

The Definitive Gil Clancy Q 'n A...Must Read For Old School Fight Fans

Written by Zach Levin SPECIAL TO TSS
Monday, 11 April 2011 09:36



As his wife, Nancy, led me to the den where Gil Clancy was waiting for me, I half-expected to find him wearing a tuxedo, or at least a sharp tie and jacket with the CBS Sports logo on the front. Most of my memories of the steely-eyed, 82-year-old are of him looking dapper as he delivered outstanding boxing analysis on network TV in the '80s, and then on HBO in the '90s. On this day, however, he looked like he'd just gotten back from a fishing trip; he was tan, barefoot, and had on green shorts, a faded Team De La Hoya T-shirt and matching baseball cap. The gravelly voice was unchanged and, after a few minutes of boxing talk, it was clear his observations were as honest and astute as ever. Clancy's den was devoid of any boxing memorabilia. There were no reminders of the half-century's worth of ring legends he's worked with as a trainer and manager, guys like Emile Griffith, Rodrigo Valdes, Ken Buchanan, Jerry Quarry, George Foreman and Joe Frazier, among many others. In fact, there were mainly shots of horses (he owns a few), and his prodigious family (he and his wife of fifty-seven years have a brood of 6 kids, 17 grandchildren, and 10 great grandchildren). Even though Clancy has had some health problems—heart surgery, two artificial hips, and a melanoma taken out of his left leg last year that looks like he tangled with Jaws—he is still a formidable presence. If he told you to drop and give him fifty, you wouldn't dare question him. Before we began the interview, I attempted to break the ice by showing him a tape of a boxing film called "TRADE," which my father (Lear Levin) shot in 1970. It featured Clancy working with a promising young heavyweight at the time (who never panned out) named Forest Ward. Clancy had never seen the film before, and though he was poked-faced, he seemed more reflective after viewing the

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tape than he was before.

ZL: Forest Ward was a good-looking prospect at the time, right?

Gil Clancy: Probably the best prospect as far as making money that I ever had. Teddy Brenner told me—later in Ward's career—'He's on drugs.' I said to him, 'You're out of your mind. He's the nicest, cleanest kid I ever met in my life.' And then we were supposed to fight Chuck Wepner six rounds. Teddy Brenner says, 'Look, we want to make it an eight.' I said, 'I don't want this kid to fight eight rounds yet.' He says, 'Why? He's gonna knock Wepner out in two or three rounds anyway, you know.' I said, 'Okay.' P.S. Wepner stopped him. By that time he was on drugs, which I didn't know.

ZL: What kind of drugs? Do you know?

GC: I don't know...he was a druggie, though.

ZL: I had heard that Ward had a fragile psyche, and when he kept hitting Wepner and Wepner wouldn't go, he kind of cracked...

GC: (cutting in) Wepner won the fight, took everything Forest had to offer.

ZL: I was reading an article in which you list the ten greatest fighters in history, and also the ten greatest fighters you ever worked with. I'd like to throw out some of the names from the first list, and you can tell me what comes to mind.

GC: Sure. Of course.

ZL: Willie Pep. GC: Well, I think the best fighter pound for pound all time. He always fought in

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the other guy's hometown, and always when the other guy was hot. And he'd come out and beat the guy. Just a great fighter. (After Willie Pep, Clancy's list is as follows: Sugar Ray Robinson, Joe Louis, Archie Moore, Muhammad Ali, Rocky Marciano, Harry Greb, Roberto Duran, Sugar Ray Leonard, and Harold Johnson.)

ZL: Best defensive specialist, Pep?

GC: Well, he was a terrific all around fighter. The only guy that gave him trouble was Sandy Sandler, because he was a freak, Sandy. Like 6 foot 1 and he could punch like a heavyweight. Outside of that, Pep just took everybody else apart.

ZL: Sugar Ray Robinson. You have him at number two.

GC: Number two, correct. He was a great technician, could punch, and he knew just what he had to do to win a fight. Always would pull it out at the right time.

ZL: Archie Moore.

GC: Archie More was a guy that had his own style. Very relaxed fighter—could probably fight 30 rounds if he had to. And again, he knew where to place his punches and how to hurt you.

ZL: An unbelievably prodigious career, too. And even 18 years into it, at 40 years old, he kept progressing.

GC: You couldn't even call him the 'old pro.' He was 'old old pro.' He knew ever trick in the book. And he was so relaxed, that's why he never got tired. Could probably fight forever if he had to.

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ZL: When Moore lost to Marciano, he was still a brilliant light heavy, right?

GC: Oh, absolutely. Sure. Marciano beat a very good Archie Moore. And the fight I always remember, of course, was with Yvon Durelle, when Moore was down five times and came back and won.

ZL: What did you think of Moore's training habits and interesting ideas on nutrition? (He claimed that he would chew on a steak, swallow the juice, and spit out the rest.)

GC: Well, I think a lot of that stuff was just for press. Chewing on the meat and spitting it out, and things like that. I don't think he did that at all. I think he was a good guy at getting publicity.

ZL: Did you watch him train, or learn things from him?

GC: No I didn't watch him much. He was out in California.

ZL: Okay, another name: Muhammad Ali. GC: Ali I've known forever. I knew him since he was an amateur. His best asset, Ali's was—nobody realizes—his best asset was that he could take the best punch in boxing. If he couldn't take a great punch, he would've just been an ordinary heavyweight. But he could take those good punches that other guy nailed him with, and just come right back and score points and eventually get these guys out of there—most of them.

ZL: With few exceptions, you need to have a great chin to be successful in the heavyweight division, don't you?

GC: You do need a great chin, yeah. But he had the best one. The best.

ZL: Lennox Lewis had a great career but he obviously didn't have--

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GC: (cutting in) Didn't have the best chin in the world, no.

ZL: But he was able to overcome it because...?

GC: Well, because the talent that was around. He was a big guy, talented guy, and there wasn't that much around in the heavyweight division.

ZL: Do you like Ali matching up against any heavyweight—I mean, I know Norton gave him problems...but do you like him against any heavyweight that's ever lived?

GC: Well, I think Marciano would have given him trouble, strange as it may seem. Even though Rocky was a small guy, he just had such a high energy level...work level...that he'd take it out of these bigger and stronger guys all the time. The reason I say that, I don't know if you remember when Ali fought George Chuvalo. Chuvalo couldn't punch, and he gave Ali trouble. Chuvalo's style was a little bit similar to Marciano's. So with Mariciano the way he could really punch, and the style he had, I think he would've always given Ali trouble.

ZL: I always figured when they had those Ali vs. Marciano debates, like the computerized bout they did in 1970 in which Rocky stopped Ali in the 13th, that it was just white folks wanting to hold on to something from the past.

GC: That and showbiz.

ZL: But I never gave Marciano a chance against Ali. Now I have to reconsider some things. ...On different note, I recently watched a great fight in which you were involved: Duran-Buchanan. I know Duran is among your top-10 greatest fighters. What's it like facing a prime Hands of Stone?

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GC: Actually, I think it was my fault that Buchanan lost that fight. Because Duran was knocking everybody out in a round or two, and we were training for 15 rounds. I said to Kenny (Buchanan), 'This guy gets to five, six rounds, we're gonna own him.' No, but, Duran, he just kept coming, nothing ever got in his way. Buchanan was, for the first time in the fight, starting to nail Duran with some pretty good punches in the round he got hit with the low blow. (Duran hit Buchanan with a low blow in the 13th round, and won by TKO when Buchanan could not continue.)

ZL: Was that a low blow, for sure? I couldn't tell from the camera angle?

GC: Oh, definitely. Definitely was a low blow.

ZL: So in that case, do you accept the victory?

GC: Sure. I went over to the referee and tried to speak to him but...

ZL: Was there no chance Buchanan could have continued?

GC: No, he was really hurt.

ZL: Was that probably the best Duran we've seen?

GC: I think so. People don't realize what a good fighter Ken Buchanan was. Kenny was a hell of a fighter. It took a real good guy to beat him.

ZL: Was he a little too upright?

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GC: Well, yeah, that was the way his style was. But he was okay. He was strong, had good defense. He was a good all around fighter.

ZL: I saw how Duran would put his head right under Buchanan's chin a lot.

GC: That's the way he did it, Roberto.

ZL: Duran didn't have much of a jab at that time.

GC: No, but he knew where he was all the time. You just didn't nail him with a lot of punches, you know.

ZL: And he was in great condition at that time.

GC: Yeah, that's what I'm saying. That's what I didn't think he had.

ZL: Give me your thoughts on Sugar Ray Leonard, another guy high on your list.

GC: Ray was one of the better welterweights of all time. Great heart. Knew what he had to do to win fights. I thought his fight when he fought Hagler was just a great performance by Leonard. He really did a good job. He knew exactly what he had to do to win the round, and he'd go out and do it.

ZL: You called that fight. Can you remind me how you scored it?

GC: I had Leonard winning close, very close.

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ZL: Had you been in Hagler's corner that night—no disrespect to the Petronellis—what would you have been telling him?

GC: I thought it was probably the worst corner job in history! The first three rounds they had Hagler go out and fight orthodox instead of southpaw, which is completely the wrong thing to do for two reasons: number one, Leonard was able to win the rounds; number two, it gave him confidence. If Hagler had fought his regular fight as a southpaw, he would've won the fight.

ZL: The fighter you have at number ten on your list is the light heavyweight Harold Johnson. He fought and lost to Archie Moore five times, so that speaks well of The Mongoose, huh?

GC: Johnson was a great fighter.

ZL: You look at the guys he fought over his 26-year career, it's almost inconceivable by today's standards. I noticed 20 years into his career, he faced your guy Johnny Persol. Persol won. I know Persol was a fine light heavy, but was that a matter of catching Johnson at the right time?

GC: Johnny could really fight. He really could.

ZL: You worked Muhammad Ali's (then Cassius Clay) corner in his first pro fight in New York. How did that come to be?

GC: Well, I was very friendly with Angelo (Dundee). We were partners when we first started out, and he moved down to Florida. And he came up here for the fight and asked me to work the corner with him. And I always joke with everybody, 'When Ali got knocked down in the second round, I didn't have to revive Ali, I had to revive Angelo.' (Clancy had no part of Ali's career, except for this one fight in NY against opponent Sonny Banks.)

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ZL: When you and Dundee were partners, what was the situation?

GC: We co-managed and I was a trainer and he was a trainer. We would put a few of our guys together.

ZL: What was your opinion of the young Cassius Clay as a fighter?

GC: Same as Roy Jones. I knew he had all the talent in the world, Ali. But I knew he made basic errors. He had so much talent that he would make a mistake and make the other guy pay for it.

ZL: So you liken Jones to Ali in this regard? A great talent who makes basic errors?

GC: Another guy with all the potential and talent in the world. But he had the same habit of pulling his head back, standing straight up, just like Ali.

ZL: Is that why Antonio Tarver caught Roy Jones?

GC: Who knows? He got hit with one punch.

ZL: Do you think Jones should take a rubber match with Tarver?

GC: I'll tell ya, I never thought too much of Tarver. I thought Jones would knock him out in about 5 or 6 rounds. (laughs)

ZL: Do you feel differently about Tarver now?

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GC: Well, no. He just landed one solid good punch. If they fought again, I think Roy would beat him.

ZL: Tarver keeps winning, though. I don't think he's pretty to look at—

GC: (cutting in) I know. I remember when he was in the amateurs, all of the coaches used to tell me, 'You gotta watch this guy Tarver.' He never really impressed me that much. He's a big tall guy, and he'd outbox the guy and win a decision. But it didn't mean anything.

ZL: Is it fair to say that fighters like Roy Jones who rely on athleticism over fundamentals, when they do slow down, and if they don't adapt their style, their careers are curtailed?

GC: I would have to say so, yeah.

ZL: This is a non sequitur, but I wanted to hear some of your thoughts on Mike Tyson. He's going to be fighting again soon. Had he stayed the course, do you think he could've become one of the very best heavyweights of all time?

GC: Oh, absolutely, he had the potential. But even in the amateurs, when Teddy Atlas was taking care of him, if a guy would stand up to him and hit him with a couple of punches, he didn't want to come out for the next round. Teddy would have to beg him, and push him, and everything else.

ZL: I didn't know that. I knew that he'd get real scared before fights, but once he was in the ring, he was fine.

GC: No, no. If things didn't go well, he wasn't too good. He's a bully. If he doesn't bully you...that's the way Holyfield beat him. Holyfield was one of the first guys to punch right back

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when he got hit. Tyson wasn't used to that, and that's what happened to him in both fights with Holyfield.

ZL: Of course Holyfield was just following Buster Douglas' example, as he was the first guy to knock Tyson off his pedestal—and on his ass.

GC: I don't know if you remember, but in that fight when Buster Douglas was coming down from his dressing room to the ring...I was watching it on TV with my wife and I said, 'Nancy, this guy's coming down to the ring dancing, like he's got a lot of confidence in himself.' Now, most of the guys who fought Tyson—like Alex Stewart was a disgrace, you know, guys like that...But this guy (Douglas) seemed like he was going to go and fight. Sure enough, he did.

ZL: Would a mentally and physically prime Tyson have struggled with a Lennox Lewis or Riddick Bowe?

GC: Yeah, absolutely. Guys who would hit him back.

ZL: Would Tyson's height disadvantage and short arms also pose problems for him against those giants?

GC: I'd say yes.

ZL: Last April, a big underdog named Lamon Brewster beat Wladimir Klitschko. Brewster seemed motivated by the death of his trainer Bill Slayton, the same way Buster Douglas was motivated by the death of his mother prior to the Tyson fight.

GC: Lamon Brewster, he really didn't win that fight. The other guy lost the fight. I mean, he was losing the fight by a mile, Brewster. Klitschko just couldn't walk. He was dead tired.

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ZL: What do you attribute that to, Klitschko's collapse?

GC: The only thing it could have been was nerves. That's the only thing I can say, unless he was doped, and I don't want to say that.

ZL: You worked with George Foreman for about six fights after his fight with Ali, until he retired in 1977. I understand he sought you out when he was contemplating getting back in the ring 10 years later?

GC: He called me up and told me he was going to come back, and I had been hearing stories about him—300 pounds and all this stuff. So I told him, 'George, I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll go down to Texas and look at you, and if I think you should come back, I'll say, 'Yes, you should.' If I tell you, 'No,' I expect you to stay retired.' He says, 'Okay, I'll call you back tomorrow.' He never called me back. He knew I would've probably told him not to come back. Which would have been one of the biggest errors I ever made, because he made millions of dollars.

ZL: In an interview you had done many years ago, long before Foreman's second act, you spoke of how Big George wouldn't accept challenges, how he was only interested in fights where he was positive of the outcome. So, you must have been shocked by his comeback, in which he faced a young big-hearted Evander Holyfield? And certainly no one thought he could beat Michael Moorer?

GC: He surprised the hell out of me, to tell you the truth. You have no idea how much trouble it was to get him to fight anybody when I was with him (laughing). Again, he was handled right the second time. He didn't fight that many challenging guys. With Michael Moorer, in that fight I think that was a miracle punch he threw.

ZL: Foreman claims that punch was months in the making, that it was always part of the blueprint.

GC: Yeah, well. (shakes his head dismissively)

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ZL: I guess that's just George being George. You also called that fight for HBO. Was that punch one of the biggest shocks you ever witnessed since you've been in boxing?

GC: It was. Yup.

ZL: In his first fight back after the Ali loss, Foreman faced Ron Lyle. It turned out to be as exciting as any five rounds you're likely to see among heavyweights. But in light of what you've said about Foreman's tentativeness about being challenged, did you expect Lyle would be so tough?

GC: I expected George to have an easy time with him. I picked George up off his face in that fight!

ZL: You've said that in Foreman's second boxing career, he revealed just how smart he is. We all know what a brilliant huckster he is, but in what other ways did you find him clever?

GC: What I've said about him is that he's smarter than Bob Arum, Don King or anybody else. Even that second time around, Arum was trying to get him to fight some ordinary guy. I forget who it was? I was on my way to the airport out of Vegas. Arum asked me to stop by his office so I could talk with George. I told him the guy he'd be fighting would be no problem. He wouldn't fight the guy. The guy was a nothing fighter.

ZL: Do you think Foreman saw something in this guy that maybe the rest of you weren't picking up on? Or was it something else?

GC: He's a strange guy, George. Very hard to figure out.

ZL: But I guess your point is, he took the path of least resistance and still got his title and his

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money. When you had Foreman as a young man, did you realize how smart he was at that time?

GC: No, no. I did know that he was always good on his feet, even when he just got out of the amateurs. He could get up and give and speech and talk and really sound well.

ZL: You also handled Gerry Cooney when he was trying to make his comeback. You've said that had you gotten him from the start, you could have turned him into a great heavyweight.

GC: I thought they were overly cautious with him. And I think they convinced him that he couldn't fight. That's what really happened to him, that led him into the mental state that he was in.

ZL: I've talked about Cooney with Johnny Bos, who did his matchmaking. Bos contradicts what you're saying in that he feels Cooney actually fought some credible opposition early in his career, guys like S.T. Gordon and Eddie Lopez.

GC: He fought a couple good fighters early on, sure. I was the matchmaker for Madison Square Garden when Gerry was coming up and I matched him against some pretty good guys that he took care of in 3 or 4 rounds.

ZL: You had Joe Frazier in his first fight against Ali (March 8, 1971). It was the only fight he won in the trilogy. Did you have him do something different in that fight? Or did Ali's ring-rust play a factor?

GC: No, Joe just fought exactly how Joe always fights. If he was boxing you for an exhibition, he'd fight the same way...bobs his head back and forth, bangs hard to the body, and that's just what he did. And Ali was having a lot of trouble with him.

ZL: You didn't work Frazier's corner in his two subsequent matches with Ali. Had you been in

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his corner, would you have done anything different from what his handlers did?

GC: Number one, strange as this is gonna sound, I would not have stopped the fight after the 14th round. (In their third and final bout, "The Thrilla In Manila," Frazier's chief second Eddie Futch retired him before the 15th round.) I would not have stopped the fight. The condition of both fighters going into the 15th round...if Joe would have hit Ali with another good solid shot the way he did early so many times, he would have knocked Ali out, because Ali was completely shot.

ZL: When they stopped the fight, Ali just collapsed.

GC: I know. I'm telling you, he was so ready to go...But Eddie said Joe couldn't see, so he stopped the fight.

ZL: For younger fight fans who weren't around to witness the Ali-Frazier trilogy, how would you describe the electricity those fights generated in and out of the ring? I mean, their first meeting is recognized as "The Fight of The Century."

GC: The first fight was probably the number one sport event of all time. World Series, Super Bowl, nothing even compared to it. People that were lucky enough to get into the fights...if they dropped a bomb on Madison Square Garden, the United States wouldn't have been able to run. I mean, so many important, distinguished people in that audience. And the electricity in the crowd was just unbelievable.

ZL: What was it like being at the center of it all? You had to have major butterflies?

GC: No. ...I never ever got that way. I don't know why? (laughing)

ZL: Does it take a certain kind of fighter to handle that kind of pressure?

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GC: Oh, definitely. Some guys just can't take anything. Like Gerry (Cooney) when he got stopped by Foreman, he was like hypnotized going into the ring. No business being in there.

ZL: And Cooney didn't take your advice to keep boxing and moving—

GC: (cutting in) Yeah, just wanted him to keep moving around. And he didn't do it. We had been working for a month, getting him to use his right hand, because he was twice as effective when he did it. The whole God darn first round, he didn't throw a right hand. But he did hurt George with a left hook in that fight. He had something wrong with him...I can't even think of the word now? It's a common thing. I just can't think of the name now. You know what I'm talking about? In an earlier fight, when I didn't have him—you know, he used to kill his sparring partners—so like a week before the fight he went out to Vegas, and I happened to be there: sparring partners were killing him. Guys that he was banging around everyday were banging him around. What the hell is it? ANXIETY ATTACKS!

ZL: Oh, he did?

GC: That's what he used to get, anxiety attacks. Even when I trained him. When I trained him, about one out of every six or seven days, he'd go into the ring...and a complete different person. Anxiety attack. And that's what happened to him, I think, with Foreman. Cause after the first round, he come out in the second round, George couldn't miss him!

ZL: And had he been taken along the right way, maybe these anxiety attacks wouldn't have happened?

GC: Oh, if he had had other opponents at first, a few more fights under his belt, I don't think Larry Holmes or anybody would have been a problem for him.

ZL: A lot of pressure on a good white heavyweight, don't you think?

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GC: Oh, absolutely. No question.

ZL: And do people go after them even harder, do you think?

GC: I don't think fighters go after them harder, no. □□ ZL: Some of the best fights you ever worked...I want to get some quick impressions of them, things you recall. Monzon-Griffith? (Clancy trained Emile Griffith from his first amateur contest through his last—109th—pro fight.)

GC: Well, the second time they fought, I thought we had a perfect fight for him that night. And I thought Griffith won the fight, just by outworking Monzon. (Monzon was awarded a UD for the 15-rounder. Monzon also won their first encounter—TKO14.) As a matter of fact, Nino Benvenuti, who was a newspaperman for the fight...for a week, he wrote everyday how it was a disgrace, how Griffith really won the fight, and this and that. Again, Monzon pulled it out and won the fight.

ZL: I'm curious, where do you rate Monzon among the great middleweights?

GC: I never thought he was that great a fighter. I had (Rodrigo) Valdes fight him twice, too. Valdes had him on the deck, and that was also another decision that should have gone the other way. (Monzon by UD15 both times.)

ZL: You were with Jerry Quarry when he fought Ron Lyle.

GC: I don't even know if you realize this, but Jerry could really fight. He really knew how to fight. And on that fight, he just put everything together. He was almost playing with Lyle. At the end of the 9th round, I said, 'Jerry, just go out there and have a good time.' Because he had the fight already won. That's what he did.

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ZL: Would Quarry have been an effective heavyweight now, in spite of his size?

GC: Yeah, he wasn't that big, but he was okay. He was 200 pounds. Believe me, he could fight.

ZL: Talk to me about the Griffith-Rodriguez fights?

GC: They fought four times. The one fight they gave to (Luis Manuel) Rodriguez, Bob Myers, a writer for the AP at that time, out in California, he wrote us a real long letter... How bad he felt that Griffith really won the fight, you know. It made us feel good, but...Luis (Rodriguez) got the decision. In that fight (their second, at Dodger Stadium, on March 21, 1963), Emile's legs cramped up about the 8th round, because they had a wrestling mat down instead of a regular boxing mat, and he told me he couldn't go on—his legs were cramping up. I said all you can do is, go out, lean against the ropes, and just stay against the ropes and counter punch every time he punches. But then, after another round or two, the legs were okay again.

ZL: A wrestling mat? That saps your spring, huh?

GC: Yeah. He couldn't move.

ZL: Why would that affect Griffith more than Rodriguez, who liked to move so much?

GC: It probably could've affected Luis the same way.

ZL: Was that an example of two styles that matched perfectly?

GC: Every fight was tough. Luis was a very hard guy to fight. Didn't look like a great fighter, but a very good, very hard guy to fight. You see the guys that he beat. Who the hell beat him, just Emile?

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ZL: Rodriguez was always moving, and lots of flurries, right?

GC: He flurried at the end of a round, a close round, and did enough to win the round.

ZL: You worked a ton of fights at the old Madison Square Garden at 50th Street. Was that, in your opinion, the best boxing venue around?

GC: Yes.

ZL: What were some of your other favorite venues to work at, as a trainer or as a boxing analyst?

GC: I liked Ridgewood Grove (in Brooklyn).

ZL: Blue Horizon?

GC: I only worked there a couple of times.

ZL: How about St. Nicks?

GC: St. Nicks was good, too.

ZL: How about some of the places out in Los Angeles?

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GC: No, they were just regular arenas they set up for boxing.

ZL: The decision to be a trainer as well as a manager, why did you make that decision?

GC: Well, when I first got started, you couldn't be a manager unless you belonged to the manager's guild. And to get into the manager's guild you had to more or less be a wiseguy. Then, my first fighter I trained that did anything was Ralph "Tiger" Jones. He beat five world champions, including Ray Robinson. Never got a title shot. Well, I wasn't the manager. I had to give him to Bob Melnick, and I took 10%. That's all I got. So Melnick paired him with another trainer. But Ralph would call me, 'Kid, you're gonna have to come over, you gotta help me. They don't tell me anything, they don't show me anything.' I worked with him on a couple of fights. Eventually, it loosened up after the guild got broken up, and I was able to do both, manage and train.

ZL: And you obviously preferred to have as much control over your fighter as possible?

GC: Of course. All the control.

ZL: When you access your skills as a trainer and a manager, were you equally adept at everything?

GC: I think I did everything pretty good. I took care of my own cuts, everything. (Like most of the old-time trainers, Clancy was the cutman in addition to being the chief second.)

ZL: Isn't it difficult to work on a bad cut and give your fighter advice at the same time?

GC: I did it plenty of times. It's not hard at all.

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Written by Zach Levin SPECIAL TO TSS
Monday, 11 April 2011 09:36

ZL: What qualities or knowledge does a person need to have in order to be a good trainer?

GC: First thing they have to be able to do is come to the gym everyday. No absenteeism. You can't say, 'Well, I'll come tomorrow,' and the fighter's there waiting for you. That's the first thing: Punctuality. That's number one. Then you have to have knowledge of boxing.

ZL: You had a tremendous work ethic. I understand you taught school all day and would leave at 3 o'clock, be at the gym a few minutes later, and work with your fighters till 9. It was the same pattern everyday for years?

GC: Actually, I'd be out of there by 8 o'clock.

ZL: Oh, you lazy bum! But seriously, I guess you can't ask your fighters to be disciplined if you're not disciplined yourself?

GC: Well, I always tried to run the fighters that way, you know. Tell 'em to be at some place at a certain time, you had to be there. □ □ ZL: Johnny Bos feels that there aren't any real fight managers anymore—

GC: (cutting in) There aren't! You don't need a manager anymore. The fighters all have promotional contracts. And the promoter is really the manager. Once the promoter gets the promotional contract, he's picking your opponents. What's there left for a manager to do?

ZL: Promoters today are notorious for protecting their product.

GC: Well, sure. And the manager would try to do the same, protect their product. So they're (promoters) managers.

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ZL: Did you have a particular philosophy when it came to developing a fighter?

GC: No, every fighter is different. Some fighters you could move along quickly, others you had to really take your time with. And some guys I'd tell them to retire, cause they just didn't have it.

ZL: Do you think moving a fighter is like a lost art form today?

GC: Again, the promoters are moving the fighters. You ever here of a manager moving a fighter in the last five years? It's either Don King or Bob Arum or Cedric Kushner or somebody else—they're all looking to have their fighters win.

ZL: And if they're only interested in seeing their fighters win, it's hard for fighters to truly develop and become brilliant fighters. Is that fair to say?

GC: Yeah, sure. They can't become brilliant fighters because they have the talent to overcome everything.

ZL: Is there a fighter you're most proud of in terms of the way you developed him?

GC: I guess Emile (Griffith) was the best. He was the welterweight champ. And then—there were no junior champions in those days—he went right from welterweight to become the middleweight champion when he beat Dick Tiger.

ZL: Did you ever have another fighter that was as dedicated as Griffith?

GC: No, not as dedicated as he was. No matter what I told him to do, no question he'd do it. I

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mean, like for example, we'd be in Vegas for a fight and I'd tell him I wanted him to stay out of the sun. And I'd be sitting by the pool...He wouldn't put his foot in the sun. He'd call me, I'd have to go over, and we'd discuss whatever the heck he wanted to talk to me about. But if I told him not to go in the sun, that was it. No sun.

ZL: Was that his nature or was it just the way he responded to you?

GC: I guess it's the way he responded to me. But he was that way and it was terrific.

ZL: Are there any fighters that come to mind that could've been great but were moved terribly, and so they never rose to their potential?

GC: (long pause)

ZL: I'll give an example. Some fighters today get a huge signing bonus coming out of the Olympics, and their promoters, anxious to recoup on their investment, match them too tough early on. And they're broken fighters at the point when they should just be coming into their own. □ □ GC: Well, one example is Forest Ward. I...thought he was better than he was...maybe I should have been a little more cautious with him. Cause he was a heck of a fighter.

ZL: Did that experience inform you as you went on to manage and train other fighters? Was it a hindsight is 20/20 kind of thing?

GC: No, I think about it. When Teddy Brenner told me to make it an 8 instead of a 6 (versus Chuck Wepner), that was my mistake. (Forrest Ward ended his two-year pro career in 1969 with a record of 9-2-2.)

ZL: A difference between the pro game today versus the old days is that now the TV networks are in love with fighters with unblemished records. In the old days, you could have a ton of losses and still fight for the championship.

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GC: That's correct.

ZL: If you were able to change this, would you prefer to see things as they used to be? Just let fighters fight. If some losses come their way, it's not a death sentence.

GC: You try to avoid losses at all costs. If a fighter progresses after a loss, maybe he'll do a little better the next time out. Gradually he gets up there, and somehow he winds up in a championship fight.

ZL: How did this come to be, this system where undefeated records are given so much value, even when the records were built on nobodies?

GC: Now television really controls the fighters. HBO, Showtime, Cedric (Kushner). And, as you said, a guy that is an Olympic champ, an undefeated fighter, that's all they broadcast on television. They don't tell you who he fought, who he beat. 'Well, he's 14-0!' stuff like that. I've been fooling around a little bit with a kid now, helping him a little bit, Dimitriy Salita. He's a Jewish kid. He's 18-0 now, he's got a bout 12 knockouts. He can fight. And he's being brought along real slowly, so far. (Bob) Arum has him, so more or less, Arum will tell him who he's gonna fight, and he fights him.

ZL: Isn't Salita coming to the end of his contract with Arum?

GC: Yeah, I think so. I think he'll renew with Arum. He should, because Arum has done everything well for him.

ZL: And Arum has been respectful of Salita's religious inclinations, allowing him not to fight on the Sabbath.

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GC: Yes, he is.

ZL: Does it surprise you to see a few Jewish fighters doing well, or boxing at all for that matter?

GC: Well, there are a couple now who can fight. (Yuri Foreman and Roman Greenberg are two others.)

ZL: I wanted to ask you about some of your partnerships. You and Howie Albert had one of the most successful and enduring partnerships (as co-managers) in boxing history. I understand you guys still speak everyday on the phone. Can you comment on how you guys met, and something about your relationship?

GC: Well, we met when Emile (Griffith) was going into the Golden Gloves, and Howie brought him down to my gym to start. Howie kept coming to the gym. I said, 'Look, you've been coming down here, you seem very interested. Why don't I put you in the corner with me?' And that's the way we started. From there he started working with some of my other fighters, and eventually all of them.

ZL: You were working out of the Parks Department gym on 28th Street?

GC: That was my last stop. No, CYO was my last stop. But I was working out of the Parks Department gym when Emile came.

ZL: Howie Albert saw that Emile had a terrific body, but that doesn't make a great fighter? (Albert worked in the Garment Center and Griffith was one of his workers.)

GC: That's all he saw. (laughs) He had a great body.

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ZL: So the stars just aligned on that one? GC: That's correct.

ZL: What are some of the other close and lasting friendships you've made in boxing?

GC: Ralph "Tiger" Jones. I was very friendly with him, all through his whole career. The picture behind you is from my 70th birthday. That was the last time I saw him. That was 11 years ago, almost 12 now. (Jones died in 1994.)

ZL: You and Angelo Dundee were pals, right? GC: Very friendly with Angelo for years and years. ...Pete Miller was a guy who taught me a lot. He passed away. He had been the Olympic coach. I learned a lot from him.

ZL: Around the time my dad (Lear Levin) shot his film "TRADE," in 1969-1970, there were a lot of young fight fanatics hanging around, guys like Johnny Bos and "Flash" Gordon. I don't see many characters like that around the game anymore. (Fight agent/matchmaker Bos and "Flash" used to print a popular boxing rag that hardcore fight fans read religiously.)

GC: Both of those guys are my protégés. I really kept them both in business. Let them hang around the gym all the time, you know, do whatever they wanted to do.

ZL: Were they picking things up just through osmosis? Or did you actually explain, 'This is what I'm looking at, this is what I'm thinking'?

GC: Oh, no. I talked to them about relevant things. Matter of fact, "Flash," he used to murder Griffith in his paper. He'd say, 'Why won't Griffith fight Bennie Briscoe? He's afraid of Bennie Briscoe,' and all this kind of stuff. And I'd sometimes say to him, "Flash," you use my office...you're still knocking Griffith. Why!?' He'd say, 'Emile's afraid of Briscoe. Put him in with Briscoe.' If I'd put Emile in with Briscoe, Emile would've won no contest.

ZL: Johnny Bos told me that "Flash" would do the same thing with him. They were friends, but

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“Flash” would excoriate him in his column.

GC: Well, he was a little nutty.

ZL: Switching gears, if you were the boxing czar—if there were a boxing czar—what are some of the reforms you’d implement to help improve the game?

GC: Well, number one, I think we need just one commission, a national commission. Also, a system whereby fighters are rated by one body, not four or five different bodies the way they’re rated now. Those are the two biggest things.

ZL: Would you do away with the “junior” and “super” weight classes?

GC: I’m old fashioned. The most I would have is 10 championship weights. 8 still is ideal, as far as I’m concerned.

ZL: What else does boxing need to do to restore itself to its past glory? Corporate sponsorship is essential, I would think?

GC: Well, that’s the main thing. I used to work for CBS for years. The sales people said they couldn’t sell boxing to their customers. I think part of the reason they couldn’t sell boxing was because they sat on their rear ends all the time. They wanted the sponsors to call them, and it didn’t work that way. When I was at CBS, I took Jerry Solomon, who was the head of Budweiser at the time...brought him to the gym a couple of times, took him out to dinner, and sure enough Budweiser came and signed a big contract with CBS for quite a few years. But the salesmen now, they’re spoiled. They have their Super Bowl, or whatever the heck they have. They expect you to call them.

ZL: Do you think there’s a prejudice against boxing, compared to other sports like the NFL?

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GC: We're always going to have that. There's always a certain group that can't stand boxing.

ZL: Are you optimistic about the future of boxing.

GC: Well, you know, they said boxing's been dead ever since the time Jack Dempsey lost. And then every world champion after that—Muhammad Ali especially, it was, 'Ali's gone...Boxing's finished!' Somebody always comes back up to capture the public's imagination. Right now we're probably at the lowest point ever, because there isn't any one outstanding guy...except maybe Oscar De La Hoya, who the public really embraces. That can change in two quick knockouts by some sensation, and it'll change again.

ZL: Boxing may be at a low point, yet there are still some great fights taking place.

GC: There's no question about it, but that's for the fight fans. I'm talking about the people who aren't fight fans.

ZL: And with a weak heavyweight division, it's hard to attract general sports fans.

GC: Yeah. Correct.

ZL: Who are some of the fighters today that you watch and admire? Who excites you?

GC: Bernard Hopkins. Oscar (De La Hoya). ZL: James Toney?

GC: I'll tell ya, he surprised the hell out of me in that last fight (vs. Evander Holyfield). I mean, he really fought a heck of a fight. But I think he's a little too small to be a legitimate heavyweight.

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ZL: So you'd be surprised to see him take on the bigger heavyweights if/when he recovers from his injury?

GC: Yes. If he ever did, let's say for example he fought Klitschko and knocked Klitschko out, then you might have a superstar.

ZL: Have you seen any prospects that you're particularly impressed by? I know you're involved with Dimitriy Salita, but are there any other young guys that have gotten your attention? GC: I think they're quite a few young guys. There's a kid by the name of Danny Jacobs. He just won the nationals (152-pound class). I think he's maybe the best prospect I ever saw—and I've been in this business over 50 years. I never saw a kid...he can do everything! (Jacobs, who hails from Brooklyn, also dominated his class in this year's New York Golden Gloves.)

ZL: Do you see him turning pro right now?

GC: I think he should. He wants to stay away for the next Olympics. I think that's a mistake.

ZL: Do you see him as a junior middleweight or a welterweight?

GC: He's probably going to grow into a middleweight.

ZL: It was nice to see you broadcasting the Golden Gloves this year. You seemed very enthusiastic about the talent.

GC: This was the best year they had in the last 4 or 5 years.

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ZL: Do you like Joe Green? (165-pound NY and national Golden Gloves champion)

GC: Oh, yeah. And Jorge Teron. Those are the three guys I like. (The 132-pound Teron just picked up his third NY Golden Gloves)

ZL: Do you like Joe Green's prospects as a pro?

GC: Yeah, absolutely, as long as he trains with the right people. □□ ZL: And how about Jaidon Codrington, who won the NY Gloves at 178? You liked him, too. (Codrington is now 1-0 as a pro.)

GC: Yes, I liked him, too. He's very similar to Ali when he won the Olympics. He's about the same weight as Ali when he won the light heavyweights; he's a tall guy; he can blossom into a heavyweight. And he can be a real good heavyweight.

ZL: That's a serious compliment. He reminds you of Ali...comparable talent?

GC: Yeah, absolutely. He's got a lot of talent.

ZL: You said this year's crop of Golden Gloves champions are the best you've seen in 4 or 5 years. How do these guys compare to all the Golden Glovers you've witnessed over the past 60 plus years?

GC: These three or four kids we're talking about are right up there with anybody.

ZL: You mentioned Bernard Hopkins as being a current fighter you respect. Is he one of the best middleweights of all time?

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GC: Well...I can't go that far, no. As a matter of fact, when I was working with Oscar (De La Hoya) and Jerry Perenchio (De La Hoya's promoter at the time)...When Hopkins knocked out Trinidad, I called Jerry the next day and said, 'Jerry, the next fight for Oscar has got to be Bernard Hopkins.' I said, 'Oscar's always looking to be a superstar, and this fights so good it's going to make him—because he can beat Hopkins.' And about a week later, Jerry decided that he was too busy to handle Oscar anymore, and he just gave him back, gave him away. So it never took place, but now it's going to take place—I think. And I think Oscar is going to beat him, if he doesn't bulk up too much. I think that would be a big mistake. (Note: This interview took place before De La Hoya's poor showing against Felix Sturm. However, I called Clancy after the fight, and asked him if his opinion of De La Hoya-Hopkins has changed: "No, my opinion hasn't changed," Clancy said. "It's strengthened my opinion. Because, if you remember, Oscar did bulk up for the fight and it took a lot of his speed away. That's how come every time he landed a couple of good punches, he wasn't moving, and Sturm would nail him right back. I still think he should come down and fight at his most efficient weight.")

ZL: That would probably surprise a lot of people. But you think he has the right blueprint?

GC: Yeah, I think so. Very similar to Emile Griffith and Dick Tiger. Tiger was the biggest, strongest guy at middleweight you ever saw. He beat guys like Jose Torres, you know. And Emile not only won, he even had him down in that fight—because of his speed. And I think Oscar's speed will negate anything that Hopkins does.

ZL: When Oscar was starting out, you said he had the makings to be one of the greatest fighters ever. He's a first ballot hall of famer, no question, but definitely not what we would consider a top fighter all-time. Do you feel that he fell short in some ways?

GC: No, I think he got a lot of tough breaks. For example, I thought he won the (Felix) Trinidad fight. The only fight I think he lost was the first fight with (Shane) Mosley. He fought a terrible fight, a stupid fight. But against Trinidad he was so far ahead in the fight...and they say he ran the last couple of rounds, but it didn't make a difference. Trinidad still didn't hit him.

ZL: I agree with you. I thought he won that fight, and probably stole the first 7 rounds. Did he actually let you go after that, and try to pass the buck? (Clancy came out of retirement to serve as an advisor to De La Hoya. He was in De La Hoya's corner for the Trinidad fight and had

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advised him to, in essence, get on his bicycle during the championship rounds—as it appeared his fighter had swept enough of the early rounds. But De La Hoya lost in a controversial majority decision.)

GC: No, I can tell you about that. In that fight, one judge, Jerry Roth, didn't give Oscar ANY of the first 5 rounds. And all he had to do was give Oscar 1, and then Oscar would have been the winner of the fight. Didn't give him ANY of the first 5 rounds! There's really no explanation for that, because Oscar was just completely dominating him, you know. (Note: Upon review, it appears Jerry Roth gave 3 of the first 4 rounds to Trinidad; not each of the first 5 rounds, as Clancy states.) ...Then, a few months later, Oscar and his father call me. He had a fight in New York (the opponent was to be Derrell Coley). They called me up and said, 'Well, you know, the fight is going to be in New York, so you don't have to come out to Big Bear or nothing, just come down and work in the corner.' And they told me what they were going to pay me, and it was half of what I'm used to getting. So I spoke to Arum and he said, 'That's what they want to pay you? Let me talk to them...I'll call you back tomorrow.' He called me the next day and said, 'That's what they want to pay you.' I said, "Well, forget it. I'm not going to do it." So I didn't do it.

ZL: Maybe it's the way the media paints it, but it often seems when something doesn't go well for Oscar, he cleans house.

GC: Yeah, well, I don't think it's Oscar that did it. I think it was one of the other guys. I'm pretty sure that's what happened.

ZL: So if you could do it over again, do you still stand by what you told him?

GC: Sure.

ZL: If we could go back to discussing some prospects and contenders. I believe Tokunbo Olajide is a tremendous fighter.

GC: Yeah, I do, too. I was there when he got knocked out, too. Geez. (Epifanio Mendoza stopped Olajide in the 1st round. In a bizarre occurrence, Olajide broke his fibula as he fell to

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the ground after absorbing a two-punch combination to the head, and then dislocated his ankle as he attempted to get up.)

ZL: I think it's only a matter of time before he proves himself the best jr. middleweight in the world—and that division is thick with talent.

GC: Yeah, Tommy Gallagher really likes him a lot. (Gallagher is Olajide's manager.) I like him a lot. He can punch.

ZL: Who are some of the trainers working today that you're impressed with?

GC: Well, Freddie Roach is doing a good job. (pause) Teddy Atlas.

ZL: Is the role of the trainer ever overstated?

GC: No—if they're good trainers. Some guys have their uncle training them or whatever the hell else. And they don't even know what to do, they don't even know how to put the gloves on—they're "the trainer."

ZL: How common is it to have fantastic trainers on the amateur level, guys who develop fighters from scratch, teach them everything they need to know? But the fighters inevitably get stolen away by a big promoter, who then gives them to a "name" trainer.

GC: Yeah, that's what happens ALL the time, from the beginning of time.

ZL: A classic scenario in boxing, huh?

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GC: Usually the first guy, the guy that got him in the amateurs, had him win the Golden Gloves or the Nationals, that's the guy who's really doing the training. Then if they turn pro with some other trainer that's got a reputation...it's not the same thing.

ZL: Who are some of the best boxing minds that you've come across, other than yourself? Any people that ever astounded you with their insights into the game, or had a rare ability to see things others didn't?

GC: Well, Ray Arcel...he was great, he really was. He knew his way around. Maybe Teddy Atlas.

ZL: Oh, really.

GC: Yeah.

ZL: Atlas seems to be focusing more on broadcasting than working with fighters these days. Do you enjoy his fight analysis?

GC: Yeah, he's okay.

ZL: Your fight analysis for CBS and HBO was top-notch. When you watch Atlas do his thing now on "Friday Night Fights," do you ever find yourself thinking, 'I'd have called that one differently,' or 'I'd have pointed this out'?

GC: No, I wouldn't say that.

ZL: When you worked opposite a great cornerman, were you in a sense dueling him? Like when Ray Arcel came out of retirement to work with Duran who fought your guy Buchanan. Was it

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ever like playing chess, with the boxers being the pieces?

GC: No. I would take care of my own guy, and whatever the other guy did we would try to do something to counteract it. I never paid too much attention to who was training the other guy.

ZL: I know you've spoken on this before, but I wanted to ask you about the third fight between Emile Griffith and Benny "Kid" Paret (March 24, 1962). How difficult was it for the both of you to come back to boxing after a tragedy like that? (Paret fell into a coma and died ten days later of injuries sustained during the bout, which was the first ring death seen by millions on American national television.)

GC: Well, it was very difficult because of what happened. And Emile, you know, was devastated by the whole thing. ...We used to have a lot of over-the-weight fights in those days, if a championship wasn't at stake. But I knew if I put him in that kind of fight, he wasn't going to perform at all. So I put him in a title fight in his next fight (against Ralph Dupas). After that Paret thing, he wouldn't really go after the guy until the guy hit him a couple of times, and then he'd start to fight.

ZL: So when something like this happens, a guy does lose his killer instinct, so to speak?

GC: I think so, yeah.

ZL: You also believe that Paret calling Griffith a "maricon" (homosexual) before the fight played no part in the events that followed?

GC: Absolutely not! Absolutely not!

ZL: Rather, you feel it just came down to Griffith throwing so many punches, in such a short period of time, and the referee not breaking it up soon enough?

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GC: Well, Emile hit him with 17 punches in 5 seconds.

ZL: Ruben "Hurricane" Carter stopped Griffith in one round, was Carter that ferocious a puncher?

GC: No! It's all Emile. I told Emile, 'Just box this guy for about 5 rounds, and then after that you'll own him.' Meanwhile, Emile met Rocky Graziano on a street corner (before the fight), and Rocky says to him, 'Hey, Emile, knock this guy right out.' (laughs) Emile went after Carter in the 1st round, and Carter nailed him on the side of the head; he went down, he got up; and he was actually marching towards Carter when the referee stopped it. And I was glad the referee stopped it. There's no sense...he would've taken an awful lot of punishment for the next minute and a half.

ZL: Moving on, I'd like to learn more about your background and what led you to boxing. Where did you grow up?

GC: Rockaway Beach (Long Island, NY).

ZL: What'd your parents do? What kind of childhood did you have?

GC: My father was a sign painter and my mother was a housewife. I played every sport.

ZL: When did you find boxing?

GC: I went in the Army first, and when I came out of the Army I went to NYU and studied Phys. Ed (earning a master's degree). Boxing was part of the program. So I was involved in that. And the PAL must have called me, the job placement center, and they were looking for a boxing coach. They called me down to see if I'd take the job. Started out at a \$1000 a year. South

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Jamaica (Queens), an all-black neighborhood. (laughs) I didn't even have a car!

ZL: Were you accepted over there?

GC: Oh, yeah. Sure.

ZL: Was it always comfortable for you to mix with other cultures and people from different backgrounds?

GC: I never had a problem. I never had a problem with blacks or any other ethnic group.

ZL: So you were never a fighter yourself?

GC: No.

ZL: Was that a disadvantage?

GC: Well, when I say never, I did box in the Army.

ZL: How many fights did you have in the Army?

GC: Maybe four or five.

ZL: What weight did you fight at?

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GC: Middleweight.

ZL: Were you okay?

GC: Oh, yeah, I was good.

ZL: You didn't have some hunger to go pro?

GC: No. I lost one fight to a light heavyweight. The one fight I lost.

ZL: Was fighting especially difficult for you? I know your left eye is impaired. (When he was three, a sliver of steel got caught in his left eye. He can see fine out of the side of the eye.)

GC: No, it didn't bother me. It just seemed natural.

ZL: When you taught school, were you strictly a Phys. Ed. teacher?

GC: I taught everything. History...math.

ZL: Had you always wanted to be a teacher of some kind?

GC: When I graduated from NYU, I did it mostly because of the economy—to make a buck. That's really why I went into it. Then I enjoyed it.

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ZL: Did you have designs at that time on a career in boxing as a trainer/manager?

GC: Ahh...let me think about it...well, I told you, I took that job at the PAL. I was taking it for the money, believe it or not, \$1000 a year! Of course, right from the very beginning, I was bitten by the boxing bug.

ZL: How were you as a trainer when you were started out?

GC: I think I did well. Cause I told you, I had Tiger Jones. He was my best guy. Then later on in the amateurs I had...every single year, for about maybe five or six years, I had a couple Golden Gloves champs.

ZL: Were you a big fight fan growing up?

GC: Well, my father was. My father was involved in boxing a little bit. I used to listen to it on the radio.

ZL: Do you think you have natural ability as a trainer and teacher?

GC: I guess so.

ZL: Were there certain boxers or trainers that you gleaned things from?

GC: I guess there was, but it's hard to think of any one in particular.

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ZL: Is it more satisfying to take a fighter from the beginning, from scratch, and take him along?

GC: Absolutely. There's no question about that. Most of my guys, I took all the way. Sometimes, the amateur coach develops a kid, then they turn pro and are turned over to one of the well-known trainers. But it's actually the amateur guy that taught the kid how to fight.

ZL: Did you have some good amateur fighters that were taken away from you, because you weren't successful enough at the time?

GC: Ahh...I guess I did have a few leave.

ZL: Any names you care to mention?

GC: Eddie James. He was the outstanding fighter of the Golden Gloves. I gave him away. There were about four or five others.

ZL: Painful when that happens?

GC: Sure!

ZL: How did you land Rodrigo Valdes?

GC: He came from Columbia. And Oscar Conill—who has passed away—I had sent him on a scouting trip, believe it or not. He came back to me and said, 'I like this kid Valdes.' He weighed about 142 when he came up, couldn't speak a word of English, and he was half starving to death. I put him with my friend Chino's wife—Chino Govin, he was a trainer. Rodrigo lived with Chino. Eventually, he wound up being the middleweight champion of the world.

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Written by Zach Levin SPECIAL TO TSS
Monday, 11 April 2011 09:36

ZL: And so the fighters you worked with that were already established, or that you didn't have a hand in from early on, did it feel more like a gig with them?

GC: No, no. Like with Valdes, I was just as close to him. I felt like I had poured a lot of stuff in him. And it all worked out. With him it was like I was taking him from the beginning, even though he'd had amateur fights down in Columbia, no pro fights.

ZL: Are the fighters today as well conditioned as they used to be?

GC: I don't think so, no.

ZL: What's missing?

GC: Their attitude, their hard work ethic—I don't think a lot of them have it anymore. Back 20 years ago, 30 years ago, these kids, they'd work all day on tough jobs, then come in and train...spar 10, 12, 15 rounds. Nowadays, these kids, after 4 rounds they're tired.

ZL: If you were working with a kid today, would you do the same things with him now as you did in 1955?

GC: No, I might include a little weight training. And as far as nutrition goes, I was always trying to get them to eat the right stuff at the right time.

ZL: Some trainers don't make good cornermen, and vice versa. Have you found that to be the case? It's a certain gift to be able to give the right advice at crucial moments?

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GC: No question about it. Some guys get so excited, the fighter can't even understand him. Or when two or three guys talk at the same time, it should never be like that. One guy should do the talking, the other guys don't say a word.

ZL: You said earlier that you were always as cool as a cucumber.

GC: Well, the one time I slapped Emile, he knocked out Paret. But I knew what I was doing, believe me.

ZL: When you slapped Emile, that was effective. You got him to do what you needed him to do. Was that premeditated or spontaneous?

GC: I slapped him because...they give you a vacant stare look. They're not even hearing what you're saying. I just had to bring him out of it.

ZL: What are some of the qualities you look for in a prospective fighter when you're evaluating him?

GC: Natural athletic ability is number one. And number two is, do they like the job, do they like the work? If they're haphazard, those are the kind of kids that never really make it.

ZL: How important is it for a kid to be able to respond well to punishment? Not "well," no one likes to get hit, but...

GC: That's very important, very important. For example, listen, Salita was in his first 8-round fight, and he fighting an experienced guy (Rocky Martinez). The guy nailed him a few times, but every single time the guy nailed him, he punched right back and took the play away from him. Immediately! That's one of the things you look for.

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ZL: Is that psychological makeup, or is it a matter of being in great condition?

GC: No, I think it's psychological makeup.

ZL: And you can't always see it at the gym?

GC: No, you can't.

ZL: I wanted to ask you about a heavyweight that I've always found intriguing, Sonny Liston. I don't believe you worked with him, but did you know him at all?

GC: No, just hello and goodbye.

ZL: Was he as scary a man as they say he was?

GC: Oh, sure. Everyone was scared to death of him. He always gave you that baleful look, no matter what. He was suspicious of everybody.

ZL: I heard from an old timer that when a boxing gym got wind Liston was coming through town, they take down their good equipment and put up the ratty stuff, cause he'd literally beat the stuffing out of it. Any truth to this?

GC: I don't believe it, no.

ZL: Too bad, I'd always liked that story—it made me think of a little defenseless town bracing itself before a hurricane struck.... Here's something I've been looking forward to asking you

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about: the Liston-Ali fights. They fought twice. It's a subject of much debate. Was there a fix? (In the second bout, the more controversial of the two, Ali knocked Liston out in 1 round with a short right hand—it was so short, almost no one saw it; Ali called it “the anchor punch.”)

GC: No. In the second fight, Ali really hit him. One my fighters, Alex Miteff, fought Ali. Miteff was a tough, tough guy from Argentina. And he was really doing a pretty good job on Ali's body. All of a sudden, Ali just hit him with a little right hand: down and out for ten. Ten! Just caught him right.

ZL: I've heard that Liston bet on himself to lose?

GC: You'll always hear that kind of crap.

ZL: The Liston that Ali fought was pretty shopworn. He wasn't the same fighter he once was, right?

GC: No, he was still a pretty tough guy.

ZL: In 1978, you became the matchmaker for Madison Square Garden, and held that position for three years. Tell me about the experience? Did you enjoy it?

GC: Well, it was a tough job, I'll tell you that. I joke about it: it was the only time I ever had high blood pressure, cause I had to deal with (Mike) Jones and (Dennis) Rappaport. They had Gerry Cooney. They were pretty terrible. But it was a tough job. Somebody wins every fight, and somebody also loses. And the losers are always angry at you, and the winners are always for you.

ZL: In what way were Jones and Rappaport difficult to deal with?

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GC: Oh, no matter what you offered them...let's say I was doing them a favor. I'd normally pay \$5,000 for a main bout, or whatever it is. And I'd say, 'Look, I'm going to give you \$7,500.' And I figured they only expected 5K. The very next word out of their mouth would be, 'What about my training expenses? And how many free tickets do we get?' (laughs) You know, stuff like that. You could never satisfy them. Never.

ZL: What was your relationship like with Teddy Brenner? (Brenner was a former matchmaker for MSG, among other major venues, and was perhaps the best-known matchmaker in boxing history.)

GC: Oh, a very close relationship.

ZL: When you were serving as a matchmaker, what was your goal, what did your job entail?

GC: Make the best fights for the fans, and bring the asses into the seats.

ZL: Was it an odd experience working as a matchmaker, in that when you were training and managing fighters your number one priority was your fighter—giving him a fight he's going to win and, secondly, have him look good doing it? When you're a matchmaker, you must be dispassionate, neutral.

GC: Also, you want the popular guy to win, the guy that's going to sell the tickets. So, you know, you try to give him a little edge in the fight if you possibly can.

ZL: What were some of the biggest fights that you made while you were working for the Garden?

GC: Cooney-Norton. ZL: How did you expect that fight to go? (Gerry Cooney obliterated Ken Norton in 1 round (May 11, 1981), setting the stage for a mega fight with Larry Holmes the following year.)

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GC: I thought Cooney would knock him out. I didn't think it would happen that fast.

ZL: In 1981, you became a boxing analyst for CBS. Many fight fans, and I count myself among them, consider you one the best that's ever done it.

GC: Thanks.

ZL: Did you take to it easily?

GC: Well, the way it happened, I was at a cocktail party with Angelo (Dundee). And Barry Frank was there. He was the president of CBS Sports. And we always used to joke around, Angelo and I. So Barry Frank says, 'Could you guys do that on the air?' I say, "Sure." The next week we were on the air from Italy. And that's what started it. I don't think I ever was nervous with it or anything. It was just watching the fight and talking about it.

ZL: Who did you enjoy working with?

GC: Well, Tim Ryan (CBS), naturally. Sam Rosen (MSG; they do the New York Daily News Golden Gloves together). I like Sam a lot.

ZL: Howard Cosell made for great TV...didn't really know boxing too well, did he?

GC: He really did not know boxing. Alex Wallau was the guy who used to give him all the information before a fight, tell him who to tout. Once Alex told Cosell something, it became gospel with him, and he'd be saying, 'Look at this, look at that!' He didn't know boxing too much at all.

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ZL: Rest assured, no one will ever accuse Gil Clancy of that.

[Comment on this article](#)

Radam G says:

Very, very NICE! That is definitely Gil, "da kill, always work and always will." I hope that some of these readers READ that interview. It may teach them a lot and help them to understand the REALITY and ACTUALLY of da game. Later for all that jive and mythical syet that people be making up. One should READ every WORD of the above interview, because it straight-up gives you da skinny on da psyche of a really, really great hurt bitnezz playa -- as an ex-Army [amateur] boxer, a trainer, manager, matchmaker, talking head, etc., etc.

I'm reminded of how some readers hop all up in my grill for talking about a boxer's amateur career. Now you can see how I'm not alone. And about fighters having pugilistic PTSD. Now can you read the thoughts of Gil, "da kill..." ditto-ing me -- or maybe it is me, who has always dittoed him -- by spittin' about the "ANXIETY ATTACKS" of Gerry Cooney that has never gone away. [Another who has/had pugilistic PTSD is Duane Bobick.]

YUP! And somebody oughta get outta my grill about calling Willie Pep -- instead of Sugar Ray Robinson -- the AT P4P greatest. Ain't by myself about nuffin,' you NEW JACK PLAYAS! How many of you suckas ever heard of Harold Johnson? Now don't start calling Gil, "da kill..." names! He picked who he picked, just as I have picked Hector "Macho Time" Camacho as one of my ATGs. READERS, read THIS INTERVIEW PIECE!!!! It some awesome WORK. Holla!

FighterforJC says:

No interview is definitive enough if it doesn't mention Pacquiao. Don't mean to be irreverent, but that's just me.

Brad says:

Nice interview Zach. I don't agree that the Duran that fought Buchanan was the "best we've seen." He was still quite raw, not really the artist he would become in the ring. The most brilliant Duran I ever saw the one from the third DeJesus fight in 1978. No lightweight in history could have hoped to beat that guy. People talk about Sugar Ray Robinson having it all, I never saw enough of Robinson's old fights to know either way, but that Duran (from the mid 70's til Sugar Ray Leonard) was the greatest fighter I've ever seen.