When I tell people I've got a soft spot for Larry Merchant they sometimes sputter, grow red in the face, and tell me I'm out my mind and need to have my head examined. I usually drop their recommendations in the suggestion box, which is conveniently located next to the shredder on the way to the executive bathroom. But there's one small problem with those snide, off-the-cuff, below the belt, quack diagnoses: I've already had my head examined! (I've got the problems to prove it.) Which leads me to conclude it must be your turn. (Take two aspirin and call me when you're better.) Because, let's face it, in a sport not known for its pleasantries, high tone, insightful analysis, let alone its noble ethos, HBO's Larry Merchant, love him or hate him, has made it a point of raising the bar, both with his language and his attitude. He spotlights megalomania like there's no tomorrow, shines a bright light in the face of the gifted when they're insufferable, and if his expectations seem out of whack with the world as we know it, maybe we'd be better off if ours were a little more out of whack with the world as we know it as well.

I grew up down and dirty in Philly and as a kid I read Merchant religiously when he wrote for the Philadelphia Daily News. He was my bread and butter, my meat and potatoes, the foundation on which I built an association between boxing and the written word. I didn't then and don't now buy or read magazines, boxing or otherwise, and was too much of a jerk to start reading books until adolescence, but I kept an interested reader's eye on Larry Merchant over the years as he moved through and out of journalism to become a force on cable TV.

I know some folks don't go for the wise old sage routine which Merchant delivers on HBO delivers with such regularity and grace. Maybe those who can't stand him figure if he's not rapping or fawning he has nothing to say and should be put to pasture. But if you forego the white hair, white skin, black and white tuxedo, not to mention his sometimes crotchety grandfatherly-like manner, to get to at the crux of what he's saying, he offers some cultured pearls of boxing wisdom.

Larry Merchant was born on February 11, 1931, in New York City. His mom was a legal secretary. His father was a "small businessman," Merchant told TSS, who ran a laundry and dry-cleaning business. "My father was also a big sports fan. My father and uncles took me to baseball games all the time. Saw a lot of football games. Pretty much my life outside school was athletics."

Baseball and football are okay, but they're not the fights, so I asked Merchant if boxing was part of his youthful equation.

"It was," he said, "because boxing was a mainstream sport. The first boxing event I can remember is listening with my father to the second Louis-Schmeling on radio. I had an uncle who fought in the amateurs. There was some distant relative, I mean some very distant relative, who had been a professional. So a lot of people were connected one way or another to boxing in those days."

Merchant enrolled in college at the University of Oklahoma. He was on the football team—“Football is a passion of mine,” he said—and once got to watch the Sugar Ball suited up and raring to go, but as per the coach’s instructions he remained sitting on the bench, forced to watch the action from the sidelines. And while he would have rather been on the gridiron, Larry Merchant, at the start of what turned into a lifelong habit, had the best seat in the house.

A shoulder injury suffered during a scrimmage KO’d his career in college ball, but the college newspaper, the Oklahoma Daily, had some openings suited to his talents. Merchant became sports editor and then editor of the paper.

But “I wasn’t 100% committed to being a sportswriter,” he said. “At one time I thought I might like to write about science, another time about politics.” He also thought about being a football coach.

After graduating from U of Oklahoma, Merchant became backfield coach at Lafayette High School in Brooklyn. But there was a war on, the Korean War, and Merchant was drafted and shipped off to Germany where he became sports editor of the Stars and Stripes.

At war’s end Merchant was discharged and got hired as sports editor of the Wilmington Daily News in Wilmington, North Carolina in 1953. Then he worked for the AP for six months, before landing the plum position of photo editor at the Philadelphia Daily News. “Don’t ask,” joked Merchant. “And from that I became sports editor when I was 26 years old. I was there 10 years.” That 10 year stint at the Philly Daily News was followed by another 10 year stint, but at the more prestigious New York Post in the more prestigious Big Apple.

Merchant did his first radio and TV during this time. He worked at NBC for a couple of years as a reporter, commentator and producer, before leaving New York and moving to the sunny clime of California. “I had written some books,” Merchant said, “sold one, wrote a screenplay, came out here and the cable revolution happened and I got sort of recruited into cable.”

Initially he was host and producer of a showed called “Sports Probe” on the USA cable network, which Merchant described as a “Meet the Press of Sports,” and then good fortune tolled when he signed with HBO to do their color commentary and analysis for the fights. That was 29 years ago.

These days the ex-sportswriter Larry Merchant is one of the most heard, if not most listened to, voices in boxing, but I wanted to know how it was for him in the beginning making the transition from the written to the spoken word.

“I had, in a sense, burned out as a columnist after 20 years,” Merchant said, “and I liked TV for two reasons. Number one, I liked the technical people—everybody seemed to be on their toes trying to make the best show they could—and secondly, it was just another way of telling a story. There came a time when I felt I wasn’t as eager to go to the ballparks as much as I had been, and I had to make a decision on whether I wanted to be one of those old columnists who kept repeating himself or did I want to move on.”

Goodbye written word. Hello TV.

“NBC had been where the Friday Night Fights were many years before,” continued Merchant, “and because of Ali they got back into the fight business and did some Ali fights on primetime, and I was the only guy around who knew anything about boxing, so I was recruited to be a commentator on Ali fights. So that’s more or less how I got into the commentating business.

“But I’d always been attracted to boxing as much because of boxing writers as the prizefights themselves. I just found that the writers had such a rich area to write about, with the shenanigans outside the ring, with all the hustlers and rustlers around the ring, and the drama going on inside the ring, that if you cared about competition, if you cared about drama in sports, if you cared about human behavior as a way of looking at sports, it just seemed like a very rich territory.”

I asked Merchant which boxing and sportswriters influenced his early work and he rattled off some iconic names: “W.C Heinz, a great boxing writer, John Lardner, who wrote a lot about boxing, A.J. Liebling, Red Smith, Jimmy Cannon, and Dan Parker in particular, who was a columnist at the New York Mirror, an old tabloid, and who wrote a lot about the colorful characters around boxing. And of course there was Hemingway, who wrote about boxing.”

Were there any examples of early boxing writing that especially stick out in Merchant’s mind?

“I tell the story of my first fight at Madison Square Garden. I was taken by an uncle, the uncle who had once been an amateur, and it was a spirited fight between two fighters whose names I’ve never forgotten: Bobby Ruffin and Johnny Greco. And the next day I read in the paper, in Dan Parker’s column, how Ruffin, if I remember correctly, ‘gave up his fish dinner in the corner’—that was the way he put it—and I can remember thinking: I’ve got to find a way to get closer to the ring.”

Closer to the ring Merchant got, but as he told TSS, “I never considered myself a boxing guy. It was just one of the things I covered as a columnist.”

Because Merchant takes the long view, as befits a man his age, he’s seen boxing’s popularity wax and wane pretty dramatically over the years, so I asked him what he thought the reasons were for boxing being held in such low esteem these days and if he thought there might be some change for the better in sight.

“It’s basically societal reasons,” answered Merchant. “Once upon a time, a young athlete would dream of becoming champion. There weren’t a lot of high school graduates, much less college graduates, at one point, and virtually every town had a gym. And kids, whether they were from coal towns or mill towns or big cities, for some of them boxing was a way out and up. But today there are alternatives, so that part has changed.

“Boxing is no longer a mainstream sport, but it has a devoted smaller following. There are about 200 boxing shows a year on cable television, including Spanish cable. It is a very big deal in the societal fabric still for Latinos—they’re just the latest racial or ethnic group that has dominated

the sport—which is a growing presence in America, which is why the sport will always be around in one form or another. And boxing, like every other major American sport except American football, has been globalized. Look at the rosters in baseball. Look at the rosters in basketball and hockey. Look who's dominating tennis now, and even to a degree golf. So boxing is more global now."

Merchant mentioned the heavyweight champions, one removed, Klitschko, Valuev, Maskaev and Liakhovich, as an example of boxing's increased globalization. He spoke of the Brawling Brit Ricky Hatton and the Welsh superstar Joe Calzaghe. He also mentioned the Philippine bomber Manny Pacquiao, who Merchant described as "the most exciting fighter in the world… In that sense, there's been a tectonic shift of the plates in boxing, and it's noticeably no longer the kind of socially acceptable kind of competition it once was. All the heavyweight prospects are playing linebacker. But it's also a shift in the sense that boxing is entertainment for most people who go [to the fights]. It's not a gut thing, as it was, for example, at the Pacquiao-Morales fight where you had a big crowd evenly divided between Filipinos and Mexicans rooting passionately for their guy. You no longer find a lot of that in the U.S. for American fighters."

As for Merchant's detractors, no doubt they're well-meaning boxing loyalists who put the word fanatic back in the words fight fan, but there's a possibility, however remote, that they don't know their bums from a hole in the ground.

"I'm not to everyone's taste. They have their favorites," said Merchant. "And my feeling is that a fighter is a performer who's frequently getting millions of dollars to get on his stage, and there are times when a fighter doesn't perform up to his standards, or does things that have to be questioned, so that's my role as a journalist. I'm trying to find the story and what happened and why it happened.

"Erik Morales, who's a guy I've championed for a long time, asked me before his last fight, why have I been hard on him, and I said, 'Well, when you've created a high standard like yourself, and then you lose three out of four fights, people want to know what's going on—and I'm one of them.' If he and his fans don't appreciate that, then I'm sorry.

"When a great singer or band or musician performs in public and the critic or the reporter goes to write about it, if his performance is beneath his customary standard or is in some way not what he normally does, then it's going to be written about and talked about. We're not just there to worship and/or appreciate, which is what every performer thinks every critic or reporter should do. We're there to ask questions. And in my mind, there's no hard questions if you know the answer.

"I understand that if the passionate fan who wants to celebrate or commiserate with his champion doesn't want to hear or see him in a way others might see him, and I get that, but it's part of the deal. If I dish it out," said Merchant, "I have to be able to take it."