I always figured my fascination with boxing started with "Rocky."

I was a second-grader when Sly Stallone's classic hit theaters. After that came the attempted one-armed pushups, the attempted downing of the raw egg cocktail and the attempted wee-hour runs.

Key word being "attempted."

Before that were vague recollections of Muhammad Ali toying with an overmatched Richard Dunn (my brother had convinced me that Dunn had a chance) and Ken Norton destroying Duane Bobick.

Then began the classic era of the welterweights -- Sugar Ray Leonard, Thomas Hearns, Roberto Duran, Pipino Cuevas, Wilfred Benitez -- and a love affair officially had begun.

It was later that I discovered that my passion for pugilism had deeper roots.

Once or twice a year, I'd go to Carrizozo, N.M., to visit my grandfather, Jose "Pete" Aguilar. A hard-nosed railroad worker and a World War II vet who served honorably in the South Pacific, my "Grampo" shared my love for the fight game. Like me, he'd always have boxing magazines lying around the house. "The Ring." "KO Magazine." Whatever. If it had to do with boxing, he read it religiously. Just like me.

We'd talk about some of the past and contemporary stars: Bobby Chacon, Oscar De La Hoya, Fernando Vargas, Erik Morales. He liked the sluggers. The guys who came to fight. The guys who'd take three or four punches to land one.

Those slick, dancer types? Eh, not so much. But it really didn't matter.

If there was a fight on, he watched.

Just like me.

Boxing was our connection. It was that thing that sliced right through any generation gap and got us to talking freely with one another.

He had HBO. He had Showtime. He'd order pay-per-view -- the price didn't much matter. Just like me.

A couple years ago, I took a bag full of boxing tapes to Carrizozo, probably 30-50 fights, featuring every big-name boxer from the last 20 years. I thought we could watch one together. His choice, of course.

He picked Chacon vs. Cornelius Boza-Edwards II, from 1983.

We watched it with my dad and brother. We oohed and aahed like it was live -- and maybe drank a little whiskey.

I've learned that life doesn't get much better.

I left that bag of tapes with my Grampo. A few years back, I gave him my credential from the De La Hoya-Shane Mosley rematch in Las Vegas.

In my mind, they were the most appropriate kind of gifts, because it had to do with boxing -- which we both loved.

My Grampo passed away Tuesday. He was 88. You're never quite prepared for it. You think strong men like him live forever. It hit me like a Cuevas left hook to the liver.

I have a lot to thank him for. Like fighting in the war, and providing me and my fellow journalists freedom to do our jobs. And for teaching his grandkids to go to work everyday and do their jobs with honesty and integrity.

But I'm also grateful to him for giving me his appreciation for the sweet science, a sport that I love -- and a sport by which I ultimately made my living.

Thanks, Grampo. Say hi to the greats for me.

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