A few years ago, four former boxing champions -Floyd Patterson, Rocky Graziano, Jake “The Raging Bull” LaMotta, and I- were in a television studio ready to respond to questions from a bold, cocky host who, as we say in Puerto Rico, “had no hair in his tongue.” He was known for asking compromising questions to his guests. Our group included Chuck “The Bayonne Bleeder” Wepner, a former top heavyweight contender from Bayonne, NJ.

As we discussed the motif of the show, LaMotta, and Rocky already had a can of beer in hand. Patterson, Wepner and I were sipping on soda and munching on some wonderful hors d’oeuvre. When asked if we understood the order of things to come in the show, we all nodded our heads, laughing. Indeed, we were not believed.

From the beginning, I thought this would be an afternoon of great fun. Patterson was naturally shy and withdrawn, LaMotta was the exact opposite, Rocky was not very eloquent but loved to talk, and Wepner seemed too sober-minded for the type of interview I was expecting.

In any case, soon enough, with miniscule microphones pinned to our lapel, we found ourselves seating comfortably around a round table with plenty food and drinks and three TV cameras moving around us. Then, suddenly, the show began... live!

When asked why we had selected boxing as the way to earn our living, Rocky, LaMotta, Floyd and “The Bleeder,” each offered a reason connected to poverty and a difficult social upbringing. At the time, already experienced with government and community work, I had decided never to adopt a “victim mode” in order to justify my life as a prizefighter.

So my answer didn’t match any of my ex-colleagues’. “I became a prizefighter,” I said, “because I didn’t want to be hurt.” We all laughed, including the host, for we knew it was a wise-crack answer. “Hey,” I continued, but this time in a serious tone, “a person gets to the top induced by smartness, sensitivity and character. If you are poor, abused and an orphan, but stupid, your chances to be successful at anything is almost null. But if you are all those things and smart and determined, then you may have a better chance at reaching great heights.”

Myself? I had many good choices available when I reached adolescence. My father had his own prosperous trucking business in Puerto Rico and was absolutely fair and generous with his five sons and two daughters. He wanted everyone of his off-springs to go to college. We all made it to High School, but only two finished college -I wasn’t one of them. For I selected boxing when I joined the Army at 18, simply because since childhood and inspired by Joe Louis, “Sugar” Ray Robinson and Willie Pep- I idolized one-to-one competition. And after watching these three super champions in fight films over and over, I wanted to be a boxer.

They were the reason why I loved to street-fight in Playa de Ponce, the barrio where I was born and raised in Puerto Rico. Now, around the table in a New York TV studio, every time we had a break, Floyd, Chuck and I munched on something solid while Rocky and Jake sipped on beer.

“Were you guys always in shape,” the host wanted to know at one point, “or did you engage in female circumstances once in a while?” We smiled and looked at each other confused. I decided to answer the question.

“If we looked at women during the free time we enjoyed as we trained for a fight,” I said, “and were lucky enough to score, then we had no problem. But if we missed training or resting periods in order to chase them, then we were definitively asking for trouble.” “Not me,” Floyd butted in. “I could never be with a woman during training.”

“Why?” the host wanted to know.

“Because my knees would get very weak,” Floyd said looking down. “My opinion is based on personal experience.”

“Sex,” I asked surprised, “weakens your knees?”

“How do you make sex?” Graziano wanted to know. “Running?”

“Well,” Floyd responded shyly but assuredly, “I don’t know what sex does to you. But it makes my knees and my boxing spirit very, very weak.”

Of course, I didn’t feel like contradicting Floyd right then and there, but I was amazed with his statement. After all, we were both managed by Cus D’Amato, who had one set of rules for everyone he trained. And Cus taught each and everyone of his good fighters that sex could be convenient for athletes as long as it didn’t interfere with their training.

“I guess,” Floyd continued, “that sex affects different people in different ways.”

“Well,” I said, “most champions and top contenders I know feel more comfortable having sex during training than not having it at all. What do you say to that?”

“Like I said before,” Floyd quipped succinctly, “I guess it works differently on different people.”

Graciano bumped in and said: “Well, I couldn’t control myself when it came to women. So, I always sneaked out. And I won many more fights than I lost. So, I guess sex worked for me.” (He had a record of 83 fights,10 losses and 6 draws, scoring 52 KOs in the process.)

“I hear mediocre boxers talk all the time about the lousy effects they got in the ring after sleeping with a woman days before a fight,” said Chuck, chuckling, “but most of them had awful records. So I figure they used sex as the excuse for their failures.

“But the truth of the matter is that I know plenty of winners... top contenders, who never hesitate to engage in sex any time they got the chance,” the “Bleeder” concluded.