

RIP Joe Rein; "I Will Wink At Some Homely Girl"

Written by Pete Carvill

Friday, 15 November 2013 11:42



“If, after I depart this vale, you ever remember me and have thought to please my ghost, forgive some sinner and wink your eye at some homely girl.” – HL Mencken, *The Smart Set*

Joe Rein, who died last week, was more than a colleague and friend to the many people who have been paying tribute to him. He was also a fine writer, a conduit to the golden era of boxing, and a mentor to many.

Joe, who was seventy-seven, was a product of the old world who found his footing in the new one. Under the name 'John Garfield', he was a prodigious poster to the East Side Boxing and Check Hook Boxing forums. At the time of writing, there are threads on both with hundreds of comments on. Those posting agree on the same things – he was a gentleman, a scholar, and a paragon of decency. Rein did not argue with people on those boards, he spoke with them. When he disagreed, he did not insult. And when he spoke, we listened.

Joe and I were friends through email correspondence. It was a relationship that began in 2006 when a piece I wrote for *The Sweet Science* caught his eye. Joe emailed me and we stayed in regular contact over the years, sending each other stories, articles, and videos that we found interesting, whether they were related to boxing or not. When Joe wrote for *Fight Beat*

, he took me with him and he sang my praises to the bosses there. He was a friend.

Joe had many stories that he let out incrementally. Everyone who heard his stories must have thought he had led the most interesting life. To Joe, though, it was just life. He loved to reminisce and posted thousands of times on forums, talking about all the fighters and fights he had been privy to. He was not boastful, though; he understood boxing and he understood silence. But when he wrote about his adventures, you wanted to hear more.

Through and through, Joe was a boxing guy. He trained at Stillman's Gym in the forties and fifties. In 2008, he was asked about Sonny Liston. He gave this story: “I worked out in different gyms with Liston at various times, but can't say I got to know him. He was a force-field of

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menace. We passed each other using various equipment but he never acknowledged me or anyone. So, one incident stays in my mind. While Sonny was shadow-boxing in ring one at Stillman's, I was sparring in ring two with a big, promising pro welter, Tony DeCola, who was tryin' to make a war of it to show off for the gym rats. I was much shorter, and little more than a lightweight. We were mixin' it up, and he got careless, and I dropped him with a short right. After the session was over, I went to do my floor exercises and skip rope. Liston motioned to another boxer to give me room - even shared the space to skip rope to 'Night Train' --*so outta character*. It was a real rite of passage for me."

Another time, he spoke fondly of his father. "When I was in high school, we had an awards dinner for the football team, and I asked my dad to come. Afterwards, the parents mingled. My dad never met a black person. We were from a tight-knit German-Irish-Ukrainian section. The father of a black player extended his hand to him in greeting, introducing himself. My dad said, 'Joe Louis was a great fighter.'"

Joe, a born New Yorker, went on to The University of Miami. While there, he trained and fought out of Angelo Dundee's 5th Street Gym. After army service, he went to work for *The Miami Herald*. It was not a great start to a career. "I covered a simple story: a man named John Smith was forced to flee his apartment in the middle of the night because of a fire. Except the address I listed was a house of prostitution and it was a different John Smith, who spelled his name 'Jon Smyth.'" Having been fired from *The Miami Herald*, he went back to New York and ended up in advertising. That industry would form the core of his later career.

"*Mad Men* is really special to me," Joe once said. "It's spot-on when I started in advertising in New York – the clothes, the sex, the smoking, the drinking, the whole nine yards. They watered *Mad Men* down. I lived every moment of it, and know all the characters they're based on. The voluptuous office manager on the show was, in fact, an assistant producer for me."

"Back in the sixties," he said another time, "I had a big commercials shoot in Paris and I was stuck with a team I hated. So, I retreated into chocolate, (my drug of choice), and believe it or not, I went from 147lbs to 250lbs in six months, which is not all the becoming if you're stretching to be 5'8". They wouldn't let me back through Customs because I didn't look like my passport."

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How many people have anecdotes like that?

Joe had had some health problems in recent years and our correspondence, once regular, had faltered. We last spoke in August. I emailed him to see how things were and told him what was happening in my life. When I first came into contact with Joe in 2006, I was young, single, and living in Tokyo; now I am older, married, have a child, and live in Berlin. I went from writing for fanzines and websites to the front pages of *USA Today* and *The Washington Times*. Joe was privy to these changes. He offered his support in everything I did. He was there in the good times and the bad. I will miss him.

Last night, I tried to think of what piece of Joe's work that would encapsulate him. He was a fine writer but the piece I've chosen is 'Eloquent Boxing Fan'. It is a video Joe made back in 2008. It is of a guy hitting a speed-bag and just talking about boxing.

No, Joe did not write it.

No, he did not perform it.

It is not even what Joe did best.

But it is what he *did*: he found ordinary people and he showed them they could shine.

So on Friday night, I will go into the city to find a cheap and friendly bar somewhere that is dark and scuffed around the edges, where the drinks and conversations flow, and there I will take stock of Joe Rein, forgive a sinner, and wink at some homely girl.

Rest in peace, Joe.

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