The sports world is paying tribute to Angelo Dundee, who died on February 1st at age ninety. But the boxing community suffered another loss that day. Referee Wayne Kelly died after a massive heart attack at age 63.

Kelly served with the United States Army in Vietnam and fought professionally in the 1970's. His career record was a modest four wins and three losses with two knockouts. The composite record of his opponents at the time he fought them was one win against eight losses and a draw.

"I'd like to think that I'm a better referee than I was a fighter," Wayne said years afterward.

He was.

Kelly began refereeing in 1988. He didn't play the political game with the world sanctioning organizations to the extent that he might have. That cost him some high-profile assignments, but he had his share of big fights.

Wayne was the third man in the ring for Arturo's Gatti's first championship victory (against Tracy Harris Patterson). Three months later, he oversaw Gatti's dramatic comeback triumph over Wilson Rodriquez on the night that the Arturo Gatti legend was born. A less-knowing referee

might have stopped that fight.

He was also the New York State Athletic Commission's go-to guy for big heavyweight bouts. Wayne presided over three Wladimir Klitschko championship contests (vs. Chris Byrd, Calvin Brock, and Sultan Ibragimov) and, most notably, the infamous confrontation between Riddick Bowe and Andrew Golota at Madison Square Garden that ended in an ugly riot on July 11, 1996.

"Golota was clearly winning the fight," Kelly later recalled. "He was outjabbing Bowe. He was outboxing Bowe. He was outpunching Bowe. And he kept throwing low blows. I don't know why. It was so unnecessary and stupid. How many warnings can I give and how many points can I deduct? Enough is enough. Finally, I had no choice but to disqualify him."

Thereafter, Wayne occasionally joked, "Great! My legacy will be that I'm the guy who started a riot at Madison Square Garden."

Wayne Kelly was a class act and one of the many people who do their part to make boxing a great sport. He knew that the fighters, not the referee, were the story. When giving instructions before a bout, he never called attention to himself by uttering a signature phrase or doing anything else to grab the spotlight. He had a smile and kind word for everyone he met and was always willing to offer advice to young referees who were learning their craft.

He was also a terrific referee; a blue-collar guy who got in the ring and did what he was supposed to do. He had great positioning and great judgment. He didn't stop fights too soon and he didn't let them go on too long. The boxing community could always count on Wayne Kelly to do his job right.

Thomas Hauser can be reached by email at thauser@rcn.com. His most recent book (*Winks and Daggers: An Inside Look at Another Year in Boxing*) was published by the University of Arkansas Press.

Comment on this article

Radam G says:

Condolences to the fam and love ones of WK! We'll see him at the crossroad on that Day of Glory. Holla!

mortcola says:

Preach it, Rad. The man played to a full house tonight in his farewell appearance, more love in one room than I can ever remember. Godspeed, pal.