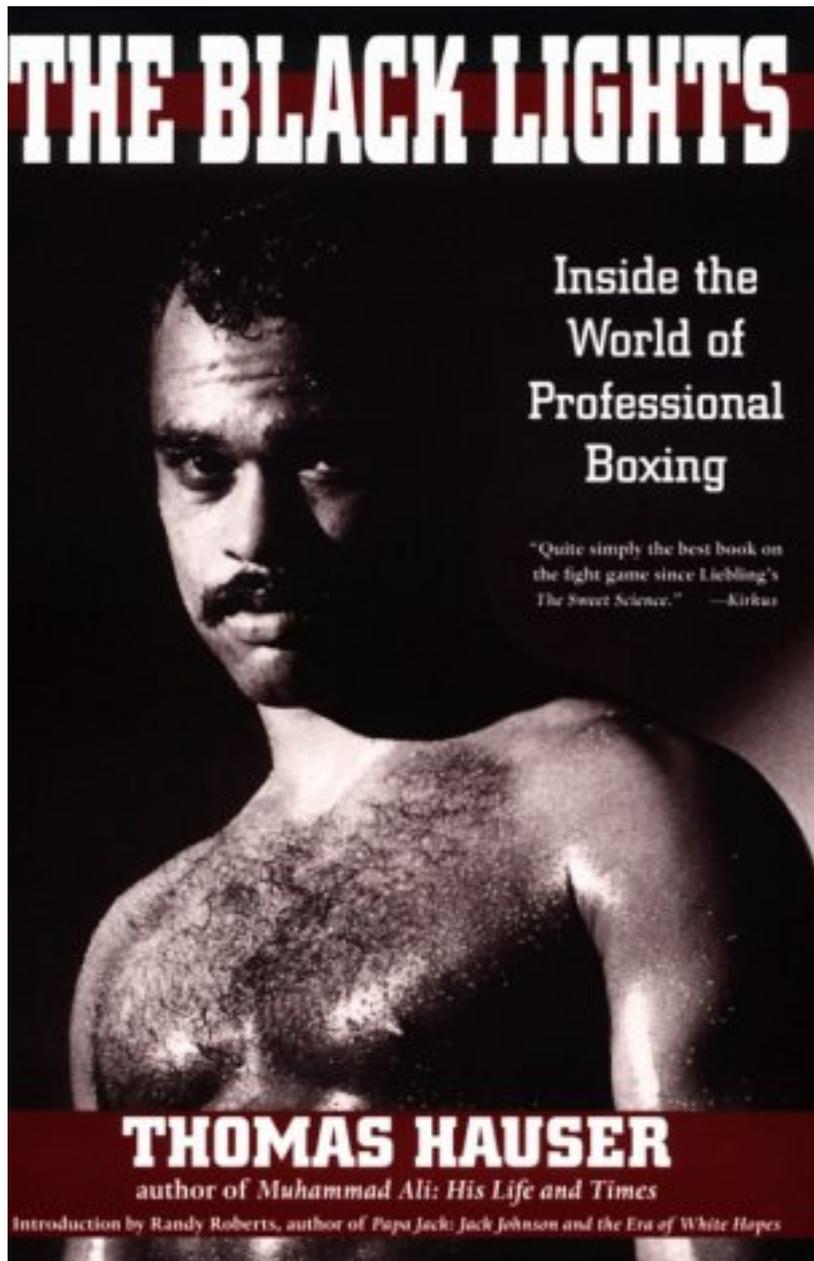


## REST IN PEACE, BILLY COSTELLO

Written by Thomas Hauser

Wednesday, 29 June 2011 15:14

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I met Billy Costello in the summer of 1984 when I visited the Concord Hotel in the Catskill Mountains. I was researching a book about the sport and business of professional boxing with the intention of building the narrative around a fighter who was preparing for a championship fight. Over time, I interviewed close to a hundred people for the project. Gerry Cooney and Mike Jones (Cooney's co-manager) were on the list. Mike invited me to visit Gerry in the Catskills, where he was training for an upcoming fight against Phil Brown.

Billy was Gerry's stablemate. Earlier in the year, he'd knocked out Bruce Curry to win the WBC 140-pound title. Several weeks after we met, he defended his championship with a unanimous-decision victory over Ronnie Shields.

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I liked Billy. He was a class act. We hit it off. I decided to build my book around his next title defense; a November 3, 1984, fight against Saoul Mamby.

“Lots of fighters have articles written about them,” Billy told me after *The Black Lights* was published. “I’ve got a whole book.”

Billy lost his title to Lonnie Smith in 1985. The only other blemish on his ring ledger was a 1986 defeat at the hands of Alexis Arguello. Whatever happened, he told it like it was. In 1999, he made an ill-advised return to the ring at age 43 to fight 40-year-old Juan LaPorte on a “legends” card in North Carolina.

Billy won a split decision in a bout that many thought should have been scored the other way. “To be honest with you,” he told the media afterward, “I think a draw would have been fairer.”

His final record was 40 wins against 2 losses, with a 4-and-1 mark in world championship fights. After he retired as an active fighter, he stayed in boxing as a ring judge. He knew what he was watching and scored fights the way they unfolded without favoring the house fighter.

In spring 2010, Billy learned that he was suffering from adenocarcinoma. That’s a particularly deadly form of lung cancer that afflicts non-smokers.

“For a long time, I thought it was just a pulled muscle in my chest or something like that,” Billy told me. “But it didn’t get better and then I started having trouble breathing, so I went to the doctor. Who the hell knows where this came from. I’m not a smoker. Hey; shit happens. This time, it happened to me.”

By the time Billy sought treatment, the cancer was inoperable and had metastasized to his bones. After initial consultations at a hospital near his home in Kingston, New York, he sought help at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Hospital in Manhattan (one of the leading cancer-treatment centers in the world). The doctors there told him that he should continue treatment at the

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hospital where he'd started.

Reading between the lines, that could have meant Memorial Sloan-Kettering didn't want to tarnish its statistics with a hopeless case. Or maybe Billy's insurance wasn't up to par.

Fighters are used to enduring physical abuse. Cancer imposes physical suffering of another kind. The chemotherapy added to Billy's suffering. He began having excruciating headaches. In mid-August, he made an appointment with a doctor named Gil Lederman.

Lederman has a checkered past. His defenders say that he's brilliant, creative, and willing to treat patients whom other doctors turn away because of the hopeless nature of their condition. His detractors take a different view.

In May 2010, a New York jury found Lederman liable for malpractice in the treatment of a cancer patient named Giuseppa Bono. According to the *New York Times*, Lederman was part of a group that recruited patients in Italy for specialized targeted-radiation treatment at Staten Island University Hospital in New York. The

*Times*

further reported, "About two hundred Italian cancer patients paid \$17,500 for the treatment, lured by promotional materials that promoted 'success' and 'cure' rates above ninety percent. None of the patients were cured."

Bono died after being treated by Lederman for pancreatic cancer. The lawyers for her estate argued that she had actually been suffering from pancreatitis and that Lederman had failed to perform medically-appropriate tests (such as a biopsy) to determine the nature of her illness before conducting radiation treatment.

Prior to that, Lederman had been sued by the estate of [George Harrison, whose wife accused the doctor](#) of forcing Harrison (who was dying of cancer) to autograph a guitar and of violating doctor-patient confidentiality.

As reported in *New York Magazine*, "When the rock star died, Lederman gave touching

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anecdotes to  
News,  
*Newsweek*  
*New York*  
*Post*

*Good Morning America*, CNN, NBC, Fox  
*Us Weekly*,  
, the

,  
*Daily News*

, a variety of British tabloids, and the  
*National Enquirer*

, which somehow got the erroneous impression that Harrison had been convalescing in  
Lederman's own home. He even allowed the

*Enquirer*

into his home to take a photo of his son, Ariel, playing the guitar that George had signed for him. Olivia Harrison [Harrison's widow] filed a complaint with the State Board of Professional Medical Conduct, which fined and censured Lederman. To prevent the autographed guitar from potentially ending up on eBay, she slapped him with a \$10 million lawsuit. As part of the settlement, Lederman relinquished the guitar [which was subsequently destroyed] and agreed not to speak further about Harrison or the case. The same week the case was filed, Staten Island University Hospital announced that Lederman would be replaced as director of radiation oncology."

Lederman's past troubled me. I suggested to Billy that he discuss the doctor with a medical professional whom he trusted before starting treatment with him. Billy did that. Then, on Labor Day (September 6, 2010), he told me, "I got nothing to lose. I've decided to give it a shot."

Eight weeks later, Billy reported, "There are four tumors in my chest. One big one and three little ones. Lederman says he can shrink them and then maybe get rid of them by taking them out with a laser. He says it will take fifteen treatments or something like that. But there have been all kinds of delays about starting with the treatments."

Eventually, the treatments started. By late-November, Billy was seeing Lederman twice a week. Six days before Christmas, we spoke again.

"This thing with Lederman is working," Billy said. "There are two more nodules they got to get rid of, but the treatment is working. Lederman says, once they're gone, they won't come back."

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Five weeks later, on January 23, 2011, reality intervened.

“I got rid of Lederman,” he told me. “I got the feeling that he was starting to play games with me. I can’t trust what he’s telling me, and he wasn’t communicating with my other doctors.”

The last five months were a sad end game.

“I get headaches all the time now from the stress. The pain pills they’re giving me to take the headaches away make me shaky . . . I don’t know how much time I’ve got left . . . I’m feeling positive. I gotta think that way. One way or the other, I’ll be all right.”

The last time we spoke, Billy was in a reflective mood.

“I got two good kids . . . I’ve had a good life . . . I’m blessed with the people I’ve known and the things I’ve done . . . I want to thank you for everything you’ve done for me.”

“No, thank you. Whatever happens, you’ll always be my champion.”

I meant it.

Billy died at Benedictine Hospital at 10:38 this morning. He was my friend. I’ll miss him.

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[Comment on this article](#)

## **REST IN PEACE, BILLY COSTELLO**

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### **the Roast says:**

R.I.P. Billy.

### **brownsugar says:**

R.i.p.

### **Radam G says:**

WOW! My deepest, deepest condolences. I'm totally shock. BC was a gentleman, a pugilistic scholar and a great friend and surrogate BIG BRO. May he get all of the greatest reward of glory. See ya' at da crossroad, BRO! Holla!