

REST IN PEACE, BUTCH LEWIS

Written by Ron Borges
Sunday, 24 July 2011 10:27



The first time I met Butch Lewis it was so long ago he was wearing a shirt.

Butch was as loud that day as he grew to be when he was at the peak of his promotional career but by then his trademark was what he called his "Chocolate Tuxedo," an odd fashion statement that would only fit in the world of boxing.

Lewis' crowning promotional moments came in the 1970s and '80s, when he would be regularly found in the ring wearing a bow tie, collar, cuffs with cuff links, a splendid tux...and no shirt. Don King had his hair. Butch Lewis had a hairless chest.

Sadly, boxing lost another character sometime in the late hours of Friday night or the early ones of Saturday morning when the 65-year-old Lewis suffered a massive heart attack at his home in suburban Delaware and died. Although Lewis had little to do with boxing in recent years, turning most of his energy to promoting a record label and several singers, his connection to boxing remained unbroken because he was unique.

That is not simply because he rose to prominence without a shirt. It was because he was loyal to his fighters in a way seldom seen in the sport.

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Although he seemed to leave the stage the same time former light heavyweight and heavyweight champion Michael Spinks did nearly 15 years ago, Butch Lewis was not a man you forgot. At least not if you had ever spent some time with him.

Originally Lewis worked as a Philadelphia car salesman at his father's Volkswagen dealership and there is no better training ground for a boxing promoter than to be a car salesman. Promoting fighters is like selling cars in many ways, not the least being that the truth is not always helpful in either endeavor.

Lewis got into boxing through his friendship with Joe Frazier, at whose side he often was found in the years Frazier dueled with his great nemesis, Muhammad Ali. Like most promoters, Lewis eventually ended up on both sides of that fence and remains one of the few people to have worked for the sport's two biggest promoters: Bob Arum and Don King.

Once a vice-president of Top Rank, Arum's highly successful promotional company, Lewis eventually went off on his own. Briefly, he and King formed a promotional company aptly called "Dynamic Duo" but the fact is there was no arena quite big enough for both King's hair and Lewis' shirtless chest.

Not once during their time together or later did Lewis call King by his name. In later years he would say "Don" with some respect but in those days King was always "Bushy" to Lewis, an example of his irreverent wit and impish manner.

But to underestimate Butch Lewis as a promoter was a grave mistake. King and HBO found that out when they tried to create a heavyweight title unification series that would include Spinks.

Initially, Lewis agreed but when he got the opportunity for an easier payday of comparable numbers against Gerry Cooney, he took it. Spinks destroyed Cooney and refused to participate in HBO's series as Tyson stormed through the tournament while HBO sued Lewis to try and force Spinks' inclusion.

Lewis prevailed but during a deposition hearing I was called in as an expert witness and questioned by lawyers from the two sides. Lewis was on speaker phone from Philadelphia when one of his lawyer's asked me about an interview I had done with Spinks and Lewis as Spinks trained in the Poconos.

When asked how I was sure Lewis was there I said, "He paid for lunch. If you check his taxes I'm sure he wrote it off."

You could hear Lewis cackling through the speaker phone.

In the end Lewis stared down HBO and landed one of the biggest guarantees in boxing history, \$13.5 million for Spinks to risk life, limb and the IBF version of the heavyweight title. Then HBO Sport president Seth Abraham was furious with Lewis, who he believed had gone back on his word, but admitted reluctantly that Lewis had advocated well for his fighter.

That was true until fight night. As Spinks sat nervously in his locker room, Lewis – shirtless and

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bombastic as always – stormed into Tyson’s and demanded his hands be re-wrapped. As the controversy grew, Tyson sat seething while staring a hole through Lewis’ bare chest.

When the wraps were finally okayed, Tyson got up and punched a whole in the wall of his trailer. Soon after he did the same to Spinks, knocking him into retirement in 91 seconds.

While perhaps it might have been wiser for Butch to have brought Tyson a Coke rather than get him riled up, he’d done his job. Michael Spinks had enjoyed one of the biggest paydays in boxing history and did not have to wade his way through a number of dangerous heavyweights to get to Tyson after having first won the heavyweight title by twice outpointing Larry Holmes.

Lewis also promoted Spinks’ brother Leon when he won the heavyweight title from Muhammad Ali in one of the biggest upsets in boxing history and co-promoted a rematch in which Spinks lost to Ali in front of 63,350 at the Louisiana Superdome, the largest indoor crowd for a fight in boxing history.

Lewis once believed he had found the new Ali in Greg Page, a big, fast-moving heavyweight in the Ali mold. King stole Page away but Lewis sued him and won him back. Unfortunately for Lewis, Page never quite lived up to expectations and soon was back in the King fold.

In later years Lewis move into music promotions and movie production, his biggest event being the comeback concert of James Brown after he was released from prison, but it always seemed the place where he belonged was promoting a big fight.

Butch Lewis was the kind of guy you find less and less in sports today. He was an original. He talked the talk and walked the walk, a man unable to give his fighters the shirt off his back because he didn’t wear one but one who gave them what they needed most – a loud and loyal advocacy.

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Radam G says:

Nice copy. BL was DA MAN! He knew how to get jiggy! And YES! He showed those suckas who would get piggy. Nobody could lock him out. The 'Chocolated Tuxedo," no-shirt wearing promoter was DA BOMB back in day DAY! He had it goin' on, and on, and on, and on! Much LUV, BL! On that DAY of yours' truly, meet me at the crossroad. Dat's where da parteeee gonna be at. Until dat day, HOLLA!