

A Christmas Story

Written by Charles Jay
Friday, 24 December 2004 18:00

Christmas is as good a time as any to remember the things that mean the most. I want to tell you about two of those things – boxing and family – and how they became interrelated

You'll hear it from people who are familiar with my work, whether they're fans or not, whether they understand it or not. Don't get on the bad side of this guy. You've got trouble if CJ's writing about you. This is the meanest, angriest guy in boxing. He's mad as hell and he's not going to take it anymore. He'd be the first guy to say "Bah Humbug". The guy would rather write a piece called "'Tis the Season.....To Be a Real Son of a Bitch".

Yes, it's true that I sometimes go overboard. I have no tolerance level for the kind of corruption that finds its way through the corridors of power in this game. I see no place for ineffectual politicians in a sport they know very little about. I have no patience for mediocrity, and no problem letting people know about it. I'm here to drive the fight-fixers like Robert Mittleman and the self-important knuckleheads like Greg Sirb away from boxing, because that will have long-run positive effects. And yes, I don't much care how I get it done. I make no excuses, and offer no apologies.

So you guys think I'm mean-spirited, right?

Well, Charles Jay is about to go soft on you.

There's that side of me, you know. I admit that I cry whenever I see certain movies, like "It's a Wonderful Life". I'm virtual putty in the hands of my six-year-old niece. Uncle Chuck gives her pony rides. I buy her gifts almost weekly, and have become well-acquainted with the likes of Dora the Explorer, SpongeBob Square Pants, Bob the Builder, Oswald the Octopus and of course, Clifford the Big Red Dog.

I seem to get emotional, even sentimental, about a lot more things these days, which, if nothing else, might be a sign that middle age is creeping up on me.

So excuse me for being a little sappy here.

I've hung around boxing, in one way or another, since 1981. Like a lot of people, I got into it somewhat by accident. I would say, on balance, that it's been a happy accident.

Of course, you never forget some of those accidents destiny steers you away from.

In 1996, as I was readying myself to start a new radio program, I made plans to travel to North Carolina and interview former heavyweight champion Buster Douglas at his training camp. The trip had a dual purpose, as my friend, a collectibles dealer, was going to get a bunch of photos and other items signed by Buster. We made arrangements to get to this ski resort where

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Douglas was training - the idea was to fly from Miami to Atlanta on a Saturday, then rent a car and take the three-hour drive to our final destination, which was, to say the least, out of the way.

But a problem developed at the last minute, because my friend couldn't get anyone to watch his store for him that Saturday, and we had to change the flight to Monday.

Imagine what I was feeling when I woke up on Saturday morning and found out that the flight we were previously booked on - ValuJet 592 - crashed in the Florida Everglades.

That's the kind of thing that makes you take stock of your own existence. Isn't it funny that at Christmas time you start putting all that stuff into perspective?

I put this business in perspective from time to time as well.

For example, I've come to the realization that boxing fans and boxing people are different than those in other sports. Think about this - if you're at a football game, and the home team wins a game due to a series of bad calls on the part of the referee, the fans really don't care, as long as they get the "W". It's fair to say the same holds true in the other team sports.

But I have been to venues, more than once, where the hometown fighter won, as the beneficiary of an awful hometown decision, and the reaction ranged from widespread booing to near-rioting. It seems the boxing audience instinctively empathizes with what fighters go through, both in their preparation and in the competitive ring itself, and partisanship takes a back seat to justice. In that way, the boxing fan has a sense of fair play that is unmatched anywhere else.

Now, I'm not going to sit here and insult your intelligence by telling you the people in the boxing industry, by and large, have that same sense of fair play. We all know there are some really bad apples in this business. There's no escaping that. But there are plenty of people at the opposite end of the spectrum as well; in fact, some of the best people you'll ever meet. People who get going when the going gets tough. People who stare adversity in the face and laugh at it. Engaging people. Selfless people. People with a lot of heart and a lot of soul.

I've seen trainers travel a thousand miles to make \$200 or less, just so some of their fighters can put food on the table.

I've seen the efforts of organizations like the Retired Boxers Foundation, who work 20 hours a day, with little or no funding, to come to the aid of fighters who are down and out.

I am grateful for the doctors who probably could make a lot more money being somewhere else, but who give of their time so that boxing can be as relatively safe as it is.

I've witnessed promoters stepping forward and going above and beyond the call of duty for the benefit of families of 9/11 victims.

I've seen fighters visit kids in the hospital, where it wasn't for the sake of a photo op.

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I know some managers who look at their fighters as more than just a commodity; who do as much for them outside the gym as inside it, and I thank them for it, because they make this sport a better place to be. You'll be reading about one of those people in the next chapter.

I'd love to be able to recognize all of those people in and around boxing who put a lot more into the game than they get out of it, and keep doing it anyway, but I would never have the space or the time to do it.

The truth is, compassion is not hard to find in boxing, and you don't even have to look that hard for it.

There was a fellow I worked with about fifteen years ago by the name of Hackie Reitman, an orthopedic surgeon who had embarked on a dream of becoming a heavyweight fighter. Hackie knew he wasn't going to be the world heavyweight champion, but he had a good time with his career. And we managed to get most of the people in the South Florida market to write about it.

Hackie was a brilliant guy and very successful in his 'other' career. He was also a gentleman. When my father was a cancer patient lying in the hospital, enduring his final days, Hackie insisted on coming with me one day to visit him. And he was always a favorite of my mom.

When I finally lost my dad, in April of 1991, we had the funeral in New Jersey. As I'm sitting at the wake, I'm told there's someone waiting outside to see me.

The gentleman introduced himself as a friend of Hackie Reitman who lived in the area. He had come by, at Hackie's special request, to offer condolences in person. I was shocked, and moved.

Flowers or a card weren't going to be enough for Hackie. He actually sent a live human being to me as a way of paying his respects.

No one's going to tell me there's no class, no brotherhood in this game.

Still, I never fully realized how much goodwill there really was until years later.

In July of 2001, I was hit by some devastating news. My brother had slipped into unconsciousness in an Indiana hospital; for years he had colitis, and as I found out later, about a dozen other ailments, including diabetes, glaucoma, and congestive heart failure, and some of the medication he was taking had caused massive complications. He had developed something called sepsis, which is defined as "a severe illness caused by overwhelming infection of the bloodstream by toxin-producing bacteria."

A person afflicted by sepsis can easily die, and things had degenerated to the point where his doctor was calling the family in, and a priest was on standby to administer the last rites.

The family was in a panic, and I had to jump on a plane from Florida to Indiana. As I got ready to make that trek, I knew I wasn't going to be able to keep up with the daily linking of boxing

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stories I was doing as part of my "Fight Page" at TotalAction.com, which had become quite popular. Since I didn't want to disappoint my regular visitors, I felt I had to offer an explanation. I didn't want to get personal, but "technical difficulties" would have strained credulity; after all, if there were technical difficulties, how was I going to be able to put a message up there, you know what I mean?

So I just told them the truth:

"Those of you who visit us on a regular basis at THE FIGHT PAGE have grown accustomed to timely updates and comprehensive material on a daily basis. And we indeed appreciate your visits.

However, over the course of the next week, I am afraid that our ability to keep the site fresh on a regular basis may be compromised to some extent.

At this moment, my brother is very ill; in fact, fighting for his life in the intensive care unit of an Indiana hospital. As his condition is literally day-to-day, and I will be going to his aid, I may not be able to keep my regular schedule regarding the updating of the Total Action site.

I don't mean this to inconvenience anyone, but I hope you can understand. In the meantime, we will continue to do whatever is possible under the circumstances, and hope to be functioning on a normal schedule again as soon as possible.

Please say a prayer if you can.

Thank you,

Charles Jay
Editor/Publisher
TotalAction.com"

I was not prepared for what happened afterward.

In the next hour or two, a few consolatory e-mails came in. After that, a few more. Then, as it turned out, a whole lot more. They just kept coming and coming and coming. By the time I got back from Indiana five days later, I discovered an outpouring, the likes of which I'd never seen before. There were about 250 messages in my e-mail box wishing my brother well. They came from all over the world - Italy, Germany, Denmark, France, Mexico, Britain, South Africa. They came from people I knew in the industry - promoters, matchmakers, fighters, managers, even direct competitors. Boxing writers. The famous and not-so-famous. Friends and fiends alike. Lots of fans. People I didn't know. People I hadn't heard from in years. People I had FEUDED WITH in the past. They sent letters. They sent encouragement. They sent their prayers. They sent hope.

In doing so, they also sent the very clear message that what I was doing meant something to them. I'll remember it as long as I live. I've never had the chance to thank everyone for that, but

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I'm doing it now.

My brother pulled through, just barely. There was, however, going to be a period of convalescence, which wound up lasting almost two years. He's got a wife and two kids in Indiana, and I also had a disabled mother there. They needed help, and so I packed up everything I owned and started a new chapter of my life in the Hoosier State.

Somehow in the transition from one locale to another, and in the process of switching service providers, I had lost track of each and every one of those e-mails. As a result, I never got to show them to my brother. He wasn't really in the kind of condition where he could sit and read, but I thought he should see them nonetheless. I thought he should know he wasn't alone in that intensive care unit. He never really had much use for boxing, but I wanted him to understand that my sport wasn't all about slugs and thugs.

He's a cardiologist, and probably won't be able to work again at his chosen profession. But these days my brother is up and around. He walks. He can drive a car. He eats up a storm and fancies himself something of an amateur photographer.

His doctors tell me his recovery has been nothing short of miraculous. And now, as my immediate family gets ready to sit down for its first Christmas dinner alone in many years, I'm going to try and dig those e-mails out of some deep, dark corner of my old hard drive and let my brother see them for the first time.

Because I want him to know about another family. A family he never even knew he had.

It's the same family I'm proud to be a part of.

The family of boxing.