

Sandy Grady To Receive BWAA Liebling Award

Written by Bernard Fernandez
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It says much when one legendary newspaperman feels as strongly about another as John Schulian does about Sandy Grady.

Schulian, 1984 recipient of the Boxing Writers Association of America's Nat Fleischer Award for Excellence in Boxing Journalism, calls Grady, one of his role models, "the Red Smith of Philadelphia from the late 1950s to the early 1970s." That description is spot-on, and is much of a compliment to Smith, the late, great New York columnist who won the Fleischer in 1975 and in 1976 became the first sports writer to win a Pulitzer Prize, as it is to Grady.

In recognition of his astounding overall body of work, but specifically his superbly crafted articles on boxing, Grady, 86, has been named the latest winner of the A.J. Liebling Award, as voted on by a blue-ribbon BWAA panel. Although his health – he has been battling cancer for some time – will preclude him from attending the 89th annual BWAA Awards Dinner this spring, the date and site of which have yet to be announced, Grady said he will be attending the event in spirit. He expressed his surprise and gratitude at getting the Liebling, a career award for Outstanding Boxing Writing, and is named after one of *his* favorite boxing writers and role models.

"I love boxing because of the characters, like you find in no other sport," Grady said from his home in Reston, Va. "There are characters in politics (which Grady covered in the second phase of his remarkable career), but they aren't as colorful."

Ernest "Sandy" Grady knows of whence he speaks. A native of Charlotte, N.C., he fell in love with boxing as a young reporter for the now-defunct *Charlotte News*, where some of his early stories dealt with a flamboyant manager of local fighters known somewhat facetiously as 'Honest' John Allen.

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“They said Honest John turned a lot of champions into contenders, and it was true,” Grady said with a laugh.

Grady was hired by boy wonder *Philadelphia Daily News* sports editor Larry Merchant – himself a winner of the Liebling, in 2008 – in 1957, and he worked there until 1961, with a second stint at the paper covering national politics in Washington, D.C., from 1982 until his retirement in 2000. But some of his most memorable prose was authored as the boxing writer for Philly’s *Evening Bulletin* from 1971 to ’82.

“Philadelphia, the city of left hookers, was *the* fight town during that period,” said Grady, whose final assignment on the boxing beat for the paper was a doozy: the first Muhammad Ali-Joe Frazier superfight on March 8, 1971, in Madison Square Garden.

It was a fitting end to Grady’s thrill ride with Ali, whom he had covered at the 1960 Rome Olympics when the future three-time heavyweight champion was an 18-year-old prodigy, still known then as Cassius Clay, captured the light-heavyweight gold medal.

“I covered Ali for much of his career,” said Grady, who calls “The Greatest” one of his most memorable characters, in or out of boxing. “I defended him when he lost his (boxing) license for refusing to be inducted into the Army.”

Grady had a way of turning printed words into a thing of beauty, much as Ali did with his nimble feet and quick hands while floating like a butterfly and stinging like a bee. His story on Sonny Liston’s only fight in his briefly adopted hometown of Philadelphia, a first-round knockout of a frightened and clearly overmatched Albert Westphal in Convention Hall on Dec. 4, 1961, elicited a classic response.

“Sonny, how did Westphal look laying there?” Grady asked one of the most fearsome knockout artists of all time.

“He look *gooooooooooooood*,” said Liston, clearly enjoying the destruction he had just wrought

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inside the ropes.

But Grady's imagery was no less vivid when he was working news side or the political arena, where he covered seven Presidents and 16 national conventions. His story on the infamous bombing of the fortified MOVE compound in West Philadelphia on May 13, 1985, which resulted in 11 deaths, 53 houses burned to the ground and 250 neighborhood residents left homeless, described the scene as "a kind of domestic Vietnam."

Grady, a U.S. Navy veteran who served in the Pacific, joins a list of distinguished Liebling winners that includes, among others, Liebling himself, Shirley Povich, Budd Schulberg, W.C. Heinz, Jimmy Cannon, Robert Lipsyte, Bill Gallo, Dick Young, Pete Hamill, Alan Malamud, Edwin Pope, William Nack, George Plimpton and last year's recipient, Peter Finney. The other finalists for this year's award were Mark Whicker, Gerald Early and posthumous nominees Norman Mailer and Wilbur Wood.

"That's pretty good company," Grady said of the exclusive club he so deservedly is joining.

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