

George Kimball (1943-2011)

Written by Thomas Hauser
Thursday, 07 July 2011 11:21



George Kimball was diagnosed with inoperable esophageal cancer in the summer of 2005.

Many people engage in a flurry of activity when they're in their sixties to make up for time lost when they were young. George was determined to make up for time that he knew he would lose at the end.

Over the next six years, George was living, not dying. He was as content and productive as most people are at any time in their lives.

He added to his legacy as a writer by authoring *Four Kings* (the definitive work on the round-robin fights among Sugar Ray Leonard, Marvin Hagler, Thomas Hearns, and Roberto Duran). That was followed by *Manly Art* (a collection of George's own columns about the sweet science). He also edited two anthologies with John Schulian (*At the Fights: American Writers on Boxing* and *The Fighter Still Remains: A Celebration of Boxing in Poetry and Song*).

On a more personal level, George's wife and soulmate wife, Marge Marash, was a source of strength, comfort, and joy to him throughout these difficult years.

George confronted his illness with candor and courage, adding a measure of humor to the mix. Earlier this year, he asked me if I'd be available, if necessary, to cover for him at a reading of his work.

"I agreed to do an April 7th event," George wrote to me on January 9th. "But I start a pretty heavy-duty chemo regimen on Monday [January 17th]. I've had all three drugs they'll be using before, though not in this particular combination. None of them were much fun. They'll do another PET scan in early March to see if it had any effect. If it hasn't, I imagine they'll discontinue treatment and just try to make me comfortable for as long as I last. In other words, there is a possibility that I won't last until April, in which case you might have to do my share of the reading. I have every intention of being there on April 7th. But if I'm not, I'll have the best of

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all excuses. Cheers, GK”

George made it to the reading, as well as other readings including a celebration of his work at the New York Athletic Club. By that time, he was fortified by the knowledge that he would never go back to the hospital again regardless of how his illness progressed. He died at home last night (July 6th). In keeping with his wishes, there will be no funeral. A memorial service will be held at a later date.

A profile that I wrote seven years ago follows, so readers can learn more about this remarkable man.

George took pride in his writing. He was more than a chronicler of the boxing scene; he was part of it. He was one of the people who I knew would always be at ringside when I went to the fights. It's sad that he'll no longer be there.

George Kimball

By Thomas Hauser (2004)

The term "boxing writer" is often a misnomer. There are people with press credentials who report on fights. Others write snippets. But there are few writers.

George Kimball is a man of letters. He was born on December 20, 1943, the oldest of seven children. His father was a career military officer, who retired as a colonel and maintained that he would have been a general were it not for the anti-war activities of his offspring. But that comes later in the saga.

"I grew up all over the world," Kimball recalls. "When I was young, I spent more time in Kentucky than anyplace else. But I was born in California. I lived in Texas and Taiwan. My freshman year of high school started in Maryland and ended in Germany."

Kimball's college years began on a ROTC scholarship at the University of Kansas. He and future Hall of Fame halfback Gale Sayers lived on the same dormitory floor as freshman.

And they were buddies; right?

Wrong.

"Gale was cold, moody, and glowering," Kimball remembers. "Years later, we talked about it; and he told me that, when he was eighteen, he hadn't been around white people before. He didn't think he belonged in college. He wasn't unfriendly; just insecure."

Meanwhile, in Kimball's words, "The revolution was calling." Ergo, in 1965, he was expelled from the University of Kansas for picketing the local draft board while carrying a sign that read "fuck the draft." The same incident led to his arrest on a charge of committing an act of gross public indecency. "They treated it like a sex crime," he explains. Ultimately, he served

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two-and-a-half days in jail for the offense. One of his nights in incarceration was spent in a cell with two murderers.

Thus began a pattern, in Kimball's words, of, "Go to school; drop out; get a job; quit; get another job; go back to school; quit again. I never graduated from college," he acknowledges, "although over the years, I've taken courses at the University of Kansas, St. Mary's College, Massachusetts Bay Community College, and the Iowa Writers Workshop; also extension courses at Harvard."

Kimball was arrested for anti-war activity a half-dozen times. But his most dramatic run-in with the law came in New York on a charge of assaulting a police officer. "That one was non-political," he notes. "The cop was refusing to help a woman who was ill; some words were exchanged; and I slugged him. The cop was clearly in the wrong and the charges against me were dismissed, although I did get beaten up and spent a night in jail. In my younger days," Kimball admits, "I spent many nights in jail for drinking, partying, and possession of marijuana, but never more than a night or two at a time."

In 1970, Kimball embarked upon a new adventure; returning to Lawrence (home of the University of Kansas) to run for county sheriff. Douglas County was heavily Republican. The Democrats didn't even run a candidate for many local offices. A half-hour before the deadline to enter the primaries, Kimball showed up with the hundred-dollar filing fee, entered the Democratic primary, and ran unopposed, which meant that he got the Democratic nomination for sheriff by default.

"A lot of the campaign was high theatre and camp," Kimball reminisces. "The Republican incumbent was the same guy who had arrested me in 1965. He had a withered arm, so I distributed bumper stickers that read, 'Douglas County needs a two-fisted sheriff.' Abby Hoffman came for a campaign rally and offended some voters when he was was photographed afterward at a rock concert blowing his nose into an American flag."

But on a more serious note, there was a lot of violence in Lawrence that summer. The black section of town erupted after a police officer shot a black teenager in the back of the head and killed him. Soon, there were riots, bombings, sniper assaults, and arson. A state of emergency was declared. The governor ordered the Kansas Highway Patrol into Lawrence.

And it all played out against the backdrop of the war in Vietnam, the invasion of Cambodia, and the killings at Kent State.

"I was a member of the Lawrence Liberation Front," Kimball says of that time. "And I was also defense chairman of the White Panthers Party, so I wasn't a particularly popular candidate with the establishment. I got blamed for a lot of things that I didn't do and a few that I did. The chairman of the state Democratic party endorsed my opponent, and I got something like thirteen percent of the vote."

"That was a long time ago," Kimball says, reflecting back on his run for public office. "I'm not the active political person I once was, although I'm still politically interested. And I have a strong

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sense of outrage toward the present administration. I wouldn't say that I roll out of bed each morning saying, 'Fuck George Bush.' But it's close to that."

Meanwhile, as Kimball was living as a counterculture activist, his life took a literary turn. After several hitchhiking trips to San Francisco and stints as a bartender and cab driver, he moved to New York and got a job at the Scott Meredith Literary Agency in 1965. He also immersed himself in the Lower East Side poetry scene and authored several articles for the Village Voice. Then, in 1967, Maurice Girodias (publisher of the Olympic Press in Paris) took an interest in his writing. Olympic was publishing English-language editions of erotic fiction like *Lady Chatterly's Lover*, which American publishers were loath to print. Thus it came to pass that *Only Skin Deep* by George Kimball (described by its author as "the erotic adventures of a high school girl in Kansas") was bequeathed to the world.

In 1968, Kimball authored a poem that appeared in *The Paris Review*. Thereafter, he published several volumes of poetry. "I wouldn't say that poetry was my first love," he muses. "But yeah; I guess you could say that. Eventually, though, I drifted away from poetry and found other ways to express myself."

One mode of expression was writing about sports.

In 1970, after living in New York and running unsuccessfully for Douglas County sheriff, Kimball moved to Massachusetts to pursue a career as a freelance writer. There, he reviewed music for *Rolling Stone* and books for *Playboy*. But his primary gig was writing a weekly sports column for a counterculture weekly called *The Phoenix*.

Kimball's career as a sportswriter had begun in Kentucky when he was in eighth grade and reported on junior high school football games for the *Murray Democrat*. Then, as a high school student in Maryland, he'd covered local sports as a stringer for all four Washington DC daily newspapers. "But *The Phoenix* was the real turning point for me," he reminisces. "I was there for almost ten years. I can honestly say that *The Phoenix* took me everywhere that I've gone to since."

Kimball left *The Phoenix* in late-1979 on the theory that it was time to do something else. Then, in February 1980, after freelancing several pieces for the *Boston Herald*, he went on staff as a columnist. That same year, Marvin Hagler (who was from the Boston area) won the world middleweight championship and Kimball prevailed upon the powers that be to let him write a weekly boxing column. By the time Hagler retired, seven years and many championship fights later, George was well-established as the *Herald's* boxing writer.

Over the years, Kimball has covered thirty Super Bowls, the World Series, the NBA Finals, all four golf majors, Wimbledon, the summer and winter Olympics, and countless other sports events. He's also the primary football columnist for the *Herald*. By his estimate, he spends twenty-five percent of his time on boxing. That includes covering big fights and local boxing stories in addition to writing a Sunday "boxing notes" column.

"When I first started writing boxing," Kimball says, "I knew virtually nothing about the business

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end of it. I'd enjoyed watching boxing on television, but that was the extent of my knowledge. I've now covered something like 330 world title fights. And I realize that understanding the business end of boxing is essential to understanding the rest of it."

"The best fight I've ever seen," Kimball continues, "was Leonard-Hearns I, although Ward-Gatti I is up there. Hagler-Leonard was memorable for many reasons, one of which was the fact that Marvin had no idea that the fight was slipping away from him. I scored it for Leonard by a point. It still amazes me how fighters, good fighters, can go through their entire career and not understand how a fight is scored. Ray Leonard understood; Marvin didn't. He didn't realize that Leonard was winning rounds with flurries of punches and by going all out in the last thirty seconds of each round to impress the judges."

Kimball smokes at least two packs of cigarettes a day ["closer to three when I'm driving or playing golf"]. He hasn't had a drink in twelve years ["I just decided I'd had enough"]. And he hasn't smoked marijuana in more than a decade ["I came to the realization that it was making me sleepy and stupid"].

He has been married three times. The first two marriages were when he was young and lasted two years each. His third marriage, which ended in divorce in 2003, lasted twenty-one years and begat him a son and daughter. He plans to marry for the fourth (and final) time on April 3, 2004, in a ceremony presided over by the Reverend George Foreman. His bride to be, Marge Marash, is a New York City psychiatrist.

Thus, reflecting back on the habits of his youth, Kimball says philosophically, "Finally, after sixty years, I'm marrying someone who can write drug prescriptions for me. And it's too late."

ADDENDUM

The wedding took place at The Nuyorican Poets Cafe in Manhattan. The Reverend George Foreman, wearing a tuxedo, looked relaxed and fit. Long ago, he was a glowering presence, but now there's an aura of good will about him.

"The first marriage I performed was in New Jersey in 1978," Foreman reminisced shortly before the noon service. "I had an old friend who had become a lion and tiger trainer. He fell in love with the lady who cleaned the cages and decided he couldn't live without her, so I flew all the way from Texas to marry them. Since then, I've married hundreds of people all over the world. I even did a wedding once in the Astrodome with 52,000 people watching during haltime of a football game. I'll never forget that. A young man and woman who were engaged won a contest to be married by George Foreman. I asked the whole crowd to be quiet and they were respectful."

"I wish people would think more carefully before they get married," Foreman continued. "I know what it's like to fumble and mess up because I've been married five times, and I'm proud of the fact that I've been married now to the same woman for twenty years. Marriage is serious; it's hard work; it's not to be played with. A good marriage is for the rest of your life."

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At the start of the ceremony, Foreman offered a brief prayer. Then, speaking in a preacher's cadence, he led the bride and groom through the language of the ages. There was one moment of levity when his voice hardened and he intoned, "If there's anyone here today who knows why these two should not be wed in holy matrimony, speak now or forever hold your peace."

No one spoke.

"I didn't think so," Foreman said.

Then the ceremony continued.

"With this ring, I declare my faith in you and in us . . . With this ring, I declare my intention to cherish you as I do today for all the days of our lives together."

And finally, "I declare thee man and wife. What God has joined together, let no man tear asunder."

So congratulations to George and Marge Kimball. They're a well-matched couple. And how many people can say to the world, "We were married by George Foreman."

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Radam G says:

And so that thing known as death has claim another one of our finest. My deepest condolences to the family and love ones of G-Kim. So busy has the crossroad been as of late. G-Kim was a diamond. Diamonds are forever. His awesome writing will BLING, BLING in our hearts forever. I'll see your light at the crossroad in the morning of the hereafter, G-Kim! Holla!

MisterLee says:

I'm gonna miss Kimball Slice. Him, Toledo, Borges, and F-lo help make this publication colorful and insightful. Of course Markanian, an occasional from Nguyen, and EM keep the site in check, and Raskin's Rants are starting to grow on me. Slice: Thanks for the memories and helping me, a boxing noob, learn from your writings. And I bought your book last year. For the last from a TSS fan: Holler!

Real Talk says:

My condolences to the Kimball family. It's been a good ride through this life for him but now he goes to be with the Lord. Rest in peace brother, your write ups will be missed. I wish he knew about the Tahitian Noni juice then he wouldn't have to have suffered through the Chemo and

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radiation. My aunt passed from cancer last year, when I was able to send her the Noni juice she bounced back but when the recession hit and I was unable to send her the juice...she took a turn for the worse after while. Cancer cannot exist in an oxygen rich environment and the Noni juice goes straight to your liver and lower intestines where 75% of our immune system is. It detoxes you and provides your body with so many nutrients that they're rewriting the medical books. It has been said to cure everything from arthritis to alzheimers. I recommend everyone drink it. I have many testimonies but my breakfast is getting cold. Dueces