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I just finished reading Mitch Abramson's essay of the sad demise of Sunnyside Gardens and it reminded me of the death of another fabled fight factory, the ***5th St. Gym in Miami Beach****, where I spent seven happy years in the '60s and a couple of unhappy hours early in the '90s. It may seem unnatural to remember an old beat up old building as a friend, but this one was.*

April 1992. Miami Beach, Florida. They have put a big Master padlock on Muhammad Ali's door. Soon even the ghosts will be razed. The world weary old 5th St. Gym is about to be reduced to rubble by the wrecker's iron ball. No more will Ali's spirit dance across the sagging wooden floor. The ring that vibrated under the feet of Joe Louis and Carmen Basilio and Ezzard Charles, of Willie Pep and Carlos Ortiz and Sugar Ray Robinson is down. Gone, too, are the heavy bags that withstood the hammers of Rocky Marciano and Sonny Liston. The speed bags which Kid Gavilan and Archie Moore made sing departed silently. The world's second most storied boxing sweatshop is to become a parking lot, or an apartment complex. I feel like I have been to the wake of an old friend.

Chris Dundee's gym on Miami Beach's southern tip was nine years old when Ali and I arrived for the first time on nearly the same day in 1960, he from the Rome Olympics and me from The Miami Herald. As students with vastly different curriculums, we climbed the 15 stairs to the second floor loft a few thousand times. Willie Pastrano, who left the gym a 20 1 underdog and returned with the light heavyweight championship in 1963, despised those wide linoleum covered steps. "I'm on my way to hell," he'd grumble, as he'd shuffle heavily upward each day at noon.

Others, like Luis Rodriguez, who began cutting sugar cane in Cuba at the age of five, never forgot a harder life and found fighting a pleasurable way to earn a dollar. A tall skeleton of a man with a nose that looked like it had been torn from a banana stalk, Rodriguez also left the gym in 1963; he returned with the welterweight championship.

They were the home boy stars, they and the irrepressible Ali, but the gym was always thick with hungry kids from faraway places drawn like moths to the gym's legendary flame, looking to fulfill a dream in a cavernous place where Chinese waiters once sold fortune cookies. The champions and top contenders came, too - Joe Frazier, George Foreman, Dick Tiger, Bob Foster, Johnny Saxton, Sugar Ray Leonard, Roberto Duran, Ken Buchanan, an endless parade of the great and near great.

Some, like Joey Giardello and Jake LaMotta, came there to train for fights in Miami or Miami Beach, while others, mostly fighters from Europe, came just because it was the 5th St. Gym. Many who came had trained at Stillman's Gym on 8th Avenue in New York, which had been the

world's most famous gym before that Spartan retreat was replaced by an apartment building in 1961. Now with a sense of history, boxing's aristocracy wanted only to break a sweat in another legendary labor camp.

Drawn like gold prospectors to Johan Sutter's Mill, the big time writers - the likes of Red Smith, Jimmy Cannon, Budd Shulberg, Doc Green - descended regularly upon the gym, usually in the spring when baseball brought them south, detached and cynical, but certainly in their own fashion to pay homage. Angelo Dundee, Chris's younger and more famous brother, always hosted the visiting newsmen for lunch at Puerto Saqua, a short stroll north to 7th and Collins, where, like the conversation, the meal of Cuban steak, black beans and rice, and banana pie never varied.

The two story building stood two blocks west of where the Atlantic Ocean washes up on pristine beaches, but for the citizens of the gym it might as well have been planted in an Iowa cornfield. The modest entrance to the gym was a narrow rectangular cut in a concrete block background of pale pink. Inside a blackboard in a tiny alcove listed in chalk the boxers training that day.

Optimistically, as though their careers would go on forever, the names of the local stars were painted. As you ascended the stairs, three hand lettered signs warned that entry would cost you fifty cents. Over the double doors at the top, another sign said: "Stop and Pay Fifty Cents, No Dead Beats." Until 1979 another sign read: "No Girls Allowed." At the door Dundee always stationed a senior citizen with no nonsense eyes to collect the access tax.

Inside was usually given over to smoke filled bedlam. The solitary ring was seldom empty. Twin heavy bags and two speed bags groaned and chattered constantly, except when Ali sparred and everyone stopped to watch. A large dust covered, fly specked mirror rested at a tilt against a rear wall, next to a door which led to tiny dressing quarters which boasted badly dented lockers, a blistered wooden bench, and two showers which were nozzles on the end of bare gray pipes over concrete squares. When the showers clogged, the runoff often spilled into the drug store downstairs. No one went to the gym for comfort.

All that is gone now. Dundee gave up the gym when he stopped promoting in 1982, after free televised bouts and the rise of gambling casino boxing all but killed small club fights. Name fighters trained elsewhere. Roosevelt Ivory who took over the gym has surrendered to the decay. Termites have chewed the floor into a quilt of plywood patches. The walls once covered with colorful posters and old fight pictures and yellowed clippings of battles long ago fought are now bare and chipped and holed. Some windows are cracked; others are missing. The only equipment that works is the large padlock securing the grill across the entrance.

Nothing remains; nothing but the smell of sweat and rubbing alcohol and, hauntingly, of chicken soup; and the ghosts, who weep. Soon even they will be gone. But somewhere Willie Pastrano is laughing. He is the last fighter to have a dream about the 5th St. Gym come true.