

If not for Edward Gersh's gloriously battered nose, he would look more like a regal gentleman than an ex-prizefighter.

Besides being the most youthful looking 87-year-old man you will ever meet, Gersh is soft-spoken, erudite, and extremely polite. He also has one of the most unusual boxing stories you'll ever read about.

Back in the early eighties, I'd met Gersh when he was managing 1976 Olympic gold medalist Howard Davis Jr. He was a straight shooter who, during the short time he worked with Davis, resurrected his stagnating career.

Although Gersh is an academic who graduated with advanced degrees from New York University, he made his fortune in real estate and the creation of West Hills Day Camp, which has been an institution in Huntington, Long Island, for five decades.

Throughout his life he has loved boxing more than any of his other passions, of which there are many.

As a penniless student at NYU, Gersh, who fought as Eddie Irwin (Irwin is his middle name), won the New York City Golden Gloves Open Heavyweight Title in 1943. To this day, he is the only Jewish fighter to ever do so.

Just recently, Gersh addressed more than 5,000 graduates at Radio City Music Hall when he received a Distinguished Alumni Award from his alma mater.

After serving in the armed forces during World War II, Gersh, still fighting as Eddie Irwin, had a brief professional career. Over the course of just two months in 1945, he compiled a 4-0-1 (2 KOS) record.

His first and last pro fights were at Madison Square Garden, both against the much more experienced Tony Gillo. When Gersh squared off against Gillo in his pro debut, Gillo was a veteran of 44 bouts.

Had Gersh known that at the time, it wouldn't have mattered. "I never knew who I was going to fight, and I really didn't care," he said. "I left that up to my manager."

Gersh gave up fighting for a number of reasons, all of which he explains in his wonderful autobiography, "A Strong Collected Spirit: A Fighter's Memoir," which he co-wrote with Stuart Murray.

A gifted athlete, Gersh grew up poor and utilized sports as his ticket out of poverty. Besides finding success in the ring, Gersh was a superb football player and later an assistant football

coach at NYU.

Because Gersh has worn so many hats during his nine decades on this earth, it is hard to keep track of them all. Among other things, he was the disciplinary dean for many years at one of Spanish Harlem's toughest public schools.

Gersh utilized his own brand of discipline, most of which would be frowned upon today, to earn the respect of the most difficult students. One of those students, Wilfred Avellez, became a professional heavyweight boxer.

Between various prison stints, Avellez compiled a 12-5 (5 KOS) mark from 1959 to 1964.

"I was the most stabilizing force in his life," said Gersh. "Anytime he was with me, he was okay. When he wasn't with me, he would get into trouble. One time he started a riot in a minimum security prison, so they sent him to a maximum security prison. Because Wilfred is such a born leader, they put him in solitary for the last two weeks of his sentence so he couldn't influence the general population."

Avellez is now over 65 and lives in a home near Gersh's day camp. In the summer, he teaches children how to fish and ride horses.

"I always saw something in him that other people didn't," said Gersh. "He is a wonderful person and a wonderful teacher. The kids love him."

As much as Gersh loved the world of academia, he wanted more out of life than being a teacher or school administrator could provide. In mid-1950s, he and others scraped together enough money to establish the day camp. Although they hit one roadblock after another, Gersh, being the fighter that he is, persevered.

He eventually made a fortune through camping and real estate, which enabled him to get back to boxing in a big way in the early 1980s. Although he had been a longtime professional wrestling referee, boxing had always been nearest and dearest to his heart.

In later years, however, it would bring him no shortage of grief.

He writes of being betrayed by Davis and other championship caliber fighters like Darrin "Schoolboy" Van Horn, who briefly held a super middleweight world title, and "Fearless" Freddie Pendleton, a talented but hard-luck lightweight with a losing record who Gersh transformed into a top contender and eventual world champion.

This great book has something for everyone. Those who love old New York will relish Gersh's anecdotes about growing up in the world's greatest city, his forays to the fabled Gleason's and Stillman's Gyms, and his time at NYU.

Equally interesting are his descriptions of East Harlem in the 1950s, when Italian and Puerto Rican gangs were battling each other over turf. Gersh was in the middle of this evolving social

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saga, which he describes vividly and colorfully.

Equally compelling is the daunting task of doing business with promoters like Don King, Bob Arum, the Duva family and Cedric Kushner, all of which is covered in entertaining and illuminating fashion.

It is obvious that Gersh is a savvy businessman, but trying to gain entry into the small and unfriendly fraternity of major boxing promoters was more than he bargained for.

As much as Gersh loves the sport of boxing, he abhors the business aspect of it. His third wife, Holli, to whom he's been married for 20 years, couldn't agree more.

"The business of boxing is terrible, no question about it," she said. "My husband says he has to conquer the urge to get back into boxing. I conquer the urge for him."

As rich as Gersh is from a financial, familial, emotional and logistical standpoint, you can't help but think that he looks back nostalgically to simpler times, when as poor and struggling as he was he could always find refuge in a boxing ring.

Few people have lived life with the gusto, relish and personal integrity that Gersh has. What makes him so endearing, and his book so whimsical and readable, is that he seems to have spent his entire life doing the right thing.

"I've lost a lot of money promoting fights and managing fighters," said Gersh, whose Manhattan apartment was owned by the late Howard Cosell. "But I loved every minute of it, and I would do it all over again if the right fighter came along."

"A Strong Collected Spirit: A Fighter's Memoir" can be purchased on-line at Amazon.com or Beekmanbooks.com.