

Written by Adam Berlin

Tuesday, 25 January 2011 19:33

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Only now, with Eric (Butterbean) Esch, the circus-sideshow heavyweight who carved out a lucrative career as the “King of the Four-Rounders,” safely retired, and Captain Schiffman gone to his grave a few days ago, can the story be told...

In my old age I have sometimes been described as a “curmudgeon.” From a professional standpoint I take this as a compliment, having served my apprenticeship with a Master Curmudgeon, Michael Katz. Katz is virtually unequalled as a sportswriting curmudgeon, but he and I spent the better part, or at least the best part, of our lives at 59 Christopher Street, which used to be the mailing address of the Curmudgeon’s Hall of Fame, a/k/a the Lion’s Head, Ltd. The curmudgeonly Al Koblin started as a bartender there and wound up the co-proprietor, in partnership with another major league curmudgeon, John Wesley Joice.

A renowned hangout for curmudgeonly novelists, newspapermen, poets, folksingers, actors, and even politicians, the Lion’s Head in its heyday was never a “boxing bar” in the sense of The Neutral Corner (then) or Jimmy’s Corner (now), although it harbored a fair number of practicing pugilists among its clientele. Jose Torres, the light-heavyweight champion of the 1960s, was a regular, as was Randy Neumann – then a heavyweight contender, now a top-echelon New Jersey referee. Roger Donoghue, the old welterweight who had been charged with turning Marlon Brando into a credible ex-pug for *On the Waterfront*, could often be found at one end of the bar, as could David Markson, the novelist who also happened to be the nephew of Madison

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Square Garden Boxing president Harry Markson. One night in the 1980s I had dinner there with Bob Foster and Eddie Futch; men who wrote about boxing – Katz, Budd Schulberg, Larry Merchant, Vic Ziegel, Jack Newfield, Pete Hamill, and Joe Flaherty – also called the Lion’s Head home.

In a saloon filled with legendary curmudgeons, Paul Schiffman occupied a special niche, as Lion’s Head’s first and only double-threat, two-way curmudgeon. He had graduated from King’s Point just in time to miss World War II, and spent a lifetime at sea as an officer on Merchant Marine vessels, principally on the North Atlantic route. The irascible Captain Schiffman spent the first half of the Lions Head’s three-decade existence, at least when he was in port, dismantling his intellectual inferiors as the pub’s most curmudgeonly customer. Then when the sailor came home from the sea, he made the seamless transition from curmudgeonly patron to curmudgeonly bartender.

He drank his Jameson’s neat, and he did not suffer fools gladly. One night Paul answered the phone only to be asked if the Lions Head had a happy hour: “Yeah,” grunted Shifty as he slammed the phone back on its receiver. “Eight o’clock. As soon as I’m off.”

When his friends started swapping reminiscences following his death last Wednesday, a quintessential Schiffman tale recalled an evening when he wasn’t even present. A fellow bartender, Richie Morrell, used to host a regular Thursday night poker game at his apartment on King Street. One Friday Richie walked into the head, ready to relieve Mike Reardon, who was working Schiffman’s usual noon-to-eight shift that day.

“Who was the big winner last night?” Mike asked him.

“Shifty,” replied Richie.

“Boy,” said Reardon. “I bet that pissed him off.”

Only those who knew him best were aware that beneath this gruff exterior lurked the soul of a poet, a man who could not only recite, at length, Yeats from memory, but who had in 1977 published *At Morning Light*, a collection of his own verse.

Although he never boxed himself, Schiffman had fought his way out of barrooms from Marseilles and Liverpool to Galveston and back, and in his younger days would have made one hell of a welterweight. One of my regrets at the timing of his demise was that he never got a chance to see *At The Fights: American Writers on Boxing*, the about-to-be-published anthology John Schulian and I co-edited for The Library of America. The final piece in that book is Carlo Rotella’s account of the 2002 10-round fight between Butterbean Esch and Larry Holmes -- the only one of Butterbean’s 89 professional fights that wasn’t scheduled for four -- because not only was Paul appreciative of great boxing writing, he also happened to have played a somewhat pivotal role in another unique event in Butterbean’s career – the only “KO By” on the Bean’s record.

In December of 1995 the Butterbean phenomenon was just beginning to take off. Esch, a

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roly-poly country bumpkin from Alabama whose fighting weight ranged from 350 or so to the 417 ½ he weighed for his last fight, was billed as “The King of the Four-Rounders” primarily because even his backers acknowledged he wouldn’t have had the stamina to fight any longer than that. The Bean was 15-0, and at this point the scheduled length of his fights had been largely irrelevant, because the opponents he didn’t knock out in the first round he usually knocked out in the second.

Now his promoter, Bob Arum, had brought him to New York for his Madison Square Garden debut, a fight that would take place on the undercard of Oscar De La Hoya’s bout against Jesse James Leija.

The main event loomed such an obvious mismatch it hardly seemed worth wasting space on, so the day before the fight I’d decided my column would be a feature on Butterbean’s first day in the Big Apple, and invited Bean and Murray Sutherland to lunch at the Lion’s Head. I’d known Sutherland, the old Scottish middleweight, in his boxing days. Now he had become a marketing genius as the guy who managed and trained Butterbean.

That the weigh-in would take place later than afternoon was a matter of no concern, since not only did Bean not have to make weight, but Arum and Sutherland probably figured the bigger the number the better. We arrived as planned at Sheridan Square, only to be informed by Captain Schiffman that the Lion’s Head no longer served lunch. (This may have been my first indication that the legendary pub might be in its death throes. Less than a year later the Head went out of business altogether.)

Butterbean looked, well, hungry, so Schiffman asked him what sort of food he’d been hoping to eat. When Butterbean said he liked fish, Shifty directed us to a hoity-toity Greenwich Village bistro that had recently opened a few blocks away. The Bean managed to conceal his disappointment that poisson-chat friture did not seem to be on the menu.

I conducted the interview over lunch, and afterward dropped Sutherland and Butterbean at their hotel, repairing to mine to write my story and take a nap. When I awoke a few hours later, my stomach was roiling.

I immediately phoned Murray, who reported that he felt so rotten he wanted to die. The next question simultaneously occurred to both of us: How was Butterbean feeling?

The next evening Butterbean, accompanied by a beaming Arum, staggered into the ring for his Madison Square Garden debut looking slightly green in the gills. He looked as if he might have even lost some weight; he couldn’t have been more than 370, soaking wet. Fortunately, or so we thought, he’d been matched against Mitchell Rose, a guy who had won just one of nine fights (1-7-1) and who hadn’t a hope against Butterbean.

The Bean spent the first three-minute stanza chasing Rose around the ring, hammering him with lefts and rights, but somehow failed to take him out, and almost as soon as the bell rang for the next it became apparent that Butterbean had shot his whole wad and had already punched himself out. He had absolutely nothing left by the second, and Rose was smacking him all over

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the ring. Butterbean couldn't even hold his hands up, and was utterly defenseless. The look of horror that began to spread across Arum's face was shortly confirmed when the referee, Joe Santarpia, halted the fight and awarded Rose the TKO.

It was the first and only time in 89 fights Butterbean was ever stopped, but for Arum it was a catastrophe of epic proportions. At ringside that night the principal topic of conversation was whether Ron Katz, the Top Rank matchmaker who'd put Rose in with Butterbean, would still have a job the next morning.

Only Butterbean, Sutherland, and I knew the real story, which is that Ron Katz didn't get Butterbean beat that night. Paul Schiffman did.

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**the Roast says:**

Great story. Compelling and rich.