

Atlas at the Controls

Written by Zachary Levin

Tuesday, 27 December 2005 19:00

A chill December wind drove everyone at the ribbon cutting ceremony deep into their down coats and fur-lined gloves. All but a resolute Teddy Atlas, who wore nothing but a thin, half-zipped leather jacket.

“Eddie Argenio was a guy who knew how to shakedown the crowd,” he said as smiles broke out across a few dozen frigid faces.

He tightened his grip on the microphone, his knuckles turning white.

“Remembering the champions of life. It’s how you keep their spirit alive!”

A bottle of champagne was smashed against a humble building, which will serve as a food pantry in a derelict section of Staten Island, Mariners Harbor. Atlas’ charity—the Dr. Theodore A. Atlas Foundation (named for his late father)—has dedicated the pantry to the memory of Argenio. He was the charity’s hammer, a fundraiser nobody could refuse.

“Eddie’d work the room at our annual dinner,” Atlas said. “Then he’d tap me on the shoulder and hand over a fat envelope with \$30,000.”

He spoke with a fervor reminiscent of April 22, 1994, when he was the cornerman for the new heavyweight champ Michael Moorer—a night he captured the public’s imagination more than the combatants. Whether he’s talking about Argenio, or his father’s unflagging dedication to the sick and needy, or the mental obstacles far outweighing the physical in boxing, it’s just a variation of what he famously said to Moorer when they beat Evander Holyfield. No matter the topic, he presents the zeal of a missionary man.

Every face was tear-streaked by the time he handed the mic over to a priest who led a prayer. In truth, the cold played as big a factor as Atlas’ words. If the bruising wind bothered him, he didn’t let on.

Adjacent to the pantry, inside a heated parish, a warm buffet awaited us. The priest cut his prayer short. The crowd inched towards shelter.

Atlas asked for the mic to talk more about the pantry, the luxury of food and shelter. As if the audience were a discouraged fighter, the trainer held their eyes, disregarding their silent pleading. What’s another few minutes of discomfort?

Once everyone was fed and defrosted, a tour of the pantry was given. While there, Atlas met a worker with a cleft palate, and no means of paying for costly surgery. He promised they’d find top surgeons affiliated with the foundation to do it pro bono. He put his arms around two local councilmen who were there partly as a photo-op, and walked them over to his new cause. With reporters in tow, he got their assurance they would be partners in this mission.

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His colleague at the foundation, Kathy Zito, simultaneously rolled her eyes and smiled. She knew the disfigured man would indeed get his surgery now that Atlas had given his word. But this wasn't on the agenda. To those who know the "Friday Night Fights" boxing analyst, his gesture was as unavoidable as Winky Wright's jab. That's what makes his outfit unique, if disorderly. In foregoing the usual bureaucratic red tape and waiting period, a recipient's dignity isn't compromised.

He left the food pantry in a sporty red Lexus, which was actually an old gift from Moorer after they won the title. The trunk was stuffed with toys. When Santa Claus' sleigh breaks down on the Verrazano, he fills in.

On the drive home he talked about his father, Dr. Theodore A. Atlas, a workaholic Staten Island physician who only charged patients that could afford to pay. When making house calls, though, the doctor never turned down a pot of tea or a homemade sandwich. He was sensitive to a person's pride. He knew how empowering giving and not just receiving can be.

Conversation turned to the pervasive corruption affecting boxing—indecent promoters, greedy sanctioning bodies, inept state commissions. It was like clicking on channel 29 on Friday night, except this time the animated Atlas jumped through the screen. He proceeded to rail against boxing's dark forces for 80 blocks. However, one senses he knows corruption in boxing is like prostitution, drugs, or cockroaches: here to stay. Unlike the never-ending sleaze endemic to his sport, Teddy's charity actually makes things right, gives him results he can see.

A few minutes from his comfortable home on Todt Hill, he lowered his window and flooded the car with icy air. It invigorated him, while the rest of us froze our vital parts off. No one complained. Atlas was at the controls.