that the hands buckling my headgear had exchanged punches with Muhammad Ali in what is no doubt one of the greatest rivalries in sports history. Actually, "Smokin" Joe was just another guy/trainer in the gym.

I also didn't pick the brain of Willie Reddish (who trained Sonny Liston during his prime) the way I would've liked to have. Today, I'd have so many things to ask him. Whatever insight and history I gleaned from him was due to the fact that I used to spar his fighter Curtis Parker when he trained at Frazier's gym in north Philadelphia. But it never dawned on me to press Willie about Sonny's fights with Floyd Patterson, Cleveland Williams, Zora Folley and Muhammad Ali. And the same thing applies to Eddie Futch, who I was exposed to on a somewhat regular basis at one time. Eddie was Joe Louis' sparring partner and worked the corner of all three Ali-Frazier fights. Yet never did I ask about Louis or him not allowing Frazier to come out for the last round of the "Thrilla In Manila." Why not? Because I wanted to be the next Joe Louis and make the 1980 Olympic team. The things that were passed along to me by Giardello, Benton, Reddish and Futch were the results of conversations in the gym as a group, not pointed questions on my part. The thought to inquire never dawned on me. Down the road if there's a need to pass along what was discussed, it will be if it applies to a particular topic or fighter.

Calzaghe has said boredom and having nothing to occupy his time with are the reasons why he's partied and snorted cocaine. And if anyone doubts him, I wouldn't. Joe's problem is he spent so much of his life living a regimented routine and was concentrating on making it to the highest level as a professional fighter. This was something he most certainly did, and that can never be taken away from him. But like most fighters, Calzaghe had no interest in any aspect of boxing other than the part fighters need to address, fighting.

Bernard Hopkins, Oscar De La Hoya and Floyd Mayweather are the start of a trend of fighters who have interest in more than just the combat side of boxing. If you talk to most fighters, they could care less as to who's the better NFL quarterback between Peyton Manning and Tom Brady. Most of them could care less about who's the better one on one player between Kobe Bryant and LeBron James in the NBA. And as far as the NCAA Tournament, I doubt many even know who makes up the final four this weekend. And how many do you think know or have

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given it a fleeting thought as to whether or not Tim Tebow will make it in the NFL as a quarterback?

Don't worry about Joe Calzaghe getting it together. He's just experiencing life as a civilian. Being confronted with the question of what to do with the rest of his life is just a shock to his system. But rest assured he's not on his way to becoming a drug addict and blowing his money. Eventually he'll tire of getting high, grow bored of it, and stop.

One of the drawbacks of being a fighter is that, if you're going to make it to the top, you must be consumed with boxing. That doesn't allow time or thought for much else. Sadly, a lot of fighters, although much smarter and articulate than they get credit for being, don't have many interests outside of boxing. Most of them have been obsessed with boxing from their early teens or even younger; they've never given much thought as to what else life has to offer. Joe Calzaghe is not the exception.

The biggest mistake Calzaghe can make is to make a comeback and challenge the eventual winner of the Showtime Super-six tournament. It's a safe bet that things won't end badly for Joe. Once he finds out exactly what it is he wants to do, the qualities that drove him to the top--and to become the fighter and champion he was—will help him succeed in the next phase of his life.

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