We are rerunning this story as a tribute to Wayne Kelly. This is a huge loss to the fight game and a personal loss to TSS member Mortcola.

Referee Wayne Kelly, well known in the NY area as a competent referee, and a rock-solid guy, passed away on Tuesday.

Here is a story Randy Gordon wrote for TSS in 2006, on Mr. Kelly.

On Saturday night, November 11, Wladimir Klitschko will defend his WBO heavyweight title against Calvin Brock. The third man in the ring that night will be New York's finest referee, Wayne Kelly. As a matter of fact, it may be an understatement to call Kelly New York's finest referee. He just may be the finest referee in the world.

Kelly – who is employed as a fulltime counselor for the Town of Hempstead's Services for the Aging – has been a licensed referee in New York since 1988. He should have been licensed 10 years sooner, but behind-the-scenes politics and professional jealousy (which I detail in a

chapter from my upcoming book, “Glove Affair,” and hope to preview on TSS soon) kept Kelly from beginning his refereeing career in his late 20’s instead of in his late 30’s. Despite the politics and jealousy, “Irish” Wayne Kelly (who is called “I-W-K” by his friends) persevered, and now, 18 years after working his first pro bout (a four-rounder at Gleason’s Arena in Brooklyn), has emerged onto the national boxing scene as one of the sport’s premier referees.

Kelly actually emerged into the national spotlight in February 1993, after working a 10-round heavyweight bout at Madison Square Garden. The fight was between top contender Ray Mercer and journeyman Jesse Ferguson. Mercer came into the bout with a 20-1 record, his only loss coming by 12-round decision to former champ Larry Holmes one day short of a year earlier. Ferguson brought a record of 18-9 into the MSG ring.

The fight was supposed to be a title tune-up for Mercer, who, five years earlier, had won a gold medal in the heavyweight division at the Seoul Olympics. His team figured he would beat the trial horse Ferguson, then challenge Riddick Bowe for the heavyweight title. It was not to be. Mercer was ill-prepared for the bout, coming in at a career-heavy 238 pounds.

Mercer was sluggish throughout the bout, which featured lots of leaning on each other and infighting, and there was no surprise when Ferguson’s hand was raised as the unanimous decision winner.

Following the evening’s fisticuffs, highlighted by Riddick Bowe’s title-retaining first-round blowout of Michael Dokes, Kelly was sitting with a group of friends and colleagues – including the writer – in a restaurant inside Madison Square Garden.

“Were there enough clinches for you to break?” Kelly was asked jokingly by a friend.

“You know something, there must’ve been a million clinches,” replied Kelly. Then he added, “And every time they clinched, they started talking. Trash talk.” Some of the table guests laughed. Some smiled. But nobody gave it another thought. Until the following Monday morning. That’s when the Newark Star Ledger carried a story about the fight, complete with quotes from Mercer’s ex-manager, Marc Roberts, that Mercer had offered Ferguson a bribe of $100,000 – during the fight – to go down and stay down, especially in the later rounds, as it became apparent that Mercer was blowing the tune-up fight, along with his title challenge to Bowe.

An investigation into possible sports bribery was launched by the New York State Athletic Commission. The State Attorney General's office was brought into the investigation, along with the New York State Police. Months of testimony, interviews and fact-finding hearings took place. Kelly was a central figure in the investigation.

He acknowledged there was "trash talking" going on during the fight. What did he hear?

Who said what? Did Mercer really tell Ferguson that if he went down for the count he'd give him $100,000? The case went before a Grand Jury. Then, with Assistant D.A. Roslynn Mauskopf prosecuting, the case went to court. Kelly was called as an expert witness. During the hearings and during the trial, it came out that Kelly's hearing was less-than-perfect. So, too, was the sound quality of the audio of the Ferguson-Mercer tape. The fighter's mouthpieces certainly didn't add any clarity to the audio. Mercer was found innocent of the attempted sports bribery charges. But he didn't get his title shot at Bowe. Ferguson did. On a hot May night in 1993, Ferguson lasted until :17 of the second round. As for Kelly, the excellent refereeing job he had done in the clinch-filled Ferguson-Mercer bout brought more lucrative, topnotch assignments his way.

One of those topnotch assignments came on July 11, 1996. Kelly was working his first major heavyweight bout. Oh, he had worked other heavyweights before – Michael Dokes and Orlin Norris included. But this was the big arena at Madison Square Garden. The principals were Riddick Bowe and Andrew Golota. Bowe was the once-beaten former heavyweight champion of the world. Golota was the rough, tough, unbeaten and unpredictable challenger.

Although the fight was for 10 rounds and not for any championship, most boxing fans and insiders considered the 38-1-1 Bowe to be the rightful champion. He was not the champion on paper because he had elected to trash his WBC belt rather than face Lennox Lewis. In addition, Bowe was coming off a knockout victory over Evander Holyfield.

For reasons known only to Bowe, he did not take Golota, 28-0, very seriously. He came into the fight at a then-career heavy 252 pounds. In his fight against Holyfield eight months earlier, Bowe weighed 240.

The bottom line in the record books reads “Riddick Bowe WDQ 7 Andrew Golota.” But the bottom line does not tell anything near the story of the fight. The fight was a dirty one, especially on the part of Golota, whose repeated low and foul blows drew him warning after warning from Kelly, and point deduction upon point reduction.

“I warned Golota maybe three times before I started taking points,” Kelly told TheSweetScience. “It didn’t matter, though. He just kept landing low blow after low blow. Finally, after the third point deduction, I stepped in front of him and said, ‘This is it! One more time and you’re taking a shower, do you understand?’ He just looked at me and said in clear English, ‘I understand.’ Then he walked right out and nailed Bowe with another shot to the groin. Bowe went down on his back and I had no choice but to disqualify Golota.”

The disqualification of Golota touched off one of the most explosive riots ever seen in a sports arena. There were reasons the riot happened. In trying to be a nice guy and do the right thing in the days before the fight, Bowe had given away hundreds of tickets to underprivileged children in the rundown, poverty-stricken area where he spent his youth, Brownsville, Brooklyn. Unfortunately, a few in that group wanted to fight more than Bowe did that night. Then there were the Polish Nationals, who turned out in droves to cheer on their undefeated hero. The mix was volatile. Following the DQ, a Bowe entourage member stormed into the ring and clubbed Golota on the head with a walkie-talkie. Golota then threw some of his straightest above-the-belt punches of the night. Within seconds, the ring was filled with dozens of wannabe fighters.

To make matters worse, the weak New York State Athletic Commission, then run by Gov. George Pataki-appointed hacks and flacks, had failed to meet with Madison Square Garden officials – a meeting which had been commonplace under previous

Administrations – and bring in the security which was so obviously missing and needed that night. Also, MSG officials had neglected to tie the ringside chairs to each other. Dozens of those chairs became missiles in the hands of the thugs who erupted moments after Kelly waved the fight off. Gunshots were heard reverberating through the famous arena.

As chaos enveloped the ring and the arena, was Kelly scared? Did he consider bailing out and heading for the safety of the dressing room, where NYSAC Chairman Floyd Patterson was quickly moved to?

“I wasn’t going anywhere,” said Kelly. “When I’m working, the ring is my office. I wasn’t through working and no amount of thugs was going to remove me from my office. I remember thinking, ‘I hope all my colleagues at the commission and friends who are here are all right. But scared? Nah! I’ve been shot at more times than a rap star!”

How true that is. All of it was as a hero in Vietnam.

Following graduation from Garden City High School on Long Island, Kelly enlisted in the U.S. Army. After boot camp, he was shipped off to Vietnam in 1967. He spent the next 13 months rising through the ranks up to Lieutenant in the 5th Special Forces Group fighting out of the Central Islands in Vietnam. While there, he saw things nobody should ever have to see and heard screams which haunted him for years. Bullets whizzed by him and bullets found him. But none could keep him down. Constant explosions around him dulled his hearing. For his bravery and for giving blood for his country, Kelly was awarded the Purple Heart. Upon returning from Vietnam, Kelly attended Hofstra University, where he earned a degree in psychology.

In 2000, Kelly met award-winning writer Nelson DeMille, also a Vietnam vet, in a restaurant. The two talked extensively about their time in the hell on Earth that was the battlefield of rain forests of the Asian nation. DeMille convinced Kelly to go back to Vietnam. He told him he’d find it therapeutic. Kelly was on a flight a few days later.

“I flew into Ho Chi Minh City, then left for Saigon,” recalls Kelly. “From there, I flew to Hanoi, then backpacked to Hue, which was destroyed in the Tet Offensive in 1968. Hue has since been rebuilt and is simply gorgeous.”

Then, something happened that is the thing unbelievable movie scenes are made out of. While sitting at a bar in Quinon, Kelly began speaking with a Vietnamese man whose English was broken, but quite understandable. Kelly bought a round of drinks, and his new friend bought a round. They talked about boxing, about Kelly being a referee, about the Vietnamese man’s love for the sport. Then the talked gravitated to the Vietnam War. Kelly told the man about his background. The man froze in his seat, his face wearing the look of shock. Then he told Kelly he, too, had fought in the Vietnam War. For the NVA –the North Vietnamese Army. He was the enemy. They talked about individual battles. Then, they found they had shared one firefight – “The Battle of LZ English” in Bongson. They stared at each other in disbelief. Thirty-three years

earlier, these two men were doing all they could to kill one another. Now they were talking, laughing and enjoying each other's company. Emotion overtook both of them. They cried until they laughed. Then they hugged, raised their glasses and toasted each other and each other's country. Then they toasted for peace in the world. Don't we wish President Bush and Kim Jong Il could do the same?

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If Kelly could get into a time machine and head back, is there any fighter or fighters he'd like to be in the ring with as a referee. He didn't have to think.

"Well, first I'd head back to the World War I era and find my grandfather, 'Harlem' Eddie Kelly, who I understand was some tough sonuvabitch (Ed Note: Eddie Kelly, who fought between 1911 and 1922, was around 40-40-10 as one of the era's toughest lightweights). Then I'd zoom forward and referee a guy who I watched on television every week, Emile Griffith. Emile, who has become one of my best friends, was a complete fighter. He had everything. Had he not suffered the tragedy of the Benny "Kid" Paret fight, which really took something out of him, I believe he could be placed right up there with Sugar Ray Robinson as the greatest fighter ever. In my eyes, he is, anyway."

While Kelly's own fistic prowess wasn't along the lines of "Harlem" Eddie Kelly or Emile Griffith, he was a tough, rock-jawed light heavyweight who fought from 1975-1979 in club battles on Long Island, winning four out of seven fights, three by knockout.

He sparred dozens of rounds against one of the finest light heavyweight contenders ever, "Irish" Bobby Cassidy, the same "Irish" Bobby Cassidy whose name graces the masthead of TheSweetScience.

Asked what part of being a referee he liked most, Kelly broke it down for us.

"Well, seeing the countries I've been able to see has been fantastic (among them is Germany, Denmark and Argentina), and meeting the celebrities I've been able to meet (Donald Trump,

Jack Nicholson, Pierce Brosnan and JFK Jr., to name a few) has been very exciting. But just being a referee is a dream come true for me. I am totally focused on being a referee. I watch as much boxing as I can, and study every referee that I can, both past and present. You can learn so much by watching all the situations that can arise. I also try to get as much information on the fighters as I can. Some referees don't want to know anything about the fighters, but I believe it helps me."

Of all the celebrities Kelly has met, he said one in particular stood out: JFK Jr.

"Meeting him was incredible," said Kelly. "He came over to me after a match at the Garden and we talked for quite awhile. He was some boxing fan. He really enjoyed coming to a card and getting into it. He had a million questions about being a referee. It seemed there was something about being a boxing ref that really fascinated him."

Kelly also loves to work out, something he did six days a week in the month leading up to the Klitschko-Brock fight. When he is not hitting the bag or sparring, he is moving around in the ring in Frankie G's Academy of Boxing in Huntington, N.Y., giving clients quite a thrill to have one of the world's best referees in the ring with them.

This is the second consecutive Wladimir Klitschko fight that Kelly is refereeing. Back in April, when the camps of Klitschko and Chris Bryd couldn't agree on a referee, Kelly's name came up. Neither camp had any problem. Kelly was given 48 hours notice to get from his home on Long Island to Mannheim, Germany. Running on no sleep but plenty of adrenaline, Kelly did his usual great job in the fight, which Klitschko won by TKO in the seventh round.

If there is one thing Kelly loves more than refereeing, it is his two children, daughter Jackie, 22, and son, Ryan, 20. Jackie, a psychology teacher in the Virginia school system, is also an award-winning dancer, specializing in Irish dance, and Ryan is an outstanding collegiate lacrosse player on Long Island.

What does he expect to happen on Saturday between Klitschko and Brock?

“I’ve learned to expect the unexpected,” Kelly remarked. “I refereed the fight between Arturo Gatti and Wilson Rodriguez (in 1996). I was told by a lot of people that Rodriguez is a boxer, a counterpuncher. Well, he came out winging, trying to take Gatti’s head off.

I was also the ref when Junior Jones was giving Kennedy McKinney a boxing lesson. Just like that, McKinney came back to knock Jones out. And then there was the John Ruiz-Fres Oquendo fight. I thought we’d have ourselves a real boxing match. Yet, there were so many clinches that I was sore for three days from constantly breaking them up. In the Klitschko-Brock fight, I am ready for anything.”

Wladimir Klitschko vs. Calvin Brock is worthy of being touted as a World Heavyweight Championship fight. Fight fans deserve nothing less. This fight, along with fight fans who will get to enjoy it, deserves nothing less than having Wayne Kelly as its referee.

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