Written by Springs Toledo
Friday, 23 September 2011 12:20

"One loses force when one pities."- Friedrich Nietzsche,The Anti-Christ [1895]

"This is getting stranger and stranger," said Ferdie Pacheco after Mike Tyson took a bite out of Evander Holyfield's ear, "we're getting to see strange things happen in boxing."

Seven-hundred and forty-three Saturday nights later, we watched young Victor Ortiz billy-goat Floyd Mayweather after backing him up against the ropes. We watched him apologize to Mayweather with a kiss after referee Joe Cortez stopped the action to parade him around the ring for a point deduction. We wondered why Cortez called "time in" and then averted his attention away from the action. We winced when Ortiz stepped towards Mayweather to apologize yet again and witnessed Mayweather return the clumsy embrace. Suddenly, lightning in the form of a left hook and right hand obliterated the familiar rhythm of the scene. Ortiz had

only begun to move casually out of the embrace with his gloves dangling at his sides. He neither saw nor expected the punch that knocked him out. Neither did we.

Larry Merchant called it a legal sucker punch, which is about right. Many fans and internet pundits point to the flagrant foul committed against Mayweather and applaud his delayed ruthlessness. This isn't an English country dance, we're reminded. "This isn't a gentleman's sport," Mayweather says, "it's a hurtin' game!" A boxing proverb ("protect yourself at all times") has become a chant and everyone is joining in.

They're not wrong, though that is not the end of it.

There's something else that few are acknowledging, something older and wiser that doesn't shout or gloat or drink from the skulls of the vanquished. It whispers underneath the din. The depleting ranks of an older generation called it the Golden Rule –"*do unto others as you would have them do unto* you." How quaint. They had a children's fable that went along with it, promising judgment on how well they upheld it. Can you hear it creak? The Golden Rule looks like another artifact to pitch on the growing heap of a dead morality. Perhaps it is recyclable. Shall we update it with the civic poison of the cynic?
Do unto others as they would do unto you –only do it first.

Is that what it's all about?

Floyd thinks so, and he's got a pattern to prove it. This isn't the first time that he exploited a situation to gain an advantage. Two years ago, he signed to fight Juan Manuel Marquez –a natural featherweight. The contracted weight for the fight was 144 lbs, with fines to be paid in the amount of $300,000 per pound over that weight. Marquez came in two pounds less than the limit. And Mayweather? He shrugged his shoulders, weighed in two pounds *more* than the weight limit, and paid the $600,000 fine with a smirk. The pundits grumbled at this. Here was a supreme boxer who felt the need to gain an additional weight advantage that he didn't even need; here was the in-your-face star of 24/7, with just enough shame to disallow HBO from weighing him before the fight, so no one would know how much of a weight advantage he actually had.

Mayweather did not breach that agreement anymore than he breached the rules last Saturday, what he did was sneer at it. That was why the pundits grumbled –an athlete who sneers at an agreement is an athlete who sneers at sportsmanship.

"When you fight for a living," said the infamously unsportsmanlike Fritzie Zivic, "if you're smart you fight with every trick you know." Fritzie boasted nine zillion of them. He butted his opponents like Ortiz, mauled them, stomped on their feet, used his elbow like Mayweather, and choked his opponents whenever he could. *Do unto others as they would do unto you –only do it first.* He had nothing but disdain for fighters who fought by the book. According to Zivic virtue, "the book is something you could clout a guy with if you had it ready." In his retirement he would reflect fondly on his fistic memories –among them was a gem from 1943, a one-rounder against Vinnie Vines at Madison Square Garden:

"In the first round we got tangled up in a clinch and when he stepped out of the clinch he extended his gloves to me. I reached out and hit him a right hand on the chin. Knocked him out."

It could've been last week. The Associated Press reported that Vines "went down with a thump. He tried to get up at the count of nine but fell back, starry eyed." Afterward, Fritzie dismissed his opponent as easily as he dismissed conventional ideas of fair play. "There was nothing to it," he said in the dressing room, "I can keep on fighting until I'm 50 if I meet boys like him."

"That's boxing," said Fritzie.

Is it?

Three years after the Vines fight, Fritzie's manager asked him if he wanted to take a trip to Memphis to fight one Russell Wilhite for an easy payday. The manager asked him if he was in shape. "I don't have to be in shape," replied Fritzie, "Any fighter with a name like that cannot fight." Just the same, he brought a pair of gloves that weighed about five ounces, with three of

those ounces at the wrists. Why huff and puff through all those rounds when you can get him out of there and go home early? In the dressing room, he got a look at his opponent. Wilhite was still in high school and Fritzie thought he looked like a choir boy. But then something dark whispered inside his balding head, 'choir boys have good lungs,' it said, 'and those light gloves might not be enough of an edge.' So he loaded his hands with electrical tape.

–And why not? Once time-honored rules of decency are shaken off, the rest is easy. A world class fighter becomes something less than world class and sometimes something less than a man. The modern cynic couldn't care less. He has declared himself immune to judgment and scoffs at any appeal to a dead morality. He exercises his fundamental right to do as he pleases and he has the whole rotten, stinking world to stick it to. "Nice fellows in boxing get it in the neck," went one of Zivic's zingers. Another one could be engraved on the Mayweather family crest: "The winners make the money, the losers make the excuses."

Fritzie would tell you lots of things. After his career ended, he was still at it –telling lots of things to lots of people as a car salesman. Floyd Mayweather tells you lots of things too. He smirks and shrugs his shoulders and hasn't the faintest feeling of regret for what he did, least of all for hurling obscenities at an 80-year-old commentator. He insists that Merchant needs to be fired. "Out with the old and in with the new," he told the world as his fair-weather friends cheered him on, "only the strong survive." Nietzsche cheered with them.

Something else went unrecognized and ignored. Something older than Merchant and wiser than Nietzsche, that doesn't shout or gloat or drink from the skulls of the vanquished. If you listen with your heart you might hear it, even here in 'the red light district of sports', whispering its golden truth above the din.

…..

Jimmy Cannon first called boxing "the red district of sports"; Mayweather's penalties in the Marquez fight reported by ESPN.com; Fritzie Zivic's statements in "You Gotta Fight Dirty," in *Tr ue*
circa 1959; "Zivic Virtue" coined by Dan Parker; Vines fight reported by AP 9/11/43; Zivic as car

salesman in
Pittsburgh Post,
1957.

Springs Toledo may be contacted at scalinatella@hotmail.com .