

Peter Finney Wins BWAA Liebling Award

Written by The Sweet Science
Wednesday, 16 January 2013 17:40



PETER FINNEY WINS A.J. LIEBLING AWARD

They are a vanishing breed, sports writers and columnists who are as instantly identifiable with their cities as, say, baseball's Stan Musial is in St. Louis, basketball's Bill Russell is in Boston and former heavyweight champion Joe Frazier is in Philadelphia.

Peter Finney, the newest winner of the A.J. Liebling Award for Outstanding Boxing Writing presented by the Boxing Writers Association of America, is one of the last of his kind, a New Orleans civic treasure whose 67½ years of writing about sports in his hometown – not only boxing, which long has held a special place in his heart -- is a perfect amalgamation of journalistic talent and incredible longevity.

Finney, 85, will be presented the Liebling at the 85th annual BWAA Awards Dinner in the spring, the date and site of which has yet to be announced. He joins a prestigious scroll of past Liebling winners that includes, among others, Shirley Povich, Budd Schulberg, W.C. Heinz, Jimmy Cannon, Robert Lipsyte, Bill Gallo, Dick Young, Edwin Pope, William Nack, Larry Merchant, F.X. Toole, Pete Hamill, George Plimpton and Liebling himself.

"When I think of New Orleans, I think of Peter," said one of Finney's contemporaries, Jerry Izenberg, sports columnist emeritus for the Newark Star-Ledger. "That city needs Peter. I hope the people of New Orleans understand what they have in him."

Added longtime sports columnist Larry Felser of the Buffalo News: "I don't know anybody in the business that doesn't like Peter and respect him. He's the classic New Orleans gentleman."

Finney began his newspaper career, as a 17-year-old, recent high school graduate, stringing for the New Orleans States. The first of his 10,000-plus bylined stories appeared on June 22, 1945. His career has outlasted that of the now-defunct State, and since 1980 he has

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been churning out award-winning sports stories for the Times-Picayune, further establishing himself as an icon to generations of devoted readers.

“It’s never been like work to me,” Finney once said of his approach to his craft. “It’s something I enjoy doing. That’s how I feel. I’ve just been lucky to hang around, I guess.”

Although he is a general sports columnist who in recent years has only occasionally authored a boxing piece, Finney is the big gun his newspapers would roll out whenever a truly major ring event demanded public attention. He has covered, among others, Muhammad Ali, Sugar Ray Leonard and Roberto Duran.

“Boxing has a charm all its own,” Finney said. “You’re right there at ringside, and it’s a captivating sport, especially at the top level. I remember the Sugar Ray Leonard-Roberto Duran fight at the Superdome in 1980. Sugar Ray was a great boxer and had a lot of charisma. One thing I definitely remember about that fight was watching a man from Panama at ringside waving a little Panamanian flag. After Duran quit, the man just dropped the flag in his lap and wouldn’t look up.

“The Ali-Spinks fight in 1978 was one of the most dramatic events the Superdome ever had because it involved Ali, and he didn’t disappoint. Ali was a mesmerizing athlete. I remember going up to his training camp in Pennsylvania, and as we were asking questions, he was doing magic tricks with a rope.

“New Orleans was always a great boxing town. Bernard Docusen fought Sugar Ray Robinson for the welterweight title at Comiskey Park in Chicago when Sugar Ray was at his peak in 1948, and it was a great fight. Actually, New Orleans’ love affair with boxing goes back to the Corbett-Sullivan fight in 1892, which was the first U.S. fight held with gloves under the Marquess of Queensbury rules. People think I covered that fight, but I just missed that one!”

The Liebling is but the latest of honors that have been bestowed upon Finney. He received the Dick McCann Memorial Award, the highest award presented by the Pro Football Hall of Fame, in 2010. He was inducted into the U.S. Basketball Writers Hall of Fame in 2012, and is also enshrined in the New Orleans Sugar Bowl Hall of Fame, Louisiana Sports Writers Association Hall of Fame, LSU School of Journalism Hall of Fame and the (Loyola University of New Orleans, Peter’s alma mater) Wolf Pack Hall of Fame. Not only that, he has been voted Louisiana Sports Writer of the Year a record 17 times by the National Association of Sportscasters and Sportswriters.

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“The Liebling Award is a great honor, and I’m very grateful to the Boxing Writers Association for finding me worthy of such recognition,” Finney said.