

THE HAT

Written by Randy Gordon
Monday, 26 March 2012 12:24

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Thanks to Randy Gordon for sharing this piece with us. This Hearn's issue, which they put out together, is the best-selling Ring of all time.

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It was in late June, 1979, that I received a phone call at home.□□

“Hi, Randy!” boomed the powerful voice on the end of the phone. “This is Bert Randolph Sugar.”
□

“Bert Sugar, the boxing writer,” I asked? “That Bert Sugar?”□□

“No, not that Bert Sugar. This Bert Sugar,” replied the powerful voice.□□

“Hello, Bert, to what do I owe the honor of this phone call?”

□□ “I have an offer to make to you,” said Bert. “A job offer.”□□

My eyes opened wide in wonderment.□□

“What kind of job offer, Bert?” I asked.□□

“Well, how about you meet me for lunch in New York City. If you can't get out of work for lunch, we can do dinner. We can do a Saturday. You tell me.”□□

At the time, I was working for a small publishing company called G.C. London Publishing Corp. We published boxing and wrestling magazines. I was the company's Assistant Editor. I was making \$12,500. That wasn't per month. That was my annual salary. Of course I'd listen to Bert Randolph Sugar. I told the owner, Stanley Weston, I had a dental appointment. □□ I met Sugar two days later at a restaurant/bar called O'Reilly's Pub. It was just up the block from both Madison Square Garden and the offices of Ring Magazine. He was sitting at a table near the door. Sugar was hard to miss, wearing a black fedora, smoking a large cigar and bellowing laughter while holding court with around a half dozen patrons.□□ I walked over to him and

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extended my hand.□□

“Bert Sugar, I'm Randy Gordon.”□□

“RANDY!” Bert shouted. He stood up and shook my hand. Then he announced, “Everyone, this is Randy Gordon. He is going to be my new Editor-in-Chief.”□□

All over the restaurant, patrons lofted their drinks.□□

“Huh? What's going on?” I wondered. The owner came over and congratulated me and told me he'd like to buy me a drink. I didn't dare tell the owner of an Irish pub that I had to go back to work and wouldn't be having a drink. I ordered a beer.□□

“I'll bring you two!” he said. “We must celebrate your new job.”

□□ I looked at Sugar and asked, “What new job? What have I accepted that I haven't been told about yet?”

□ Sugar leaned forward and became serious.

□□ “What do you know about the current status of Ring Magazine?” he asked.□□ I didn't have to think. The granddaddy of all boxing magazines was, in boxing terms, “shot.” Finished. Washed up. Its fighter ratings had been at the center of a highly publicized scandal in which promoter Don King and ABC television were also involved. It became known as the King/Ring/ABC scandal. Of the three, ABC and Don King flourished. Ring Magazine, however, was (excuse the pun) floored by the scandal. Boxing fans found it inexcusable for the 75-year-old magazine to have knowingly and purposefully tweaked their once-respected ratings and allowed in fighters who had no right being listed among the best in the world. Sales of the magazine took it from champion to street-corner bum in a very short time. My boss, Stanley Weston, had spoken about purchasing the magazine. Bert Sugar beat him to it.□□ I told Sugar I know that Ring

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Magazine had become an unreadable rag, that it was a joke from cover to cover.

“You are 100% correct,” said Sugar. “The magazine is dead. I bought it for a song and a dance, that's how dead it is.”

“So, you are now the Publisher of a dead magazine and are now announcing to everyone that I am your new Editor? What are we the Publisher and Editor of?”

“We are now in control of one of the biggest names in the publishing industry,” said Bert. “Ring Magazine. The Ring. The Bible of Boxing. And I'd like to correct you. The Ring is not dead. It's on life support. You and I are the doctors who will revive it. I know we can.”

Then he looked me in the eyes and said, “Look, I won't blame you if you turn me down. You have a fulltime job. You receive a check every week. After one issue, we may be out of business and you'll be out of work. But I believe in us. I believe you and I can build The Ring, not only back to respectability, but to being bigger and more popular than ever before. I want to do this and I believe you are the man to do it with me. Go home, discuss it with your wife. Take a few days and let me know.”

I didn't need to discuss it. I knew then and there that a new chapter in boxing's long, storied history was about to be written, and that Bert Sugar and I would play a large part in writing it.

“When do I start?” boss, I asked Sugar. I didn't even ask about money. I didn't even care about money. I was about to be made Editor of The Ring. Riches? Bert had just made me rich by asking me to become the Editor.

“You'll accept?” asked Bert excitedly. I nodded my head. “I accept,” I said. To the 30 or so patrons in the restaurant, Bert shouted, “HE ACCEPTS! RANDY ACCEPTS! DRINKS ARE ON ME!”

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The place stood and cheered. I didn't start with Bert for almost a month. During that time, we remained tight-lipped about my hiring. Well, Sugar remained tight-lipped. Mine flapped a bit. I told my two closest colleagues at G.C. London of my intended move. One was Bill Apter, pro-wrestling's top reporter and journalist. The other was the man who would replace me as the top boxing writer at G.C. London, Steve Farhood. Farhood is currently a boxing analyst on Showtime. Both Apter and Farhood, these 35 years later, remain as two of my closest friends. Both were able to stay as tight-lipped as Sugar. I began the first week of July. Our first issue was the October 1979 edition. It had Muhammad Ali on the cover in a tight face shot. Sales went from near zero to record numbers. Together, we churned out issue after issue of record-selling boxing magazines. When we covered a fight, we shared a room on the road. We were indeed the Odd Couple. Many times in Las Vegas, when I'd be getting up to run on The Strip at 5:00 a.m., he'd just be getting in after a night of drinking and story-telling with the best boxing writers in the world.

In 1980, while covering the Larry Holmes-Muhammad Ali fight, columnist Dick Young asked me "You share a room with Bert Sugar. Does he always wear that hat? I mean ALWAYS? Does he sleep with that thing on?"

I said "Yes, he does, Dick. He never takes it off."

"Never?" questioned Young.

"Never!" I replied.

"I'll have to see for myself," said the widely-read columnist. The next morning, around 8:00 a.m.--a day before the fight—I was at a desk in the room I shared with Sugar, working on editing galleys for the next edition of The Ring. Bert was in the shower. There was a knock on the door. I went to the door, looked through the peep-hole, and saw it was Dick Young. I turned, pushed open the bathroom door and whispered, "Bert, Dick Young is outside. He wants to see if you always wear your hat."

Bert and I were on the same page. "Quickly, throw me my hat and get my cigar," whispered Bert, who then yelled, "WHO'S THERE?"

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“From the other side of the door we heard, “It's Dick Young, Bert. You got a second?””

“Sure, Dick. Here I come.”

Bert put on his black fedora and put the cigar in his mouth. No towel. No pants. Just his fedora and a towel. Then he opened the door. Young, who had himself been smoking a cigar, just stood there frozen, his mouth agape. The cigar hung from his mouth.

“Hi Dick, what's going on?” asked Bert.

“I don't believe it,” he mumbled. “I just don't believe it.”

He walked away mumbling.

The next day, in his column, “Young Ideas, Camp Confidential,” there were items about Muhammad Ali...about Larry Holmes...there were quotes from both of them...there were quotes from Angelo Dundee and from celebrities. Young ended his column with, “And yes, Bert Sugar ALWAYS wears his hat.”

Bert was generous to a fault. From the first week we began working together, we used to have breakfast at the small diner next door to The Ring. After our very first breakfast, we walked out of the diner and saw a homeless guy rummaging through a garbage can. Bert reached into his pocket, pulled out a wad of bills, walked over and handed it to the man. We walked away and entered our building. Throughout the remainder of the day, homeless men and women came into our office, looking for handouts. Our front office staff chased them away. We later found out that the homeless guy Bert had given money to earlier in the day had told other homeless individuals that a nice guy with a hat and cigar had given him lots of cash, and that they should see if he'd do the same with them.

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“How much did you give him, Bert?” I asked.

“I had played poker last night,” he replied. “I gave him my winnings. What the hell. I'll win more in tomorrow's game.”

“Well, how much was it?” I wanted to know.

“Twenty five hundred,” he said.

Bert Sugar loved boxing. He loved reading about boxing, talking about boxing, watching boxing, studying boxing, doing interviews and writing about boxing. On flights to cover various events, time would pass so quickly, as we talked and talked and talked about every facet of boxing. We talked of its past, we talked of the current scene and we speculated about its future. Every road trip was an experience. On March 31, 1980, I was standing in a line with Sugar in Knoxville, Tennessee, waiting to pick up our press credentials to the double title fight that evening: John Tate vs Mike Weaver for the WBA Heavyweight Title and Marvin Johnson vs Eddie Gregory for the WBA Light Heavyweight Title. As we waited our turn at the press desk, the two guys in front of us were asked by the people handing out credentials, “Your names, please.”

We were stunned at what we heard. “I'm Bert Sugar,” said one guy, “and this is Randy Gordon.”

Bert and I just looked incredulously at each other. We tapped them on their shoulders.

“Will the real Bert Sugar and Randy Gordon please stand up,” said Bert. “Will the imposters kindly take off!”

“Hey, we wanted to see these fights so bad,” said one of the guys, “that we figured we'd try anything.”

They settled for taking pictures with us. ☐☐ As much as Bert Sugar loved boxing, its fans, its fighters and its insiders loved him even more. Oh, he wasn't without flaws, but then, who is. ☐ He was so proud of his son and daughter and of his beautiful wife, Suzy, and all their grandchildren.☐☐ It's not how Bert Sugar died that any of us will remember. It's how he lived, and what he brought to this world while he was here.☐☐ Tonight, I'm gonna' stay up late and look through all the copies of The Ring that Bert Sugar and I—and the team we built—put out. While I'm doing that, I'm gonna' pop open a few cold ones.☐☐ This is for you, Bert. R.I.P.

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deepwater says:

Burt Sugar was a gentleman. I met him many times and he always had a quick line to put a smile on my face. People at Gleasons gym would surround him meanwhile de la Hoya is a few feet away but no one noticed. In this pic Sugar is posing with my fiancée. They actually talked cigars for 10 min. I will always treasure my memories. After I lost an amateur fight at Gleasons he explained that even though I lost the fight I closed the show like a champ and went for it. That is what the people will be talking about over beers later on. He made my loss feel like a win. I raise my drink to a proper gentleman: Burt Sugar.