Former journeyman heavyweight Leroy Caldwell, who fought out of Las Vegas throughout the seventies and early eighties, was in New York in early December.

Yvonne Caples, who he has trained for three years, was here to battle Suzannah Warner of New York, via London, at the Paradise Theater in the Bronx on December 8. At stake was the NABF Atomweight (102 pound) title. Caples lost a competitive eight-round decision.

Caples, an English teacher at Silverado High School in Las Vegas, is a lot better fighter than her nominal record of 7-11-2 (1 KO) indicates. Much of that she attributes to Caldwell.

And Caldwell is proud of the work he has done with her. He guided her to the IFBA light flyweight title in July 2003. He helped make her a champion once, and he hopes to do it again soon.

Having fought the likes of Cleveland “Big Cat” Williams, George Foreman, Ron Lyle, Oscar Bonavena, Joe Bugner, Earnie Shavers, Trevor Berbick (twice), Pinklon Thomas, Gerrie Coetzee, John Tate, David Bey, Pierre Coetzer and Henry Tillman during a career that spanned from 1969-85 and produced a 27-31-5 (6 KOS) record, Caldwell knows a thing or two about boxing.

Considering the fact that his face is relatively unmarked and his mind is so sharp, no one can ever say that Caldwell was a catcher.

At one time or another he sparred with all of the great heavyweights of the seventies and early eighties.

He also worked for three years in the camp of longtime light heavyweight champion Bob Foster and helped prepare Gerry Cooney for his epic battle with Larry Holmes in 1982.

“If I didn’t fight them, I was their sparring partner,” said the 60-year-old Caldwell.

Several years ago Caldwell was banged up badly in a car accident. Although the injuries he incurred necessitated surgery on his feet and a right knee replacement, he is in relatively good health.

Unfortunately his health is about all he has going for him right now. He lost the gym in which he used to live and train several months ago when a local motorcycle club was able to pay a higher rent to the landlord than Caldwell could afford.

Before that he was partners in another gym, but opted out of that situation when things began to get ugly between him and his partner.

A month and a half ago, Caldwell, a Milwaukee native who had fought nearly 20 main events in various Las Vegas venues, found himself without a home. Although he has been forced to live in his 1992 Pontiac, he still trains fighters daily at the late Johnny Tocco's gym at Main and Charleston.

Caldwell said that plenty of friends have offered to put him up and help him out. But, he adds, "I got a lot of pride. It's getting cold now and people are inviting into their homes, but I don't want to go. I don't believe in asking. I believe in trying, but a closed mouth don't get fed."

A man of subtle and quiet dignity, it is hard to believe that Caldwell was the notorious street fighter that he says he was. Having never engaged in even one amateur bout, it was street fighting that led him to boxing.

Someone who saw him knock out two men at one time on a New Orleans street corner directed him to a local boxing gym. In very short order, he made his pro debut in June 1969. He stopped Speedy Heard in the third round. One month later Heard extended him the six-round distance, but Caldwell still emerged victorious.

Because Caldwell's now gnarled right hand had been broken so many times in his street fighting days, he was forced to campaign as a pro with little more than his left jab. He says his jab was as much of a defensive weapon as it was an offensive one.

"I was a jabber," said Caldwell, who although known in the seventies for his rare weightlifter's build, says he never lifted a weight in his life. "I had hurt my right hand so much in street fights, I was afraid to use it. My left hand was my left hand, my right hand, my everything.

"I was always muscular," he added. "It's in my genes. I used to walk up and down stairs on my hands."

After going 5-0, Caldwell was thrown to the wolves by his management.

In his eighth fight he was stopped in five by Terry Daniels in Corpus Christi, Texas. A little more than two years later Daniels would unsuccessfully challenge Joe Frazier for the heavyweight title.

In Caldwell's next bout he was stopped by the murderous punching Cleveland "Big Cat" Williams in ten in Orlando.

"When I fought Williams he was past his prime. He had already fought [Muhammad] Ali and been shot by the [state] trooper," said Caldwell. "He stopped me, but that had more to do with my inexperience than anything else."

Caldwell still marvels at how muscular Williams was. Back then fighters with such heavy musculature were very rare.

"He had muscles up his [butt]," said Caldwell. "I thought I had big muscles until I met him."

For the next two and a half years Caldwell stayed busy, picking up several wins in his adopted hometown of New Orleans.

He was matched with Ron Lyle, who was 4-0, in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin, in July 1971. Lyle had recently been paroled from a Colorado prison where he served time for murder. A tremendous puncher, he was viewed as a can't-miss prospect. Caldwell lost a five-round decision to him.

"Lyle could punch, no doubt," said Caldwell. "But you can't hurt what you can't hit and he couldn't find me."

Two fights later, Caldwell squared off against George Foreman, who was then 29-0, in Beaumont, Texas, which was close to Foreman's hometown. Foreman stopped him in two rounds.

"Foreman could punch about the same as Lyle," said Caldwell. "He caught me. He was very strong and very determined."

Nobody's punching power, asserts Caldwell, came close to that of Earnie Shavers, who was 41-2 and still had hair when he stopped Caldwell in two rounds in a high school gym in Shavers' home state of Ohio in October 1972.

"He was the hardest hitting human being I ever met," said Caldwell. "He hit harder than Foreman and Lyle combined."

Three fights after Shavers, Caldwell squared off against Oscar Bonavena at Circus Circus in Las Vegas. He was again stopped in the second round.

"I underestimated him," said Caldwell. "I saw him fight Ali and wasn't impressed. I was bouncing around the ring and didn't realize how close to the ropes I was. I bounced off the ropes and he caught me square."

After the loss to Bonavena, Caldwell was rarely stopped again. He battled Berbick to a draw in their first fight, in Berbick's home country of Canada in June 1979, was stopped in ten by Pinklon Thomas, and went the distance with past or future titlists and prospects like John Tate, Berbick (in a rematch), Randy Mack (twice), Willie "The Cannon" Shannon, Stan Ward, David Bey, Pierre Coetzer and Henry Tillman.

During that same time period, he also beat prospects Jeff Shelburg, Dave Johnson, Fili Moala, and Mircea Simon, the latter of whom was 12-0-1. He battled to a draw with Kevin Isaac, and was stopped in five rounds by Gerrie Coetzee in South Africa. He later returned to South Africa to work as a sparring partner for Coetzee, who he described as a "good fighter and a good man."

Although Caldwell was very busy, he wasn't exactly breaking the bank. While his biggest payday was the $18,000 he earned against Coetzee, his purse for Foreman was

$1,500. For Shavers and Bonavena, he made $1,000 each. Sad to say, those were his high end purses and those numbers are the gross amounts before expenses were deducted.

Throughout his career, Caldwell, who had several children, was forced to augment his income by working as a nightclub bouncer and store security guard. Although he fought hard and often, his nominal purses did little to provide him with a lifetime of security.

“I was forced to take what I could get when I was fighting,” he said. “Managers had me believing if I didn’t take this fight, I couldn’t fight there (at that venue) again. I had no one looking out for my interests. When I retired, I had nothing.”

Besides the fact that he took fights on short notice for short money, Caldwell says he was often forced to travel to his fights alone.

“Ninety-eight percent of the time,” he said. “I had to make a living, but I had to do what I had to do by myself.”

Caldwell remembers being treated like a king by the poor villagers in Soweto, South Africa. Having traveled to that country twice, to fight Coetzee and Coetzer, he said that even the white people in Johannesburg treated him with reverence.

However one day he wanted to take in a movie, so he and his escort, a local black man, went to the theater. The escort kept warning Caldwell how difficult it would be for him (the escort) to get in the theater because of the oppressive apartheid laws.

“I bought two tickets, but the lady wouldn’t let him (the escort) in,” said Caldwell. “I asked for the manager and they said only I could go in because I had a passport. They were very hung up on colors over there.

“You and I (a white man and a black man) could not stand on the corner and talk to each other back then,” he continued. “Even a light skinned black and a dark skinned black were not allowed to talk on the street.”

As badly as he was treated by the boxing establishment, Caldwell says that he refuses to be consumed by anger. But he seems genuinely hurt when he talks about all of the main events he fought in Las Vegas, but is still unable to get a ticket to the fights these days.

He still loves the boxing game and hopes to mold another champion over the next few years. He currently trains several amateurs, as well as Caples and his son Caleb, a light heavyweight who is 1-1-1 (1 KO) as a pro.

“I have a lot of boxing knowledge,” said Caldwell. “Sometimes it hurts that I did so much for so many people, but no one did anything for me. That will only help me as a trainer. Besides teaching people how to box, I can make sure they don’t have to go through what I went through. No one should have to go through their career like that.”