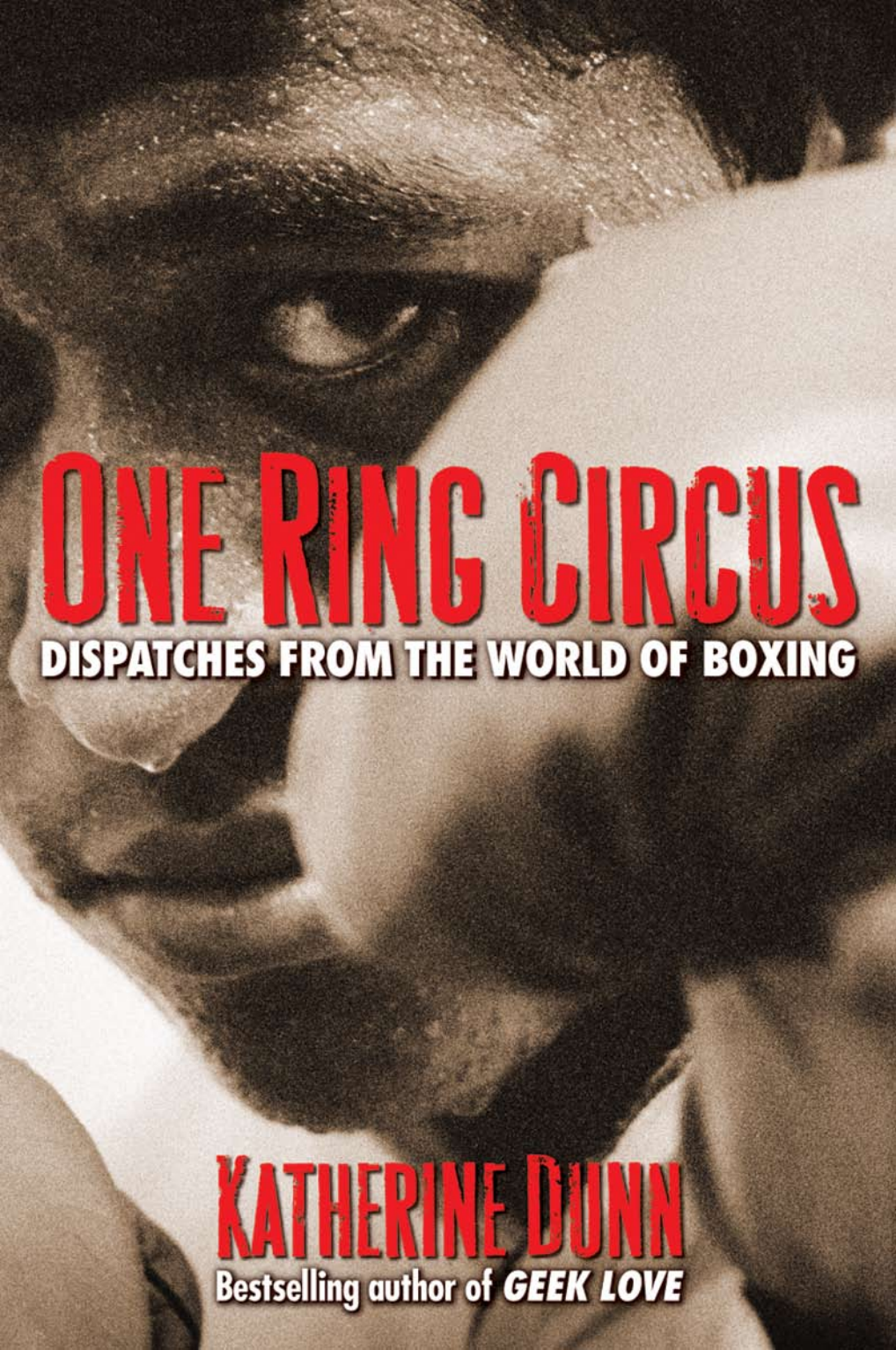
ONE RING CIRCUS
DISPATCHES FROM THE WORLD OF BOXING
KATHERINE DUNN
Bestselling author of GEEK LOVE

ONE RING CIRCUS

Dispatches from the World of Boxing

Katherine Dunn

Tucson, Arizona

These articles have appeared in slightly different form in the following publications: "The Unhappy Warrior," "Buckaroo Boxing," "Vice and Virtue of Boxing," "Beauty and the Beast," "Minker's Mettle," "Debut: Minsker Turns Pro," "The Big Risk," "The Fight: Hagler-Hearns," "Who is this Arguello?," "Sugar Blues: Leonard-Hagler," in the *Willamette Week*. "Just as Fierce" in *Mother Jones*; "Golden Girls" in *Vogue*; "The Knockout" in *Women's Sport and Fitness*; "Defending Tyson" in *PDXS*; "One Ring Circus: Ali-Frazier IV" in *Sports Illustrated/ Women*;" Fight or Die: Johnny Tapia" in *Playboy*; "Cuts" (formerly "Cut Men") in *Stop Smiling Magazine*; "Fists of Fury: Francisco Roche" in *The Rocket Newspaper*; "The Rumble in the Rectory" in cyberboxingzone.com.

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For D.K. Holm
It was his idea and he gave it to me.

ONE RING CIRCUS

Dispatches from the World of Boxing

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Part III The Big Risk

Introduction:
Sometimes the Subject Chooses You

Boxing is simple. Two unarmed volunteers, matched in weight and experience, face off in a white-lit square. It is ritualized crisis, genuine but contained. At its best, a bout is high improvisational drama and the boxers are warrior artists. When it falls short of perfection, which is almost always, the failures are interesting in themselves. Horrifying or hilarious, and all points between, no two fights are alike. What happens in and around that mislabeled ring is a potent distillation of everything human.

This book is a sampling of all I have chased after, tripped over, been blind-sided by, learned, un-learned, mistook, admired and detested over three decades of writing about the sport of boxing.

These dispatches span an era ranging from the brilliance of Sugar Ray Leonard to the long decline of Iron Mike Tyson and the rise of women in the ring. Also included are stories of amateurs and little known club fighters—the blood and bones of the sport. The 1980's and 90's, and the early years of the 21st century were decades when tribal casinos gradually rescued the individual art of boxing

from burial under the avalanche of corporate team entertainments, and when strenuous, often futile, efforts were launched to increase safety and to regulate the anarchy. It was complex, usually fascinating and always messy.

When I was a kid, back in the middle of the twentieth century, boxing was part of the blue-collar dream life of America. Boys learned the sport as amateurs in school or church or community center clubs. Every newspaper covered it. And, long before television, the professionals came to us on the radio.

On warm Friday nights with radios propped in open windows and families out on porches and stoops, the scratchy voice of the ringside commentator filled whole streets. In some neighborhoods you could walk block after block and never miss a round.

My family was pretty typical in that the men were interested in boxing and my mother disapproved. She called it barbaric and vulgar. That was enough to intrigue me.

I've never been one to yearn for the good old days. That post WWII America was a rough place, as I recall. Racism and sexism were insistent and institutional. Spousal battery was condoned. The smacking and whipping of children in school and at home was expected. Gangs were common. Brawls boiled up in streets, playgrounds, taverns and workplaces.

At the time, boxers struck me as peculiarly civilized. They didn't screech or holler. They didn't use knives or bicycle chains or chunks of plumbing, and they only fought when the bell rang. When it rang again, they stopped. Amazing. Still, I believed that, being a girl, I had no access to the place where the rage was trained and restrained.

Muhammad Ali erupted into the general consciousness while I was in high school. If you knew nothing else about boxing, you knew Ali. Early on I was one of the many who found Ali offensive. He

violated the tradition of modest, dignified champions I'd learned to respect. But he won us all over eventually, and became an indelible icon of humor, beauty, skill and defiance. His long career reached deep into my adulthood. For me, his physical decline tangled the bewildered awe of my childhood with a grim adult awareness of terrible consequences.

In 1980 I married Peter Fritsch, who, among his other interests, was a boxing fan. Pete casually opened a door I'd assumed was a brick wall. One day when he had to be away, he asked me to watch a televised fight and tell him what happened. When he came home I was ready with three pages of notes, prepared to deliver a round-by-round account. Turned out he just wanted to know who won.

Until then I had only seen the professional sport on television. Pete took me to a live fight card. Looking back I can see that it was an ordinary club show, but I was electrified. It was a plunge into one of the great mysteries—the nature of violence.

From that night on I needed to attend every match in reach and watch every punch thrown on television. I studied boxing books and magazines. The boxing scene in my hometown, Portland, Oregon, was lively in those days, but the coverage in the daily newspapers struck me as sparse and grudging. The sports pages were dedicated to team games and golf, and seemed to actively disapprove of pugilism. It burned me, seeing people pour hope, energy and passion into the ring and yet receive no recognition.

By then I'd published two novels and some short stories. I called myself a writer. I decided that if I wanted local boxing written about, I'd have to do it myself. In early 1981 the editor of Willamette Week, a local alternative newspaper, agreed to print what I wrote about the sport. That's how it started for me.

The same daily reporters I'd criticized patiently answered my

stupidest questions, and they snatched me back several times when I was trying to march off some journalistic cliff or other.

My husband, Pete, was not a writer, but he loved the sport and he enjoyed going to the fights, teaching me, discussing it endlessly. In gratitude for his support, I added his name to my byline in 1982 and 1983. Our marriage ended in 1984 and Pete went on to other interests. I stuck with boxing. Pete has graciously given his permission for my name to appear alone on four articles in this book, which were originally published under both our names. Those pieces are: "The Unhappy Warrior," "Buckaroo Boxing," "Beauty and the Beast," and "Vice and Virtue."

When I first started, boxing was known as "the last male bastion," and I figured writing about it was a daring, difficult thing for a woman—right up there with teaching cobras to samba or getting shot out of a cannon three times a day. But my vanity was soon flattened by the fight folk who didn't care whether I was female, male, or a magenta-rumped baboon as long as I got the job done.

This mania for the task at hand contributes to the inclusive nature of the sport. Race, gender, religion, size, age, education—none of it matters if you are serious about the work. Of course the minute you flub, any suppressed prejudices will surface in virulent epithets. This pattern is part of boxing's Newtonian doctrine of cause and effect and should not be taken personally. I've reason to be grateful that redemption is seldom more than a hefty dose of crow and three or four desperately honest efforts away.

In this era when the sport is maligned, marginalized and ignored, its practitioners are eager for anybody who might provide coverage. Boxers, trainers, coaches, corner men, managers, officials, all take pains to help me and every other reporter who wanders through.

Back in 1981 there was one major advantage in being a female

boxing reporter—no lines in the women's rest room. In the fairgrounds and armories where the local fights took place, there was just enough female company to dull the ominous echo built into public latrines. I might find some boxer's mother or wife or girlfriend in there, pacing or praying or cussing a blue streak. Their inside information was solid.

Nowadays, in the flash casinos, there is some danger of being spike heeled by lawyers, or elbowed at the mirror by business execs discussing the merits of an uppercut while fixing their lipstick. Admittedly, I get a kick out of this shift in demographics.

Women were always deeply involved in the supporting roles of the sport, but I didn't understand their potential. The only women's bout I saw in the first few years was so awful that I bought the old fight guy dictum that women couldn't and shouldn't box. I never believed women lacked the strength or the ferocity, but I thought they would not accept the discipline. I was wrong again, as demonstrated by the stories included here. Even the crustiest coaches and trainers made fast U-turns the first time a girl child or a woman walked into their gym and out-worked the boys.

Boxing is dangerous, and while it is a natural venue for comedy, it is always serious. Note has been made of the verbal structure in which boxing is not a game. You do not "play" boxing any more than you "play" running, jumping, climbing or swimming. These are essential functions of our species. They are also things we do for pride and pleasure—sports. When they are done with intelligence, skill and beauty, they are arts.

It's a privilege to serve as a reporter for the pugilistic art. The Fight Guys—male and female—strive in the heat of the white light while I sit out in the comfortable dark making remarks. Thanks to them I see mortal galaxies from here. —KD, 2008

★ PART I ★

SCHOOL OF HARD KNOCKS

School of Hard Knocks

Photographer Jim Lommasson, whose photos grace the cover and interior of this book, spent years visiting and shooting boxing gyms all over the country. Wherever his assignments took him he would scout out the local boxing gyms, befriend the denizens, and find a way to shoot.

I'd seen him around the Portland gyms, but didn't know about his project until one day in 2003, when he came to my place and spread his wonderful photos out on a table. He was creating a book that would honor, not the competition, not the stars, but the gyms themselves.

As he talked it became clear that we shared similar views on the nature of boxing gyms. When Lommasson invited me to write some of the essays that accompany the photos in his 2005 book Shadow Boxers, he gave me a chance to say things I'd been thinking about for a long time.

One day many years ago, I rode my press credential into a busy boxing gym and was shocked to see a hard-punching monster known as Frankie "The Preacher Man" doing push-ups in the ring with his year-old son sprawled on his back. Amid the din

of ringing bells, drumming speed bags, and smacking leather, the baby slept, his long lashes fanned across chubby cheeks, rocking in the smooth rise and fall of his father's powerful shoulders.

The coach said Frankie had been bringing the child in at least twice a week for months, babysitting while his wife worked. Frankie had an idea that if he went on doing push-ups this way as the child grew, he'd keep getting stronger. Figuring Frankie was eccentric, I asked if it was a nuisance having the baby around. The coach gave me a sideways squint as though I was the weird one. "Nah," he said, "the guys look out for him."

Like all things human, boxing is complicated and full of contradictions. Whenever you get to thinking you know it all, something smacks your ear to refresh your humility. By then I'd been reporting on the sport of the busted beaks for a while. I'd seen plenty of evidence that boxing is deliberate science—the opposite of the scared, mad frenzy we associate with back-alley brawls. "Lose your temper, lose the fight," the saying goes. But my notebook had been splattered with blood at ringside, and I had typed quote marks around plenty of tough talk. The sport is packaged and peddled as mayhem because that's what sells, and with all my arrogance, I was still buying the hype. I hadn't hung around the gyms where boxers spend a thousand hours for every minute in an actual bout. The difference between the gym and the klieg-lit show ring is the difference between a garden and the sprig of celery in your Bloody Mary. They're related, but they're not the same.

In the decades since The Preacher Man's baby jolted me, I've seen a lot of boxers bring their children to the gym. Despite the sport's grueling work ethic and ferocious demeanor, it's not unusual to see a preschooler in the corner, cheerful with a coloring book, or skipping a shortened rope. I'm no longer surprised to sit

down next to an open gym bag and find an infant inside, snoozing peacefully on a nest of sweat-stained leather gloves. I've seen a five-time world champ in three weight divisions laughing on his knees on the floor, changing his youngest son's diaper. Still, it's always a revelation to see fighters hovering eagerly around a baby, hear the baritone cooing, watch the bruised knuckles counting tiny toes, and the swelling pride when Dad chooses one of them to mind the fragile bundle while he's in the sparring ring beating one of his colleagues blue.

This is not to claim that boxers are all sweet messengers of light, just that they are full-fledged humans, not cartoon thugs. The big guys don't consider it odd to have children in the gym because they've been there themselves since they were mere tykes. The gym is home. For many it's the safest place they know. If the toddlers are around long enough, somebody will start showing them how to move and what to do with their left hand.

There are gyms that cater only to professionals, but most boxing gyms are about kids. Serious adult and teen boxers, whether amateur or pro, are walking billboards for the gym, proof of the coach's skills, teaching assistants, and models for how to do it right. A healthy gym probably has at least half a dozen little guys for every grown-up. It's the youngsters who keep the gym and the sport alive.

The coaches like to get kids early, somewhere around eight or ten. Boxing is a demanding set of skills, as unnatural and precise as piano or quantum mechanics. It takes years to learn the basic moves and more years to develop finesse. Training shapes the growing body, sculpts bone and muscle, hones reflexes and stamina, and builds the necessary self-discipline. The more urgent reason, of course, is to get kids off the street before they get tangled up in

drugs or gangs or other forms of destruction.

Not long after I encountered The Preacher Man's baby, I was perched on a bench in a different gym watching a small but impressive nine-year-old exercising his talents in the ring. When the boy finished and was getting ready to leave, he came over to show me the puppy hidden in his jacket. In the standard lame adult way, I asked what he wanted to do when he grew up. I expected a line about wanting to be a world champ. He said, "I'm gonna get me a string of bitches and be a flash pimp." He was calm and grave saying it. I couldn't tell if he was serious or pulling my smug middle-class leg. Either way he rattled me. Fight gyms are generally pretty mellow, but you shouldn't forget what's waiting outside.

Boxing is the oldest of the martial arts, and there have been stretches over its 5,000-plus years when it was considered a skill for the privileged. The nobles of Achilles' Troy and Hannibal's Carthage trained in the sport. Europe's titled gentlemen learned fencing and boxing in the same exclusive schools. Oxford and Harvard used to field formidable fighters in intercollegiate competition.

The United States popularized boxing both as a sport and as a way to make a little money. Baseball and boxing were the national pastimes through the middle of the 20th century. In an era of bootstrap individualism, training in one-on-one combat made sense even for the comfortable and educated. Summer was for sandlot baseball, winter for the indoor sport of boxing. Every substantial town had professional fight cards. Amateur boxing programs were supported by high schools, colleges, churches and newspapers, city halls and police departments, charities and the military. Coaches and gyms were everywhere.

But real dedication to the ring is always the province of whichever group has it hardest. The history of the professional sport

in this country is written in waves of immigration. Successive generations of Jewish, Nordic, Irish, Italian, Middle European, Soviet, and Latin emigres march through the record books. Long before Jackie Robinson peacefully integrated baseball, the great Jack Johnson forcibly integrated boxing, and black athletes came to dominate whole weight divisions for decades at a time.

After World War II, the cultural focus and the money shifted to corporate team sports. By now, early in the 21st century, the establishment has turned its back on boxing. Still, it survives, as it always has, in hard-core boxing gyms that play a vital role in their communities. They are in stern blue-collar neighborhoods, in slums and sleaze and bombed-out blocks where nobody should live. They are where the rent is cheapest because a boxing gym is no way to make money. They are where the fighters are—the struggling classes, the strivers.

Gyms are in storefronts or garages or basements or up two flights of stairs above the tavern or, more rarely each year, tucked into spartan community centers. They may be warehouse-sized or small enough to heat with one light bulb and a featherweight skipping rope. Some are kept clean and reeking of disinfectant. Others just reek. A few have multiple rings and a battalion of leather punching bags, cupboards full of sparring helmets, gloves, ropes, team uniforms, and video equipment for studying tapes. For some the lone heavy bag is a canvas duffel stuffed with rags. The ring is a mat on the floor and instructions to imagine ropes.

Each gym is a one-room schoolhouse with students ranging from kindergarten through pugilistic college working side by side. As in any other school, what counts is the teacher. Coaches are the heart of boxing gyms. They vary widely in ability and temperament, and are prey to the full spectrum of foibles. But they

try. With notable exceptions, they are former boxers who refuse to abandon the game. The adrenal surge of boxing is addictive even in the reduced dosage of teaching and working corners. There is power in being The Coach. There's also enormous responsibility. Coaches will tell you they are just "trying to give back" to the sport and the community.

My friend Lee coached for the city parks department for thirty years and, now that he's retired, he volunteers as an assistant coach. He says he lost his first dozen or so amateur bouts as a ghetto kid and was never very good. "But I stuck with it," he says. He loved the sport and the gym and the trips. "We traveled all over and saw things and met different kinds of people that I never would have had a chance to experience." Lee is a quietly inspiring teacher whose former students often come back to visit. On road trips, he made sure his teams detoured for museums. "When I started coaching," he says, "all I knew was how my coach treated us."

Coaches attend seminars and take written tests every year to maintain their certification to teach amateurs. But they learn from each other. They start by hanging out and then helping out—imitating the coaches they respect. They may always be volunteers in somebody else's gym, or they may start one of their own.

The head coach sets the tone in every element from which posters go up on the walls to how many push-ups and crunches are enough. Is profanity tolerated? Is sparring viciously competitive, or technical and scholarly? Then there's technique and style. Boxing styles are as varied and distinctive as singing voices or a painter's "hand." A boxer's style is determined by physique and personality and who taught him. Aficionados can often tell a fighter's educational roots by his style. One may be from the Cus D'Amato School of peek-a-boo defense and power hooks, while another is

an example of Detroit's famed Kronk Gym with the jab coming up from below. The coach imprints his own aesthetic on his students and some are more successful than others. If your coach doesn't know how to block or slip punches, your defense will have major problems.

When his fighter is a professional, the coach is called a "trainer" and earns ten percent of the boxer's pay for a fight. Only a handful of the thousands of professional boxers can actually earn a living in the ring, so most trainers earn scant nickels per hour of teaching time. Most coaches work a day job and then spend hours in the gym in the evenings. Many pay out of their own pockets for the rent, electricity, heat, and water to keep the gym open. The coach loads boxers into his own car and drives hundreds of miles on his own dime to get them competition. He often ends up feeding his boxers, paying for hotel rooms on the road, pitching in to buy equipment. Coaches are dead serious about keeping kids busy and out of trouble. They see boxing as a lifeline for those in deep water. Odds are they know from personal experience.

Coaches take pride in their trophies. When their boxers win, they win. But if they've been around a while, every gym and every coach keeps another more private scorecard with two lists: The Lost are those who left the gym and ended up in jail or dead. The Saved are those who went on to college or got decent jobs. They keep distant count of the hair salon impresario, the electricians, truck drivers, printers, social workers, the real estate salesman, the car dealer, the restaurant owner, the construction worker.

After years on this beat, I have my own lists. The Preacher Man hung up his gloves long ago and moved away with his family. But I've kept track of the small boy who said he wanted to be a pimp. He had talent and charm and he worried his coaches sorely. In his

teens he got loose and spent time in juvenile detention. When he was released the coaches got him back. He became a state Golden Glove champ and graduated from high school. They celebrated but didn't let go. He started college. Then I was out of touch for several years, so when I ran into one of his coaches a while back I was scared to ask. The kid's OK, though. Nowadays he's pouring all that charisma into teaching sixth grade, and he loves it.

A coach's friends are other coaches. Who else can speak their language? If they are lucky, their wives are active partners: the gym record keepers, competition judges, hug and first-aid dispensers, chaperones, organizers of cake sales and raffles. When coaches retire from whatever occupation has paid the bills, they have more time to spend in the gym. If they do their job properly they create a few new coaches to take their place when they are gone.

The hype of boxing is true enough. The sport is hard and only the brave endure. The game is brutal, but its core is strangely gentle. Students come on their own time, after school or work. There's no extra credit, no activity bus to get them home afterwards, no college scholarship to reach for. A few have dreams of stardom—a world championship, big bucks. Most just want to hold their own on the playground, or earn the respect of their family, their pals, or their mirror. They are drawn first to the toughness, wanting strength and skill to defend against the outside world. But they stay for the secret tenderness at the heart of every good boxing gym.

Fight guys rarely talk about it, but it's visible everywhere. They cling to the rugged-warrior image and use steely shorthand to describe it. The guy who reaches into the kid's mouth between rounds to take out his mouthpiece, tips the water bottle so he can drink, holds a rag to the kid's nose so he can blow, swabs the sweat and blood from his face, massages his neck, puts ice where it hurts,

all while offering strategic advice and urgent admonition, that guy with hands as gentle as a worried mother is just "working a corner."

In part this physical tenderness is a practical response to wearing gloves. Anyone with huge puffy mittens on his hands can't blow his own nose or tie his own shoes, so those who are not gloved-up help those who are. But there's more to it than that: The flat fact is that a boxing gym is a place where men are allowed to be kind to one another.

There's not much shouting in a boxing gym. A coach may have a whole group of boxers do calisthenics together, but the actual teaching is done one-on-one like the fighting. The coach talks only to the particular kid he's working with for that 15-minute or half-hour stretch. Each lesson is tailored and personal. Then the coach sets the kid to practice what he's learned and moves on to the next boxer. The coach will drift by and comment or make corrections in the course of the workout.

At any time a gym may have a dozen or more people of all ages, sizes, races, and genders—a nine-year-old preparing for his first bout working next to a seasoned pro focusing on his fiftieth match. Each is absorbed in his own process. They stake out a working area to pound combinations into a bag or shadow box or skip rope, careful not to slop over into someone else's space. The work sessions last three minutes, like the rounds of a fight. The gym bell ends the round and they have one minute to rest, stretch, swig water, swap polite nods or wisecracks with the guy at the next punching bag. The bell rings again and work resumes. No two are doing exactly the same thing at any time. Each is focused on his or her private meditation on adversity.

In a world of absent fathers, boys, and increasingly girls, find

reliable authority in the boxing coach. In gang turf, the gym is staunchly neutral ground. If home and streets are fraught with chaos, order still prevails in the gym. The violence is ritualized and contained in the ring where there are rules and bells, protective helmets and a coach in the corner, watching carefully. Outside the ring, nobody is hard on you. You have to be hard on yourself. It is a discreet subculture with its own language and aesthetics. A crisp nose-flattening jab is a thing of exquisite beauty. There is a clear etiquette. Violations of courtesy are dealt with briskly. Respect is earned and accorded.

But a boxing gym isn't always a peaceable kingdom. Even in the best gyms there are occasional rivalries and paranoias, injured feelings and divided loyalties. You hear tales of some idiot who got mad and slugged a civilian in a gym and was permanently 86'd. There's an old story of a pro fighter who brought a gun into the gym and seriously wounded his trainer. That shooter is, of course, in jail.

You hear stories. But in all the years I've been warming a bench in dozens of gyms around the country, I've only seen violence erupt once outside the ring. That was when a drunken father slapped the face of his teenage boxer son. Every fighter and coach in the room descended on the pathetic sot. Nobody hit him, which is a tribute to the discipline of the sport. They escorted him from the premises in a storm of scathing commentary that continued long after he was gone. Mention his name in that gym to this day and you'll trigger dark looks and ominous muttering.

In fact, it's dawned on me over the years that there is less macho posturing in boxing gyms than in the average corporate boardroom. A greenhorn may come in with an attitude, hostile and defensive. Usually he'll relax after a few weeks. Gym mates develop an easy

comradeship of shared experience. Every boxer steps into the ring alone and succeeds or fails in his own right. It is not a team sport. But gym mates cheer and advise each other, comfort each other in defeat, celebrate victory. Your sparring partners may never know your whole name, but they come to know your deepest identity as you learn theirs.

And you learn about yourself. The deliberate, artificial crisis of the ring reveals your spinal identity—who you are in the fire, in pain, in fear, in defeat, and more dangerously, in triumph. When you've seen into yourself that far and still come into the gym the next day, there's not much more to prove. And those you respect know it. Boxing is so hard that anybody who ventures into it has demonstrated toughness. By walking through the gym door, you earn the right to be kind.

Handwraps

These simple strips of cloth are at the core of the sport—one of its ancient, silent mysteries. This appeared first in Jim Lommasson's book Shadow Boxers in 2005.

A pro boxer of my acquaintance is attracted to street brawls. He always yanks his shirt off before jumping in, which is only sensible, he says, because the other guy could grab or choke him with it. Besides, he can whip the shirt around his left hand, grab it tight, and have some protection from the clash of bone against bone.

You see the same principle at work in every boxing gym. Some lean character in sweats snaps out two long coils of cloth and methodically wraps one around each hand. The ribbon is wound over the palm and back of the hand and up the wrist. The knuckles are thickly padded, but the fingers stay bare. Every boxer in the gym carefully swaddles both hands before starting work. Gloves are slipped on over the wraps for sparring or hitting the bag. At the end of the workout, the sweat-stained wraps are peeled and rolled neatly or wadded into gym bags headed for the laundry.

The core dilemma of fist fighting is that the human hand isn't

designed as a weapon. The metacarpal bones radiating from wrist to knuckles are too fragile to withstand a blow delivered with the full force of the body. Skin tears. Wrists and knuckles are wrenched apart. Bones snap.

The ancient Egyptians recognized the problem. Images of boxers on Egyptian urns from about 6,000 B.C. show men with hands wrapped well up the forearms. The Greek Olympians wrapped their hands, and added gloves.

Modern gym wraps are cloth strips two inches wide and nine or twelve feet long. They come in various colors and fabrics, some stretchy, some heavy cotton, some thin like gauze. Every trainer has his own method of wrapping, but the basic problem is always the same: cushion the knuckles, support the thumb and the thin metacarpals, and fuse the wrist in a straight line. Wrap it too tight and the circulation is cut off, making the hand numb. Too loose and it slips, leaving the hand vulnerable.

Even the best wrapping job doesn't provide complete protection. Delicate hands can end a boxer's career early and in pain. An amateur I once knew fought and won the National Golden Gloves while the bones of the back of one hand were buckled in a lump like a brooding tarantula beneath the skin. People always wanted to shake his hand, but he would offer only a limp clasp before pulling away. "A lot of guys, when they hear you're a fighter, they want to give you the big macho squeeze to prove they're tough," he told me. "They can really hurt you." Since then I've noticed that most boxers have gentle handshakes, and some avoid shaking altogether. Even a strong hand can get tender and arthritic from years of abuse.

That's why, when you walk into a gym today, just as in ancient Greece, one of the first things you're taught is to wrap your hands.

A trainer does it at first, explaining as he goes, so you can learn to do it for yourself. For actual bouts the rules specify thin gauze wraps and surgical adhesive tape in precise lengths. The coach or trainer does the important wrapping for a fight. The boxer sits, usually straddling a chair, extending one hand at a time and responding to orders: "Spread your fingers more. Grip. Too tight?" It can take as much as half an hour to do the job properly.

Trainers use this quiet time to give last minute instructions and assurance. The intricate web of tape and gauze transforms a sensitive, dexterous and uniquely human organ into a bludgeon. It's a meditative process, a ritual change of identity, repeated every time a boxer enters a gym or steps into the ring. Whatever brand of anxious mortal sits down in that chair, a fighter stands up.

Golden Girls

1995 was the year when Vogue Magazine decided that women could and would box. This ran in the April 1995 issue…

The Grand Avenue Gym in Portland, Oregon, is an old-style fight gym, with not a shred of Lycra visible. The smell of bleach is complicated by the tang of sweat. Scattered around the gym some twenty boxers, fiercely focused on their tasks, punch the bags, shadow box, and skip rope with startling speed and grace.

In the ring, two boxers glide around each other, long ponytails flying beneath their leather helmets. The smaller boxer, thirteen-year-old Maria, is a beginner. She darts forward, fists flailing. Twenty-seven year-old Rene Denfeld, a taller and more experienced boxer, doesn't punch back but slides to the side, twisting to avoid the punches or blocking them with her gloves. Occasionally her left hand floats out in a lazy jab, flicking lightly at Maria's helmet. Maria's father and two brothers, beside the ring, call out, "Move your head!" and "Slip, Maria!" After the first few times, Maria pulls her head away as the jab approaches. When the bell rings, Maria touches gloves politely to thank her sparring partner, then climbs out, puffing and grinning as her father removes her mouth guard

and gives her a drink of water.

Denfeld, a writer and 116-pound competitor who won her division in the Tacoma Golden Gloves this year, leans over the ring ropes, listening to the quiet instructions of her lean, seventy year-old coach, Jess Sandoval. Boxing is an individualist's sport. It is taught not in groups but one-on-one, a fact often mentioned and much appreciated by women boxers.

Women in the ring are a phenomenon so startling that they attract reporters, sell tickets, and shatter stereotypes simply by being there. Competitive boxing is usually depicted as something so brutally painful that no sane woman would set foot in the ring. Yet this spring, thirty women entered the New York Golden Gloves, tucking their hair into sweat-stained leather helmets, donning padded chest guards, breathing through fitted mouth guards, slinging punches with speed and power.

Until 1993 only boys and men were allowed to compete in the nation's thousands of amateur boxing events. Since then, Denfeld and other women have been cropping up in matches all over the country. But short of the Olympics, the New York Golden Gloves is the largest and most publicized event in American amateur boxing. John Campi of the *Daily News*, which sponsors the event, says, "I've watched many of these women train. They are serious athletes. They take it as a discipline."

And the women have been good for the Gloves. Their raw novelty has pumped fresh life into the sixty-eighth year of the tournament. Ex-Peace Corps volunteer Marlene Eichholz started boxing two years ago in an exercise class and now drives two and a half hours each way from her ten acre boarding kennel near Woodstock, New York, to train at Gleason's Gym in Brooklyn. The twenty-eight-year-old Eichholz worked hard to gain enough

weight to make the Golden Gloves minimum of 100 pounds.

One of Eichholz's probable opponents in the Gloves is 103-pound Deidre "Dee" Hamaguchi. A Yale graduate, Hamaguchi, thirty, spends most of her time teaching judo to women and schoolchildren in Harlem and Bedford-Stuyvesent.

Then there is thirty-two year-old Katya Bankowsky of Manhattan, an independent filmmaker. As a child she wore out her brother's punching bag. "But there was really nowhere for a girl to box, so I put it out of my mind," she says. Two years ago she started training at Gleason's.

Women's involvement in combat sports is not really new. There have been professional women boxers since the fifties. But there were so few women professionals—100 at most in the United States at any time—that they rarely got matches. They have been sidelined as an occasional novelty act, trotted out with mud-wrestling-style hoopla. Few women ever got enough training or experience to be competent. The classic tale of a professional women's match had scorn in the punch line: "the first time she got hit, she started to cry."

But women were never permitted to go through the traditional schooling process of amateur boxing. They were in the position of a kid who was never allowed near the water but at the age of 21 is informed that she can now try out for the Olympic swim team. It's a tribute to the cranky power of the human spirit that some would try anyway, and that a few could be pretty good.

The growing interest in self-defense classes in the 1980's paralleled the introduction of boxing aerobics classes in health clubs. Then, in Seattle, in 1993, Dallas Malloy, a sixteen-year-old pianist and the daughter of college professors, sued the national amateur boxing organization for gender discrimination and won the right

to compete. In October of that year, Malloy also won the first women's amateur bout in American history against a game college student named Heather Poyner. Malloy, now eighteen, has gone on to college and other interests as most amateur boxers eventually do. But the door she unlocked is now and forever propped open for others.

Last spring the Chicago Golden Gloves tournament included fifteen female competitors. By July 1994, some 260 American women had registered as amateur boxers. There are more now. Women in the United States are catching up with women in Canada, Britain, and other European nations who began boxing years ago. The organizations that regulate the sport internationally are now discussing the possibility of women boxing in the Olympics. The term *woman boxer* is no longer an oxymoron.

The drama of women's entry into the sport of broken noses is inflamed by the public's conflicting notions about women and about boxing. Female boxers ignore Hollywood clichés about the sport of boxing—that it is the last male bastion, that the only justification for its danger and brutality is as a harrowing escape route from poverty. Many of the new female boxers are educated professionals, the antithesis of the poor-street-thug stereotype.

For now there are no million-dollar purses waiting for women boxers. Bizarre though it may seem, they box because they enjoy it. They claim it's great for self-defense. They say it's a great workout for every muscle, that it's intellectually challenging, that it's not as dangerous as it's cracked up to be, and that it increases self-confidence. Some may suspect that they've taken too many punches already, but these women insist that boxing is fun.

Women's capacity for aggression is rarely acknowledged. Denfeld says, "If you close your eyes and imagine a woman being

punched, what you will see is what we see in popular culture. You see a woman who is cringing, pleading, helpless, violated. Yet women are told that if your children are threatened, all of a sudden you're transformed into a raging creature with superhuman powers. There's this mythology that in a pinch an untrained woman is going to toss three guys out of the window and know precisely how to throw a punch."

For many female boxers, the sport is an opportunity to grapple directly with fear. "The first time sparring and getting punched was a real breakthrough for me," says Denfeld, "to realize that I wasn't going to break, and not only that, but I could hit back."

Boxing headgear leaves the face open. That means women risk bloodied or broken noses, swollen lips. Denfeld laughs because her boyfriend is embarrassed when her face is bruised. He's afraid people will think he hit her.

But the women themselves take their injuries in stride. At Gleason's Gym, Bankowsky has even seen models allow themselves to take serious hits. "One of them," says Bankowsky, "got a black eye and had to miss a booking. It's pretty interesting that somebody who makes a living off her face would take up boxing."

During the Dallas Malloy lawsuit, the amateur organization tried to argue that females are more at risk than males are. But they could find no supporting medical evidence. Boxers are not prone to the permanently paralyzing injuries that occur in many other sports, from football to skiing. Still, boxing is not ping-pong.

One hazard predicted for women has not materialized. The reaction of male boxers has been surprisingly positive. "Maybe it's not something they wished for or wanted, but they seem to take real pleasure in having women come into their world," Denfeld says. "There are, inevitably, a few jerks. But some women are that way too."

Sparring, however—the scholarly practice of the sport—is problematic. Few gyms have enough women to allow them to spar only with each other, so they often work out with male sparring partners.

"It's very hard on the men," says Denfeld. "There's a tremendous taboo in our society against hurting a woman. We're seen as physically weak, and any guy who would hit a woman is considered a real jerk. Other men look down on him. But in this almost clinical training process they can let the taboos slip away, forget that I'm a woman and just think of me as an athlete."

The scarcity of women competitors means that it's sometimes impossible for women to find an amateur match. Among the thirty entries in the New York Golden Gloves, some may have no opponents in their weight class and thus be unable to compete. But the boxers tend to view this situation as temporary. They have a crisp impression that they are paving the way for others. Bankowsky says, "We're the first women to enter the New York Golden Gloves. Ten years from now, the women who enter the Golden Gloves are going to have been training for ten years. They're going to be a whole different caliber of boxer than we are."

In Bankowsky's eyes, this tournament is more than competition to win the prized and glowing gloves. It's a fight for the future.

Minsker's Mettle

The chipper kid was talented and a friend to all fight folk from the time he was nine years old or so. When he became a national amateur champ, even his local rivals and their coaches were proud. This ran in Willamette Week on April 2, 1984.

He doesn't drink, snort, shoot, or smoke, and he fights like a mongoose. His biggest dissipation is pike fishing in filthy weather. He's fast whether he's thinking, talking or fighting. He likes to train. He's a boxing manager's dream.

These things, however, had nothing to do with the reason the New York modeling agency Click picked twenty-one year-old Andy Minsker of Portland. Click grabbed him because he has a face like a bright-hearted cougar, and coast-to-coast shoulders on a 5-foot-9-inch frame that carries a scant 125 pounds. The Click scouts stumbled on him in a magazine photo of the 1983 Sports Festival. They weren't interested in Minsker's ranking as the leading featherweight boxer in the United States. They figured he'd be a great clothes rack.

In February Minsker was training at the high-altitude Olympic Camp in Colorado Springs. No problem for Click. The agency

flew him from Colorado to New York for three days of fashion photo sessions and paid him $600 a day. The results will appear in this summer's issues of *Vogue*, *Esquire*, *Gentleman's Quarterly*, and *Interview* magazine.

"It was a snap," says Minsker, "And it has nothing to do with boxing, so I get to keep the money."

"Those clothes they photographed me in were all Italian designer styles. Hard to describe," he grins, "but nothing I'd ever feel comfortable wearing." He's comfortable in jeans or dress sweats, but some scouts claim that he looks best in boxing trunks, knobby and skinny but "moving as light and true as a Mother's prayer."

Such scouts are the discreet connoisseurs who haunt amateur boxing, searching for potential moneymakers for the professional ranks. The word is out on Minsker. "The kid has a thousand pretty moves," says one of these veterans.

What makes Minsker so good? He can slug without getting slugged back. It sounds simple, but it's not so easy. In the fast and smart 125-pound division, it means that Minsker has excellent defensive skills. He can slip and block punches. He has a charismatic style, economical but flashy; a grace that gets the job done but keeps the audience soaring with amazement. He tends to counterpunch, luring his opponent into an attack that Minsker can evade and capitalize on simultaneously. It's a strategy that demands intelligent composure under fire as well as superb reflexes. Even more marketable is Minsker's power. In the past two years, this speed specialist has developed a knockout capacity that has him stopping and dropping opponents at a ferocious clip. His record now stands at 225 wins and 22 losses in 13 years of boxing. "My goal," he says, "is to win 250 before I lose 25."

These skills won Minsker the 1983 National Golden Gloves Championship and the 1983 Amateur Boxing Federation crown. Ranked No.1 in the nation, Minsker has a guaranteed shot at the U.S. Olympic trials in Texas this June, and the odds are good that he will represent the United States in Los Angeles. A lot of wise money says Minsker will take the Olympic Gold.

As national champion, Minsker is already in the big leagues if he chooses to turn pro. Each step toward the Olympics ups his ante. So far his international competitions have him hammering three weight divisions in New Zealand, flattening a crew of Scandinavians, and stopping the British Commonwealth and Yugoslav champs with first round KOs.

Nobody in a boxing ring is born knowing how to do these things. The word "talent" doesn't begin to explain how it happens. Heredity can help: Andy's father, Hugh Minsker, was the 132-pound U.S. Olympic alternate for the 1954 games. According to his coach, Leroy Durst of the Multnomah Athletic Club, "Hugh was the best pound-for-pound fighter in the country at that time."

Minsker says his father has never pressured him to box. "For a long time I didn't even know my dad had boxed," he says. "We kids used to bang his trophies around playing, but I never made the connection…I started out at the Mt. Scott Community Center gym when I was eight years old, just because my step-mom wanted me to have something to do after school. Chuck Lincoln was the coach then, and Ed Milberger was the assistant coach. I remember Chuck saying, when I first went in, 'So you're Hugh's boy!' but I didn't make anything of it. I boxed for more than a year before I found out about my dad."

Minsker is quick to point out that there is a good coach behind every fine athlete. "I have to give all credit to my coach, Ed

Milberger. He's been with me since the beginning. He's driven thousands of miles to get me to tournaments and fights. Ed is one of the most under-rated amateur coaches in the world. He's taught me from the beginning and if I ever make it big I'll make it worth his while."

Minsker gained power after he had crumpled his right hand on somebody's head nearly three years ago. He fought and won many times with the damaged hand, and explains that he couldn't afford the surgery and didn't want to take time off to allow the hand to heal. "That would have washed me out of '84," he says. "You'd get awful rusty in six months. It was then," he recalls, "that Ed took me into the gym and showed me how to plant to throw a left hook. I'd always been so skinny I never thought I could punch hard. That was the turn around. I've been stopping guys ever since."

Milberger remembers, "I also pointed out to Andy that you were a lot less likely to hurt your hand hitting the belly than the boney head. Andy started working the body pretty good after that." After winning the 1983 Golden Glove nationals in March that year, Minsker finally had the required surgery. Seven months and several international victories later, he won the ABF nationals in October.

As one of the Amateur Boxing Federation Elite-Operation Gold boxers, he was able to stay uninterrupted at the intensive-training center in Colorado Springs. But he prefers to go to the camp for a few weeks before each bout.

"It's cold up there," he complains. "It's hard to run in ice and snow. And there's nothing to do. You can't box 24 hours a day." When he returns to Portland he lives with his parents, takes classes at the Portland Upholstery School ("It's a good trade for after I retire from the ring.") and works.

Minsker's job, five nights a week and most weekends, is coach-

ing the boxing team at the same scarred old gym in the Mt. Scott Community Center where he began. At the '84 Oregon State Golden Gloves Tournament in the Marriott Hotel in February, he was the youngest coach present. His team took two state championships and the second-place team trophy.

With the Olympic trials scheduled for June, this spring is a time of pressure for all the competitors. It's natural for them to wonder if they've chosen the best route. "Maybe I should go and stay in camp for the big push," muses Minsker. "There's a lot of political juggling in the amateurs. That's the way of the world. If they like you, you'll go some place. The fortunate thing about an Olympic year is that it eliminates politics. They're going to take the best they've got. They want to win twelve gold medals. They're going to take a guy who can punch and who can take a shot to the chin. I don't box amateur-style. I don't take punishment. Even in a tough fight, I don't get hit a lot. If they taught more power and how to slip punches, the Russians wouldn't run us over all the time. I don't throw punches just to make points. I'm working now to get the science of hitting them on the jaw and dropping them."

Sometimes you count the cost. "It's hard to hang on to a girl friend when you're gone so much," says Minsker. "You go out with somebody for a while and everything's great, then you go away for a month. When you get back she's going out with somebody else….Maybe it's bragging, but the girls I've dated have been just flat-out beautiful, and that's trouble. I don't have anything except boxing clothes, walking suits. Every time I go anywhere, other guys will start looking at my girl, and then they figure out that I'm a boxer. If they've been drinking at all, they always decide to pick a fight. Seems like I'm scared to death the whole time."

There is also the future to dream about. "There are people

who fly in from Detroit and Houston to see my fights. I'll make the Olympic team and then, if the money is right, I'll turn pro. It never used to appeal to me, but now it seems like I've put so many years into boxing I ought to try to get something out of it. I'd like to fight for four or five years, then retire when I'm 26 or 27, go into business for myself. Hey, I've worked twice as hard in the last 12 years as some people work all their lives! If I retire when I'm 26, it'll be like another guy retiring when he's 62. I'd love to stay in Portland, but probably nobody around here could afford it. Maybe if six or seven businessmen got together to bankroll my contract…."

Hugh Minsker worries, "The way things are in this state, I'm just afraid that if Andy ends up winning the gold he might end up turning his back on Oregon and going to Texas or someplace."

It's not just a financial problem. There is a chilling lack of recognition for boxing, amateur or pro, by reporters in Oregon.

"Face it," says Andy Minsker, "recognition is the main reason for fighting amateur."

A state champion for six consecutive years before winning the national title, he can't help taking it personally.

"Well, I'm a white guy," he grimaces, "and people don't think white guys can fight. And usually white guys nowadays *can't* fight. Maybe that's part of it. But one way or another, the people here don't think I'm for real. They don't understand that I'm No.1, and they're going to have somebody representing them at the Olympics. They'll give all sorts of attention to the 14 year-old girls in rhythmic gymnastics, and I'm not saying they don't rate; they do. But nobody knows who I am."

★ PART II ★

UPPERCUTS

Cuts

Cut men still carry bottles of adrenalin solution in their kits. They have more effective medical tools to work with now, but the good ones know how to use adrenalin. This first appeared in the Boxing Issue of Stop Smiling Magazine, 2005.

Skin rips. It tears. It flakes and scrapes and splits and peels. For all its flexible, stretchable, washable, self-healing glory, human skin—this largest bodily organ, the sewer and ventilator, layered silken insulator, symptom gauge, pain and pleasure sensor, shield and flag of its bearer—is thin. It rips. And when it rips it bleeds. The head bleeds most of all. Those delicate instruments the eyes, ears, nose, mouth, and the silent radiant brain, are fed by a dense net of high-pressure blood vessels that cushion and fuel the central command post of the body politic. A nick above the neck is worth a slash on the chest or arm. Still in the ancient anarchy of the boxing ring, mere blood is nothing. A split lip, a scraped ear or a bloody nose doesn't count. These are aesthetic issues, laundry problems. A spray of wine that stains the referee's white shirt, slimes the opponents' gloves, disgusts the ticket holder, and punctuates the notebooks of the ringside reporters with beading droplets.

The cut that counts in boxing is anywhere in the broad expanse above and around the eyes. The smallest slit in the brow hairs is a crisis. If the blood runs into a boxer's eye he can't see the punches coming. The ref will stop the fight and the bleeder will lose for a reason unconnected to his skill or stamina, his brains or strength or heart. He will lose because he can't see to defend himself.

A fair fight that is stopped by cuts is undecided, as unsatisfying to fans and participants as if lightning or a meteor had struck the ring. This blend of circumstance is the organizing principle for a cult of specialists known as cut men. The cut man is the guy in the fighter's corner who is hired to stop the bleeding during the 60-second rest periods between the rounds. They are sometimes called Minute Men but they will explain that 40 seconds is all they actually have. When the bell ends the round the fighter walks to his corner, sits down, get his mouthpiece out, takes a sip of water, and only then can they go to work on the cut until the ten-second warning sounds and they have to leave the ring.

Cut men rarely have medical credentials. They are former boxers or trainers who make their living elsewhere, driving cabs or bulldozers, teaching fourth grade or repairing gas mains. But this is their real life. They are the shamans and witch doctors of boxing. Broadcasters call them all "the best in the business" and give them monikers like "The Clot," "Zipper," or "Stitch." If they are skilled and don't wheeze of booze in the corner, they are respected by fighters and trainers, managers and reporters. They are proud and secretive about the potions and techniques they use to stop the blood. They claim to possess mysterious clotters that no one else uses, miracle vessel constrictors that nobody else understands. Maybe they do. Or maybe they all use the same arsenal, which is whatever the boxing commission says they can use, but some of

them use it better.

Trainers who learn the tricks can take care of their own fighters but they are just "working cuts." True cut men are freelancers, hired to work the corner one match at a time. They may work half a dozen bouts on the same evening. Some fighters never cut and some cut every time. Maybe one in five or ten bouts will produce any blood at all but when they're needed, it's a desperate need and woe for the frail-skinned fighter whose manager was too cheap to spring for a cut man. Their success is not gauged by whether the fighter wins, but whether it was blood that stopped him.

In boxing as in auto repair and politics, far more harm seems to be done by ignorance and stupidity than by informed greed or malice. Take the case of a young light heavyweight who bears a vague resemblance to Rocky Marciano. For the sake of avoiding lawsuits call him Zevedo. Now, this Zevedo is managed by two well-meaning businessmen from a small farming town. Call these gentlemen Mr. Grocery and Mr. Seed & Feed. They are staking money on the idea that Zevedo's left hook is superior to other weapons in the 175-pound division.

They'd known his family for generations and watched him grow up. He'd worked weekends and after school at Mr. Feed & Seed's place of business but when he failed to get a football scholarship out of high school he decided he wanted to box. The two gentlemen pooled money to buy equipment, and set up a gym in Mr. Grocery's storeroom. Mr. Seed & Feed cut back on the boxer's work hours so he could train, but kept his pay the same.

The tutor chosen to hone Zevedo's technique is Mr. Hardware. Mr. Hardware is reputed to have won a Tough Guy fight some twenty-eight years ago, and was known to be a heller in a bar brawl until he settled down in the family store. No question,

these three were as sweet as you'll ever meet and they loved the kid like a son. Zevedo's last ring appearance was one July, when he went up against wily C.Q. Williams in the packed ballroom of a casino hotel. Zevedo was 8-1 against dreamy mini-mart clerks and desperate bus boys. He should never have set foot in the same ring with a craftsman like Williams, who has more than thirty professional bouts, including respectable showings against world-ranked competition. Of course, it's hard to get fights out of small towns. Maybe his managers thought he was better off losing than sitting idle. Maybe they figured his strength and gumption gave him a chance at an upset. Or maybe they didn't realize that Zevedo was in too tough.

Grit and power Zevedo certainly has. He rooted around like a bee-stung rhino whenever he could catch Williams and ram him onto the ropes. But the weird and important stuff of that bout was what went on in Zevedo's corner. In the third round, Zevedo got a fat cut under the left eye. Apparently this was the first time the cornermen, Hardware and Grocery, had ever seen blood loose on its own. They were clucking over the kid between rounds, but they didn't do anything for that cut. They dabbed around it nervously with a towel but couldn't bring themselves to touch it. The ick factor of gushing red seemed to paralyze them. Their hands would twitch and wince anytime they got close to the cut itself. Naturally, the cut kept bleeding down Zevedo's face and onto his chest.

In the next round, Zevedo's other eye gave birth to a mouse that immediately developed ambitions to full-blown rathood. By the end of that round the eye was squinting and beginning to close. The common remedy for such a problem is a cold metal endswell or a frozen bean dip can applied with pressure. The corner duo tsk'd over it and twittered for the referee to take a look. "It's all

right!" snapped the ref, meaning the bulge wasn't bad enough yet for him to stop the bout. The pair were reassured and didn't do anything for the swelling or the cut.

Williams did his own brand of surgery for a while and temporarily reduced the swelling by slicing it open to let the blood out. With cuts under both eyes, Zevedo's face was a ketchup race. A fine spray of red droplets caught in the eyebrows of the judges at ringside. The ref's white shirt looked like he'd been bombarded by paint guns.

The fans hollered practical advice but Zevedo's cornermen were too flustered to understand it. All they could manage was to dab a towel at the blood with quaking hands. One ringsider sent frantic messages to the pair, advising them to use pressure and Adrenalin solution on the cuts. Another cornerman took pity on Zevedo and loaned them Adrenalin. The brown bottle appeared at the end of the sixth round.

Adrenalin is used as a coagulant in a solution of one part per thousand of saline. Standard procedure is to stop the blood flow with direct pressure on the cut, then shield the eye and press the solution into the cut with a cotton swab. In this case, the trainer grabbed the bottle and upended it over Zevedo's gushing cuts. The result was dramatic. This stocky, saturnine kid, who stolidly faced the strafing of his opponent, leaned on the ropes and screamed. The idiot had poured the solution into his eyes. The two cornermen were stunned. They stood gaping at the howling kid. The ringsiders shouted, "Sluice his eyes with water!" Dithering and fumbling, the pair finally found their water bottle and poured it over Zevedo's face. He stopped screeching. Zevedo bled through the seventh round. Both eyes swelled above the cuts. He went down hard in the eighth and the ref stopped the bout.

With the best corner in the world, Zevedo still wouldn't have

whipped C.Q. Williams that night. But those cuts were under his eyes rather than above them. Mediocre corner work could have controlled the bleeding so it didn't interfere with his ability to defend himself. As it was, Zevedo got as much trouble and pain from his well-meaning, totally incompetent seconds as he did from his opponent. The fact that their seconds' licenses were not yanked after this fiasco suggests that those licenses, which were issued by the state commission, don't mean a whole hell of a lot.

A top-notch prizefight second is a psychologist, strategist, boxing wizard, and emergency surgeon. He inspires, advises and succors. He has to know his fighter's abilities and it's nice if he's sufficiently telepathic to read the mind of the opposition. He needs the brain of General Patton and the healing hands of Oral Roberts. These talents can't be located by a civil service exam, and there are not large flocks of such characters roaming the general population. We can't expect every corner to boast a genius. But the guys who are responsible for a fighter's health during the critical moments in the ring should know a little first aid.

Determining the competence of a second is the duty of the boxing commission that issues the licenses. In this and most other boxing jurisdictions across the country, the procedure for procuring a second's license is to pay a small fee and induce a fighter to name you as his second. A manager's license just costs a little more. Amateur coaches are required to attend annual classes and pass tests to be certified. Professional referees and judges have varying levels of required education depending on where they work. So why should any yahoo off the street be able to step into a fighter's corner and take the kid's life and career in his hands?

Even the seediness of boxing has glamour. It's a world of romantic baloney where just carrying a spit bucket is a license for

bravado. Naturally everybody wants to get in on the act. Ego masquerading as know-how is common to every human endeavor. It's to be expected that a number of horses' katoots will always be strutting around pretending expertise they don't have. But there are also those who, with the best intentions, don't know that they don't know. For the athlete dependent on help in his moment of need, good-hearted ignorance is just as dangerous as malice or indifference.

Zevedo knows that his managers and cornermen are not experienced but he sticks by them. "They mean well," says Zevedo. "They just don't know."

The Vice and Virtue of Boxing

No one can enjoy, much less examine any of the hazardous human endeavors without confronting physical, emotional and ethical problems. Sometimes it's a brick wall and we turn away. In other cases we somehow find a way to rationalize our attraction and continue. In November of 1982 when the Korean boxer Duk Koo Kim died of a massive brain injury following his fight with lightweight champion Ray "Boom Boom" Mancini, I was afraid I'd met my brick wall for boxing. I spent months reading medical reports, research data, and learned commentary, interviewing experts and participants, trying to understand the peril of the sport. There is no denying it. Then I tried to understand why I, like so many others, am drawn to it despite or maybe because of the danger. The results of my cogitations appeared in Willamette Week newspaper on April 15 of 1983.

Boxing is a dangerous sport. This is not exactly news, of course. It's been two hundred years since the English half-jokingly labeled boxing "The Sweet Science." In those days a man of the world was expected to be familiar with four combat techniques:

cudgel fighting, swordsmanship, pistols, and fist fighting. Fists were considered the least lethal of the four, the gentlest. The Victorians would sneer at how soft the fight game has since become. The padded gloves and three-minute rounds would seem like sissy stuff to the old bare-knuckle champs, but boxing is still no game of ping-pong. Few of us are punchy enough to deny that getting clocked in the cranium is hazardous to one's general well being.

It's not safe even for the boxing fan. Nothing brings out the vociferous belligerence of the humane and pacific type like the word "boxing" uttered aloud in mixed company. The New York Times may not know where it stands on nuclear disarmament, but it's quite sure that boxing should be banned. We have known refined and cultured people to fling skillets at the heads of spouses who were caught defiling the sanctity of a civilized home by watching a boxing match on TV. It's a subject that triggers a lot of emotion, both pro and con.

Those who love the sport and those who hate it share at least one anxiety, and that is the danger of brain damage from the cumulative effect of repeated blows to the head. The symptoms can range from minor motor or vocal discombobulation to massive personality changes, paranoia, memory loss, and even complete dementia. The medicos call it traumatic encephalopathology. It's more commonly known as the "punch-drunk" syndrome and for boxing it is definitely the scorpion in the ointment.

Despite the yowls of the alarmists, there are not legions of drooling demented ex-boxers mumbling at ash cans and living on welfare. Before the 1950's, punch-drunk symptoms were recorded in as many as 15 percent of professional boxers whose careers spanned between six and nine years. Since then, ring physicians believe there has been a dramatic reduction in the incidence,

because of better medical supervision and because the average boxer's career now includes far fewer bouts. Sugar Ray Robinson, for example, retired in 1965 after 201 professional bouts. Sugar Ray Leonard retired in 1982 with a total of 33 pro bouts. There is NO reliable documentation of contemporary incidence of the syndrome, but any percentage of boxers going "slug-nutty" is not a cheerful prospect.

Though punch-drunk syndrome is rightly associated with this punching game, there are reports in medical journals of the same condition in soccer, rugby and football players, jockeys, professional wrestlers, mountain climbers and even parachutists.

The widely published warning to parents not to punish children by shaking them is based on the punch-drunk effect. A whack on the padded posterior is less harmful than causing that small egg of a skull to whip back and forth on its scrawny stalk of neck. The implication is, clearly, that any activity that causes an abrupt jarring of the head entails a possibility of brain damage.

Examination of the available medical literature by an admittedly lay reader suggests that:

- Boxers are not troubled by multiple fractures of every bone in their bodies or massive insult to their innards, as are jockeys and football players. Boxers do not endure permanent paralysis from the waist or the armpits or the neck down like those same football players and jockeys, racing drivers and gymnasts.
- Modern medicine can remedy, if not prevent, much of the damage that a boxer can sustain in the ring. Cauliflower mugs have disappeared. Eye and hand injuries or a tendency to spout blood too easily can send a boxer out to look for another job, but, with decent medical care, they need not affect the quality of his life.

- Much more research is needed to determine the causes, frequency, and effect of damage to the central nervous system in general. There has been no comprehensive medical study of boxers with proper methodology and control populations since the 1950's.
- Much of the medical literature on brain damage in boxing is tainted by partisan emotionalism on both sides. Opponents punctuate data reports with rabid, Strangelovian tirades against the brutal, criminal nature of the sport. Proponents tend to be working under the auspices of boxing commissions, frequently serving as ringside physicians. Although they obviously have more direct clinical knowledge and experience than their opponents, the probability that they are fans of the sport makes their objectivity questionable. Individuals on both sides occasionally stoop to shoddy methodology, if not outright fairy tales.

My conclusion: On the volatile subject of boxing, doctors can be just as hysterical as the rest of us.

There are some sober efforts among the literature. A 1982 report by the American Medical Association Council on Scientific Affairs Advisory panel on Brain Injury in Boxing is bound to affect the future of the sport. Chaired by Portland, OR surgeon Jack E. Battalia, M.D., a longtime member of the Portland Boxing Commission, the panel concluded that the incidence of punch-drunk syndrome in boxers had decreased since the 1950's and may be prevented by sound medical and administrative supervision of the sport. The panel's report to the American Medical Association offers nine recommendations for increasing the safety of the sport.

Medical help may be on the way, but administrative supervision is still a problem. The frequent complaint among boxing circles is that, though the participants govern baseball, tennis and other

sports internally, boxing alone is governed by commissions whose members are usually political appointees. The nature of boxing itself has made this necessary. It has always been the least organized and most anarchistic of sports. Though amateur boxing is strictly conducted by amateur association rules and officials, there is no comparable structure in the professional sport. Every pro boxer is a freelancer. Pro boxers are not protected by any union. As isolated individuals held loosely by an Old Boy system, they are at the mercy of any group or person with power and money.

The long reign of organized crime over boxing ended in the '60's, but the reputation for corruption hangs on. The current power structure of the sport is in upheaval. Dissatisfaction with a decade of domination by Mexico (home of the World Boxing Council) and Panama (home of the World Boxing Association) is spawning a host of splinter factions in the United States. Each new sanctioning organization lobbies for its own supporters and publishes its own meaningless rankings. The only real power at the moment is in the hands of the major television networks, which foot the bill. The current controversy over the sport has inspired Congress to use a noisy investigative folderol as a pre-election year publicity gambit. It's hard to imagine any solid benefits resulting from federal involvement, and there's no telling at this point who will end up holding the reins. For all we know, the AMA will take over supervision of the sport. Stranger things have happened.

The sleazy past and the half-wit chaos of the present boxing administration obviously do little to enhance the sport's image. Even so, the voices raised against boxing seem peculiarly emotional and, in my eyes, hypocritical. But the vehemence of the reaction is far from new. It is a bitterness that has always surrounded this always-controversial sport. And it intrigues me, suggesting as it does that

boxing tweaks something sensitive at the core of society.

For much of the nation Saturday, November 13, 1982 was a cold, rainy day. The football strike was in progress and the television networks had plugged empty air slots with, among other things, a lot of boxing. However, Ray Mancini was the first white American boxing champion in years. He was also a polite, personable, blue-collar kid riding a G-rated soap opera to the stars. His fights were always in prime viewing time on a national broadcast network. Thus many of those watching him defend his WBA lightweight crown that day were not regular boxing viewers. For some of them it would be the last boxing match they would ever watch voluntarily.

Duk Ku Kim, the challenger, was a Korean boxer unknown in the United States, even to close followers of the game. It's no reflection on Kim's character that his presence in the ring that day was not due to his accomplishments. The nefarious skullduggery that brought this unknown, untested fighter to a No. 1 world ranking is a world-weary political tale in its own right. But the twenty-three year-old Kim knew only that he'd been given a shot at the championship of the world. He'd worked years for this chance. His skills, his heart and his will were certainly adequate for the task. What was meant to be a walkover display for the Champ turned into the roughest, and greatest, fight of his life.

Kim went down in the 14th round of that bout, never to rise again, and the shock of his fall was felt in millions of living rooms across the nation.

A wave of revulsion swept the media. Editorials, features, reportage, and letters to the editor expressed indignation and disgust. The murderer was not, in the public mind, Mancini himself. The young fighter was horrified and grief-stricken. He was pitied rather than blamed. Nor was much blame laid at the feet of promoter Bob

Arum, or the sanctioning officials of the WBA, who were vague shadowy figures. In the angry eyes of the public the villain in the case was boxing itself.

Much that was said and written at the time was emotional gibberish. Old grudges were revived. Long-harbored resentments surfaced. The bitterness at having been made party to Kim's death, the angry guilt of those who had watched, mesmerized by the ferocious drama of the battle, all spewed out. The usual quota of sports reporters suddenly discovered that the game that had helped pay their salaries for years was unconscionable. A number of people who had never before revealed any interest in, or concern for the sport became instant experts in time to suck up the money and publicity that rewards artful denunciations.

Boxing's businessmen panicked. Death is bad for business. Hundreds of band-aid proposals for safety improvements appeared overnight. Many of the suggestions were well intentioned. Some might even be effective. The WBC announced that it would limit championship bouts to 12 rounds, like architects leaving the 13th floor out of a building to avoid irritating the superstitious. A proposal to lengthen the rest period between rounds from one minute to 90 seconds delighted the TV networks that could have sold fifty percent more advertising for each bout.

In the storm of breast-beating, the voices raised in defense of the sport seemed frail, disorganized and bewildered. But in the midst of the melodrama there were, inevitably, a few deeply considered, well-written, and selfless indictments of the sport. George Will of the Washington Post expressed his concern with dignity: "…a sufficient reason [for the extinction of boxing] is the quality of pleasure boxing often gives to the spectators." This pleasure, said Will, involved the stirring of "unworthy passions including a lust for blood."

It is my conviction that a fight crowd differs little from spectators of other sports. The excitement and passions roused by football and soccer are probably identical to those expressed in boxing matches. It is notable that in most criticism the boxers themselves are not seen as culpable. The fighters are depicted as innocent victims of the crowd appetite. Perhaps if the sport were conducted spontaneously and privately in alleys, schoolyards, or taverns it would be considered as honorable and innocent as mountain climbing.

"Estimates of the fatality rate in boxing are calculated at 0.13 deaths per 1,000 participants. Calculated fatality rates per 1,000 of other sports were: College football (0.3), Motorcycle Racing (0.7) Scuba Diving (1.1) Mountaineering (5.1) hang Gliding (5.6) Sky Diving (12.3) Jockeys and sulky drivers in Horse Racing (12.8)"

—From the final report of the AMA's investigative panel on brain injury in Boxing

The real complaint is NOT that boxing is dangerous but that it is obvious. It INTENDS to be dangerous. Every opposing argument rides this refrain: "Boxing is the only sport in which the avowed intention of the participants is to do their opponent bodily injury."

In the minds of those who are horrified by the sport, it is completely irrelevant that far more frequent and critical injury is done to jockeys, race drivers, football, soccer and hockey players. It is immaterial that more football players get knocked out more often and that rodeo riders suffer a higher incidence of brain damage than do prize fighters.

Boxers, like other athletes, are primarily concerned with the verb "to win." The lore of the sport is that, if you hurt an opponent seriously, it will take the heart right out of you. If you are the instrument that causes another boxer to die you might as well quit immediately because you'll never be the same again. Boxing is singularly ineffective at accomplishing its bad intentions. Other sports and many non-athletic professions injure more often and more critically, but it is the intention that is condemned rather than the actual result.

Games more lethal than boxing are exonerated because death and maiming are a result of the action, but not the avowed object of the action. When your stated purpose is to cross a finish line first or to move a ball down a field, whatever happens along the way can be classified as an accident. Everybody knows that football, for example, actually intends to injure. It is a war game with collision tactics and damage strategy. However, it has advantages over boxing. Even with televised close-ups, the armor-plated uniforms make the players look more like Marvel Comic Super Baddies than humans. Helmets and face grids finish off the disguise. We are not subjected to grimaces of malice or agony or to the unseemly spectacle of splintered bones jutting through shredded flesh. The uniform hides everything until the guy can be whisked away in an ambulance. All we see is a foundering tank, a short-circuited robot being helped from the field.

Then too, the game doesn't screech to a halt if one player gets broken. A substitute is always available to plug any holes in the line. These details help us ignore the damage, but the crucial element that allows football to escape the censure of the sensitive public is that, despite injury statistics, despite obvious tactics, there is the enveloping pretext that the whole thing is about controlling terri-

tory and getting a ball to a goal.

Our society condones violence and courts danger in a thousand ways. In a consideration of dangerous ways to make a living that includes lumberjacks, miners, firefighters, commercial fishers, taxi drivers, cops, steel construction workers, industrial painters and other respectable jobs, boxing couldn't get near the top 100. Compared with a lot of perfectly honest professions, even jockeys get off lightly and are well paid for the risks they take.

On the other hand, many of us are so urbanely insulated from nature that it's a status symbol to do something hazardous in our spare time. We pay for the right to fling ourselves out of airplanes with a sophisticated hanky to cushion the fall. We shoot rapids. We go hunting and shoot each other. We climb mountains and fall off them with dismal regularity. More fashionably, we ski down them at high speeds with nothing between us and demolition except a millimeter of designer nylon. We send our adolescents to remote and expensive boot camps where they are taught to eat maggots and survive in the wilderness equipped with nothing but a jack knife and a length of string. Those of a sedentary disposition can achieve a convincing version of punch-drunk syndrome without the inconvenience of exercise by simple over-indulgence in alcohol.

Why do we play these rough games? I'm not qualified to say, but like everybody else, I have a theory. I figure that far from being an unworthy passion, the capacity for aggressive violence is crucial to the survival of the species.

We all learned in school that humans are clawless, fangless, slow, and weak compared with either the cattle we eat or the felines and canines who would gladly eat us. The teachers claim that one gift alone makes Homo Sapiens the masters, and scourges, of all living creatures. That gift, we are told, is the magnificent human brain.

So how come we're not swimming around in the tropics, humming the heavenly bebop of the spheres like dolphins? The fin fans claim dolphins have much more cranial capacity than we have and are too Zenned out on wisdom and the spirit of cosmic play to bother manipulating their environment. In my opinion brains, opposable thumbs and upright posture don't begin to explain all the things humans get up to.

Consider, however, our intense inclination to survive. Consider our capacity for ruthless calculated violence. Consider that, frail, ridiculous little brutes that we are, everything from the elephant to the tiger runs like hell when they smell us coming because we are the baddest beasts on the planet. Brains combined with aggression are why we're not extinct.

It's a tribute to focused intelligence that millions of fierce human animals live crammed together in urban proximity without mass slaughter on every city block, every day of the year.

It's a delicate balance. We suppress individual impulses and limit individual survival instincts so as to survive better with the benefits of cooperation. If we don't bite each other we get refrigerators, miracle drugs, designer jeans and the joys of plumbing. But if we get too mellow and obliterate the old individual survival instinct along with its main tool—aggression—we all die of chronic and progressive milque-toastery in the first crisis that happens along. In the past, of course, we've had trouble suppressing aggression and little danger of eliminating it. But the recent technological advances in personality-blasting drugs and genetic meddling make a bovine population seem like a genuine option.

So we play hard and dangerous games. If we knew in advance that we'd be maimed or killed in a given sport, we wouldn't play. But we ride the odds because we feel immortal and the games do

a lot for us. They teach good scout virtues. They are safety valves for tension and energy which, unchanneled, could shred the fabric of society. Sports are a continual testing of our strength as individuals and our resilience as a species. The more risk in the game, the closer it carries us to the limits of our own possibilities. Games are powerful art forms that offer us greatness and hurl us deeper into life by their drama and beauty. Sometimes we choose the game and sometimes the game chooses us. We watch games for the same reasons we play them. And, because we are strange half-creatures stuck awkwardly between tigerish individualism and the cooperative security of civilization, we like our games to veil their risks, however thinly, with some homely pretext like a finish line.

Which brings us, naturally, to the Sweet Science.

"Boxing is honestly violent," says Texas referee Steve Crossen. "There's no pretense of trying to push a ball across a goal line…. Boxing falls victim to its own honesty. People don't like to admit there's a violent side in all of us…. It's wrong for boxing to be a target. It shows a lack of intellectual integrity. If you're going to ban boxing, let's ban all sports in which participants are injured or die."

In an interview published in a recent issue of *OUI* magazine, heavyweight contender Randall "Tex" Cobb discussed boxing with writer Barney Cohen. "The thing you got to realize," said Cobb, "is the thing Larry Holmes brought up so pointedly during the last three quarters of an hour I spent with the man. And that's that this boxing-match business ain't no point of honor, darling. This ain't no fight-and-die concept. Son, this is a GAME. There is a way it is played. The man just ain't interested in no stand for honor. He ain't interested in playing last man standing. The man says, 'No, fool, this is a game of hit-and-don't-be hit.' And he's good at that.

"The problem is not with the right and wrong of the sport, but with the emotional attachment people apply to the judgement. People have all these tremendously negative emotional connotations of fighting which come from the experience of the street situation. Their concept of a prizefight is really the fistfight. The feeling is you're put in a corner, out of fear or anger or intimidation, where your honor has been besmirched or, for whatever dumb reason you've decided that you simply cannot take another backward step. And now you've got to fight and you don't want to and you can smell your own revulsion of yourself, of the other guy, of the stupidity of the situation, and you've got all this hatred and all this fear, and darling that ain't what it is I'm doing in the ring and I wish to god somebody would explain that to you! I hit people. But I ain't mad at them. If I want to quit I can. If I get scared I can sit. I don't because that's part of the game. Hell though, if this were a real fight you think I'd be out there in front of thousands of witnesses with leather on my fists? I'd be out behind a bar in some alley with a bat. I'd be tearing the guy's lungs out. Maybe that stuff ought to be banned. But this ain't the real thing. It's a game."

Buckaroo Boxing

Nowadays almost all boxing in the United States takes place in gambling casinos. Promoters are contractors using casino money to put on the matches. Back in the 80's there were still a few old-style promoters who recruited investors to stage the big fights. And for the crucial small club shows where young fighters learn their trade and build their records, there were those fight-loving individual promoters who ponied up their own cash and swam in red ink to make it happen.

All that day the clouds did imitations of Sonny Liston. They were slow and bruised and nasty. They were heavy as death and scheming for a splashdown.

The fights were scheduled outdoors in the Rodeo Arena, so the threat of rain had the promoters on edge and the boxers spooked. There were jokes at the weigh-in about fighting barefoot and in slickers, but the worry was real.

I didn't care if it rained crankcase oil as long as the fight went on. I took the backroads out of Portland and was halfway through the six-pack in the cooler when the first yellow, damp-curled poster caught my eye. It was stapled to a tarred telephone pole in the

gravel parking lot of a juke-box-and-beer roadhouse, in the heart of what used to be called the Toolie Weeds. Half the names on the poster were wrong, claiming fighters who had said yes once and changed their minds since. The photos were bleary and torn but the address was right. Mollala. The Buckaroo. The road twisted on but the sky began to relent.

By the time I slid into Mollala the blue was slicing the thunderheads like a smile. I was still blocks away from the Rodeo Grounds when the excitement hit. Parked cars lined the road and spawned a buzzing stream of people, all headed in the same direction. A faint razzmatazz of carnie music pushed against a suddenly laughing sky. Then the Ferris wheel appeared, lit like the pearly gates and spinning huge as a bingeing Santa Claus.

I waded through the tall grass in the parking lot, hopped a ditch, and went through the fence. Everybody I passed had a paper cup the size of the colossal popcorn barrel at the drive-in movies. Every cup was full of beer. The carnival glittered off to the left and the boxing ring sat at one end of the big arena in as tidy a little amphitheater as ever played in Athens. A single, large droplight hung in the clear air above the canvas. In the meadow beyond, a herd of horses grazed peacefully. The corndogs smelled great.

A main motive for reporters writing about boxing is that they get to sit with their noses on the ring apron. The disadvantage is that when you sit that close you can't cheer. Any display of partisan feeling would undermine the reputation of journalistic objectivity. And if you holler for one guy, his opponent will probably be offended and refuse you an interview afterwards. There are those who argue that you can't see a fight properly if you're too close, anyway. It's a matter of forests and trees. These connoisseurs prefer a 12-to-30-foot vantage in order to savor the choreography and

gestalt of a bout. That may be why the parasitic press are relegated to the hurly-burly at the judge's table. This time I sat up in the bleachers and yowled like a paying customer. Very satisfying.

There isn't a bad seat on the slope, the ring announcer is wearing a white Stetson, and a crew from CBS Television is lugging film equipment down the steps. They are here to film the Northwest junior lightweight and lightweight champ, Louie Loy. Louie has been in Los Angeles visiting his family and recuperating from the kidney infection that scratched him from the June card in Portland.

He flew back in today with his younger brother, Larry, who is his sparring partner, and his father, Louie Sr., who trains and manages him. Louie's Uncle Richard lives in Portland and Louie lives and trains with him while he is here. Richard met the plane, which was late, and the whole clan went straight to the professional gym, where the CBS crew was waiting.

From the moment he stepped out of the car, the cameras followed Louie, focusing on his hands being wrapped, trailing him through a full workout. A microphone picked up every sound.

CBS has been enjoying top-flight Nielsen ratings on its boxing matches and has assigned documentary producer Maurice Murad and his crew to do an hour-long special on boxing. Murad picked Hector Camacho and Louie, who will meet for a July bout in Madison Square Garden, as subjects for the film. Both fighters are undefeated and, going into this match, extremely promising. Camacho is fast, a classy southpaw stylist from New York. Louie is a West Coast puncher with a high KO ratio and a level head. Murad is intrigued by the mystique of the sport. The special, he says, will be aired in December. Meanwhile, Louie has offered to spar a few exhibition rounds with his brother to open the Molalla

card, so the crew tags along, trying not to interfere.

"It's hard not to act strange when the camera is on you," says Louie. "They're going to follow me tomorrow when I do my roadwork, too. I know I'll want to run faster and farther just because they're watching. But I'm going to pace myself and do it my regular way."

The sun sets as Louie and his brother put on their leather sparring helmets and climb into the ring wearing sweatshirts. They get an enthusiastic hand from the small but zealous crowd, and the diehard defenders of the underdog root for Larry.

Louie patiently signs autographs afterwards, but it's been a long day for him and the Loys head home to Portland with the TV crew in their wake and a last cheer from the crowd floating after them. Then the real fights begin.

The three Garcia brothers of Caldwell, Idaho, are well-schooled, promising amateurs who are becoming classic examples of what happens when you turn pro in a remote backwater and don't have a wily manager. The Garcias had no manager at all and they joined the punch-for-pay ranks with the simple policy of saying yes to any bout, anywhere, against anybody. Disaster.

Lorenzo, the middle brother, debuted in two consecutive bouts with Brian Tinker in Boise. They were brutal wars, with Tinker coming out on top both times. In his third pro fight Lorenzo Garcia came to the Expo-Center to meet Bob "Duke'em" Newcomb in a 1981 affair that clawed its way into the vicious zone of legendary battles. Lorenzo lost that one, too. Things continue like that, and by the time Lorenzo arrives in Molalla he's sporting a ridiculous record of one win and four losses that in no way reveals what a staunch and elegant character he is.

We know next to nothing about Lorenzo's opponent, Juan

Rodriguez. He is part of a last-minute package from San Jose, handled by Joe Amato. Rodriguez weighs in at 131 compared to Lorenzo's 127, and his record is 5–4.

Lorenzo is in fine shape and moving well in his classic stand-up style. Rodriguez is no slouch; his hooks are wide, but he's tough when they're toe-to-toe and he hammers at the body. Lorenzo is quick, accurate, and a nice counter-puncher. It is all very pretty and correct. If Lorenzo has a fault, it is that he lacks hostility. He is far too humanitarian in his outlook to try for a knockout. He had Rodriguez stung and staggered a half dozen times, but politely stepped back so that Rodriguez could recover and they could go on playing. Lorenzo fights best when he's pressured and, since Rodriguez had no compunction about trying to slaughter him, it was an interesting bout. Rodriguez was cut early and Lorenzo's sharp shooting kept the blood flowing, but it went the six-round distance and Lorenzo took the unanimous decision for the second win in his pro career.

A trio of pretty Garcia women celebrated in the front row and Lorenzo sat down in his robe with them to cheer the next bout. That involved his older brother, Ray, and another mystery man from San Jose named Jerry Lewis. This Lewis (136 lbs.) is no comedian. Ray, the oldest of the Garcia brothers at 22, was the last to turn pro. He won the amateur regional belt in 1981 and then couldn't make it to the National Tournament because of illness. His pro record, in the Garcia tradition, consists of one loss. Ray was off his feed this night: poor timing, his distance and concentration both askew. Lewis is a tough customer. He hooks well to the chin and his lateral movement threw off Ray's momentum every time. Ray missed more than he landed but he struggled on to lose a decision to the sympathetic grief of the assembled Garcias.

Renee Garcia is eighteen years old and the baby of the family. He started out in the helpless mode and was 3–2 when fate intervened in the form of Portland manager Fred McNally. McNally took Renee under his wing, and fights for the junior welter are being carefully chosen now.

But Sam Wilson is always a wild card for Renee, and they are in the ring together for their third go at each other. Renee won their first fight and then came in on twelve hours' notice with a recently broken nose to meet Wilson the second time. Wilson took the sole win in his five bouts that night. Wilson may be another victim of idiot guidance. But he persists, and gets tougher by sheer dint of losing. He lost to Jihad Kareem at the Marriott one Thursday night and climbed in with Renee again a week later. These two always do their best to obliterate each other, and this night was no exception. Wilson has 10 pounds and the reach advantage over Garcia. It's a wild scramble and Garcia probably lands some low blows in the melee. The decision is close but unanimous for Renee Garcia, who goes to 6–2 in jubilant fashion.

The moon came out and the carnie lights danced in the music from the merry-go-round. The corn-dogs were blue ribbon thoroughbreds and the cotton candy was as pink as a thumbed eye. To top off these delights, Charles "Machine Gun" Carter got into a fight. The 1980 U.S. Olympic Middleweight has had a bumpy transition to the pro game, but there's evidence that he might be on the right track at last. Carter is developing a punch and, though he's still the fastest middleweight we've seen, he's learning the difference between a flurry and an effective combination. Carter (165 lbs.) jumped in with another unknown quantity named Sam Turner (165 lbs.) of San Francisco. Turner arrived with a 4–0 record, respectable skills, and a sturdy chin. He was not impressed with

amateur laurels and had every intention of chewing hunks out of the Machine Gun. Carter went in and took chunks off Turner instead.

It's hard to pin down the frame of mind that makes a real fight. It's certainly not anger. Good boxing requires such clear and rapid analytical thought that a cool head is mandatory. Maybe the driving force is desire, what the fight folk call "being hungry." This hunger is a slippery beast with a million faces. You can smell it, feel it, and taste it when it's there in the ring, but it looks one way on Sugar Ray Leonard and altogether different on Aaron Pryor, Alexis Arguello, or Curtis Ramsey. That night, for the first time, we felt and tasted it in "Machine Gun" Carter.

Carter has so much natural ability that he skated through the amateurs. That kind of talent is a curse as well as a blessing because it makes success seem easy. The hunger that can drive mere flesh and blood through the grueling discipline of professional boxing is something Carter had to discover late and by himself.

Judging from what he did to Sam Turner, Carter is developing an appetite. It was amazing to see the easygoing Carter want that win badly enough to go tearing in after it. I was glad to be sitting in the bleachers so I could yell about it. Referee Jim Cassidy stopped the bout at 2:50 of the fifth, with the game Turner out on his feet and unable to defend himself. "Machine Gun" Carter goes to 8–1.

Hunger is what southpaw Francisco Roche (154 lbs.) of Cuba via Seattle has got, and what Steve Moyer (161 lbs.) has not. In fact Steve, the third generation of Portland's fistic dynasty, seemed ill at ease and far from home in the ring that night. He is trained by his grandfather, Harry, who also tutored ex-Junior Middleweight Champ Denny Moyer as well as Steve's Dad, former middleweight

contender, Phil Moyer. It wasn't lack of schooling or encouragement that had Steve lunging into the saw blades in Molalla.

Francisco Roche isn't just hungry, he's ravenous. Portland saw his last at the Marriott when he was merrily out-pointing Darryl Penn until the instant Roche gushed blood from a bone-deep cut over the left eye. When Roche's trainer, Joe Toro, stopped the bout and the win went to Penn, Francisco lost his composure. He flung himself down on the floor of the ring and cried, pounding the canvas. Toro was disgusted with the scene but Roche, who had, by all reports, been robbed in a flagrant hometown decision in Canada only weeks before, was furious. But neither Roche nor Toro had anything to regret at Molalla. Moyer had at least six pounds on Roche, was considerably taller, and had an extra reach advantage. Roche ate him like fire on a marshmallow. It was the only mis-match of the night. The little guy totally outclassed the big guy.

Moyer was bleeding from a cut over his left eye at the end of the third round and the ref finally stopped it at 2:10 of the fourth. Moyer dropped to 14–8–2. Francisco Roche went to 10–2–1, and we'll certainly see more of him.

It was a grand night, and McNally Sports Attractions rates a Patron of the Arts Trophy for contributing several thousand smackers to the aesthetic awareness of Molalla. Historians in the crowd drifted out through the gates, reminiscing about the old days when the ring sat on the pitchers' mound in the Civic Stadium and the stands were packed. Rings have been scratched in the dust of empty lots, roped off in cow pastures, and surrounded by gilded chairs in Regency salons. Whether the ring sits in a lush casino or in the parking lot outside, the action inside the ropes has the same zesty appeal.

Debut: Minsker Turns Pro

Having published the first stories about Andy Minsker, the editor of Willamette Week newspaper felt a certain pride of ownership. In discovering Minsker, his small weekly had scooped the dailies in their own back yard. That's the only explanation I can come up with for him sending a free-lancer like me on a jaunt to Las Vegas. This appeared first on December 10, 1984.

Las Vegas—From the 12th floor window of the Showboat Hotel you can see snow on the mountains. You can also look straight down the smokestack of the mock stern-wheeler on the roof of the casino below. If you had time you could count several thousand rose, lemon, tangerine and bellyache blue light bulbs that spell out the name of the flashiest, trashiest city on the planet.

Twenty-two year-old Andrew Minsker is not looking out the window. The Portlander lies propped up on pillows and pretending to watch a television game-show host do Woody Woodpecker voices. Minsker's lean frame is moving seldom, and slow as glass. Usually he is a laughing, hard-working, fast-talking guy who is never still for fifteen seconds at a time. He is not sick. He is con-

serving energy. He is forcing calm onto his body, deliberately freezing the churning in his head.

It is the afternoon of Thursday, November 28, 1984 and tonight, Andrew Minsker, the 1983 national amateur featherweight champion and 1984 U.S. Olympic alternate, will enter the boxing ring in the arena downstairs. It will be his 253rd bout, but the first boxing match he has ever been paid to fight.

Any professional debut is a leap into the dark. There is a dreamy terror at the young dancer's opening curtain, or the violin prodigy's first long walk toward the podium, or the brilliant collegiate athlete's first minutes of play in the strange sport played by the pros. It is not, despite the claims of some hidebound amateur sports officials, a loss of virginity or a tainting of purity. It is not circumcision by seashell. It's not even prom night. It is, however, an anxious rite of passage, a dramatic change in the game. Few make the switch easily. Many fail completely. In boxing, one of the hardest and strangest of games, nearly fifty percent of all those fighters who endure a professional debut will never enter the ring again. Many quit after two or three bouts.

From the 1976 Olympiad to 1982, boxing enjoyed one of its periodic heydays of splendid competition. With the great skills and magnetism of Sugar Ray Leonard, Roberto Duran, Thomas Hearns, Gerry Cooney, and a dozen other major forces, the art flourished and fortunes were made in and around the ring. Leonard's retirement in 1982 marked the onset of a lull in the game's excitement. The cancellation of U.S. participation in Moscow in 1980 kept many topflight amateurs from turning pro. They hung onto their simon-pure status, hoping for another crack at the gold in '84. The result was an American boxing team of such depth that more than one American fighter

in every weight division was capable of walking away from the '84 Olympics with medals.

Portland's 125-pound Andy Minsker and featherweight gold medalist Meldrick Taylor were classic examples. Minsker defeated Taylor in the U.S. trials in Fort Worth in June, but in turn was decisioned by Taylor weeks later during the U.S. Trials finals in Las Vegas. And so, Minsker—Portland's Olympic boxing hopeful—lost his chance to shine in Los Angeles.

Fight scholars speculate that if Minsker and Taylor fought fifty times they would split the wins right down the middle. Now these two, and hundreds of other amateurs are entering the paying ranks of the sport. The word is out that 1985 will be an explosion of talent and enthusiasm. For every aspiring professional there will come this one nervy, watery-gut day of waiting for the crucial night and the first pro fight.

The weighing-in ceremony takes place in a dim corner of the Las Vegas arena, called the Showboat Sports Pavillion. The big room focuses on the square white canvas of the raised ring in the center. Rows of red chairs climb away toward the dark of the steel-strutted ceiling. Workers test the ring ropes, running a vacuum cleaner over the canvas deck, straightening the 2,600 individual chairs. The fight folk are swarming in one aisle. The fat guys in the noisy sport coats wave fists sprouting bundles of greenbacks. These are the bettors. The quiet, healthy-looking youngsters in dressy sweat suits are the fighters. The serious older types, some lean as boxers, others heavy and tired but sharp-eyed and intent, are the managers and trainers, looking out for their boys. Cameras grind and flash. Reporters sidle through with notebooks.

This is the great social event of the fight game. The joking palaver is tangled up in wheedling power plays. The crowd sur-

rounds the gleaming official scale, which stands cool and white as a honky-tonk crucifix. A Nevada state boxing commissioner calls out the names in pairs "…Andrew Minsker and Candido Partida!" The fighters and their handlers slip through the mill, meet in front of the scale and strip to shorts or less with their eyes fixed on the scale. When their turn comes, all of the men do the same thing. They step forward, pause in front of the scale for one deep breath, straighten their spines, then carefully step up to stand watching as the balance bar finds its level. They act as though that last focusing breath is all that keeps them from weighing 10 pounds too much. "Minsker, 126 and a quarter!" bellows the commissioner, "Partida, 126 and a half!"

The reporters and the commissioners at the long table jot furiously on their papers. As the next pair is called these two bundle their clothes with them into the small room where the commission doctor will examine them.

Candido "Candy" Partida is Mexican, handled by manager Jimmy Montoya of Los Angeles. Partida has a 9-5 pro record in the United States and has never been off his feet in a fight. He is a rugged, powerful 26-year-old who speaks no English. His trainer translates for him. Partida is 5 feet 5 inches tall. Minsker has five inches advantage in both height and arm-length. Nobody expects Candido Partida to become a world champion. Nobody imagines that he will beat Andrew Minsker tonight. Partida, however, has a steady, adult look to him. He's in rock-hard condition. "He gives nothing away," says the translator. "He is never easy."

Minsker's manager, Billy Baxter, the millionaire professional gambler, turned fight manager four years ago and has engineered two world champions so far. Speaking to reporters at the weigh-in, he has strong words about his hopes for Minsker. "I think

Andy is the best prospect in the country right now outside of the Olympic medalists themselves."

A Baxter-arranged contract guarantees that all of Andy Minsker's bouts for his first two years as a pro will be telecast on Top Rank cards on ESPN. The agreement says Minsker will fight eight times before December 1985 and be paid a total of $50,000. This averages a little over $6,000 per fight, including what will certainly be several six and eight round bouts. The usual pay scale for a Top Rank main event is closer to $2,000. Minsker's second year is set for six bouts at an even higher rate.

Baxter is convinced that this is just the beginning for Minsker. The manager views the education of a professional boxer as a delicate Montessori progression. The fighter must be tested and taught against opponents of gradually increasing ability and widely varying styles. It can be argued that it is absurd for even the best fighters to debut in front of a television audience. Scholars, however, welcome the chance to watch an artist grow, to analyze and predict each youngster's future. It will be several fights down the road before the Olympians will be truly tested. They will be protected like million-dollar colts until they are ready. "Bluffing Billy" Baxter plans to take the same great care in the education of Andy Minsker.

The two big dressing rooms begin to fill soon after 4 P.M.. The fighters for all six bouts on the card assemble, with opponents placed in opposite dressing rooms. The trainers and managers huddle over equipment bags and mother the fighters, arranging them each on a vinyl-covered massage table to rest under a sheet until it is time to prepare.

Minsker is in the first bout. His trainer, Ed Milberger, has been his coach since Andy was 8 years old. Their preparations

have the smooth efficiency of long custom. Minsker sits with his long hands dangling over a chair back while Milberger carefully wraps the yards of protective gauze and tape that help prevent the bones of the hand from splintering with the power of the blows.

"I've done some sparring without headgear," Minsker muses. "The smaller gloves will be different but that's OK. I like it better not wearing headgear. You can see better.

"It will be good to have six rounds to work in," he adds. "I've always been kind of a slow starter. I like to feel the guy out, see what he can do."

The room is lined with white-covered bodies stretched out on tables. Minsker, hands now changed into weapons, gets up and begins to move, to dance and shadow box. The other fighters prop their heads on their hands to watch. Billy Baxter, with his small son Nathan beside him, also watches. Nathan's blue eyes never leave Andy's face. Baxter is smiling.

"What you smiling at?" asks Andy.

"I feel like I've got the winner of the race," says Baxter. "But it's kind of frustrating because there's no money to be made. Nobody is betting against this horse."

Minsker, who has always leaned toward a professional boxing style, still anticipates the hurdles in his first professional bout. There is no protective helmet. The red gloves weigh two ounces less, which means less padding. You feel the punches more, whether you're giving or receiving. The scoring is different. It isn't just speed that counts here. Power counts. The labor is not simply to connect but to effect. The rules are slightly different; the styles are very different. Three amateur rounds require much less of the body than six or eight or ten rounds. The pacing and strategies are in an entirely new zone.

On November 15 in Madison Square Garden, six members of the U.S. Olympic team made their pro debuts in front of 18,000 fans—the tickets were given away free—and a major broadcast network television audience of millions. Pitted against awkward but less than brilliant opponents, the six Olympians were all predictably victorious. Welterweight star Mark Breland, in with a much shorter brawler named Dwight Williams, drew boos from his hometown crowd at his inability to put Williams down. Heavyweight Tyrell Biggs also heard boos for his performance in winning a six round decision. Andy Minsker's nemesis, Meldrick Taylor, now fighting as a lightweight, was luckier. He stopped Luke Lecce in the first round.

It is the evening of November 28 at the Showboat Sports Pavilion in Las Vegas. Andy Minsker hears no boos, but Partida is not making it easy. The tough Mexican comes forward in a crouch, both hands hooking wide at Minsker's body. Minsker handles him. The Portlander slips punches and moves well. His jab has steam and his hook is deadly. Partida butts with his head and throws a few low blows, which are probably the natural effect of a short man aiming for a tall man's belly. In the second round, Minsker hammers him into trouble on the ropes but the bell saves Partida. Partida goes down for the first time in his career during the fourth round. He doesn't like it on the deck. He gets up and survives.

In Minsker's corner, Milberger and Baxter are coolly urging more combinations. The television commentators, Bernstein and Smith, are saying Minsker carries his hands too low. The crowd of 2,000-plus loves it. They cheer Partida at his final bow. In the United States the fight folk say, "Winning is the bottom line." In Mexico a fighter is honored for great effort even if he loses.

Partida has given away nothing.

Minsker wins a unanimous decision, taking every round of the six-round fight. He leaves the ring in his long white robe and the crowd cheers him all the way back to the dressing room. His next appearance at the Showboat will be January 24.

Hunched on the table, Minsker listens as Billy Baxter tells him three, or maybe six things he needs to work on.

"Sure," he says, nodding seriously, "we'll get the tape of the fight and start work on it right away." Young Nathan Baxter, nine years old and silent, stands close, watching Andy, taking everything in. Minsker wanted to look wonderful and feels he did not. "Damn," he mutters, looking into Nathan's child eyes. "You know? Damn!"

Later, in the 12th floor room, Minsker phones home to ask what his father thought of the fight. Hugh Minsker, a 1952 alternate to the U.S. Olympic team, passes on a message. An ad agency wants Andy to spend a week in Mexico being photographed wearing Calvin Klein jeans. The money is very good.

"Should I do it, Ed?" Andy asks on his way into the shower. Minutes later, emerging dressed and gleaming, he asks again, "What do you think, Ed? Should I do it?"

Downstairs again, admirers stop Minsker with congratulations and requests for autographs. The feeling of celebration begins to grow in him. He is on his way to a soft drink and a chance to watch the videotape of the fight. In the lobby he sees Candido Partida, also showered and dressed. Partida is bruised and swollen. One eye is almost completely shut. Minsker doesn't have a mark on him.

Awkwardly, warmly, they shake hands. Minsker says, "You are a good man, a good fighter. You have a great heart."

Through puffy lips, Partida tells Minsker in Spanish that

Andy also is very good. They wave to each other, heading in opposite directions.

Ed Milberger is quietly happy. It's a beginning," he says.

Fists of Fury: Francisco Roche

I was afraid Francisco Roche might get into trouble with the law if I published his story. Phone calls to U.S. Immigration officials and the State Department assured me that whatever he did in Cuba would stay there. This ran in The Rocket newspaper in February of 1983.

"Portland is Roche's whorehouse.
Every time he comes here, he gets screwed."
—A fight fan

"Hey Cisco!" the crowd screams. "Francisco! Yeah, ROACH!" they howl, and the dark whippet figure in the ring whirls with arms spread toward them.

Something about Francisco Roche grabs the crowd. His lean muscle is defined in the white light. He's as fragile as a bullwhip, a city panther, the Nureyev of the fire escapes, the flame master of the street dance and the alley entrechat. He's the 5-foot-6-inch southpaw with the 7-foot arms. He's the Cuban from Seattle with the frail, indecipherable code of tattoos threading his arms and thighs. His face is wildly beautiful and he's a sweetheart, tender as

an angel, he oughta be in movies. But what hooks us is that he's as sincere as death.

He's the welterweight boxing champion of the Northwest and the dirtiest fighter in the region. He specializes in the head butt with a sideline in holding his opponent's head with one hand and cracking him with the other. His brand of sportsmanship in the ring is that of a bobcat in a hen house. But the crowd forgives him, even urges him on, because he is always the underdog, always at a disadvantage.

He shouldn't be able to do what he does. He's unschooled and wide open with a tendency to arm punching that should prevent him from having any power. A halfway decent pro ought to put him in the crocodile zone in short order. Instead, Roche beats up on guys who are more experienced than he is, and who are, generally, a lot bigger. He's quick, he's left-handed. He's got a good chin and dazzling courage. And he's the hungriest human we've ever seen who could still walk.

He should fight at 144 pounds but he weighs in dressed in shoes, jeans, sweaters, hats and jackets so he's listed as 147 pounds. He jumps in eagerly with middleweights. He gave Steve Moyer 10 pounds and several inches in height as well as a lot of experience last summer at the Mollala Buckeroo but Roche sliced the big guy to ribbons and the ref had to stop the slaughter in the fourth round.

Roche had only 10 pro bouts under his belt when he fought classy veteran Curtis "Razor" Ramsey. On paper the bout was a grotesque mismatch.

Joe Toro, Roche's trainer said, "Yes, it is too soon for Francisco to go in with someone like Ramsey." But Toro explained that it is hard to get bouts from Seattle, a town that traditionally stages a

fight card about as often as it rains dollar bills.

"I call all over the country. Nothing. He always ends up fighting above his weight. But who knows what he can do? The kid always surprises me. And, if he could go the distance with Ramsey, maybe it would get him known. Maybe he could get fights."

When Roche and Ramsey met in July of '82 at the Marriott Hotel in Portland, it was anything but a mismatch. Ramsey wasn't himself that night and Francisco was Roche to the core. It was a theatrically bewildering contest. Ramsey was fuddled by Roche's aggressive speed and southpaw style. The veteran looked terrible and the crowd fell in love with the fiery Cuban.

When the decision went to Ramsey the crowd threatened to dismantle the ballroom and Roche wept in a display of cantankerous martyrdom that rivaled Monty Python and John the Baptist.

Roche is a lousy loser. He hates it. He was scorching Darryl Penn to ashes when a cut over Francisco's left eye stopped the bout. The TKO win went to Penn and Roche threw a tantrum, flinging himself full length on the floor of the ring and pounding the deck with his fists while the tears sheeted down his face.

But Roche is used to hard times and rough going. Last spring he went to a small mining town named Coalstrip, Montana and beat a Canadian named Muldoon. The promoter, Bob LeCoure, paid Francisco with a check that bounced. Just before that, Roche suffered the first loss on his record when a loudly booed hometown decision went to 15-0 wunderkind Sanford Ricks in Canada.

"He came to me about a year and a half ago," says Joe Toro. "I got him amateur bouts. Maybe a dozen. He lost a couple of decisions and I hate to say it, but I think there was prejudice involved because he's Cuban. Finally he comes to me and says, "If this is going to happen to me I might as well turn pro. I need the money."

Roche's main source of income is fighting. "He tries to get work," says Toro. "He does lawn jobs and labor whenever he can pick it up. But I've seen him go in for a dishwashing job when the 'Dishwasher Wanted' sign is sitting in the window and they'll tell him they just hired somebody else. Face it, the kid is not just black. He doesn't speak English very well, and to top it off, he's Cuban."

Roche arrived in the United States on June 2, 1980. He was one of the thousands of Cubans who went from prison to New Jersey. After six days of processing through immigration, he flew to Seattle where his younger brother worked in a candy store. Roche is eager to become a U.S. citizen and is working on his English.

"He's a quiet, reserved kid," says Toro. "I didn't know he'd been in prison until a few months ago, when I was renewing his license. The form asks whether you've ever been convicted of anything and I was going to leave it blank. He's a clean-living guy. I didn't figure there was anything like that in his life. But he tells me, yes, he was in prison in Cuba. Well, you don't ask a guy what he was in for. Francisco doesn't talk about himself. If they want to tell you they will, but you don't ask."

Awkwardly, with Joe Toro's help in translating, I asked. This is Francisco Roche's story.

Francisco is twenty-two years old. He is one of fourteen brothers and an unspecified number of sisters. They lived in a small apartment in Havana and were poor.

One day, when Francisco was fifteen years old, his mother was coming home from the grocery store with both arms full of parcels. A flashily dressed pimp was sitting on the steps in front of their tenement building. Francisco's mother could not see over her packages and she accidentally stepped on one of the man's white shoes. The man jumped up, very angry that she had dirtied his shoes. She

apologized, but the man would not accept her apology. He wanted her to get down on her knees immediately to clean his shoes. He raised his hand and was going to hit her, to force her down.

Francisco was beside her. He jumped and hit the man on the chin before he could strike Francisco's mother. The man fell down, and, whether from the force of the blow or from hitting his head in the fall, he lay unconscious. Francisco ran upstairs to their apartment and grabbed the machete, which was kept just inside the door for the family's protection. He ran back outside. The man was still unconscious. Francisco chopped off both his hands.

Francisco says he meant to kill the man then, but his mother stopped him. The police came and Francisco went to prison. The man survived. Roche still feels that he did the correct thing and says he would do it again if he had to. "Nobody," says Francisco in perfectly cogent English, "Nobody hits my mama."

Francisco says his mother's health was bad and she could not visit him in prison, but his brothers and sisters came to see him. He has no contact with Cuba now, and does not know how his family is faring.

"I don't like to hear this," says Joe Toro, when Roche finished talking. "I'm glad I'm an American. I'm 63 years old and this boy has seen more than I have…..He got carried away. He did a very bad thing. But I'll tell you something. I was raised in New Jersey, but I was born in Puerto Rico and grew up surrounded by Latin people. They are very proud people and for them the Mother surpasses anything in the world."

Francisco and his sweetheart, an American girl, expect a baby in February. Roche stays busy, training at the Eagle's Club Gym in Seattle and going anywhere to fight, Hawaii, Las Vegas, always over his weight, always the out-of-town underdog.

Roche came back to the Marriott in Portland for a re-match with Darryl Penn, this time for the vacant northwest welterweight title. It was a rollicking brawl and an unholy mess of fouls. Francisco Roche took the decision and the championship belt and the crowd was as happy as he was.

Toro has hopes for Roche's future. "He is a throwback to Kid Gavilan and Gene Fullmer. The old style rough-and-tumble fighters. He has a chance to make a lot of bucks in the ring. He has the belly for it."

The right belly for fighting is an empty one. Roche is hungry. He's fit enough. His muscle is solid and he gets enough to eat. But the hunger is in his face, and in his every move in the ring.

Sugar Blues: Leonard vs. Hagler

The decade of the 1980's was a rare, glorious time to be following the professional sport of boxing. Ali was gone and the heavyweight division lacked luster, but there was brilliance in the lighter weight divisions. A lot of that star shine came from one man, and he took it all the way from welterweight (147 pounds) up to middleweight (160 pounds). That man was Sugar Ray Leonard. This ran in Willamette Week on April 16, 1987.

There's no escaping Sugar Shock.

Several nights have passed since the Superfight swept the nation on April 6th, but the talk rolls on. Asked if they saw the match, your lawyer, your auto mechanic or your aura reader may still tend to glaze over in a slightly anxious euphoria, as though they've been privileged to watch a guy strolling on the surface of the Willamette River and are afraid you won't believe them.

Since last November, when the contract for the Leonard-Hagler

match was signed, many sportswriters and boxing scholars, including this one, have pooh-poohed the fight and the whole idea of a Leonard comeback.

For most this was not a matter of disliking Leonard. It was the result of a careful analysis of boxing history and human physiology. Comeback after a five-year layoff? With no tune-up bouts? In a heavier weight division? And against the blue-collar Samurai himself, Marvelous Marvin Hagler? Can't be done, we said. No way. Sugar Ray obviously neglected these reasonable arguments. We doubters are currently stuck on a dry but familiar diet of hat and crow.

Folks who know Leonard personally claim that he's a nice man. I'm willing to believe it despite his commercially "cute" manner. He's successful and intelligent and a valuable role model for the young.

And there's no denying that he's one of the greatest fighters in the history of the sport. He's a brilliant boxer, a fantastically gifted athlete. As fight fans we're lucky to live at a time when we can witness his performances. Yet, it's in the ring, where something deeper than personality or social skill is revealed, that I don't like Sugar Ray Leonard.

I have never liked him. His showboat style in the ring offends me. His willingness to taunt and belittle his opponents with jeers and insolently lowered guard infuriates me. The flamboyant insult of his "bolo" punch is particularly obnoxious when it works, which is usually. When this despicable bolo is used to humiliate and bamboozle my heroes, as it did against the snake-dancing counterpunch king, Wilfredo Benitez, or the formerly ferocious Duran, and now even Marvin Hagler, I consider it an abominable atrocity.

For a while Leonard's evasive tactics in the ring had me convinced that he was a coward as well as a cad. Seeing him stand in that

same Caesars Palace boxing ring in 1981, hurt and half blind in the center of Thomas Hearns' firestorm power, waiting for an opening, cured me of that bitter illusion. When he jumped straight into the electric furnace and yanked the tall man's power plug, changing Hearns permanently, there was no denying that Ray Leonard is a man of incredible courage.

I liked Wilfred Benitez even though he was silly. Nobody could hit him. He ignored all the rules. He did his training in discos and in the bedrooms of beautiful women. He fought better when he was backing up and best of all when he was pinned on the ropes. He would plant his feet and dance from the ankles up with a miraculous wizardry that was more protection than steel armor. He enjoyed boxing and treated it as a game. He was a "good sport." Nobody could lay a rough glove on him—until Leonard did.

I liked Roberto Duran best of all. He did everything right. I even liked the fact that he was a lousy sport. Fighting wasn't a game to him. Each time the bell rang he set out with the worst intentions imaginable. Until his second fight with Sugar Ray, when the fast feet and faster hands had him flummoxed, when the shame of the bolo punch got to him, when Leonard's style drove this fiercest fighter to commit virtual suicide by saying "No mas," and quitting in the middle of a championship match. The scary thing about Leonard's effect is that the guys he whips never seem the same again. He takes something out of them.

I like Marvelous Marvin Hagler, whose art could be entitled Zen and the Integrity of the Working Man. Hagler is saner than the mad Duran, less hysterical than the high-strung Benitez.

Yet, sitting in the Fox Theater on that Monday night, I saw Leonard use the same techniques on Hagler that had driven the "Hands of Stone" to the "No mas" moment. Hagler endured.

Leonard had wings. He flew. To the stunned millions who saw it, this was a true resurrection. An impossible five years later and 10 pounds heavier, this was still Sugar Ray. He was brilliant and infuriating.

The bolo to the body came in the fourth round while Hagler was lunging and missing, frustrated at being unable to catch Leonard. But Hagler was figuring it out. As Leonard began to tire, Hagler came on. The Hagler right jab began to work. The relative power of Hagler's punches began to tell. The ninth round of their terrible dance will find a place in the dramatic classics of history. Leonard was trapped, covering in a corner with Hagler throwing a rain of leather. I thought it was the end, that Leonard was tipping over the edge into the crocodile zones of hurt and exhaustion. But then Leonard came out with a hurricane flurry, driving Hagler back.

There are those who feel that professional boxing means that the toughest S.O.B. will win. Hagler's punches were heavier, more damaging, and in a back alley there is no doubt what would have happened. But boxing is a game of hit and don't be hit, and Ray Leonard is a master at delivering fast and frequently. Note that Hagler was never hurt in this bout and that Leonard was in serious trouble a few times. He was as tired as death. But he came back. It was that incredible courage again.

I am one of those who think that this was a straight fight. Not rigged. We tend to deny our losses by howling fix at every unpalatable result. I also don't think that this was a lesser Hagler, decaying in skill, speed or strength. The pace of the bout was horrendously fast and demanding, set by Leonard and calculated for that 12-round distance. I do think that three more rounds—Hagler's championship distance—could have changed the out-

come totally. But Leonard and his team had figured that, and cleverly set the 12-round limit.

I believe that Sugar Ray Leonard did something extraordinary. He came back to the ring after a five-year layoff, without a single tune-up match, in a heavier weight division, against the most skilled and seasoned champion in the world, and he won. He did it with enormous natural talent, tremendous discipline, and real intelligence. He defied time and nature and gravity. And he won. I don't like it, but I believe it.

Who Is this Arguello?

A Legendary Champ Mounts a Comeback in Eugene

One of the old saws still heard occasionally in fight gyms goes like this: "If it's simple, it ain't pure. If it's pure it ain't simple." This statement is always uttered with oracular authority. When I ask what it means, the answer is a snort to the tune of: "If you don't know, you can't understand." In the far from simple case of Alexis Arguello, I began to get a glimmer. This appeared in Willamette Week on October 24, 1985.

When Alexis Arguello appears on national television this Friday, October 25, he will not be wearing his usual elegant white suit. He will not be exquisitely polite on behalf of Miller Lite beer. At the age of 33, after two years in retirement, one of the finest fighters in boxing's long history will try to return to the ring. The question for Arguello and for fight fans and scholars will be, "Is this still the great Alexis Arguello?"

In his 17-year professional career, the shoemaker's son from Managua brought brilliant gifts to the ring, but his greatest impact

was ethical rather than physical. Arguello knocked out 63 opponents in his 78 victories, but the cynical fight world was touched deepest by his professionalism, his personal dignity, and the respect and courtesy he offered to everyone he met in or out of the ring.

Arguello's return is not triggered by vanity, or by the restless itch that spawns so many comeback fiascos. Having amassed two substantial fortunes during his career, Alexis Arguello is broke. He is fighting again to support his family.

Aficionados, who respectfully dub the former champion of three weight divisions "St. Alexis," or "The Archbishop," are of two minds on the subject of his return. Remembering depressing attempts by Muhammad Ali, Joe Frazier, and even Sugar Ray Leonard, they say, "History shows you can't come back." Frankly sentimental about Arguello's glowing image, they fear that age and rust may tarnish what mere defeat could not. On the other hand, boxing is the most unpredictable of human pastimes. There are always exceptions. Maybe, the fans speculate, there could be another year or two of recovered glory. Maybe Arguello could actually be the first man to win the title in that magic fourth weight division—especially now that his nemesis, Aaron Pryor, has skidded into drug limbo. One way or another, the answers will start coming off the TV screens this Friday night.

The fight will take place in Anchorage, Alaska, part of that state's effort to attract major television events. Co-promoters of the card are Sam Glass of Tiffany Productions in New York, and Bobby Stroup of S Productions in Eugene.

Arguello cannot appear in the ring against a less than reputable opponent. This test bout will pit the former champ against a Eugene fighter from the Ox Boxing Team stable, a subsidiary of S Productions. It is a big crack at a Top 10 rating for Pat "Lightfoot"

Jefferson, the 1980 U.S. Olympic team 140 pounder. Jefferson is known for speed and excellent boxing skills but he lacks a power punch. The twenty-seven year-old Jefferson, 25-5, is hungry. He is also a fine defensive stylist, a type that has given Arguello trouble in the past.

The pundits shake their heads. The odds have to go with Arguello, but this is definitely a fight rather than a pushover. As of early in September, Arguello's trainer, Eddie Futch, was not committing himself about the ex-champion's future. "We'll see in this fight coming up," says Futch.

S Productions brought Arguello to Eugene to train quietly for two weeks early in September. This serious work time allowed no press splash, no crowds in the gym to watch the workouts. Still Arguello's presence caused the local fight buffs to consider the road that brought him here.

In Nicaragua's capital, Managua, where Arguello was born, they call him *Flaco* (skinny). From the time he turned pro at age 14 until the 1978 revolution, they chanted *Flaco* in the streets on fight days. The patented Arguello right to the chin was an unofficial national resource. In the U.S., however, where the casual fan is only interested in rhino-sized heavyweights, the 126-pound world champion is frequently ignored. When Arguello came to the U.S. to live after the Sandinista revolution, and moved up to take the 130-pound world title in 1978, the U.S. TV networks began to notice him. He was more salable as a U.S. resident. And his formal English improved rapidly, a big advantage in pre-and post-fight interviews. The ultimate attraction, though, was that he kept winning, usually by dramatic knockout. The right hand appeared magically, to clip the sleep buttons of a dozen opponents' chins.

Arguello's American breakthrough came on October 3, 1981,

when he defended his third world title, the lightweight (135-pound) championship, against the wildly popular nice Italian boy from Youngstown, Ohio, Ray "Boom Boom" Mancini. When Arguello stopped the blue-collar cyclone in the 14th round, he put a new face on macho in America. Mancini, the rare white hero in a sport dominated by blacks and Hispanics, was a soap-opera lure for spectators. Mancini's manager was a reformed fight writer named Dave Wolf, whose skill at playing high and sweet on the emotional keyboard turned Mancini's family fantasies into greenbacks.

Arguello demolished the "People's Champ." Any other fighter would have created 20 million enemies in the process. Arguello, behaving precisely as usual, helped the bruised and bleeding Mancini up off the deck, hugged him and said, "You are a great fighter. One day soon you will be a great champion." The TV cameras zoomed in on Arguello's leading man looks, his cheerful smile and his genuine courtesy. You could almost hear the thunderclap of the great, goofy American heart opening to this totally alien creature—a gentleman.

Recalling that moment four years later, Arguello frowns slightly. "That was nothing staged. It was from my heart. It's ridiculous for fighters not to respect each other, not to behave respectably. This is our job. Do two opposing lawyers leave the courtroom and go on snarling at each other after the trial? No."

Nobody thought it was staged. Boxing scholars had watched Arguello act the same way for years. Those casual viewers, more interested in Mancini than in boxing, forgave Arguello for trouncing their hero.

More startling was the sudden vivid effect on other boxers. For decades the American model of a champion was the lyric braggadocio of Muhammad Ali. Fight gyms from coast to coast rang with

crude imitations of Ali's "I'm the greatest, he's vermin" attitude. What Ali carried off with brilliance, his thousands of youthful imitators rendered simply obnoxious.

Within days of the Arguello-Mancini bout, 10-year-old amateurs were shaking hands gravely and congratulating each other on their excellence. The weekly TV fight cards blossomed with post-fight interviews in which the suddenly gracious winner "didn't want to take anything away " from his opponent's reputation. Even the 140-pound world champion, Aaron "The Hawk" Pryor, formerly the angriest buzz saw on the block, changed his ways overnight.

The fight Magi watched this dramatic change in general ring demeanor and nodded sagely at each other: "It's good they should copy Arguello. He does everything right. Ali was Ali. Nobody can copy him."

Defeat came to Arguello in his attempt to be the first man ever to hold a world title in four weight divisions. The effort brought him up against the human machine gun, Aaron Pryor, who held the 140-pound title. Their two bouts, in November 1982 and September 1983, were each named "Best Fight of the Year" by various boxing magazines. The two devastating losses dropped the lid on Arguello's boxing career. He was thirty-one years old. He had boxed professionally for 17 years. He had several million dollars worth of real estate in Miami. Arguello hung up his gloves. Two years later, as Pryor wandered in grim decay, Arguello announced that he planned to campaign again at 140 pounds for a fourth title.

The boxer and the fan tend to view the sport in the same way. They are intrigued by the performance, by what happens in the white light of the ring. The knifing and dodging and politicking that happen in the murk around boxing have little to do with the sport. It is strictly business, another game entirely, designed for and

by people who do not box. It is the business of boxing managers, agents and trainers to conduct these affairs cleverly while preventing them from intruding on the concentration of the guy who does the fighting. An unfortunate side effect of protecting fine athletes as though they were racehorses is the frequency with which they reach retirement with all the political and financial savvy of a four-year-old colt.

Fight scholars were reluctant to admit that this had happened to the dignified, intelligent Arguello. Yet, how else could he have lost as much as $20 million dollars? He wouldn't squander it on drugs and gold-plated convertibles. His style is class rather than flash, and the standard forms of foolishness seem totally uncharacteristic. With this and other questions in mind, I visited Arguello's training camp in Eugene. In conversations with Arguello and with Bill Miller, the New Englander who has been his booking agent since 1978, the picture began to emerge.

Since Arguello was fourteen years old, his financial affairs have been handled by one Dr. Eduardo Roman, a successful Nicaraguan businessman with a PhD in economics and an eye for fight talent. Roman was Arguello's adviser and mentor, his "patron." Under his guidance Arguello won what amounted to a fortune in Nicaragua along with his featherweight title. He built a pleasant house for his wife and two children. He supported his parents and various other family members.

Roman's clout in Managua was tied to the Somoza government. When the Sandinistas rebelled in 1978, Roman bolted to Miami and persuaded Arguello to come with him. Arguello's family sympathies were with the Sandinistas. His brother died fighting for the revolution. But Arguello depended on Roman for everything. When Arguello defected, the new Sandinista government seized

his property. The house he built for his family is now, reportedly, a Russian consulate. Arguello, once a national hero, is now an outlaw in Nicaragua.

In the United States, Arguello stuck to his trade. Meanwhile, Roman was managing Arguello's money and campaigning heavily for the return of Somoza. Booking agent Miller says, "Roman is a political animal. He used Alexis to draw contributions for Nicaragua. As Roman handed out the money, some of it naturally spilled his way."

Unknown to Arguello, Roman's interest in Nicaraguan politics had superseded his interest in Arguello. The fighter and Miller believe that Roman began siphoning money from Arguello's personal corporation to help finance the anti-Sandinista forces.

After Arguello's retirement from the ring, he made headlines when he announced his intention of joining the guerrilla forces in Nicaragua to help overthrow the Sandinistas. "Roman urged Alexis to go and involve himself in the war," says Miller. "He had Alexis change his will so that Roman was the beneficiary and then sent him into the jungle. Alexis is an athlete. He's never fired a gun in his life. He was willing but it was ridiculous."

After a few months in Nicaragua, Arguello returned, intensely confused. He was no longer sure who was right and who was wrong in this ideological battle. Arguello no longer talks politics in public. "No matter what I say," he explains, "somebody gets hurt. It's best that I say nothing."

Upon his return to his home in Miami, Arguello discovered his money was gone and that the Alexis Arguello Corporation was facing serious tax problems with the IRS. Having dismissed Roman and liquidated his assets, Arguello has paid his taxes and his debts. But he has little left.

"At first he thought of promoting boxing matches in Miami," says Miller. "Finally he told me his situation. I went down to Miami. He said, 'Maybe I could fight again. I'll make a comeback.' I said, 'Let's take it slow. Let's get a complete medical evaluation first.'"

Arguello went to New Hampshire; he began working in a makeshift gym set up in an empty wing of a computer factory owned by a friend of Miller.

"He was tested and examined continuously through June and July," explains Miller. "In July the medical evaluations came in. The doctors said he has the body of a seventeen-year-old. It gradually became apparent that he was no longer a former athlete to be examined. He was an athlete in training for competition."

The question of a trainer arose. Eddie Futch, who trained champions Larry Holmes and Michael Spinks, is working with Arguello now. The seventy-four year-old Futch has a list of former students that reads like the boxing hall of fame. His reputation for integrity and civility is equaled only by his fame as a teacher. Yet it is surprising to find him working with Arguello. Futch trained Arguello for the first bout with Aaron Pryor. Afterward, Arguello blamed Futch's training techniques for the loss. This remark was so opposite to Arguello's normal manner that observers wondered if he might have suffered brain damage during the bout. Within days, Arguello retracted the statement and apologized publicly to Futch. Still, the question lingered.

"Who do you want as a trainer?" Miller asked. "Alexis said, 'we should get Eddie. I owe him one.' I said, 'Forget owing. You should have the best. Who is the best?' Alexis said, 'Eddie.'"

The Arguello family is at their table in the Hilton's top-floor restaurant shortly after 5 P.M. The fighter's grave, working manner is gone. He is relaxed, smiling calmly, joking. The maitre d', a

Peruvian and a boxing enthusiast, is flambéing a mushroom sauce at their table and chatting with them in Spanish. The maitre d' has arranged to open the restaurant kitchen an hour early each evening for Arguello's convenience.

Beyond the windows the whole Willamette Valley stretches, but the fighter in his white suit, his graceful wife Loretto's mane of black hair, and the cheerful good manners of their four-year-old son attract more attention from other diners.

Arguello talks about his other son, a thirteen-year-old who is staying with a grandmother in Miami so he can go to school. "He goes to public school," says Arguello. "I don't want it to be too easy, too protected for him…he doesn't box. He plays football. He's a good quiet boy, shy, serious in school. It is probably a burden being my son. His friends know who I am. The only pressure I place on him is to behave with respect and honor. To be decent."

He contrasts his own sons' lives to those of the boys he met in June. "I was the commencement speaker for the graduation ceremony at Boys Town. All tough kids. Hard lives. I just spoke to them about what I know. They understood, I think. I love boxing. We boxers come from the slums, the ghettos. It's my duty to help the young. To show them a way to succeed, to have self-respect and heart. It's my duty to be an inspiration to them."

What might be overly sentimental or even contrived for another athlete, Arguello says with complete conviction. Yet, the Boys Town speech was a remnant of his last non-boxing form of income. He is under contract to Miller Lite to do TV commercials. His decision to return to the ring has eliminated commercial work, because FCC rulings prevent a competing athlete from endorsing alcoholic products. Now Arguello is on the Miller All-Star roster, making occasional personal appearances, such as the Boys Town commencement,

for $2,000 a day plus expenses.

The Arguellos leave to put the child to bed, and Alexis invites Miller and Futch to come to his room later. "You know the film cassette I found for tonight? *Casablanca*."

Just days later, the smooth, protected process of Arguello's preparation ran into stormy disruptions. While sparring with Eugene fighter Jesse Lopez Jr., Arguello felt some discomfort in his inner ear, but ignored it. Then the promoters discovered that their October 5 date in Anchorage was in conflict with a major televised football game and they postponed the bout until October 25.

Anxious not to miss his peak of condition, and eager for a tune-up bout, Arguello agreed to a short-notice match on October 1 in Reno, Nevada. He would meet former northwest welterweight champ, Francisco Roche. Roche, an unpredictable wildcat from Seattle, was delighted at the chance. The Arguello camp left Eugene, going to Reno to train.

During the last week of September, Arguello suffered a dizzy spell and collapsed on the streets of Reno. Bill Miller immediately called off the October 1 bout with Roche. Climbing on the plane to fly to the Eastern doctors who had worked with Arguello before, Miller told reporters that it was an infection of the inner ear.

"If it's temporary, a little thing, then we may be able to fight in Anchorage. If it's serious, Alexis is going back into retirement."

On October 2, the press was informed that the Anchorage bout would take place on October 25 as planned. Pat Jefferson's boxing skills are not to be taken lightly. Arguello's fans are worried. They expect a lot from Arguello, and they fear he won't be able to deliver.

Ask the fighter if he ever resents the demands of the crowd, the howls for blood from ringside, and Arguello becomes quietly indignant.

"No. Never. They have given me everything. And it isn't blood they want. They want from me exactly what I want to give. The performance. Boxing is a great art form. I have lost in the past. But I have never, and I will never give a bad performance."

The Fight:
Hagler vs. Hearns

Las Vegas: Caesars Palace,
Saturday, April 13, 1985

Back in the 1980's, long before Willamette Week won a Pulitzer Prize, it was a small alternative newspaper operating on one wing and a lot of elbow grease in a medium-sized town in the mildew zone. The only reason the editor sent me to a huge boxing event in Las Vegas was because local fighter Andy Minsker was on the undercard. Turned out I didn't get to see Minsker's bout, so I set out to tell what it was like to be there. This ran on April 25, 1985.

The high voltage zing of a big fight is legendary. No Hollywood premier, no Broadway opening, no ticker-tape parade draws so widely and deeply from the glitter heart of America. Stars and pimps rub satin shoulders. Tycoons and bricklayers, high-priced hookers and righteous socialites, all flaunt their glad rags in identical excitement.

The outrageous extremes of Caesars Palace in Las Vegas have

been the natural setting for a dozen Fights Of The Century, pulling crowds by air into this remote desert hot spot. The upcoming Hagler-Hearns fandango, set for April 15, is further complicated by a 35,000-member convention of broadcasters in town for the weekend to jam hotel rooms, snag traffic, and drive casino employees to hysterical ecstasies as the money rolls in. At least 30,000 people who do not have a ticket to see Hagler fight Hearns are trying to buy one.

Upstairs in his suite, Marvin Hagler is getting mean. This is not a simple task for a guy who is intelligent, healthy, kind, family-loving, and a millionaire. Hagler has developed his own system of mean meditation over the years. He puts himself into a discipline that he calls "jail." He hasn't seen his wife and four children for weeks. He will refuse to see them until after the fight. The hype, the TV commercials, the press conferences, and six weeks of seclusion in a Palm Springs training camp are behind him. Now, while the endless party of Las Vegas whoops at street level, the domed blue-collar samurai hones his Zen claws in games of backgammon, gin rummy and checkers with the Petronelli brothers, Pat and Goody.

These two stubborn New Englanders have been with Hagler since he was an intense eleven-year-old in their Brockton, Mass. gym. The Petronellis and one shaven-headed lawyer named Wainright are Hagler's entire entourage. As fight time approaches, he shuns all other human contact. He stays alone, thinking and getting mean.

Downstairs in the red swarm of Caesar's casino, a buzzing knot at one craps table is surrounded by uniformed security guards who keep the rubberneckers from pressing too close. With a dozen buddies to cheer him on, Thomas "Hit Man" Hearns rolls the

dice, calling "Eight! Eight! Come on eight!" and turning his head away with a quick smile when eight fails to appear.

Deeper in Caesars' maze, past Cleopatra's Barge where the band plays, opposite the 30-foot marble copy of Michelangelo's David, around a few corners from the life-size ghost-white statue of Joe Louis in marble trunks and boxing gloves, is the Sports Book, a room dedicated to the serious and scholarly forms of gambling. Multiple television screens and electronic tote boards entertain the audience studying racing sheets at individual desks. A 10-foot tote board announces odds on The Fight in glowing red.

At 10 P.M. on Saturday, the Caesars board shows Hagler with a slim 6 to 5 edge in steady betting. Heavyweight champion Larry Holmes has $5,000 on Hearns. Former *Ring Magazine* editor Bert Sugar and Sugar Ray Leonard also pick Hearns. Welterweight champ Donald Curry, ex-featherweight titan Sandy Saddler and Roberto Duran say Hagler will win.

The electric snake-town carnival is in full swing. The neon streets sizzle and jump with flesh made gaudy by the lights. At the airport, long lines of bag-burdened new arrivals wait to be ushered into cabs, limos and buses by frenzied shepherds. On the wide front steps of Caesars Palace, glittering crowds stand mesmerized by the turquoise glow that bathes the mammoth building and its surrounding fountains, sculptures and arching footbridges. Groups of satined and sequined tourists are scooped into taxis, but the bemused crowd never seems to grow smaller. The lines are bizarrely patient here. Even the prime-time rich are willing to wait in this leisure zone where hurry is from one pleasure to another. Only the taxis are genuinely furious in their zooming, and tales circulate of pedestrians smashed and forgotten in the crosswalks.

GAINFORD'S LAW (for successful fight promotion): It don't matter how many seats you got. It's how many asses you got in them seats that counts.

— George Gainford, manager and trainer of Sugar Ray Robinson

Caesars Palace has decided to set up the smaller of its portable bleacher arenas in the parking lot beside the tennis courts. Instead of the 30,000 seats available for the Holmes-Cooney fight a few years ago, only 15,128 tickets have been sold for Hagler vs. Hearns.

A Caesars spokesperson explains, "We decided to go for quality seating and raise the ticket prices so we could still make money. In the big stadium, half the people were so far away from the ring that they couldn't see anything."

There are a few, very few, $50 seats far up on the lip of the overnight arena, but the rest have gone for $200 or $400 or $500, with a resounding $600 price tag on the ringside seats. The fight has been sold out for weeks. By fight day the ringside seats will be netting $2,500 each from the scalpers.

The trouble is that there are not enough scalpers for this boxing match. People who would normally parlay a pair of tickets into a tidy profit at the expense of latecomers are stubbornly hanging on to the precious strips of cardboard. Big bucks won't buy them. Fight buffs banking on the greed of scalpers are wandering the casinos in a desperate search. Even the scalpers want to see this fight.

An earnest business manager, hunched over a telephone in the casino office, dials number after number with the same litany: "Please tell Mr. Arum (or Mr. Greb or Mr. Superstar) that I am

anxiously seeking tickets to the fight for Mr. Herb Alpert…. Yes, Mr. Herb Alpert…. Ah, I see…. Thank you, anyway."

Las Vegas taxi driver Ray Luntz, swooping through the traffic circus of flesh and flash, rants at hilarious pedestrians and gripes. "Too much money! I saved a month for them ducats! A pair of $200 seats, me and the wife. So I pick up two jokers at the airport last night, and right away they wanta know have I got tickets. Sure, I say, double ducats a pair. They start trying to buy them off me. I'm no scalper! I wanted to go to the fight! But shit, my kid needs braces. These orthodontists you wouldn't believe. I'm driving and saying nah, nah. All of a sudden I hear these guys offering me 800 bucks apiece for my goddamn tickets. So, I figure, what the hell. Me an Lucy will go to the closed circuit show and let Marvelous Marv and the Hit Man fix the kid's teeth."

"Including the TV and radio technicians," says the Caesars spokesperson, "we issued close to 800 press passes." The plastic-coated passes are equipped with a pin to stick into a shirt or lapel, and they come in blue (for seating at ringside), green (10 inches of bleacher in the farthest, highest row) and yellow (admission to the closed-circuit showing in Caesars Pavilion right behind the bleachers). Beige means you are a technician and are free to plug into Caesars electricity and wander anywhere as long as you don't sit down. The priorities are established by circulation, daily status and raw pull. The Oregonian is at ringside. Willamette Week is a yellow card.

Caesars Pavilion is a corrugated metal shed the size of an airplane hangar. The steel spider web of the arena bleachers looms over one end. Just inside, a dozen mobile rooms on wheels have doors labeled with names of the pre-lim fighters. The Hagler and Hearns portable dressing rooms are tucked away in back and are

constantly guarded. The middle of the shed is set up as a kind of theater with the holy-of-holies scale for the weigh-in on a stage, screens for the closed circuit broadcast hanging from the ceiling, and more bleachers.

The far end of the shed, closed off by black plastic curtains like a thousand unrolled garbage bags, is the press section. Long rows of folding tables and chairs give it the look of a school cafeteria except for the dozens of telephones and six high-resolution television monitors. One corner boasts tables loaded with plastic-wrapped sandwiches, bottomless coffee urns, bins of chips and popcorn, and ice. Three times a day, a forklift delivers cases of soft drinks for stowing in the two big refrigerators.

LAS VEGAS: Monday, April 15—The Fight
Income-tax day. On this day in 1865 at 7:22 A.M., President Abraham Lincoln died of the gunshot wound inflicted by John Wilkes Booth at Ford's Theater the night before. On this day in 1912, the British luxury liner Titanic sank in the North Atlantic after striking an iceberg. And on this day in 1920, a robbery at the Slater and Merrill Shoe Co. in South Braintree, Mass. resulted in the deaths of the paymaster and a guard. Italian-born anarchists Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti were later convicted of the murders and executed.

The 8 A.M. weigh-in ceremony goes off without a fuss in front of several hundred reporters still hung over from the big poolside party last night. Hagler weighs 159 and one-quarter pounds. Hearns squeaks in at 159 and three-quarters. Thousands sigh with relief. The prelim fighters step up onto the scales for a dwindling audience and by 9 A.M. everybody is on the way to breakfast.

The sky is an aluminum pan with one polished spot—probably the sun. The 90-degree glaze of the weekend is gone. A stiff breeze kicks sand in from the parking lot. The temperature hovers in the high 70s.

Caesars Sports Book is bedlam. Lines of bettors coil toward the entrances. Local TV news crews hover at the windows focusing floodlights on the calm clerks who are taking in money and handing out slips. Brooks Brothers suits can be heard pontificating predictably, "The big M is not and never has been a one-punch knockout specialist!" And, "Hearns is a one-handed fighter, agreed. But consider that one hand!"

High-energy talk ripples the line as neophytes and aficionados make their views known. Pedal pushers and shorts vie for betting room with blazers and tweeds. Two deaf couples, chic in white linen, sign vigorously to each other in obvious debate over the relative merits of Hagler's southpaw stance and Hearns' low and elongated left hand. The four hop and jostle in the line as they demonstrate their points vehemently.

The red-lit letters of the fight tote board are steady as each bet cancels out the one before. It's 6 to 5 for Hagler.

Las Vegas is spinning in the fight whirlwind. Next door to Caesars, the Dunes offers films of the great fights of both Hagler and Hearns 16 hours a day. Booths all over town are hawking T-shirts, caps, balloons, souvenir programs and glossy photos. Street-corner entrepreneurs hold up red Hagler or white Hearns shirts to the passing cars. Every waitress, dealer and slot mechanic has an opinion.

"Too much power. Hearns' right hand all the way," says cabby Ray Luntz. "And too goddamnned much money. Back in '71 when I fought Jose Napoles—I was a last-minute sub at the Olympic and

he knocked me out in the seventh, but I didn't have the sense to fall until the ninth—I got a big 15,000 bucks. Why should these two guys be walking off with a *minimum* $5 million each?"

"Why the hell not?" hollers the tipsy fare in the back seat. "If a coupla million bozos wanta pay 20 bucks a pop to see these guys on closed-circuit TV, who else should get the bread? Bob Arum? The TV network? The Feds? The average boxer is still getting paid the same $200 for four rounds, $500 for six, that they got back in friggin' 1940! Give it to the fighters!"

By 3 P.M. on fight day, a crisis has developed in the press section of Caesars Pavilion. All the soda pop is gone. The ice in the tubs has melted. The ham, turkey, ham and cheese, and tuna sandwiches normally spread profusely on trays are all gone. Only drab, dry cheese sandwiches remain. The caterers and the forklift driver have been busy supplying the dozens of concession stands set up around the arena.

At 3:30 P.M. the forklift finally appears, honking its way through a crowd of parched reporters desperate enough to unload the cases themselves.

By 4 P.M. all the ringside and pressroom phones have been checked and are functioning for direct reporting to dailies and wire services. Portable word processors have been plugged into ringside wiring. The pressroom crowd dwindles as the blue-card folk head for ringside and the green-card holders begin their climb of the bleachers. The yellow-card holders pull their chairs up close to the six high-resolution color monitors feeding directly off the ESPN broadcast. The TV crew is running final tests. An announcer does cruelly accurate Howard Cosell imitations to the delight of the pressroom.

It's time for the prelim fights. The ticket holders trickle in

slowly. Typically the cheap bleacher seats fill up first. At 4:50 P.M. Daryl Chambers, the 22–2, 16 KO progeny of Detroit's Kronk Gym, steps in for 8 rounds with 154-pound slugger Luis Santana from Los Angeles. Halfway through the third round the corner men are debating whether to carry Chambers back to the dressing room or let him walk.

A reporter wandering through the dim aisles in the dressing-room area gets caught in the winner's celebration. The beaming, burly Santana races through the shed door, grabs the reporter in a sweat-soaked hug and plants a kiss on the journalistic cheek before scampering off to the showers. Hours later the reporter finds a broad smear of dried blood coating jaw and neck and realizes it is the residue of Daryl Chambers' cut.

5:30 P.M. Portland featherweight Andy Minsker fights John Watkins of Los Angeles in a six-rounder that frustrates the press-room spectators because it's not televised. Attempts to peer through the chain-link fence are obstructed by a view of legs and bleachers. Formerly cordial security women, now scrutinizing tickets for authenticity, aren't joking any more. A nightstick rattling the wire mesh in front of investigative noses suffices to send the most ardent Minsker followers back to sulk in front of the uncommunicative tubes.

The closed-circuit broadcast is set to begin at 6 P.M. and the green-card holders are drifting back into the pressroom. "You'd need a telescope to see anything from up there in the gods' section of the bleachers. These TVs are definitely the way to cover this fight."

The green-card carriers say Minsker stopped his man in the fourth, but they don't know how he looked doing it.

6 P.M. The closed-circuit broadcast begins and the Kronk Gym

has a winner. Light heavyweight Ricky Womack decisions David Vedder.

In the pressroom another load of soda pop arrives. On the TV screens the sky appears to darken with a rain menace. Hector Camacho appears at ringside in a shining blue-sequined suit. Larry Holmes arrives soon after and sits beside him.

Announcer Curt Gowdy explains that the intrigue of Hagler vs. Hearns is in the evenness of the match, even though Marvelous Marv and the Hit Man lack personal charisma. Hisses spout from the pressroom assembly. "Charisma my royal Irish arse!" howls an indignant Bostonian. "Look into the deep, dark eyes of The Bald One and say that, you Dowdy Barstard!"

The TV crew in the shed is poised, waiting for Hagler. "Is that him? Is he coming? Don't step on those wires, please. Is that him?" Two false alarms later, a smallish figure trots around the corner, robed in black, a hood hiding his face. The Petronellis are on either side of him, a phalanx of uniformed guards around him. Hagler moves fast and is gone, sucked into the great shout from the arena.

The folks in the pressroom gallop back to their TV sets. There they stand at last—Marvin Hagler and Thomas Hearns. They are as like as a pit bull and a greyhound. Their goatees are the only similarity. They are frighteningly beautiful. These two are the cause of all this fuss. They have drawn thousands from across the continent. The idea of this moment is earning millions of dollars for many people other than themselves.

Through all the weeks of hype, they have become as familiar to us as the daily comic strips. We have talked them into easy patterns. Hagler is an intelligent counterpuncher and has a great chin. Hearns has one of the great long-distance jabs of all time, and his

right hand is the hammer of god. They have duked it out already in the playful imaginations of the aficionados a thousand times, and everything that could be said or written about this samurai duel has already been spewed to the point of monotony. All that remains for the men themselves to do is enact one or the other of our projected scenarios proving one camp or the other as superior in prognostication. The fight itself has become, in the minds of many, a formality.

It's easy to be wise now. Now we can say Hearns was brilliant at 147 pounds, effective at 154 pounds, but has not been impressive at 160 pounds.

Now we can remember that Hagler is the most consistent champion of the last decade, so far above every other middleweight in the world that he makes the whole division look shoddy by comparison. But somehow it isn't that clear at 8:02 P.M. on April 15. It isn't clear at all.

Before the first bell rings, Marvin Hagler does something he has never done before in all of his 64 professional bouts. He stands in his corner hammering his own chest and his own gleaming skull with his own gloved fists. The maniacal demon, Roberto Duran, punched himself before his fights, but Hagler? Never. It is a gesture that seems to say, if I hit myself, what can anyone else do to me?

When the bell rings, Hagler the cool tactician, the versatile mechanic, the scholar and yogi, abandons all his usual patience and caution. He attacks. Suddenly it's not a game. It is not a sporting event. It is the real thing.

Sports reporters rarely cheer or holler. Rooting for one side means the opponent may not give you an interview. Boxing reporters can sometimes be heard cracking jokes or talking baseball while the

punches fly and the sweat and blood spray onto their notebooks and shirts. It is evidently part of the mystique of objectivity to be blasé.

But the 200-plus people in the pressroom are not cool when Marvelous Marvin Hagler launches himself into Thomas Hearns' body in the first seconds of the first round. The press gang roars. And goes on roaring.

The first round is a bubbling blister from hell. Hearns climbs into the ring with everything to win and nothing to lose. His junior middleweight championship is not on the line. His money is secure. All he can lose is a fight. Marvin Hagler risks everything. The money is there, but that light in the public eye, that name of Champ, that place in history can all disappear in a single punch. Hagler shows Hearns that there is something else to lose. Life itself. Hearns fights for it.

He lands that famous right hand and the legendary blow hurts Hagler but cannot stop him. Hearns is on the ropes, then Hagler's forehead is bleeding over his right eye. The wire-service reporters, rattling blow-by-blow descriptions into their telephones, can't keep up with the action. It is too fast and the shape of the fight changes too quickly with first one fighter and then the other hurt. "Ill get back to you," snap the wire-service guys, and they drop their phones.

By the end of round two, Hearns is Jello-kneed on the ropes. He comes out for the third dancing. He tries to glide off at the end of his jab and bite at that cut on Hagler's forehead. Referee Richard Steele stops the action so the doctor can examine the cut. Hagler is allowed to continue. "I was afraid, a little bit," Hagler will say later, "but whenever I see that blood I turn into a bull. That's when I know I've got to get serious and get it done quicker."

Hearns is backing away as the final barrage catches him. A min-

ute into the third round he topples to the deck like a felled pine.

Early in the hype for this event, Hagler was asked how he would deal with Hearns' height advantage. "He'll just take up more room on the canvas when he falls," said Hagler. And Hearns seems to stretch over miles as he lies there with the referee chanting numbers above him. He beats the count, staggering like a newborn colt, his long legs drunk and bewildered.

Later they will ask Hearns why he stayed in close to fight with Hagler instead of keeping his jabbing distance.

"Marvin," the Hit Man will answer, "left me no choice."

Marvin Hagler jogs into the big shed for the post-fight press conference still robe-less, pulling his smiling wife along by the hand and waving at the hundreds of hard-nosed cynics who are giving him a standing ovation. He is probably the happiest adult human being on the planet at this moment. He has just punched his way out of mortal time and into history.

The bout has lasted eight minutes and 15,128 ticket holders have gotten more than their money's worth. They float out of the arena into the Las Vegas night, walking tenderly, speaking gently, high as eagles.

Just As Fierce

It was popular in feminist circles in the 1980's and 90's to depict females as inherently less aggressive than males. This didn't jibe with my experience and observation so I jumped at the chance to argue my case. This appeared in the November/December 1994 issue of Mother Jones.

The girl wanted to fight. She was young and blonde and she spoke good English and at first the guys in the boxing gym laughed.

But when Dallas Malloy stepped into an amateur boxing ring in Lynnwood, Wash., last year, she broached a barrier far more imposing than the crusty male bastion of the sport. She challenged an ancient and still powerful tradition of what it is to be female. She defied what may be our most pervasive notion of gender difference—the idea that men are physically aggressive and women are not.

Malloy was sixteen years old, the youngest daughter of college professors. She was already an accomplished pianist, writer, and athlete when she drew international attention by suing U.S. Amateur Boxing for gender discrimination, and won the right for

American women to compete as amateur boxers. Reporters and television news crews from three continents jostled for space at ringside to watch Malloy outpoint Heather Poyner in the first sanctioned women's match.

Asked why they wanted to fight, the young women said they enjoyed it, just as some men and boys do.

The more potent, unasked question is how society at large reacts to eager, voluntary violence by females, and to the growing evidence that women can be just as aggressive as men. A small part of that question was answered in the bleachers that October fight night, as packs of rowdy women lawyers waved manicured fists and cheered with tears streaming down their cheeks

After thirteen years as a boxing reporter, I was a little misty myself on that historic night. Much about Dallas Malloy seemed familiar. A certain steadiness in her eyes reminded me of the woman who raised me.

My mother, still a witty and gifted artist in her hale 80's, got a rifle a few years ago. I pity the burglar who gives her a chance to use it. When we kids were small, she never had a formal weapon, but made do with whatever came to hand. Her broom, skillet, spoon, or shovel served to rein in pesky bill collectors, hostile relatives, rats, rattlesnakes, rambunctious drunks, or any other threat to the peace of her regime. Mom came from a line of frontier females who could drive four horses and the school bus, plow and shoot straight, slaughter beeves and negotiate a sale, reroof the barn, and then go home to embroider flowers on pillowcases while supervising the kids' math homework.

One of Mom's favorite relatives was her Aunt Myrtle, a gentle woman, revered by her farming clan. A classic Myrtle tale describes how she dashed into the subzero cold one winter night, clad only

in boots and a nightie, to battle a pack of prairie wolves who were killing her prize turkeys. My mother, a child then, watched amazed from the kitchen window as Myrtle the dainty, the kind, danced with her kindling hatchet flashing into the skulls and spines of fanged and flickering beasts. Blood exploded in black sprays across the snow. "And that Christmas," the story always ends, "she gave us kids wolfskin mittens, with the fur side in, and stitched snowflakes on the cuffs."

More than seventy years have passed since Myrtle swung her hatchet. Our current era is downwind from the social upheaval of the Vietnam War, the pacifism of the civil rights movement, and the determined progress of feminism. American culture is torn between our long romance with violence and our terror of the devastation wrought by war and crime and environmental havoc. In our struggle to restrain the violence and contain the damage, we tend to forget that the human capacity for aggression is more than a monstrous defect, that it is also a crucial survival tool. The delicate task is to understand the nature, uses, and hazards of the tool. The first step is to recognize that it exists, and that we all possess it to one degree or another—even us women.

This is difficult because so many of us are convinced that women are incapable of aggression on the same scale as men—that women are physically too weak, or are inherently, biologically different in aggressive capacity, or are spiritually superior to the whole concept of violence. These beliefs are the legacy of ancient, traditional definitions of the female role, inadvertently augmented by some recent efforts to combat the oppressive social factors that still assail women.

But most of us would not be here without a generous sprinkling of physically aggressive women in our bloodlines. Through-

out human history, long before antibiotics and prepackaged foods, many women had to be strong or they didn't survive. They had to be fierce or their young did not survive. And these gifts have not declined in this upholstered age of air conditioning.

The regular cop on the night beat in my neighborhood is alone in her patrol car because of budget cuts. Some midnights I can see her parked across the street, doing paperwork by the dash lights. The clerks at the local 24-hour market say our cop calmly interrupted a mugging in the parking lot last week. The bad guy was big and wild, but she grabbed him and held him facedown on the pavement until her backup arrived. A thumbhold of some kind, the clerks think.

During the last few decades, American women have proven their efficacy in every law enforcement agency, earned the trust of those who fight forest fires beside them, and struggled for the right to demonstrate brains, resourcefulness, courage, and strength in a thousand venues from sports to the space shuttle. But the idea that women can't take care of themselves still permeates our culture.

The bouncer at many a college tavern will let a scrawny, pencil-necked male wander home alone at 2 A.M., but will insist on an escort for the captain of the women's soccer team. This kind of protectionist attitude, however grounded in good intentions, defines women as less than equal to men. It also reinforces the stereotype of the helpless female for both victim and assailant: Women believe they are helpless against male aggression; criminals see women as vulnerable.

The fact that women are subject to rape (and the rape of men and boys is largely ignored or denied) is often used as the reason why females warrant special protection. For both sexes, the majority of rapes in the United States are committed behind closed doors

by people known to the victims. Rape by strangers on the street is dramatically less frequent than muggings and assaults. Advocating protectionism for women based solely on their vulnerability to rape further reinforces their victimization, and discounts other vicious acts as serious crimes. Women's "rapeability" seems small justification for the uncategorical separation of the sexes.

There is no denying that some women could use the protection of a stronger person—but so could some men. And when the soccer captain, a fit, fleet expert in the elbow, kick, and head butt believes she needs a bodyguard to get to her dorm room, she has been robbed of part of her own identity.

Ironically, some of the most dedicated defenders of women have enhanced this mythology of weakness, rather than worked to combat it. The intense campaigns against domestic violence, rape, sexual harassment, and inequity in the schools all too often depend on an image of women as weak and victimized. A few well-known feminist leaders, including Andrea Dworkin, Catherine MacKinnon, and Patricia Ireland, regularly portray women as helpless targets of male violence.

This idea that males are physically aggressive and females are not has distinct drawbacks for both sexes. Defining men as the perpetrators of all violence is a viciously immoral judgment of an entire gender. And defining women as inherently nonviolent condemns us to the equally restrictive role of sweet, meek, and weak.

Most arguments for a difference in aggression between the sexes fluctuate somewhere between nature and nurture. But hard as it may be to believe, there is no known biological reason why women cannot be as physically aggressive as men. Geneticist Anne Fausto-Sterling and biologist Ruth Hubbard are two of the many women scholars who are critical of research that postulates a variety

of biologically determined gender differences beyond the reproductive functions. Both scholars argue that the innumerable factors of nature and nurture affect each other in highly complex ways.

Anne Fausto-Sterling has examined many familiar theories of biological difference. Her work debunks claims that physiological differences exist in male and female brains, and that females have better verbal abilities, worse visual-spatial abilities, and less capacity for mathematics than males.

Fausto-Sterling also attacks the central idea that males are biologically more aggressive than females. She specifically deflates the myth of testosterone—often named as the root cause of war, riots, murder, bar brawls, corporate takeovers, wife beating, clear-cutting, and other forms of "male" aggression—demonstrating that no credible evidence indicates that testosterone causes aggression. In fact, studies of soldiers preparing for battle in Vietnam suggest that testosterone levels actually drop severely in anticipation of stressful situations.

Gender differences in the form and context in which aggression is expressed, concludes Fausto-Sterling, are more likely to be caused by learned and cultural factors than by biology. The broad spectrum of aggressive behavior in humans is far more complex than the mere squirting of a gland. Science is only beginning to grapple with the jungle of questions and concerns that surround it.

Even our understanding of physical differences between women and men is changing. In "The Politics of Women's Biology," Ruth Hubbard points out that many physical characteristics are extremely variable, depending on environmental and behavioral factors. We tend to assume, for example, that men are genetically endowed with greater upper-body strength. But this disparity (and others of size and strength) between the sexes is inflated by cultural

strictures on exercise, variations in diet, and other factors.

Training of female athletes is so new that the limits of female possibility are still unknown. In 1963 the first female marathon runners were almost an hour and a half slower than the best male runners. Twenty years later the fastest women were within 15 minutes of the winning male speed. Female sprinters are now within a fraction of a second of the top male speeds, and some experts predict that early in the next century women will match male runners.

Perhaps the strongest evidence that women have as broad and deep a capacity for physical aggression as men is anecdotal. And as with men, this capacity has expressed itself in acts from the brave to the brutal, the selfless to the senseless.

Historical examples of female aptitude for the organized violence of warfare, for instance, include the 19th-century tradition of African women warriors who formed the core legions of the kingdom of Dahomey and the 800,000 Russian women who fought in every combat position and flew as fighter pilots during World War II. The gradual movement of women into combat positions in the military forces of Canada, Britain, the Netherlands, Norway, the United States, and other nations is evidence of a growing contemporary understanding that women can be as dangerous as men.

And while national military forces have historically resisted the full participation of women soldiers, female talent has found plenty of scope in revolutionary and terrorist groups around the planet. According to criminologists Harold J. Vetter and Gary R. Perlstein, nearly a quarter of the original Russian revolutionary terrorists were women—mostly from the educated middle class. More recently, Ulrike Meinhof and the other women of the nihilist Baader-

Meinhof Gang were only the most publicized of many female terrorists in Europe. There is also substantial female revolutionary involvement in the Irish Republican Army, the Basque Separatists, the Italian Red Brigades, and the Palestinian Intifada, as well as in revolutionary groups throughout Asia, Africa, and Central and South America.

In "Shoot the Women First," British journalist Eileen MacDonald published remarkable interviews with 20 female terrorists, including Leila Khalid, leader of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine in the '70s. The book's title is taken from advice reportedly given by Interpol to anti-terrorist squads. Many experts, it seems, consider female terrorists more dangerous than males. They are reputed to endure more pain and to stay cooler in a crisis. The Basque women interviewed by MacDonald gleefully admitted to escaping severe punishment when caught by claiming that a boyfriend had fooled or forced them into robbing the bank, firing the gun, or planting the bomb. The women saw this as outwitting the authorities by turning their own antiquated macho mind-set against them.

Nonetheless, it is still popular to assert that all female criminals are driven by male threat or patriarchal pressure. (The characters in "Thelma & Louise" and the defense of serial killer Aileen Wuornos are good examples of this stereotype.) Although on the surface this presumption of female innocence corrupted by male aggression seems complimentary; in fact it is deeply patronizing. Columnist Amy Pagnozzi, writing for the New York Daily News on the trial of Lorena Bobbitt, said, "A baby. That's what an American jury decided Lorena Bobbitt was yesterday, in deciding she was not responsible for her actions. It is a decision that infantilizes and imperils all women."

On the rare occasion when a woman has been held responsible

for her actions, she's been branded a monster far more frightening than a male perpetrating the same acts. For years, scholars believed female criminals were hormonally abnormal, with more body hair, low intelligence, even an identifiable bone structure. Freud thought all female criminals wanted to be men. The female criminal violates two laws—the legal and cultural stricture against crime and the equally profound taboo against violent females.

As in the public sphere, there is ample evidence that women can be as physically aggressive behind closed doors as men. Here, too, a failure to acknowledge the bad that women can do is a failure to take women seriously.

We should not be surprised when women's aggression is expressed in the one place where they have traditionally held equal or superior status, the home. And it is in the home where that most frightening of crimes, child abuse, most often occurs. Studies of family violence and reports from state and national agencies are consistent in finding that while males commit the majority of sexual molestations of children, women commit more physical abuse of children than men. A Justice Department study released this July found that a full fifty-five percent of offspring murders are committed by women.

Considering how much more time women spend caring for children than men do, these figures shouldn't be surprising. Unless, of course, we fail to recognize that women are capable of violent reactions to stress just as men are. Yet female involvement is scarcely visible in the media's coverage of child abuse.

Spousal abuse is an area where research is questioning still more closely held beliefs about sex roles and violence. Historically, the campaign against wife battering has been a primary vehicle for the "men violent, women nonviolent" message. There is no

question that a terrible number of women are brutalized, and even killed, by their male partners. Every effort should be made to punish the perpetrators, help the victims, and, most of all, prevent such crimes in the future. But this reality is only part of the complex and ugly domestic violence picture.

An increasing amount of research suggests that women are violent in domestic situations just as often as men. Studies based on large, random samples from the whole population have found domestic violence to be distributed more or less equally between the sexes. These include studies conducted by Dr. Suzanne Steinmetz, director of the Family Research Institute at Indiana University-Purdue University at Indianapolis, and by Murray Straus and Richard Gelles, who have conducted the large-scale National Family Violence Survey over a period of seventeen years; and research by Anson Shupe, William A. Stacey, and Lonnie R. Hazlewood.

The overall pattern depicted by Straus and Gelles is that spousal violence falls into four categories of essentially equal size: male battery of an unresisting female partner; female battery of an unresisting male partner; mutual battery usually initiated by the male; and mutual battery usually initiated by the female.

They found that when only the women's version of events was analyzed (that is, the men's version of events was omitted), the results were the same. When only the most severe forms of violence were analyzed, the results were the same. (In a fist-to-fist row, a bigger, stronger man is obviously far more likely to injure a smaller woman than the reverse. But a man's superior strength is often neutralized by a woman's use of weapons.)

The public has received a dramatically different picture of domestic violence. Other, more widely publicized studies do suggest that women assault their spouses much less frequently than

men and rarely or never initiate mutual assaults. But these studies are based on small, self-selected "treatment group" samples or police records and are statistically less likely to measure accurately the overall rate and form of domestic violence.

The rhetoric and reality clash: Our mythic fantasies of a female ideal contradict and undermine the actual strength and multi-dimensionality of women. In cases where female aggression is destructive, our denial compounds the problem.

In boxing, they say it's the punch you don't see coming that knocks you out. In the wider world, the reality we ignore or deny is the one that weakens our most impassioned efforts toward improvement.

We live with a distinct double standard about male and female aggression. Women's aggression isn't considered real. It isn't dangerous, it's only cute. Or it's always self-defense or otherwise inspired by a man. In the rare case where a woman is seen as genuinely responsible, she is branded a monster—an "unnatural" woman.

But slowly these stereotypes are crumbling. We are starting to realize that, in the words of columnist Linda Ellerbee, "The truth is that women, like it or not, can be brutal, too. Brutality's not sexist."

I suspect that the mythology of females as essentially non-violent grew out of a profound impulse to give special protection to the bearers of future generations—a sort of gender version of the non-combatant status of medics and Red Cross workers. But the problem is the same for all non-combatants, whether in wartime or danger-ridden peace: You can still get hurt, but you're not allowed to fight back.

Then, too, we humans don't respect victims, and the disrespect

in the language of the nonviolent female nature is too familiar. It echoes the chauvinist romances of past male authorities who explained why women needed to be banned from vast sections of the workplace, prevented from learning to read, excluded from doing business or owning property, and relieved of the onerous responsibility of making fundamental decisions about their own lives.

Such rhetoric is absurd in a time when millions of American women are shoulder to shoulder with male colleagues in every field of human endeavor. Women have fought for their achievements over decades, battling in courtrooms, classrooms, legislatures, workshops, and the streets of the nation. It took the ferocious, unconquerable will of a great many women to win recognition for equal intelligence, invention, organization, and stamina.

In the boxing world, that kind of courage is known as heart. Now, with the possibility of genuine equality visible in the distance, it is self-destructive lunacy to deny the existence of women's enormous fighting heart.

It is time to recognize the variability of females, just as we do males. Women are real. Our reality covers the whole human megillah, from feeble to fierce, from bad to good, from endangered to dangerous. We don't just deserve power, we have it. And power in this and every other society is not just the capacity to benefit those around us. It includes, absolutely and necessarily, the ability to inflict damage and the willingness to accept responsibility.

One Ring Circus: Ali vs. Frazier IV

When the daughters of Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier declared war on each other, boxing fans expected it to be, at best, a sideshow—and, at worst, a debacle. The last thing anybody expected was a genuinely thrilling fight. This story ran in Sports Illustrated Women, September 2001.

The subject of boxing is two people—who they are, and the complex chemical reaction that occurs when they collide on a given night.

It is supposed to be a kind of Spartan Zen, fierce but silent except for the periodic bell and the smack of leather on flesh. The purists prefer that a boxer's identity be revealed and defined only by what happens inside the ring. But the curse of all the arts is that the most magnificent performance won't pay the rent if nobody's watching.

This anachronistic, individual sport has no teams or leagues or municipal franchises, just loners and dreamers surrounded by piranha. So boxing sells what it has—personalities, often depicted as comic-book mutants. There are monsters and noble warriors,

saints and hoodlums, and good kids who fight to pay for their sisters' eye operations. The promoters urge glittery costumes and showboat entrances and prefight insults, or a mariachi band or a python over the shoulders or a battle with a giant octopus—whatever it takes to create the stars who lure in the audiences. The solemn ritual of the sport survives on the neon spread of star shine. You tune in to catch Mike Tyson or Oscar De La Hoya, and you discover the interesting kids on the under-card.

Of course the star of stars, the master who showed the way, was Muhammad Ali. It's hard to remember now, when he is so revered, but a lot of us detested Ali in the 1960's for the very reason we later admired him: He was a showman outside the ring. In an era when boxing heroes were supposed to be dignified "good sports," Ali was a silly, loudmouthed smart aleck. He bragged and he taunted his opponents. His noise would have been brief if he hadn't delivered in the ring. But he did, and eventually we recognized that his noise was as effective as his boxing. Without it he would have been just as fine a boxer, but he wouldn't have been a global icon. He made use of the natural tension between the art itself and the need to market it, the sport vs. the spectacle. Athletes and their promoters are still trying to imitate him.

You would think—having been tricked, slicked and spun around by Ali—I'd have learned to keep an open mind. But no. When his daughter Laila started boxing and was followed into the ring by Jacqui Frazier-Lyde, the daughter of his greatest rival, Joe Frazier, I joined the snort-and-sneer brigade. We assumed that greedy promoters were just exploiting the daughters for their fathers' names. We figured the daughters were coming to this complex and difficult sport too late to learn it properly, that they would disgrace themselves in the ring and tarnish the hard work of serious women boxers.

Despite our dire predictions, the daughters haven't done that. They willingly admit that they are not the best women boxers, but they are the *best-known* women boxers. They understand precisely how much novelty voltage smart, attractive females wearing their fathers' names can generate. They are injecting star power where it is sorely needed.

You can be excused if, after reading the press coverage of the Ali-Frazier-Lyde bout in June, you thought it was the first time women had faced each other in the ring. Actually women have been boxing since the ancient Minoans or before, but they have been generally ignored. Legal warfare in the 1970's finally secured the right of American women to fight professionally. The stars were few and dim, though. A media conflagration surrounded a 16-year-old Seattle girl named Dallas Malloy back in 1993, when she sued and won the right for women to box as amateurs in the U.S. Interest flared again in '99 when a woman named Margaret McGregor defeated a male boxer named Loi Chow. But both Malloy and McGregor retired from the ring soon after their public splashes.

The lone female boxer to parley her moment of fame into stardom has been Christy Martin, who fought a woman named Deirdre Gogarty in a ferocious slugfest during a widely-seen 1996 Mike Tyson pay-per-view show. Martin's blood-smeared victory glare hit the cover of *Sports Illustrated* that week, and she continues to box professionally. Although many other women are now respected in boxing circles, Martin has been the only one to make an impression on the general public.

Martin also impressed Laila Ali. Laila's parents divorced when she was eight years old, and her mother, Veronica, raised her. Growing up in an affluent Los Angeles suburb, she was a quiet kid who leaned toward trouble and was busted for shoplifting as a teen.

"Everybody else was trying to get out of the ghetto," she says. "I was trying to get in." After studying business in college, she opened a nail salon. She was attracted to boxing when she saw Martin fight, and she took up the sport to lose weight.

In October 1999, after a year of gym work but no amateur competition experience, the 5'10", twenty-one year-old Ali made her pro debut at the Turning Stone Casino in upstate New York. Wisely, she insisted that her bout not be televised live. Nonetheless, her father's name rang media bells, and TV news stations played the story as happy fluff with brief video clips of Laila's first-round knockout win and shots of her father in the audience. The boxing press, always disdainful of the celebrity aspect of the sport, sniffed that her opponent was a porky waitress with no skills. In interviews Ali herself stressed that she was a beginner and had a lot to learn.

It's a mark of Muhammad Ali's spectacular power that, some twenty-five years after his great trio of fights with Joe Frazier, their names are still linked automatically. At home in Philadelphia after Laila Ali made her debut, Frazier-Lyde got a phone call from a local boxing reporter. Frazier-Lyde was 38 years old and, at 5'9" weighed a chunky 210 pounds. She was the mother of three, a busy lawyer and a former boxing columnist for the Philadelphia Sunday Sun. Although she went to college on a basketball scholarship, she thought her athletic life was over. "When I made dinner for my kids, if they didn't eat their food, I was eating their leftovers," she laughs. The reporter asked if she'd seen Laila fight. "I said, well, looking at her, I could kick her butt.' And it was all over the paper."

Frazier-Lyde saw the response to her flip remark as an unexpected opportunity. She started hitting the gym and publicly demanded a showdown with Ali, promising to "establish Laila financially and then establish her horizontally."

Ali did her best to ignore Frazier-Lyde, but four months later Jacqui, minus 35 pounds, made news with her own pro debut, stopping her opponent in the first round. She continued to campaign for a match with Ali. Frazier-Lyde had been an alert adolescent when her father lost two out of three in the great fight trilogy and she liked to talk up the legacy of the fathers. Ali resisted the notion. "I wasn't even born when all that was going on. This is not about our fathers," she said repeatedly. "This is about you and me."

Early in 2001 Ali finally agreed to a fight, though it was questionable whether the match would ever take place, much less have an audience. In keeping with boxing's long tradition of family enterprise, both women are promoted by their husbands, rather than by the established promoters who have connections to make fights happen with ease. No big casinos or television networks would even consider the event. Nobody thought it would make a dime. And why would they? There had never been a big, heavily promoted bout between women.

So the fighters set out to create their own spectacle. Both fought other opponents in a non-televised March 2001 event at the Turning Stone Casino. The casino was wavering about whether to host the big match, but a prank by Frazier-Lyde clinched the deal. At a press conference after the March fights, she presented Ali with a white cake decorated with a big red heart. She gave a short speech, saying the heart was for Ali's "heart trouble about fighting me." Then she punched her fist through the cake. The assembled press went wild. The casino recognized a marketable commodity and a dynamic saleswoman. It signed on to host the fight.

From there the hype kicked in hard. With three months until their June 8 bout, the women began an aggressive publicity campaign. Frazier-Lyde was the loud one. She took the excited,

talkative, joking role associated with Muhammad Ali. Laila was as steady and calm as Joe Frazier. She was comfortable with silence, but when she spoke she was clear and pointed.

They gave hundreds of interviews. They posed back-to-back on the covers of *TV GUIDE* and *Jet*. They hit the nightly news on every major network.

Still, on the Monday before the Friday-night fight, it seemed as if all their efforts might not have been enough. Almost half of the tickets to the 8,000-seat show tent were still unsold. The crucial pay-per-view sales were unknown, and their bout was the same night as the second game of the NBA finals.

During the week before a fight, male boxers with any clout usually refuse to do any promotional activities except one press conference at the weigh-in. For Frazier-Lyde and Ali, there was no such luxury. That Monday they spent long hours in a Syracuse shopping mall, signing autographs, cooing at babies, shaking hands. Tuesday they gave speeches at schools with TV cameras in tow. Frazier-Lyde arm-wrestled a high school principal (and won). Wednesday brought a big press conference at the casino and Thursday the weigh-in. In between, there were endless interviews. Ali says she'd wake in the mornings as her husband handed her the phone to do yet another radio Q&A. "I told him, 'You are wearing me out,' but I don't think he believed me." And always there were the workouts.

The general news media gobbled it all up; Katie Couric even refereed an early morning trash-talking session on "The Today Show." But disgusted sportswriters responded with venom, pointing out that the two women had only 16 bouts' experience between them and that Frazier-Lyde was sixteen years older than Ali. Respected sports newspaper columnist Jerry Izenberg called the match "a

marriage between the god of memory and the farce of merchandising." Boxing writer Bert Sugar dubbed it "a stroll down mammary lane." Other women boxers scoffed. Christy Martin—who had fought the month before on the under-card of a men's championship—was not amused by the prospect that Ali and Frazier-Lyde would be the first female head-liners on a pay-per-view show with male boxers on the under-card. She fumed in *USA Today*; "You should have to pay your dues before you are in the spotlight like that…This is the worst thing that can happen for boxing."

The fighters took the criticism in stride. To those who said they were exploiting the legacies of their fathers, both women pointed out that promoters, TV networks and journalists had made many millions from their fathers' efforts. What was so wrong with their daughters getting some mileage out of the family names? They also argued that their actions weren't hurting women's boxing—rather, they were getting it some attention. As Ali put it, "I'm hoping that promoters see that …you can make women the main event and you can put your money behind women and make money off it. Because that's what promoters are concerned about. A lot of these girls don't realize that I'm in their corner. They can be mad because I get all the attention, but I'm trying to help."

Of course, there was another possibility: If the fight turned out to be bad in any of the thousands of ways that a boxing match can be awful, then the failure would extend well beyond Ali and Frazier-Lyde. Their own names would be mud, but they might injure the prospects of other women boxers.

FIGHT NIGHT.

The huge tent behind the casino was filling. Fans flew in from California, drove in from New York City and Philadelphia; the casino ultimately wound up selling nearly 7,000 tickets, and the

pay-per-view sales numbered around 100,000. The great names of boxing history had been attending Boxing Hall of Fame ceremonies down the road in Canastota and were cropping up everywhere in the crowd. The white-maned patriarch of boxing managers, Lou Duva, floated through to work with his fighters on the under card. George Foreman's daughter, Freeda George Foreman, a fighter herself, walked by looking nine feet tall and elegant in a green suit. Reporters at the press tables had the jitters. Some bellyached at having to cover this travesty. Others mourned in advance. "We just hope that it won't be as bad as we're afraid it could be," somebody said. "That would be embarrassing and ugly and sad."

The preliminary bouts rolled by. The last bout before the main event was a slow rhino waltz of heavyweights. Halfway through, Joe Frazier entered the tent, greeted by enormous applause. Muhammad Ali had an appointment elsewhere that night.

Frazier-Lyde made her entrance led by her trainer and brother, Marvis. She was in black, as always. Ali wore white as always. They faced each other, inches apart, and shared a long stare before retreating to their corners.

The national anthem came and passed, the introductions, the referee's instructions. Then the first bell rang.

Styles make fights, they say. A boxer's style takes years to develop and is as distinctive as a singer's voice. The women may have swapped their fathers' public personae, but their embryonic boxing styles stayed in the family. Ali is the long-armed boxer who wants to punch from a distance and move freely, keeping her opponent away with a jabbing left hand. Frazier-Lyde tends to fight as if in a phone booth, getting in close to throw short, powerful punches. In the first few seconds she charged in and took the fight to Ali.

It wasn't pretty. It wasn't finely skilled by any stretch. It was that

scary, gorgeous thing that the ritualized crisis of boxing occasionally spawns—a real fight. Not a game at all. The women were equals, if not in technique, then in strength and will. The pace was furious. They ate punishment and rallied to return the favor. Dominance seesawed between them. Both refused to lose. It was personal. It was a hurricane in a box.

Between the third and fourth rounds a reporter who had been scathing before the event said, "This is a terrific fight." Duva stumped around the outside of the ring, shouting at the reporters, "They belong on the front page tomorrow!" Nobody disagreed.

Toward the end, the crowd was on its feet, jumping and screaming. When the last bell rang the mood was delirious. Ali won a majority decision with one judge scoring it a draw. Joe Frazier was in the ring hugging his daughter and calling her a winner. Duva was hollering into the stands, "Nobody shoulda lost that fight! They both fought their hearts out! Boxing won!"

Circus was a word commonly tossed around in the run-up to the Ali-Frazier-Lyde fight. It was used to mean hype with no substance, glitz without glory. It meant easy, safe and phony. As if fire-eaters don't burn, big cats can't strike, and wirewalkers never fall. As if gravity were a powder-puff opponent and the planet packs no punch at all.

This fight was a circus, as all big boxing matches are. The glitter gets the audience in the door and puts them in the seats. And then the joke is over. The white lights go on above the ring, and two people give whatever they've got. Sometimes it's a clear view of the human heart. That doesn't happen every time. Maybe it doesn't happen often enough. But when it does—as it did that night—it's the greatest show on earth.

The Knockout: Lucia Rijker

In the summer of 1998 Women's Sports & Fitness magazine asked me to identify and write about the "best" professional woman boxer in the country. "Best" is a word that starts many an argument, but in this case I decided it was probably Lucia Rijker. I spent time chasing around Los Angeles, and then Foxwoods Casino in Connecticut, after the most dangerous woman on the planet. She was as courteous as a queen.

The huge blue Suburban swoops out of the white haze of the L.A. heat and pulls to the curb. The door opens and the world's most dangerous woman flashes a devilish grin and invites you in.

Lucia Rijker is running late for an appointment with her hair stylist and she's in a hurry. To make room she shoves aside a translation of "The Art of War" by the ancient Chinese military strategist, Sun Tzu. The battered paperback is always with her lately, in the car, in her gym bag. "It's complicated," she says. "I have to read it carefully." When she tells you to buckle up you obey.

Driving, she explains why she admires her hair stylist, what a serious person he is, and a dedicated artist who works with an impressive list of movie stars. She met him at a photo shoot when she

first moved to Los Angeles from her native Amsterdam. "If I were rich," she says, "I'd fly him in to do my hair for every fight." The light Dutch accent shifts her snappy American toward the exotic.

She doesn't look at you as she talks. Her whole body is absorbed in muscling the borrowed van around. She likes the van's power and size, and the view from up high. Her eyes assess all 360 degrees of traffic. Swift reflexes respond smoothly to every opening or threat. By the time she parks and cuts the engine you've decided that only world-class athletes should be allowed to drive.

When you mention reflexes she nods. "You know what I notice? How guys have a tendency to reach to touch your face or your head, like to cuddle? Right away my head jerks away, ducks, whup, whup. And they say what's up with you? And I say I can't help it, it's a reflex. When something comes toward my face, I move away. There was this police officer in Holland who got hit and paralyzed by a guy and she didn't see it coming because she was looking at her notebook. I would feel it coming and would move without looking. That's why I want to train the police. Because they have a gun they think they can deal with anything. I think they should train in kickboxing and boxing so they will know what another human being is capable of physically. And so they know what they themselves are capable of."

She slips into the salon the back way, through a dim tropical lanai where slim young men relax, smoking, talking quietly in the shadows. Phillip, her stylist, hugs her, scolds her for being late.

They gossip cheerfully as the scissors fly. She could be any chic female in a hair salon except that he is asking her advice about his workout, his diet. When he steps away for a moment, she leans back in the chair, stretches her arms and briefly flexes the monumental shoulders under her snug T-shirt, the biceps carved out of velvet oak. The frail creatures around her stop for

an instant, and stare.

Movie boxers are never as gorgeous as the real thing. Actors aren't graceful enough. Or fast enough. The fluid density of muscle isn't there, and the eyes are never right. Mere Hollywood magic can't compete with the luminous intensity honed by a life of fear for breakfast, sweat for lunch, and pitched battle before supper.

After twenty-four years of combat sports, thirty year-old Lucia Rijker looks like she sees through brick walls. Picture her zapping the forces of evil and dancing on the bar in triumph till the cops arrive to beg for her autograph.

The T-shirts sold at the Wildcard Boxing Gym where Rijker trains in Los Angeles show her in a superhero pose. The shirt calls her "Lightning Lucia." Monikers have always been part of boxing and the hypesters can't resist heaping labels on Rijker, (rhymes with 'hiker' and 'biker') the Women's World Champion boxer in the 139-pound division. They call her the most dangerous woman on the planet. The Women's International Boxing Federation dubbed her "Pound for Pound The Best Female Boxer in the World." She doesn't like the tag "Lady Tyson." She doesn't mind "Lady Ali," even considers it appropriate because she, like Muhammad Ali, sees her mission as larger than the boxing ring.

Rijker is sharply conscious of her role in the new wave of serious women in a sport that has traditionally marginalized females as titillating novelty acts. The bets are still being laid on whether female fighters are a passing fad in this controversial sport, but so far Rijker's skills stand up to the scrutiny of the critics, and the probing fists of her opponents.

Born and reared in The Netherlands, Rijker says she learned to fight at her mother's knee. "My mother is a fighter," says Rijker. "She was one of the first white women to marry a black man in

Holland and she had to fight for her marriage and for her children. I respect that."

Still, by Rijker's lights, she has not suffered from discrimination. She has a sophisticated view of her own novelty. "Being a woman, being bi-racial, and being an athlete competing in a 'Man's' sport, have all been advantages for me."

Her mother was a waitress in Amsterdam, her father a mechanic. The youngest of the family's four children, Lucia has two older sisters but is closest to her brother. She started judo at the age of six, karate at nine. At thirteen, she took up fencing and became the Netherlands' junior champion.

She was fourteen when Holland was swept by a mania for Bruce Lee. "My brother came home with stories of Bruce Lee, and started practicing kick boxing. He dragged me to the gym. After my first lesson I thought Wow! This is tough! But I liked it. So I went back. "

Competing while she finished high school, she wove her life around the sport. She now calls her kick boxing career "semi-pro" because the pay was never enough to live on. She held four women's World Championships. She smashed bones, noses, and careers, sending at least one former champ into retirement. She had a record of 36 victories and no defeats. Her only loss was in an exhibition match with a bigger male opponent. She stretched her income by managing the gym where she trained, working on tournament promotions, and teaching kickboxing.

Her coach, a powerful figure in European martial arts circles, taught her to teach by sudden immersion. Announcing that he had to leave town, he'd tell her she had to teach his class the next day. The first time it happened she spent a tormented night figuring out how to conduct the class. She came to love teaching.

After twelve years of kickboxing she was fed up. There were injuries, and extended periods of recuperation. She felt trapped by her contract with the coach who was also her manager. In 1993 she took her first vacation, coming to Los Angeles to visit friends. After years of rigid scheduling around training times, the freedom was intoxicating.

"I made a call and said I'm not coming back," she says. Her friends and family were shocked, "but I just cut it all off and started all over."

She took up teaching martial arts classes in some of L.A.'s tonier private schools and health clubs. "I had to learn to talk with women, to teach women. I had spent my life in gyms working with men and this was a new thing for me. Very interesting."

Rijker speaks what she calls "three and a half languages; Dutch, German, English, and enough French to survive." She studied English in school in the Netherlands, but she learned her California style, "On the street. I had to teach to make a living so I have to be able to communicate." She took some time to consider who she was and what she wanted to do.

In the United States the Eastern martial arts have been open to women since the 1950's. The USA fields women's judo and Tae Kwon Do teams in the Olympics. But the western martial art—boxing—was different.

Boys who want to box learn the sport the same way they learn to play baseball—in amateur programs that allow them to compete from the age of eight on. Most professional boxers have had years of amateur training and dozens or even hundreds of amateur bouts. Right to work laws have allowed women to box professionally for decades in the United States, but American women were flatly forbidden to participate in amateur boxing. It was the equivalent of

trying out for the Olympic swim team if you've never been allowed in the pool, or trying out for the Yankees when you've never been permitted to throw a ball.

Then, in 1993, a bright Seattle teenager named Dallas Malloy sued the national amateur association, U.S. Amateur Boxing, Inc. in Federal Court for gender discrimination and won. When the new ruling went into effect in October of 1993, women and girls began trickling into boxing gyms all over the nation. In 1995, Lucia Rijker became one of them.

"A lot of people had talked to me about going into boxing." She explains. "Finally one guy said 'Give me two weeks, let me train you for two weeks. See how you like it. I realize that my whole identity, all my life has been as a warrior, a fighter. In kickboxing I had done everything I could do. This was a new sport. It was a challenge to learn. I decided to give it a try."

The female amateurs attracted media attention, which prompted promoters of small professional shows in clubs and casinos to scour the bushes for women boxers. Few of the new amateurs were ready to try the pro ranks. But women had already been fighting professionally for years in obscurity.

The earliest documented boxing matches between American women took place in the 1880's. Some legitimate competition has persisted in fits and starts ever since. But most women boxers were circus or variety performers playing rigged exhibitions in saloons and theaters.

In the 1950's the 110-pound Barbara Buttrick started out in the boxing booths at fairs in her native England where she fought any woman, and a few men, who stepped up with the ticket price. Buttrick came to the United States where some professional matches were taking place and fought for ten years, racking up a record of

24 wins, one loss and one draw. She retired in 1959 as the most famous female boxer of her day.

The 1970's produced a brief flurry of female ring activity, which subsided for lack of numbers. With only a hundred or so women competing nation wide, matches were rare and difficult to make. Still, the women never went away completely.

While they were banned from entering the sport as amateurs, women discovered alternate routes to the ring. Some started out in the "tough woman" competitions that grew as part of "tough man" tournaments. Derived from the early "boxing booths" at fairs and carnivals, these "tough man" shows featured untrained citizens, from college students to truck drivers, who plunked down their twenty-five dollar entry fee for a chance to step into the ring with another untrained character and brawl and sprawl their way through a three round bout. The winners advanced, fighting each other, with the last one standing collecting a purse that might be a hundred or a thousand dollars or more. The winners were often inspired to hit the gym and practice up for the next "Tough" contest.

Some women as well as men have used this route into the professional game. The other back door to the pros was through training in the Asian martial arts. Kick boxers switch sports or compete in both because boxing pays more.

The new demand for women in the 1990's means these novice pros are better paid than men starting off in the sport. While a male boxer fights his first few bouts for a standard hundred dollars per round, the women sometimes get twice as much.

The fight crowds loved them. At first there was the raw shock of seeing women fighting. Then there was the energy they brought to it. Few had any defensive skills. All offense and fury, they were the most entertaining bouts on many a small card. When USA

Cable TV offered its first women's bout on a televised show, an audience poll showed 85% of viewers wanted to see more women's bouts.

In 1993, former boxer Barbara Buttrick, now widowed and the mother of grown children, founded the Women's International Boxing Federation, an organization which lists and ranks professional women boxers and sanctions championship titles in all weight classes, from flyweight to heavyweight.

In April of 1997, a promotional company called Event Entertainment created a rival sanctioning organization, the International Female Boxing Association to add the luster of "championship bouts" to its all-woman boxing shows. Pay-per-view shows with titles like "Lips of Rouge, Fists of Fury" and "Leather and Lace" followed.

The much-touted "male bastion" has been breached. Boxing trainers and managers all over the country are on the lookout for female talent. In such an eager atmosphere, Lucia Rijker, the world champion kick boxer, had major advantages. Her first boxing trainer was the famed Joe Goosen, head of the Ten Goose Boxing Club in L.A. She sparred with highly skilled men such as Gabe and Rafael Ruelas.

The rigorous regimen appealed to her. "I love the lifestyle, the discipline, the training, the atmosphere of the gym and the challenge of learning a new sport." She won all five of her amateur boxing matches by knockout.

Then, on March 16, 1996, what had been an underground movement exploded in front of a massive, worldwide television audience. The event was the Don King-produced Mike Tyson vs. Frank Bruno heavyweight championship bout. But the main event was eclipsed when the show opened with the gutsy slugger, Christy Martin, "The Coal Miner's Daughter" from West Virginia, punch-

ing her way into the public eye with a bloody win over "Dangerous" Deirdre Gogarty of Ireland. The Martin-Gogarty bout out-clashed and out-classed the men's bouts.

Martin, the former Tough Woman, landed on the cover of *Sports Illustrated* and high on the national talk-show and headline circuit. In that one match, Martin and Gogarty ripped down the cutesy veil that had relegated women boxers to the foxy-boxing fringes of the sport. Overnight the sturdy, powerful and ferociously aggressive Martin became the highest paid and most famous female boxer the world has ever known.

Just five days later, on March 21,1996, Lucia Rijker made her debut as a professional boxer by knocking out Melinda Robinson in the first round. Robinson, who had previously lost to Martin, claimed that Rijker's lightest punches were heavier than Martin's hardest.

Boxers are matched by weight classes. Christy Martin, who started out in Tough Gal tournaments, and Lucia Rijker, the martial artist, fall into the same general weight range—135 to 140 pounds. The experts predict a collision.

The back of that "Lightning Lucia" T-shirt reads, "You Can't Hide Forever." It's a message to Christy Martin. In this one-on-one dueling sport quality cannot be measured by the clock or by the number of points scored or yards gained. A fighter's quality is defined by the quality of her opponents. Martin is the biggest target for the ambitious young guns. The ring logic is that the woman who defeats her will have a chance to inherit the limelight and the substantial paydays that only Martin has earned so far. The challengers are lining up in hopes of getting a crack at her. They include big banger Kathy Collins of New York, who is fresh from the amateur ranks, and Michigan's fast, smart Tracy Byrd, who grew up

in boxing gyms with her gifted heavyweight brother, Chris Byrd.

Rijker is first in line because of her experience, her genuine skills and media appeal, and because the hefty weight of promoter Bob Arum is behind her. She is being schooled and honed for the ultimate purpose of meeting Martin. As one Rijker fan puts it, "Lucia is a bullet with Christy Martin's name etched in the steel."

Of course, 30 other women have already failed to put the kibosh on Martin. Putting Rijker into the ring with her is no guarantee at all of who comes out the other side. The attraction for the fans is that the pairing would almost certainly be a great fight. But in the flaming business of boxing, simply getting the two together is a major battle.

The ritual pissing match is in full swing. Martin's acid remarks about other female boxers have earned her a caustic tag in some circles as "the Tonya Harding of Women's boxing." The plump Martin announced early on that she wouldn't fight the lean, muscular Rijker unless Rijker passes medical tests to prove she's a woman. According to Martin, Rijker could be a male transsexual or be pumped up on steroids, so it wouldn't be a fair fight.

The Rijker camp says Lucia will happily take any tests necessary to prove her unalloyed femininity. They say Martin is ducking a fight with Lucia because she knows Rijker would beat her. Claiming that Deirdre Gogarty was seventeen pounds lighter than Martin, these critics claim most of her other recent opponents have been underskilled and over-matched. They sneer that Martin's honorary title of World Boxing Council champion is a sham because the WBC, a major sanctioning body for male boxers, has no female rankings, and Martin did not win the gaudy belt in a title bout. It was simply presented to her for the benefit of her powerful promoter, Don King.

Rijker won the WIBF European championship by stopping

Irma Verhoef in the Netherlands in the fourth round in February of 1997. She won the WIBF World Championship on November 20, 1997, with a devastating knockout of German Jeannette Witte in the Los Angeles Olympic Forum in front of a global pay-per-view television audience.

The Martin fans claim that Rijker doesn't deserve a shot at Martin because Rijker has only had eight professional bouts and five amateur bouts as a boxer, while Martin's record is 34 wins, one loss. The Rijker fans reply that her 35 kickboxing victories are more legitimate than the many tough woman bouts included in Martin's record.

Pissing and hissing aside, the real question is whether Martin's promoter Don King will risk putting his leading lady into the ring against Rijker, who is promoted by his archrival Bob Arum. These decisions aren't sentimental and have nothing to do with the integrity of the sport. The issue is money. If the fight will sell enough tickets, the two businessmen will make it happen.

The dreamers say it could be the first female main event on a major pay-per-view card. The scowlers say it will never happen, that Martin will retire rather than face Rijker. The media momentum is growing.

Fox Sports boxing expert Rich Marotta named Rijker-Martin as one of the ten most interesting matches of 1998. *The Ring* magazine, known as "The Bible of Boxing," flagged its story on Rijker as "The Woman Who's Gonna Kick Christy's Butt!" The HBO broadcasters who first applauded Christy Martin are now asking when she will take Rijker on.

Rijker, a dreamer, has a gut feeling that she will meet Martin in the ring. "I will fight her. I know it. Either she will retire or I will fight her."

The Wildcard Boxing Gym is on the rough edge of Hollywood, upstairs in a shabby strip mall that features a laundromat, a Thai language newspaper office, and a Hispanic alcohol rehab center. A steep staircase leads up to the open door. The gym is clean, bright, and discreetly ornamented with fight posters. The door and a wall of windows yawn open to let the hot, dry Santa Ana winds blow through.

In one corner a tough handful of Russian immigrants are practicing footwork under the tutelage of a former Russian Olympic star. The speed bags across the room are doing drum rolls under the flying hands of a Mexican featherweight and a black middleweight television producer working back to back.

The Wild Card's owner and chief trainer, 34-year-old Freddie Roach, is a lean redhead with scholarly glasses, a soft voice and a notable head-knocking career as a boxer behind him. Over the past ten years he's trained serious contenders, and a few marginal champions. He also serves as a boxing consultant for movies and television. When actor Mickey Rourke wanted to become a boxer, Roach trained him. Other actors come into the gym to work. It's a funny world where the actors want to box because it makes them feel real, and the boxers want to act because the pay is so much better. Occasionally Roach helps a fighter get bit parts.

In the ring, a powerful bear of a man finishes trying to rip holes in the reluctant belly of his sparring partner and steps out, sweating happily. With the helmet and gloves removed, the bear is Sam Simon, producer of the TV show The Simpsons among others. Simon is the one who introduced Lucia Rijker to Roach in 1996.

"I was thinking about doing a boxing bit on the show," Simon remembers. "She was teaching at Bodies In Motion (a health club) and I heard somebody mention her at a party." He called her. They

met and he watched her videotapes.

"It's obvious that she's a star," Simon shrugs. "She's a tremendous fighter and she's got movie star looks. She can do anything." Simon asked Roach to meet her. "Freddy didn't want to. He was strictly, 'No chicks!'"

Roach nods, and explains. "People had come to me about women before and they'd always say, "She can fight." But they could fight 'for a girl.' One round on the mitts with Lucia convinced me she could fight for anybody. A lot of guys her weight she could knock out. Maybe most of them."

Rijker says she switched trainers despite her respect for Joe Goosen and the serious intensity of his gym. "Freddie taught me things I could use in our very first lesson. He explains the why of what I'm doing and I need that."

With just one pro win under her belt at the time, Rijker did not have a manager, so Roach introduced her to his friend Stan Hoffman. The cheerful "not so silent" partner of the famed Gleason's Gym in New York, Hoffman managed another of Roach's students, light heavyweight James Toney, and a Dutch fighter named Rogelio Tuur. Hoffman's experience in Holland helped him hit it off with Rijker and they agreed to work together.

Roach also took Rijker to see promoters Don King and Bob Arum. King had already signed Christy Martin and was looking seriously at women's boxing, but Rijker didn't like the terms of the contract. Visiting Arum on the same day in Las Vegas, she encountered exactly the opposite attitude. Arum has frequently made it clear that he does not approve of women boxing.

"He was polite," Rijker recalls, laughing. "But he wasn't interested." She insisted that he look at a tape of her fighting. He didn't want to. She said she would not leave the office until he watched

it. "So he put on the tape and all of a sudden he was shouting, 'She can punch! This girl can really punch!' and calling for the people in his office to come and see."

Arum agreed to promote Rijker, but he still tells reporters, "I am promoting Lucia Rijker. I am not promoting women's boxing."

So you're a fifty year-old chainsmoker on a strict sugar and caffeine diet, but you've seen Rijker's javelin jab smack the chops of gritty Dora Webber under the lights at Foxwoods Casino and you have a nagging curiosity about what that fist looks like, coming at you. Freddie Roach is known for his courtesy as well as his ring wars, and he chats amiably while perched on a stool behind the gym's counter. You ask if you might possibly, maybe, spar, for just one round, with Rijker. His answer is fast and final.

"That would not be a good idea. Lucia is training for a fight and she's very aggressive. She does not mess around. She's very focused."

Focus is the word. She's already done her long morning run when she marches through the gym door at the stroke of noon, nods briskly to an acquaintance, and ducks into the women's dressing room. She emerges in sweats and ring shoes and pauses, carefully wrapping her hands in yards of protective white gauze bandage. She's always regal, and she's imposing when she wants to be, but this silence surrounds her with a solid wall.

There are other boxers beating the bags and jumping rope. A few loungers watch the action, socializing and joking as they lean against the office counter. But Rijker acts like she's in an empty room. She launches directly into her workout and for two solid hours does not stop moving. The other boxers stop their own training to watch her but she speaks to no one, seems to see no one except her trainer, Freddie Roach.

She stretches in front of the big wall mirror, and then climbs into the ring to warm up with round after round of furiously fast shadow boxing. Her hands punch the air in flashing combinations as she swivels, circles and advances against an invisible opponent. Roach crouches, watching and brooding just outside the ring.

The many brutal fights Roach endured have left him with Parkinson's syndrome. He has a limp, a heel that won't touch down, and a kink in his neck that hoists one shoulder toward his ear. Except in the ring. The minute he steps through the ropes his body changes, legs steady, shoulders relaxed, as though the fighter in him overrides all that's gone wrong, making him whole again.

He climbs into the ring wearing big leather catching mitts and guides Rijker through a long, grueling lesson. He asks her for particular combinations of punches and her gloved fists batter his padded hands with a sound like gunfire. Roach was right. You wouldn't want to be on the receiving end of those punches.

It is six weeks from her next bout and soon she will add daily sparring sessions to her routine. For now she moves from the ring to the punching bags, pounding three different sizes of bag in different patterns and rhythms, and then to skipping rope followed by wrenching floor exercises. Only at the end, as she is finishing a balance exercise in agonizing slow motion, only then does some one speak to her. A small boy watching her poised on her toes on the edge of a platform, demands to know what she's doing.

She laughs delighted, her sober face transformed in impish merriment. She hops down to explain and soon has the boy trying it. She positions his feet, helps align his posture, and steps back to watch, encouraging him. "You can do it." He topples off balance howling, "It's hard!" She rumples his hair and gets him to try again.

An hour or so later, freshly showered in tight white jeans and spike heeled sandals, stoked on lamb chops and iced tea, Rijker glows in the vine-shaded terrace of a nearby Greek restaurant. The waiters hover worshipfully. She triggers male stares and double takes even on Sunset Boulevard where the starlets promenade. But she is busy talking about being held a virtual prisoner in Tokyo by a kickboxing promoter. She is a lively storyteller, mimicking different voices and accents, acting out the body language of shock or fear or disdain.

Describing Yakuza involvement in some areas of the Asian martial arts, she comments coolly that she admires the simple ethics of organized crime. "You screw up, off with your finger. You screw up again, your throat is slit. It's tough but you know the rules." She contrasts this clear cause and effect with the murky doings of the straight world, where right or wrong is often a matter of who has the most expensive lawyer.

Turning to practical matters, she interrogates her manager, Stan Hoffman, on the relative merits of leasing or buying a car to replace her own worn-out heap.

She grills anyone she runs into who strikes her as having experience or knowledge on a topic that interests her. She asks endless, probing questions. Later she will ask others the same questions and compare the answers.

She's working to be smart about the intricate processes of the boxing industry. "I have to learn this business, and it's tough! Sometimes I wonder what I've gotten myself into," she says.

She uses the same technique in figuring out her financial situation. She spent days questioning a financial advisor.

"So many boxers end up broke. I don't want that. A few weeks ago I saw a beautiful house by the sea with beige pink marble floors

and brown-gold tinted mirrors. I wanted it. I always fought to be the best, to win, for fame. Now I will add money to my goals—to build something secure so I can have that house and not have to worry about rent. So I can teach and start camps for kids, run a gym, whatever."

While female novice boxers are paid more than men, the advantage does not continue as they gain experience. No women's bout has yet been featured as the main event on a televised card that includes males. Christy Martin has a contract with Don King that reportedly guarantees her $100,000 per fight and several fights a year. Rijker and all the other women boxers earn much less. Rijker earned $5,000 each for most of her bouts. The bout against Andrea DeShong was on a large pay-per-view show so she was paid $20,000. But, as with all boxers, a substantial percentage of her purse goes to her trainer and to her manager before taxes. Even fighting five times a year as she did in 1997, Rijker is not yet earning an opulent living.

She's careful with her health, tuning her workouts with an inner ear trained over a fighting lifetime. She rearranged her already healthy diet with help from sports nutritionists. Learning about the potential damage caused by her occasional dehydrating fasts to make weight she ditches the practice. "I don't want to end up with Parkinson's like Freddie. He's a warning to me."

The apartment tour takes ten seconds. The place is small, sparsely furnished, and immaculate—a Dutch stereotype of cleanliness. Once, describing training camp digs she shared with a group of slobby male boxers, she said, "If it would make me a better fighter to clean the entire house from top to bottom, I would do it." Serving as a scrubwoman in camp didn't strike her as useful, but keeping her own place squeaky-clean obviously does. She remarks

on the mess if a magazine stack is slightly askew.

The only clutter is corralled on one small bulletin board beside the kitchen door. It is thick with mementos, photos of friends and family. A snapshot of a newborn infant Lucia is taped to an old news clipping about a boxer killed in the ring. The inked word "remember" is scrawled in the margin. She says, "I keep it to remind me that's not what I was born for, to die in the ring. This is serious, what I do."

"And this is my meditation altar, where I chant."

It's a low table set with candles and flowers, a small rug in front. She learned to chant Sanskrit prayers years ago from athlete friends. The process worked for her, helped her relax and concentrate on her performance. She adopted it.

Arriving in Los Angeles, the Mecca of personal exploration, where Asian religions are the core of the fermenting new age mysticism, Rijker decided to study the Buddhist traditions behind the meditation techniques.

"Buddhism," says Rijker, "acknowledges cause and effect. It recognizes that you have your life in your hands."

She attends a meditation center regularly. When a friend from the center was recovering from surgery this summer, Rijker visited to help her chant and meditate. Through meditation, she says, "You can get in touch with your heart. It's a survival mechanism to close off my heart because I'm alone, far from home, cut off from my family. If I allowed myself to feel I might cry for ten days without stopping."

One whole wall of the apartment is covered with rows of Rijker's unframed pastel drawings. They are abstract color studies in strong, angular compositions.

One drawing is different, almost childlike—a volcano spewing

tears. "I did that one when my dog died." she explains. The dog lived and traveled with her for many years, an emotional anchor in an often solitary life, a responsibility to keep her from running wild, staying out late or not coming home at all. "I always had to come home to walk the dog, to feed her and care for her. Taking care of her was also taking care of myself."

She talks about presenting a strong, independent image although she knows she's emotional and sensitive. "But I always have to be tough in the gym. If you show vulnerability there, those guys will walk all over you."

The phone rings and she is instantly absorbed in the friend on the other end. At one point she says, " I guess I have to learn to live with celibacy."

Rijker has recently broken off with her boyfriend—an actor and part-time boxing trainer. The rigors of her training, she says, made her demanding and self-centered. She is moody and tense as a fight looms nearer. She didn't feel she could give enough to the relationship.

"I wouldn't advise anyone to become a professional athlete," she says. "It is an isolated, grueling life and there are many negative aspects. But there is an up side. I saw a special little piece on TV—a collage of little girls saying 'sports make me feel strong, make me feel confident, teach me to keep going.' All these positive things about sports. Little girls saying 'let us play.' And there is me among the other women athletes shown as role models. I am so glad to be part of something like that. I asked one little girl, the daughter of a friend, what she wanted to be when she grew up and she said 'a soccer player, or maybe a boxer.' And it was just so natural for her. But ten years ago that would have been impossible."

And there are other pleasures. "The day of a fight the world is

mine. Everything has to go my way and everyone does what I tell them. It's a very powerful day. You're like a queen because you're there to do a job. You are important that day. And everyone is there to help you win. To perform. I love that feeling. "

She also loves knocking people out. "It is such a feeling of power. There she is, stretched out on the floor, and I am still standing."

Rijker could not afford to go away to a training camp before her September fight, so she did the next best thing and moved away from her telephone. She borrowed a small house from friends while they were out of town. Except for her time in the gym each day she stayed secluded, preparing her own meals and tightening her focus.

The September 13, 1997 bout was supposed to be a world title fight. The WIBF 135 pound championship was held by a Don King fighter named Nieves Garcia. Since King would not agree to a Rijker challenge for Garcia's title, the obliging WIBF created a new weight class, the 139-pound division, especially for Rijker. The 139-pound championship was declared vacant. Rijker was ranked number one in the class, and a German kick boxer named Jeannette Witte was ranked number 2. Rijker and Witte were to fight for the title on the under-card of the huge September 13 pay-per-view show in which promoter Bob Arum matched his "Golden Boy" the WBC welterweight champion Oscar De La Hoya, against the aging wizard, Hector "Macho" Camacho.

But Jeanette Witte was unable to get her U.S. travel visa in time and the championship match had to be postponed until November. Just days before the September bout, Rijker learned that she would not be fighting Witte, whose light-fisted, jab-and-run style she had been training for. Instead she would meet the most experienced

boxer she had ever faced, the heavy punching Andrea DeShong.

A former tough woman fighter from Mingo Junction, Ohio, DeShong is a professional masseuse and the only woman to defeat Christy Martin. She fought Martin three times, winning once and losing twice. In their last encounter Martin stopped her in the seventh round. DeShong is a wily, ring-wise veteran with 13 wins, five losses and one draw on her record. Judging by the size of her belly, DeShong never seems to be in top-notch condition, but she is always relaxed and is apparently unimpressed by hoop-lah.

Arriving in Las Vegas days before the fight, Rijker was inundated by hoop-lah. Television crews followed her into the gym, videotaping as she worked out. She was interviewed and photographed whenever she poked her head out of her room. In a formal press conference the day before the fight, she sat on a dais with her manager Stan Hoffman as he said, "In all my years in boxing, this is the first time I ever had to make a hair appointment for my fighter."

Her hair looks fine. She charms a cluster of cynical boxing reporters with her looks, articulate remarks, and a modesty that is alien to this sport. How would she describe her style? "I have no style yet. I'm still learning. You have to know this game well before you can develop an individual style."

Nobody asked about DeShong. They asked about Christy Martin. She refused to make nasty remarks about Martin, but said she hopes to fight her some day.

No one asked her about Martin's demand that she prove she's female. They waited until she was gone and promoter Bob Arum was answering questions.

"All I can say is, when she was fighting in Biloxi in June, we had to get a special medical clearance for her to fight because she

was menstruating," says Arum. It's probably the first time Arum ever used that word at a press conference. From the pink faces of the hardnosed reporters, it might be the first time they'd heard it out loud.

Rijker had talked about the Biloxi fight while she was back in L.A. She usually takes birth control pills to make sure she won't be menstruating when she has to fight. That time she'd accidentally left the pills behind. "I'll never do that again," she said. "I got so tense that I went into the shower after the fight and just stood there and screamed at the top of my lungs." That was after she stopped Gwen Smith with a picture-perfect left hook in the fourth round.

Rijker met DeShong for the first time at the weigh-in the night before. They shook hands and wished each other good luck. Rijker says "She's a nice girl. Very polite."

The Thomas & Mack Center, Las Vegas, 6 P.M., September 13, 1997.

The arena is jammed and roaring with De La Hoya fans eager for the main event. An audience of millions is tuned in via worldwide pay-per-view television. But the opening act has its own excitement.

The black-clad Rijker is grimly serious entering the ring, eyes down, listening only to the murmuring Freddie Roach, who sticks close by her. The cheerful DeShong mugs for the camera. The fight is scheduled for eight rounds, each lasting two minutes. The referee tells the two fighters, "I want good sports-ladylike conduct."

It's clean and fierce. Rijker comes out in her textbook stance, dancing forward and jabbing her left fist into DeShong's face. DeShong uses her left to distract Rijker while swinging her wrecking ball right hand. The right catches Rijker high on the head and a snaking DeShong hook lands on Rijker's temple. Rijker jabs her way in and slams her own right to DeShong's soggy belly. By the

third round Rijker' fast fencer's jab dominates DeShong's every move. The canny DeShong is backing up but switching from a right-handed to left-handed stance, trying to confuse Rijker. She does it once too often. Rijker times her and catches her with her arms spread too wide to defend herself. Rijker's right hand slams under DeShong's rib cage. All the air explodes from DeShong's lungs. Her arms drop to her sides and she falls back against the ropes, gasping. The ref jumps in to stop the action. One look at DeShong's stunned face and he signals that the fight is over. Rijker has stopped DeShong in the third round. Rijker's fiercely serious face breaks into a broad grin and she throws her arms into the air, dancing on her toes in jubilation.

In the drab grey dressing room afterwards, Rijker was still smiling, relaxed as she dressed to go out to sit with her friends and watch the rest of the fights. Manuel Diaz, the cut man who worked her corner, hands her an ice pack to press against her temple where a slight reddening is visible. Diaz is wearing a black "Rijker" shirt, but has occasionally worked for Christy Martin and worn her pink ring colors. Rijker tells him, "I think you look better in black than in pink." A well-wisher congratulates her on the win and her face becomes almost childlike with wonder. "I dreamed I would stop her in the third round," she says. "I dreamed it and it was true."

In DeShong's dressing room the excitement was still high. The still wet DeShong bounced out of the shower wrapped in a white towel to talk enthusiastically about Rijker.

"She caught me switching. She timed me right and caught me with a good one. I couldn't breathe," she laughed. A gleaming, iridescent shiner was coming into bloom over DeShong's right eye.

"She doesn't punch as hard as Christy but she's a much better boxer. She'd beat Christy today. Right this minute. And…"

DeShong's merry eyes lit with inspiration, "I could teach her some things. If I could train her for just two weeks, she'd be the world champion for twenty years."

Two months later, on November 22, Lucia Rijker knocked out German Jeanette Witte in the third round, to win the 139-pound women's world championship. Her manager, Stan Hoffman, says he is hoping for a bout with Christy Martin in the spring or summer of 1998.


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SECTION A

★ PART III ★

THE BIG RISK

Beauty and the Beast: Hagler vs. Duran

I wasn't eager to see the encounter between two of my favorite fighters, Marvin Hagler and the aging Roberto Duran, but, in an odd way, it turned out fine. This ran in Willamette Week on November 22, 1983.

Resurrections are creepy. Whether it's Muhammad Ali or Bill Walton, Sugar Ray Robinson or George McGovern, we find ourselves sniffing cautiously at every comeback.

Then we get caught up in the idea. The comeback is wish country. The fighter wishes, and the people he served in the dream function of spectator sports wish along with him.

"Duran is Duran, " says matchmaker Teddy Brenner. There are baseball caps and T-shirts that say the same thing.

"Duran est Duran," is spray-painted and scrawled in chalk on the walls in Panama. For years the flat statement was enough. Now the slogan is haunted by a silent but understood "still" or "again."

Roberto Duran was so high for so long, he was the dream fighter for so many, that there is an odd conjuring power to his name. He was that magical combination, the phenomenal boxer

with terrible ferocity and power. But he wasn't Sonny Liston evil. He wasn't a criminal. He was a devastating commando whose ruthlessness fell into the "all's fair in love and war" category. Duran didn't just beat people, he did it with contagious enthusiasm. For those who embraced him, his charisma teemed with passion and honor. A lot of decent people hated him. Nobody who saw him stayed neutral.

When Duran slit his own throat in his New Orleans rematch with Sugar Ray Leonard he contributed "No Mas," to the American Dictionary of Slang, a synonym for quitting, for giving up. The theories ran wild and bitter. He was a coward, a traitor, a Mafioso, a communist. He was a drug addict. He'd been bribed. He'd bet huge sums against himself but didn't know how to dive gracefully. Nobody but Ray Leonard thought Leonard had beaten him. Duran himself was responsible.

His comeback bouts were embarrassing, the sleepwalking of a fat ghost. His fans tried to bury him so they could mourn decently, but he kept crawling out to stagger around. Promoter Don King threw him on the ash heap. Then came the turnaround. Rival promoter Bob Arum picked him up. If Tylenol could make a comeback, Arum speculated, so could Duran.

You have to feel for Marvelous Marvin Hagler. He is undisputed monarch of a division that has been notoriously lusterless for years. He is certainly better than the rest of the middleweights, but how good he really is may still be questioned because, through no fault of his own, he has never faced great competition. Hagler wanted money, but he also wanted his ticket to the stars, the right to sit with Robinson and Ali and Joe Louis. Only a great opponent could give him that. Then Leonard retired. Thomas Hearns signed a contract but broke a little finger before the bout and showed no

interest in signing for another date. Depressed by his mediocre prospects, Hagler talked about retiring. Then along came Arum's pet rehabilitation project, Duran.

Hagler, planning for his long-delayed and well-deserved moment in the limelight, instead got caught at the wrong end of some other guy's miracle. He reportedly got $8 million for defending his unified middleweight crown against Duran, and that's bound to be some consolation. But the fact is, Hagler won the fight that Thursday night—and lost the show.

The main building at the Portland Expo Center was crammed with bright ski equipment, but a series of arrows sent fight fans to the big metal shed out back, where the three closed-circuit screens were hung. The walls rocked in a mean rain riding a gale warning. The crowd came in dripping and noisy, filling the folding chairs and bleachers with so many bodies that the shed warmed as the beer went down. There were Hagler fans in the murky dimness, but they were quiet. The roaring chants were all "Doo-Ran! Doo-Ran!"

During the prelims the scholars drifted the aisles, looking for bets. The Duran fans clapped their money down defiantly. Those who knew why the odds were so long in Las Vegas shook their heads and insisted on 3 to 1.

The pundits were unanimous. Hagler would beat him blind. Hagler would knock him out. It was a mismatch. Duran was old and fat and built to weigh 135 pounds, not 160. He shouldn't step through the ropes with any natural middleweight, much less with Hagler.

Some, offended for years by Duran's rudeness, his unsporting approach to the ring, gloated over the beating he would take. In the pages of *Inside Sports*, Ferdie "The Fight Doctor" Pacheco

scorched Duran's "Bully" personality, his inability to take what he was eager to dish out. "Hagler will give Duran some king-sized lumps," chortled Pacheco; Duran's vindication would be "to take his beating bravely."

"Noticeably absent," said the ringside commentators from Las Vegas, was the enormous amount of South American betting money that had been expected to close the odds as fight time approached. Arum says that more than 2,000 Panamanians had flown in for the fight. They bought tickets but they didn't bet. The odds stayed at 3 to 1 for Hagler. The Panamanians bought the comeback, but only to a point. They were hopeful but not convinced.

It's hard to remember that Duran lost the fight. It's a fact that tends to slip away easily. Once the palaver was over, once the anthems had been sung, once the bell had rung, something else began. It was a boxing match. If Hagler and the rest of us expected Duran to come tearing forward as he did against the green and hapless Davey Moore, we were all mistaken. He boxed, jabbing despite Hagler's reach advantage, jabbing despite Hagler's southpaw stance.

The wise ones had figured Hagler would be faster than Duran, but Duran was far quicker, with a lightweight's hand speed. The magi were sure Duran couldn't tolerate a middleweight's punch. We never found out, because Hagler landed so few punches. Duran doesn't seem to get hit. He doesn't look musical about it like the dancing Benitez, but even this brick-shaped, 160 pound Duran slipped and blocked and repeatedly made Hagler look futile and foolish. They say that punching power doesn't increase as a fighter gains weight and it may well be true. Duran earned Hagler's respect, but he didn't have the crushing power of the lightweight Hands of Stone.

Hagler won the fight, but the judges' scoring made it far closer

than it was in reality.

John Nolen, longtime fight scribe for The Oregonian, was sitting in the third row in that Las Vegas parking lot, surrounded by 500 other reporters and broadcasters. "I was amazed at the Duran mystique," says Nolen. "I guess the judges got caught up by the Duran mystique, too."

It also got to Hagler. You could call it Duran's brain vs. Hagler's brawn, but that doesn't cover it. Muhammad Ali had something like it. The judges always gave Ali extra points; they couldn't help themselves.

The fans in the fifth row at the Expo-Center are spreading the myths:

"Duran once knocked a guy out and the guy's wife climbs into the ring screaming, so Duran knocked her out, too!"

"Remember when Ray Lampkin was laying there half dead in '75 and Duran says, "Next time I'll kill him!"

"Yeah, but they don't tell ya how Duran went to the hospital afterwards and kissed Lampkin's cheek while he was still half out of it, and then sat beside him all night long. They don't tell ya that!"

Hagler fought right-handed; he switched back to southpaw. He tried a dozen angles. He fought well inside on Duran's terms, on Duran's turf. Hagler out-pointed him. Hagler won the fight. He deserved more rounds than the judges gave him. But he didn't beat Duran.

Duran looked younger in every round, brighter, cleaner, as though spent years were sweating out of him. The crowd was on its feet in the 13th round when we noticed that Duran was nursing his right hand, carrying it high, using it seldom, and swatting rather than punching when he did throw it. The swelling under Hagler's left eye threatened to burst and the cut above that eye was

seeping dangerously.

The screen went dead halfway through that 13th round and the crowd stood up and yelled, and then, still yelling, began to move, looking for the management. Midway through the 14th the screen came back to life and people froze and turned where they stood to face it. Hagler was closing in. Duran was skating. Duran didn't throw his right hand at all. Hagler took both of the last two rounds strongly.

When the decision was announced, Duran, strutting with rage, flipped a gloved fist like a finger at Hagler. Duran's unmarked face twisted and mouthed fury. "You're nothing," he seemed to say. "Nothing at all."

He was too small and too heavy and too old and he gave Hagler a real fight, the only fight the Champ has had in years. It wasn't just brains or experience, though both men have more than their share of each. There were strange moments in those fifteen rounds: Hagler, coming in strong, lands a right to the body; Duran, stung, lunges forward, arms spread, chin first, rabid with anger. Hagler steps back, psyched out.

Hagler is a fine artist of the psych himself. He is a fearsome presence in the ring. He has petrified opponents with a look. But Duran psyched him. When the wise guys were doing their predicting, they knew about Duran's magic in the ring, but they figured Hagler wouldn't be affected. He's had all of London after his blood. He should be immune to that crippling power wave that rolls off Duran in the ring. But he wasn't. He hurt Duran and the magic alone backed him off.

Hagler would probably fare much better in a rematch, but it's a no-win situation for him. Even if he pulverized Duran, he would simply have beaten a fat, washed-up, over-the-hill lightweight. And

Hagler lost this show. He didn't stop the round little old guy from Panama. Hagler, who never had to go past the 11th round in a title defense, had to go the distance with the crumbling Hands of Stone. This fight carved no niche in time for Hagler. It raised questions about the honorable southpaw where none had existed before.

Duran, on the other hand, looked pretty good. Duran again, maybe—for a little while.

"Other times, you know," said a Hagler fan, "they would have burnt Duran alive. And there are places yet in this world where some sunumbitch like Duran, they'd catch him asleep and drive a stake through his heart and maybe *that* would keep him down!"

The Unhappy Warrior: Holmes vs. Cooney

The fight folk get impatient with writers using boxing as a metaphor. They're likely to tell you, "Everything is like boxing but boxing isn't like anything else." Still, the year-long build up to the heavyweight title fight between champion Larry Holmes and challenger Gerry Cooney danced so blatantly on the racial divide that it was downright pathetic. This ran in Willamette Week on June 22, 1982.

Dear fat-headed America, the dreamer. Once again, logic drops right out of the ratings and magic gets the vote. Confess: you didn't think Gerry Cooney could, should, or would win. You just *wanted* him to.

If you've paid off your bets, the hollow in your pockets is echoing with laughter. You dreamed a feast and woke up with pie on your mugs. That 50-1 shot in the quinella collapses in the first turn and rolls merrily in the dust, kicking and hiccupping with unbridled levity. But ask not at whom the horse laughs. He laughs at you.

Those who sneer at the "materialism" of the United States should take a close squint at the mystical undertow that was tug-

ging on the levelest heads in the land before the Holmes-Cooney bout. Characters who certainly knew better lined up with wise guys and bimbos to lay out money on one of the dumbest bets in memory. And they celebrated as they did it.

It was party time that Friday night, June 11. In Portland alone, hundreds of brand new *ON* TV antennae had been installed just in time for the heavyweight title bout. The regular cable company sent bills for June that bore a printed apology because, having been outbid in the stratospheric finagling, they were unable to carry the event. The big dishes that scooped the fight out of the sky cost four to six times more than a ticket to the closed circuit viewing of the bout. Groups of five to fifty fans chipped in on the price and bickered about how many friends and relatives they could bring along and whether the freeloaders should be charged a six-pack or a full case each.

There were crowds in front of flickering screens in living rooms, basements, and parking lots all over town. They were not there hoping to see Larry Holmes get smashed. Nobody had anything much against Holmes, and the zest for the bout had nothing to do with him. Scarcely anyone expected it to be a "good fight," but that was irrelevant. The bout's magnetic appeal was something else entirely.

America has a thing about heavyweight boxing. The Big Man division is our turf. There have been occasional raids on the title from abroad, but the crown always comes home to God's Country. The legend of the heavyweights is the myth of Hercules and Ajax. The good, big man can beat anybody smaller than he is. According to the mystiques, the heavyweight champion can beat anybody on the planet in unarmed combat.

Heady stuff as symbols go, and we were in a buying mood.

Things have been slipping so badly for so long that they've got us down in the mouth. We could use a bit of success, even third-hand. Gerry Cooney appears and a cockamamie hope flowers in our downtrodden dreams. Suddenly the heavyweight crown looks like the lucky rabbit's foot we've been searching for.

A white champ, we suspect, would be proof that the good old flag isn't finished yet. Somehow, in the murky recesses of our craniums, it seems that Gerry Cooney as champ could turn the whole thing around. A million new jobs would appear overnight. Detroit would unveil a new car that runs better, lasts longer and costs less than the best of the Japanese marauders. Our leaders would suddenly have haloes and high IQs. Johns Hopkins would publish research proving that five ounces of Irish whiskey per day prevents cancer, heart disease and radiation sickness. A dollar bill would buy 10 beers or 5 gallons of gas, and the cute little green things would breed in your pockets….Of course, a wrong-headed bet for superstitious motives is not a sign of moral turpitude, but when a huge chunk of the population makes one simultaneously it's a sign that the temper and digestion of the nation are not in good order.

We've lived high and grown soft, and the creeping stench of the second-rate is scary as well as offensive when it's rising from our own doorstep. We have trouble remembering what it's like to try harder, and we suffer from an insidious doubt that we can do it at all. Maybe we figured Cooney was, indeed, a soap opera hype and, since we were wondering about our own authenticity, we sent him out as point man. Let him draw the fire and we'll see if hype jobs are surviving this season. Or maybe a depressed and deflated white America was just hungry for a symbol of its own vitality. If only Cooney could become the heavyweight champion of the world, it might be easier to believe that being a white American

was something worthwhile after all.

We bunched hopefully around the flat screens like the blacks who, in 1937, gathered around radios from Harlem to Watts to listen while Joe Louis fought for this same crown. Like them we were looking for a sign. We wished. And to make the magic work, we threw money into the well.

There were 40 guys in that living room to see the fight, and three of them were for Holmes," said a witness at one party. "To begin with everybody claimed they weren't betting, but as the pre-fight interviews went on, the money started flying. The three guys who bet on Holmes walked out after the bout with well over $1200 between them."

That was just one room out of hundreds, in one town out of thousands. Cooney, a big, homely kid who hadn't fought in a year and whose professional experience was laughable to begin with, stepped into the ring with the highly skilled, perfectly conditioned, seasoned and proven Champion, Larry Holmes, and it was Cooney who was the odds-on favorite to win. Ridiculous.

And what exactly were we banking on? A lucky punch. As far as most of us knew, that was Cooney's only chance. It's rather magnificent in a way, like the Children's Crusade or the jungle suicides in Jonestown.

But the gods must love America. They didn't give us what we wanted; they gave us what we needed. They picked our pockets, as we deserved, but they also saved us from our fantasy binge. The Fates were evidently in the mood for mercy rather than for justice. Everybody won that night.

Cooney is not the champion. We would have backed him if he had been a total clod, and we backed him with no evidence that he was anything much. The fact that he is tough, gritty, and

a far better fighter than we had any reason to expect exonerates us from our idiocy. Despite having been denied practical experience by his looney-tune managers, Cooney is good enough to hang our white hopes on for years to come. He has a future, and that future belongs to us.

Strangely, like birthday presents for naughty kids, we also got our champion. We molded him ourselves with the chill of our rejection and denial, and with the hungry heat of our need for the other guy, the white guy. We pushed Larry Holmes. We drove him. During the long year that the hype for this fight has been building, while Holmes worked and trained, he had to feel that yen growing in the whole nation, pressing in on him, crowding him out. He was willing to be the champion of everybody, but we didn't want him. Toward the end, the pressure must have been like living at the bottom of the sea.

A lesser man would have crumbled in defeat before he ever set foot in the ring. Holmes hardened and purified and pushed through. He fought Cooney courageously and with complete conviction. He fought brilliantly, drawing on a dazzling arsenal of versatility. But, there was more. Holmes came off the screen that night and grabbed us. If we had never really looked at him before, he forced us to see him then.

He wasn't just fighting Cooney. That night Holmes took on the whole nation. We were all there in the ring against him. The judges themselves, the whites who didn't want him, the blacks for whom he had never been champion enough. And he won.

Then he cried. Nobody seems to be mentioning those brief seconds after Holmes' hands were raised in victory. We all saw it, and yet, because it isn't mentioned we begin to wonder if it actually happened. There was Don King, master of the absurd, with his

arms around the champ. And tough Larry Holmes, who unflinchingly absorbs legendary blows, who gets hurt and comes back as a matter of course, this same Larry Holmes laid his big head on King's shoulder. The screen was filled with the huge face of the world's champion crumpling and sheeting with tears. He cried. It had been a brutally painful bout, and there was pain in his face. But he cried from joy because he had beaten us all and if nobody else in the world knew it, he did. And he cried in relief, because his own need to win had been an enormous burden.

It lasted only a few seconds. Then Holmes snapped back and was a pro again, the gracious champion. Interviews taped the following day reveal a different Larry Holmes, temporarily drained, exhausted, but calm. He has found his rock and his dignity. He was always a decent palooka, but if he was not a great man before this fight, he is now, and he knows it. He doesn't need us any more, which is ironic. Because now, at last, slow dim ninnies though we are, he's got us.

The Big Risk: Andy Minsker

To Lake Tahoe for Minsker's second pro bout. Other less favored Portland fighters were on the same card, but their hometown was the only thing they shared. To Minsker, slot machines and craps tables were kids' stuff. Life on a 20-by-20 canvas was closer to the real thing. This appeared first in Willamette Week on January 24, 1985.

STATELINE, NEV., January 10, 1985—Andy Minsker laughs, bouncing on the bed in the miniature nightclub they call a bedroom on the ninth floor of Caesars Tahoe. He is telling uproarious tales of his trip to Puerto Vallarta one week in December to model for Calvin Klein ads. "I thought they wanted photos of me wearing designer jeans! When the guy threw me a pair of shorts and told me to put them on, I laughed. I thought he was joking. I mean, I'm so skinny! I'm no beefcake. When the big boss came in and told me, I went and did it."

The twenty-two year-old Portland boxer earned $10,000 for his five days of blushing. The advertisements will appear in major magazines in March. "You've blown it!" growls one of his Tahoe listeners. "Now, you'll never be Miss America." Minsker grins

wickedly and spits into the covered plastic cup that he keeps beside him.

The room is warm and Minsker lolls shirtless and easy, surrounded by wall-to-wall upholstery. Even the ceiling is dark green velour. Minsker's manager, Billy Baxter, the wizard of Las Vegas, is in the room next door. Across the hall is his trainer, Ed Milberger.

In other rooms of this casino-hotel tower, other boxers and their trainers and managers are waiting, like Minsker, for the 11:30 A.M. weighing-in ceremony so critical for that evening's fight card.

Beyond the windows lies Lake Tahoe, gunmetal cold and restless. It is caught in the raw stone teeth of mountains flimsily disguised by snow. Million-dollar homes are supposed to be tucked away in the forests around the lake. The road from Reno snakes upward in ear-popping curves through dense fog and snow. The few A-frames visible by their lights look as fragile as pup tents among the surrounding trees. The road gives a final twist, then spills out of the wild night into a shock of spangled highrise neon, like a spark blown clear from Las Vegas to flame up among the dark, wintering firs.

There must be service stations here, maybe even a grocery store. Somewhere close is a small airport, often closed by winter weather. All signs of normal life are shunted out of sight. The sheer mountain walls lean close, their bases invisible behind the shoulder-to-shoulder casino hotels. Each of these establishments is a small, crammed city, so complete that you could spend weeks and fortunes without ever stepping outside its doors or catching a glimpse of the snow veils dancing off the peaks above you. The Vegas casino clones of Caesars, Harrahs, Del Webb's High Sierra, and The Nugget all elbow up to the mountain road, offering a 24-hour, year-round wing-ding with risk as the main attraction.

This little Vegas is complicated by troops of skiers clumping through in pastel nylon, but the clinking glitter is Vegas all the way. Risk is the item for sale here, and it is in big demand. Thousands save up to buy a Saturday of blade-walking or scrimp all year for a two-week binge. The knife-bright days on the ski slopes see crowds of people throwing themselves into long, hissing descents that trigger the adrenal roar in their innards. Nights in the casinos, they buy their risks a coin at a time.

There is no piped music in these vast, tangled rooms with their battalions of slot machines and phalanxes of blackjack, craps and roulette. The music here is the tantalizing *kerchunk* of the one-armed bandits and the electric beep of a victory tune with a rattle of coins for the bass line. There is food for the body at in-house restaurants. Patrolling waitresses deliver liquid-nerve refills anywhere on the floor. For a breather from putting your neck on the line there are the big shows with big-name entertainers—and tonight, at Caesars, there is boxing.

The sport of boxing is evolving into a symbiotic orchid rooted in gambling casinos and energized by the growlight of national television. The old fight centers of New York and Los Angeles are relegated to farm team functions, staging club shows in the once great arenas of Madison Square Garden and the Olympic. But the big bouts, the champions and top contenders, display their strange, contentious game for television audiences from the ballrooms, supper clubs and parking lots of the big casinos in Atlantic City and Nevada.

The casinos pay enormous site fees to the broadcast and cable networks for the privilege of staging a boxing match. The TV exposure is a stupendous enticement to potential visitors, and boxing itself sucks live crowds into the casinos' tempting corridors. Boxing

is almost as popular a sport for bettors as football and basketball, and, with TV backing, it can be profitable even in a small arena. The TV industry loves boxing for its full minute of commercial advertising time after every three-minute round. The viewer ratings are high all through the year because boxing provides a risk event of ritual crisis that appeals to that part of us that jaywalks and fantasizes about putting the house, the car and the wedding ring down on a long shot.

Caesars Palace in Las Vegas is the site of many of boxing's most spectacularly profitable matches. Now, with ESPN promoting a nationwide tournament on Top Rank's weekly boxing shows, Caesars Tahoe is getting in on the action. Tonight's show will be the first in a monthly series planned for this site.

The card tonight includes two middleweight boxers in the elimination rounds of the ESPN tournament. The posters read like a Portland fight night with no fewer than three Portlanders on the card.

Delbert "Mean" Williams, the Northwest middleweight champion, a cheerful character despite his ring name, is here for his crack at the tournament. Matched with slick-boxing Charles Campbell of Fort Worth, Texas, who is favored to win the tournament, Williams is in tough. His manager, Portland's Fred McNally, and his trainer, Arnold Manning, are quiet and edgy.

Doug "The Sleeper" Holiman, a Portland veteran of 12 wins and seven losses as a middleweight, is in for 10 rounds with a brawling hero named Nicky Walker from just down the road in Carson City. Holiman's friend and manager, Wally Jorgenson, has a confident manner and a furrowed brow.

Noe Ramirez, a former high school wrestling champion from Sunnyside, Washington, has fans in Portland but will be alone in

the ring with a California monster named Luis Santana. Ramirez' manager, Bruce Seibol, editor of *Northwest Boxing Review*, thinks Noe will win.

The elevation of Lake Tahoe is 6,200 feet—quite a jump for flatland athletes. They shrug it off, saying, "It will affect the opponents the same way."

Among the fight-game insiders, less attention is focused on the veteran performers than on the scrawny wisp of a pre-lim kid coming in for his second professional bout. Portland's Andy Minsker, the national amateur 126-pound champion in 1983 and an '84 Olympic alternate, is under intense scrutiny. The glut of new talent entering the professional game following the Olympics is led by the richly medaled U.S. team members. Minsker, who easily outpointed gold medalist Meldrick Taylor in the U.S. trials only to lose to him weeks later in the box-off, is seen as a force to be reckoned in the same class as the Olympians.

Minsker, the cougar-faced string bean from Milwaukie, has boxed since he was eight years old. Now, as the popular but demanding coach of the junior boxing team at Mt. Scott Community Center, Minsker is dedicated to the science of the sport. He can, as the gym rats say, box a bit. In the highly competitive 126-pound division, Minsker looks like a fair bet for future rankings. At 5'10" he has a four to six-inch reach advantage over 98 percent of the division. He has fine technical skills, a scrappy style and a snappy punch.

What interests the TV money guys, however, is Minsker's complexion. Boxing is so demanding that it has always been the turf of the poorest and of the most recent immigrant minorities. Though fight announcers distinguish opponents discreetly by the color of their trunks, the multi-million dollar popularity of Ray

"Boom-Boom" Mancini and Gerry Cooney is a constant reminder of the novelty and sheer cash value of a decent white fighter in a game now dominated by blacks and Hispanics. When such a one crops up, the cash registers tingle with excitement.

This rarity factor is a marketing advantage, but it is also grounds for extended suspicion. Can he *really* fight? And if he can, will he stick with it?

The day before a fight, you rest. You don't eat much. You don't drink at all. When fight-day morning rolls around, your mouth is flannel and you are anxious to be weighed. "Liquid puts the weight on," says Andy, spitting into his covered plastic cup. Spitting is a strength-conserving way to get rid of fluid and weight.

The time passes slowly.

"Home in Portland," says Minsker, "I'm always busy with (commercial upholstering) school and training and work on the car. There are fish to be caught and little kids to be taught." The thrifty Minsker is known to use the waiting time to embroider slick, satin-stitched names on other boxers' gear "for fifty cents a letter."

As the 11:30 weigh-in time approaches, Minsker moves fast in his dress sweats, sailing past the rows of hypnotic gambling devices toward the indoor swimming pool. Though he fought many times in casinos as an amateur, Minsker doesn't seem to feel the lure of Lady Luck. "The worst thing about these places," he says, "is that there's nothing to do. You go nuts."

Caesars management would be appalled, but Minsker is strictly a high-stakes gambler. The speed of a pony or the random temper of a machine interest him no more than an upward trend in pork-belly futures. His is not a something-for-nothing fantasy. He risks years of constant, grueling effort, physical pain and danger, as well as the scorching public exposure of every error. He bets everything

he is and has on himself.

The weigh-in happens next to the elaborately curving green-lit pool. Boulders are stacked in and around the pool, forming caves and grottoes that are softened by potted plants and furnished with upholstered deck chairs. Three young women practice an aquatic-dance routine at one end of the pool, ignoring and being ignored by the fifty or more men bustling around the official scale at the other end. The usual hodge-podge of managers, trainers, matchmakers, and reporters is swollen by ESPN TV crews and Top Rank officials. The team of announcers who will explain the fights that night sit hunched over clipboards, scribbling notes as they talk with one boxer after another.

The old-time reporters drink and smoke too much. The old-time fight guys have chronic indigestion due to the unpredictability of their chosen work. The pallid and the paunchy stand around eyeing the racing-trim boxers. A legendary gym rat peers out through a clump of trailing ferns, as two by two the fighters strip to their underwear for the crucial trip to the scale. He untangles the sodden cigar stump from his rumpled mug long enough to mutter, "Used to be ya could tell something by whether a guy wore jockeys or boxers. Whatever happened to Fruit of the Loom?" he shrugs and plugs the cigar back in.

It's a fashion show. Delbert "Mean" Williams, fresh from a calm morning ensconced on a bar stool in front of a one-armed bandit, is in a red-and-blue striped bikini. He steps off the scale to be replaced by his opponent, Charles Campbell, in silver-gray nylon briefs with hip notches. The ten sculpted fighters strip off their dress sweats in turn, and no two of them have the same kind or color of underwear. Minsker's looks conventional unless you notice the Calvin Klein stencil on the waistband. His

opponent, the sturdy, silently determined Lamont Baker, is in royal blue knit.

The sharp eyes of this crowd are not impressed with fashions. They focus on the corrugated bellies. The wisecracks are to kill time while they size up the opponent's skin texture, muscle tone, arm length, and an indefinable something in the eyes and around the jaw. The search is for clues not just to physical condition, but also to the states of mind that will influence the night's results. The boxers eye each other quickly. They are in a hurry to be done with the ritual. Most of them are hungry and all of them are thirsty.

Having made his 126-pound contract weight, Minsker is in the restaurant smothering two flapjacks with strawberries. Talk among the fight folk and reporters at the long table turns to a recent call by the American Medical Association to outlaw boxing. Though fighters and managers have heard the howls many times before, it always bothers them. Why is boxing the scapegoat? They wonder, and answer among themselves: "The doctors have their problems. All these malpractice lawsuits. People aren't treating them like gods anymore." The fight reporters talk hopefully about a national commission. Several black and Hispanic fighters listening shake their heads ruefully. "Yeah, that would be good," they agree, knowing too well that there is no billion-dollar lobby to promote their interests in the corridors of power.

Minsker, for all his years in the sport is wounded by the AMA's criticism. His shoulders hunch defensively. "I don't understand why they're attacking boxing. Why don't they talk about jockeys or hockey or football? A lot more guys die. Those guys get brain damage too. No boxer gets his spine snapped and gets paralyzed or gets all those fractures and internal injuries and their joints ruined!" His hands grip and run across his arms, feeling them for

breaks. "Well," he decides, brightening, "maybe it ain't the best thing in the world to do. But it's got me every place I've ever gone, everything I've had. I've gone to New Zealand and Scandinavia and all over the United States, and I'm making money now that nobody makes without going to a four-year college."

Changing the subject to shake off the depressing thoughts, he explains his new haircut. The hair has been clipped to the skin on the sides and around the back with a short greased thatch left on top. "My sister's been cutting hair for years. I took her this picture of Jack Dempsey in the ring with this giant—must have been Jim Jeffries—and she did mine just like Dempsey's."

Minsker weighs 70-odd pounds less than Dempsey did in his prime. Perhaps Minsker looks more like another featherweight, the great Sandy Saddler, who was called "The Praying Mantis" because of his stick-thin body and great height. But Saddler was only 5'8". Minsker, with another two inches, resembles that predatory insect even more.

He laughs, teasing manager Billy Baxter for worrying that he might not make weight: "Last night at dinner, every time you'd take a bite you'd look over to see what I was eating." Minsker thinks this is hilarious since he has never had a weight problem. Baxter nods, amiable now that the scales are satisfied, but reminds Minsker that his opponent, Lamont Baker, is a good fighter who has been training hard. "I predict," says Baxter, "that this is going to be a tough fight."

Baxter, 44, a genial blonde bear with a sharp nose and sharper gray eyes, is a professional gambler whose success at world-class, high-stakes poker has earned him the moniker "Bluffing Billy." His gently precise Georgia diction warms the nation's sports-handicapping phone lines, and his shrewdness in assessing the

prospects of teams and individuals, from football to boxing, has earned him millions. The crusty boxing establishment, which scorns anyone who hasn't been in the game since the Flood, has accepted Baxter as a fight manager, partly because of his unpretentious charm, but mostly because even the magi can't argue with success.

With a new, untried fighter in Minsker, Baxter is still exploring and testing. Lamont Baker trains in Las Vegas, and the manager knows that Baker is in good shape. Minsker trains in Portland with Ed Milberger, and reassuring phone calls are never as convincing as your own eyes. Baxter knows how hard the change from amateur to pro can be. He also knows that this hard game can end in an instant. One punch can wipe out the TV, the modeling, the big money, and the title at the end of the rainbow.

The doors to the tiered amphitheater of Caesars-Tahoe open at 4:30 P.M. on Thursday, January 10, and a few thousand skiers, gamblers, natives, and fight fans form a line, four and five deep, to find seats for the 5:30 show. The ring, lit white, stands up in front of curtains that opened on Jefferson Starship the night before.

Behind those curtains, in ominous black-cloth cubicles, the fighters scheduled for the early bouts wait with their corner men. Off-stage, down a corridor, past the big restaurant kitchens, a double fire door swings in on a huge banquet room that appears at first as empty as a condemned roller rink. The walls are gold satin. The room is musky, unlit except for one end near those double doors. Beneath the single light, Andy Minsker and Ed Milberger sit facing each other, with their knees nearly touching, on a pair of folding metal chairs. Baxter stands close, watching as the gauze strips are wound over Minsker's hands. "We could go in any time if there's an early knockout. Otherwise we're the fourth bout," explains Baxter.

Of all the waiting in boxing, this time in the dressing room is

the most delicate and terrible. The monster is outside the door and the knock may come at any time. Boxing is, in its own strange way, a team sport. The three men with their different attitudes, ages and duties sweat together during this wait.

Lamont Baker and his team are, no doubt, sweating close by. Minsker and Baker have fought once before, in 1984, at the amateur regional tournament in Las Vegas. Minsker took that decision by staying outside and using his reach advantage, but the sturdy, determined Baker pressed him hard. Now Baker has a shot at revenge. Each fighter has just one professional victory on his record. The hundreds of amateur bouts no longer count.

The crowd roar drifts back past the kitchens to the empty banquet room. The first bout on tonight's card is a tough middleweight tangle. Then Portland's Delbert Williams wrangles with Charles Campbell, a lanky Texan. Campbell shows the polish of his sparring with World Welterweight Champion Donald Curry and the unmistakable stamp of trainer Joe Barriente's teaching. Williams, exhausted after an aggressive start in this rarefied atmosphere, clinches and wrestles as the crowd begins to boo. After eight rounds, he loses the decision to Campbell.

At ringside, the commission doctor talks about the 6,200-foot altitude. "Fifty percent less oxygen in your blood than at sea level, that's what it means," he says. The waiting fighters and managers begin to brood. Most of them have been claiming that the elevation won't bother them.

Noe Ramirez (13-6, 7 KOs) of Sunnyside, WA steps in with Luis Santana (23-2-1, 18 KOs) of Hawthorns, CA. When Noe hits the deck in the second round, the knock on the door comes for Minsker.

The ESPN fight announcers have their information garbled.

Al Bernstein says that Minsker trains in Las Vegas and knows Baker but has never sparred with him. "We asked Andy if working in the same gym and being friends made it harder and he said, well, maybe it did." Bernstein has Minsker and Baker mixed up with two other guys.

Some fighters are stone-faced in the ring. Lamont Baker is one of them. From the first bell to the last, his expression never flickers from its stern concentration. This is considered an asset in fight circles because the boxer's face won't register pain if he gets stung and won't telegraph when he's planning a new trick.

The twenty year-old Baker is 5'6" and built like a brick. His best bet with Minsker is to wade in close and wail on Minsker's ribs and belly with an occasional crack at looping a right hand over Minsker's habitually low left. Baker follows this strategy with great determination.

Minsker is never stone-faced. He peers out from under his deep eye sockets, which causes his eyebrows to climb madly for shelter in his hair. They never quite make it, but they rumple his forehead in the process. This gives him an awestruck, horrified, delighted, or inquiring look that may be as misleading as no expression since it seems to be totally unconnected to what is happening at the moment.

With his enormous reach advantage, Minsker could keep Baker at the end of his jab all night, slicing and popping the shorter man without ever getting hit. Minsker, to the knuckle-gnawing agony of his corner men, chooses not to pursue this course. He crouches until he is no taller than Baker and leans in, hooking to Baker's hard belly on the inside. He plants his feet and claws like a wolverine.

Light-heavyweight contender Eddie Davis, when asked to define the difference between his style and his brother's, said "Johnny,

he always loved to box. Me, I like to fight." Andy Minsker can box, and frequently does. On this occasion he chooses to fight. Maybe he wants to wipe out any poor impression created by over-anxiousness in his November 28 debut. He is obviously eager to look exciting and effective against Baker.

Reaching in, halfway through the first round, Minsker gets caught off-balance by a roundhouse right to the head followed by a shove. The floor reaches up to smack the back of his pants, and the Portland fans who have flown, driven or hitchhiked to Lake Tahoe for the occasion nearly swallow their tongues in shock. All the way back in Portland, a thousand hearts freeze for a split second in front of television screens. He's gone too far this time, and risked too much. Minsker has abandoned his own style and his own turf, figuring he can beat Baker on Baker's terms, play Baker's game and win.

With more than a minute left in the round, there is time for Baker to finish him off if Minsker is dazed at all. But Minsker hops up as if he just sat on a bee. It all happens so quickly that Referee Norm Budder seems to assume that the boxer only slipped. Minsker goes on without an eight-count and without being docked a point for the knockdown. From that time on, Baker is always dangerous but Minsker is in control. It's a good scrap and the crowd loves it. The announcer, Al Bernstein, finds himself being won over. "Minsker is very unorthodox but he's fun to watch! Maybe his unorthodox style will be criticized throughout his career, but it seems to work."

Ringsiders can see Minsker's mouth moving, saying "sunufabitch" as each round ends and he finds that he has still not stopped Baker. At the final bell, Lamont Baker, a good fighter in top condition, is still standing and still dangerous. (Neither guy has shown any sign of being affected by the altitude.) Minsker takes the unanimous decision, winning every round on the judges' cards.

The crowd absolutely loves it. They roar all the way.

Ed Milberger is quietly furious. Doug Holiman climbs in to struggle for air in 10 rounds with Nicky Walker, and loses the decision while Ed is still muttering. Andy "sunufabitches" repentantly, and Baxter offers firm advice.

Milberger says, "I'm gonna have to get fierce with him if he's gonna go out there and do exactly what I've been telling him not to do. He can be a superstar, but not if I let him get himself hurt first. Acting like a rank amatoor!"

Baxter is happier. "He's improved a lot. I'm pleased. Frankly nobody is going to pay to see somebody ride around the ring on a bicycle. I applaud his impulse to get in there and fight. It will make him easy to sell. But I've never yet seen a great fighter who leads with his head."

The river rush of the fight crowd spews out through the big theater doors and spreads, slowing and settling among the magnetic islands of the slot machines, crap games and blackjack tables. Everyone is hot to play. Boxing does that for its audience. Every fight scholar in the back row knows what the boxers *should* have done, and that adrenal knowledge makes the viewer audacious for hours, like a dance tune hummed all the way home. What is a game for the gamblers is business for Caesars, and the house wins big tonight.

Doug Holiman, unscathed in his loss to Nicky Walker, is soon perched on a leather stool with a Styrofoam cup of quarters beside him as ammunition against his new opponent, the one-armed bandit.

Noe Ramirez plays blackjack all night long with a grin etched into his swollen cheek. He wins a hundred bucks and is still grinning the next morning over his orange juice.

Minsker's team, though grousing dutifully about perfection,

has reason to be happy. Minsker, Baxter, and Milberger gallop off to see the fight re-run on TV.

In a matter of days the skiers and gamblers will be back at their regular work, planning their next holiday-for-risk. The fighters will be back in gyms from Oregon to Texas, sweating and thinking, studying for their next bouts.

The message of the lights and the casino plush is "You can't win if you don't play the game." The sweat-reek of the gyms whispers another song: that dreams are their own profit and risk is its own reward.

Defending Tyson: The Bite Fight

During my time of paying attention, the former heavyweight champion "Iron Mike" Tyson has been the most dramatic and tragic figure in sports. I never met or interviewed him. Like millions of others, I watched his fights on television and swam widely in the oceans of ink that others produced about him. He was marketed as a monster. My inclination was to be suspicious of the hype that occasionally flared up in furious allegations. When the notorious Bite Fight happened, the media response seemed to me based on hysteria and misapprehension. That ticked me off. This appeared first in the July 9, 1997 issue of PDXS newspaper.

On June 28, 1997, during the third round of their heavyweight title match, Iron Mike Tyson bit the right ear of Evander Holyfield, ripped off a piece, and spat it out. Moments later, Tyson bit Holyfield's other ear. After the round ended, the referee halted the fight and declared Tyson disqualified and Holyfield the winner. A few weeks later the Nevada Commission fined Tyson three million dollars—the highest monetary penalty in sports history—and revoked his license for a year.

But long before the Commission decision was issued, actually from the moment of the bite, the verdict shrieked from the headlines and TV sets of America, TYSON BAD! The cover of *Sports Illustrated* blasted "MADMAN!" in huge type with the tagline: "A crazed Mike Tyson disgraces himself and his sport." Columnist Dave Anderson of the New York Times described Tyson as a "mad pit bull." The adjectives flew thick and nasty—"dirty, disgusting, repellant, bestial, loathsome, vile, animalistic, vampiristic, deranged, maniacal, cannibalistic, murderous, cowardly..." Bill Clinton was horrified. John Sununu and Geraldine Ferraro held a Crossfire debate on "Tyson Bite" which degenerated into a "Ban Boxing" rally. The press could scarcely be more enflamed if the guy had reached up Holyfield's rectum and ripped out his heart in front of the TV cameras. We haven't seen this much hysteria since the first OJ verdict. "Bad" black men drive the press batty.

Tyson is being treated more viciously by the press and the public than any boxer in history—with the possible exceptions of Muhammad Ali in his anti-war, anti-white years, and Jack Johnson, who pissed off all the white folks by beating white fighters and marrying white women.

Other fighters have fouled as badly as Tyson in recent memory and have been dealt with very differently. Heavyweight Andrew Golota repeatedly hit Riddick Bowe with blatant low blows in two, back-to-back bouts. In each bout Golota was actually winning when he fouled. He was disqualified and lost, but he was not suspended or fined. In fact, Bowe's entourage was punished for the post-fight riot in Madison Square Garden.

Roy Jones lost his title on a DQ for hitting Montell Griffith in the head while he was on his knees. Terry Norris lost his world title twice on DQs for hitting Luis Santana when he was down. Neither

Norris nor Jones was penalized further. Ray Mercer offered Jesse Ferguson a hundred thousand dollar bribe in mid-fight to take a dive in their 1993 bout. Mercer was never punished beyond losing the match. Yet, if Mike Tyson were burnt at the stake tomorrow, every sports reporter in America would apparently stand up and cheer.

But there is another way to look at the Tyson Bite affair. Try this. The bites were against the rules and should be penalized, but they were understandable and even justified. The sanctified Holyfield was fighting dirty. The ref was doing nothing to stop it. Tyson had to defend himself. The tradition in boxing is, if you're being fouled, foul in return.

Much of the commentary assumes that Tyson often commits fouls and that the bites are merely an extreme version of his usual unsportsmanlike tactics. Yet, despite being hyped as a monster throughout his career, Tyson is not a particularly dirty fighter. He rarely throws low blows even though he's shorter than most of his opponents. He hits on the break or after the bell occasionally, and he can wield a potent shoulder and elbow. Sometimes he clinches too much. This pattern is run-of-the-mill in the dirty boxing spectrum. Only the bites were extraordinary.

No one but Mike Tyson himself knows what was going on in his head that night, and his public apology explicitly said that he "snapped" as a result of the severity of the cut over his right eye caused by Holyfield's head butt in the second round. Immediately after the bout he said Holyfield was butting repeatedly and he had to retaliate to prevent further damage.

Tyson's version of events has been ignored, discounted as lies. *Sports Illustrated* described the bites as "completely unprovoked," and that is the prevailing view.

The critics have adopted two basic theories of motivation.

Both theories depend on the idea that Holyfield was completely dominating Tyson:

1) The Thug Impulse theory says Tyson is a brutal, animalistic thug and he behaved like a thug/brute under stress. The bites were impulsive results of rage at his inability to bully Holyfield;

2) The Premeditated Escape theory says Tyson deliberately set out to get himself disqualified to avoid the humiliation of losing to Holyfield again.

This is Holyfield's own opinion, as expressed immediately after the bout. It has been augmented by the fact that, before the bout, trainer Teddy Atlas had predicted a third round disqualification. Atlas was at a TV fight party at reporter Jack Newfield's place in New York and word of his prescience spread rapidly. Asked afterwards how he knew, Atlas replied, "I know his character." Let it be noted that Atlas, for all his excellent abilities, has a deep personal hatred for Tyson.

Having watched a videotape of the three rounds of the fight several times in slow motion, I think Tyson was telling the simple truth. Holyfield was head butting repeatedly and intentionally. The ref, Mills Lane, was doing nothing to prevent it. Tyson retaliated for furious revenge and to convince Holyfield to stop the tactic.

This is what I saw:

Holyfield came out from the opening bell with a rough-house strategy including consistent fouls—throwing low blows, holding and hitting, wrestling and shoving, and above all using his head as a third fist. Toward the end of the first round, the referee warned him about wrestling. "You know better!" Lane told Holyfield. The ref gave him a warning for one low blow in the third round, but ignored the rest. I counted three.

Taller than Tyson by at least three inches, Holyfield bent and

crouched constantly to swing his head against Tyson's, and he frequently made contact. Tyson, having been cut and concussed by head butts in his first bout with Holyfield, was dipping and ducking throughout trying to avoid that cranial battering ram. Halfway through the second round Holyfield got the desired result. A head butt produced a large, copiously bleeding cut beneath Tyson's right eyebrow. A training cut in the same spot had caused the bout to be postponed from its original date in May. My view, based on the videotape, is that the butt was deliberate. The ref called the head butt "unintentional." No points were docked from Holyfield. The cut was perfectly located to drain into Tyson's eye, obscuring his vision. The possibility loomed that the ref would soon have to stop the fight because Tyson could not see to defend himself.

Holyfield won both the first and second round on the judge's cards. Tyson's use of the jab from outside—reportedly a strategy devised by his new trainer, Rich Giachetti—was not working against the longer armed Holy. But these were not lop-sided, humiliating rounds. Tyson held his ground and was still in the fight.

Between rounds, the plastic surgeon Ira Truckee, who was serving as Tyson's cut man, managed to stop the bleeding, but a flicked feather could make the cut spill open again.

Much has been made of Tyson coming out of his corner for the third round without his mouthpiece. Referee Mills Lane noticed it immediately and sent him back for it. Trainer Richie Giachetti was standing on the ring apron with the mouthpiece in his hand and slipped it into Tyson's mouth. The critics like to claim this as a sign that the bites were premeditated, that Tyson intended to come out without his mouthpiece so he could bite freely.

This doesn't make sense. The fighter doesn't control the mouthpiece between rounds, the corner man does. These PPV

shows have microphones and cameras in the corners so there would be clear evidence if Tyson had refused the mouthpiece. Certainly he and Giachetti could have cooked up a scheme days in advance—"when I tip you the wink, don't give me the mouthpiece..." But it's a big gamble to bet you can get in a bite before your unprotected jaw gets shattered by one of the best heavyweights in the world. And any competent referee will catch you before the first punch is thrown, as Mills Lane did. Nah. It's far more likely that Rich Giachetti was rattled and forgot. In every other case where a boxer comes out without his mouthpiece, we know it was the corner man who goofed.

Once his mouthpiece was in, Tyson attacked in his old fast hooking fashion, looking for openings for a massive right hand. Holy covered to weather the storm and struggled to stay in the game, and get inside again with his head. A Tyson right to the body followed by a crunching left to the chin had Holyfield hurt and buckling when, in the split second before the first bite, he slammed the right side of his head against the cut on Tyson's eye. This placed Holyfield's ear just below Tyson's mouth and the video clearly shows Tyson reacting to the pain of the butt and then instantly chomping on that ear.

Holyfield claimed, after the bout, that Tyson spit his mouthpiece out first and then bit. That is the scenario used by all the critics to prove calculated premeditation. In fact, the video clearly shows Tyson's mouthpiece was still in place when he bit. This style of mouthpiece bonds with the upper teeth and allows the lower jaw to open. Only after Holyfield pulled away from him did Tyson bend over and spit the mouthpiece out, along with the chunk of his opponent's right ear. The black mouthpiece and its trajectory are apparent on the videotape. Mills Lane, stepping in, bends immedi-

ately to retrieve the mouthpiece. Holyfield swirls stamping in pain, then turns his back and walks away. Tyson rushes and pushes at his back with both gloves. Holyfield bounces against the ropes.

Then there's a break in the action. Mills Lane first declares Tyson disqualified for biting, and then changes his mind when the Nevada Commission doctor, Flip Homansky, says Holyfield can continue. Lane deducts two points from Tyson, one for the bite, one for the shove.

The fight resumes, Tyson has Holyfield hurt again, Holyfield's head swings into his face again and Tyson bites again. The left ear this time. His mouthpiece is still in. They continue fighting to the bell. Tyson walks to his corner with the mouthpiece in his mouth.

Tyson dominated this round on the judge's scorecards but the docked points eliminate the gain. Between rounds Mills Lane stops the fight, disqualifying Tyson for the second bite.

Tyson had turned the momentum of the fight and had Holyfield in trouble when the first bite occurred. If there had been a fourth round, Holyfield might have been stopped. Claiming that Tyson was looking for a DQ to escape from humiliation doesn't compute.

Maybe Tyson didn't believe the ref would stop a mega-million dollar fight on the grounds of the fouls he committed: two bites and a shove. The cut made him vulnerable. He said he had to retaliate to protect himself. He couldn't butt in return because he would have been the more damaged party. Low blows weren't really an option—he's not adept at throwing them and his style doesn't lend itself to them. I think the bites were impulsive self-defense. Biting is against the rules. He shouldn't have done it. But obviously he couldn't rely on Mills Lane to prevent Holyfield from butting.

Tyson's idiot handlers, John Horne and Rory Holloway, made

a monumental mistake before the fight when they objected to the assigned referee, Mitch Halpern, and allowed Mills Lane, the former District Attorney, now Washoe County District Judge, to fill in. (Mills Lane has since retired from the ring and dedicates his time to a "People's Court" style TV show.) Lane has been a fan of Holyfield for years. According to Holy's trainer, Tommy Brooks, "The night Holyfield lost to Riddick Bowe, Mills Lane cried tears." Lane has also been quoted long before this bout, saying that Tyson is a vicious criminal who should never be allowed to box. It's not surprising that Lane failed to notice the sustained strategy of fouls that the Holy One was using.

The blindness of the ringside commentators and the hundreds of reporters in the arena is more disappointing. They bought all the years of hype from both sides. Holyfield, the Christian Warrior, is good and everything he does is saintly. One irate fan told us, "It's not so much the bite as *who* he bit!" Tyson, the street thug, is bad. They've been wanting to punish him for a long time. Apparently there is nothing on the planet more terrifying and evil than a bad black man.

Tyson faced a press conference alone the Monday after the fight and read a complete apology. He said he was wrong to bite. He said he would accept without contest whatever punishment the Commission handed out. He asked not to be suspended for life. He didn't blame Holyfield or Mills Lane or anyone else. He took total responsibility for his actions. Many reporters dismissed the apology claiming it was "spin doctors" at work. No. "Spin" is when you try to pin the rap on somebody else. "But is he sincere?" they keep asking. Please. Obviously Tyson is deeply sorry. Nobody goes looking for this kind of shit storm. Did anybody ask if Bill Clinton was "sincere" when he apologized to the victims of the Tuskegee Experiment?

Biting is against the rules but rules don't exist unless there is some common inclination to act the opposite way. Biting is far from "abnormal" behavior, and this is not the first time fang met flesh in a boxing ring.

A favorite tale of Portland fight manager Mike "Motormouth" Morton involves his instructions to Andy "The Scapoose Express" Kendall the night before Kendall fought Dick Tiger in Madison Square Garden back in the 1960's. "Andy," Morton advised, "When the bell rings for the first round go out and hit him hard in the balls. The ref will take a point away. When the bell rings for the second round, rush out and bite him hard on the ear. The ref will take another point away. So you've lost two rounds, but you've got eight more rounds to work and your opponent is damaged and scared." Kendall failed to follow this canny strategy and lost a ten round decision to the master technician, Tiger.

Others have not been so persnickety. Heavyweight Andrew Golota bit Samson Po'hua on national TV two years ago and it raised a few eyebrows, but not a ruckus. In fact Golota went on to win the bout with a fifth round TKO. Bobby Czyz declares he has been bitten. Jimmy Ellis has confessed to biting. No suspensions or fines resulted. Evander "Holy" Holyfield himself has admitted biting "Jakey" Winters while Winters was beating him in an amateur match when he was seventeen. Winters says Holy drew blood. Holy points out that he bit the shoulder, not the ears, but amateur helmets cover the ears so there's no virtue in that.

Naming no names, we've seen boxer bites even in the Pacific Northwest. One dangerous ex-middleweight of our acquaintance reminisces fondly on the psychological terrorism of a well-timed bite, and boasts of following up by blowing his nose on the wound. Boxing is not ping-pong.

Bites also occur in other sports. High school and college wrestlers have been known to take a nip of each other now and then. Tree Rollins bit Danny Ainge, and the NBA fined Rollins $5,000 and suspended him for two games. Not exactly the three million dollars and year of exile handed to Tyson.

Fight folk and experienced fans know all this but still, reflexively, declare themselves "shocked and appalled" in the face of the usual screams to ban the always-maligned sport. No one calls for basketball to be banned when Dennis Rodman head butts a referee or kicks a photographer. There is no roar to abolish the Catholic Church when priests molest choirboys. But boxing is different. And Mike Tyson is America's bogeyman.

Fight or Die: The Johnny Tapia Story

For Johnny Tapia fighting was genuinely fun and his infectious delight lit up crowds, judges, TV commentators—everybody but his opponents. Tapia doesn't approve of Playboy Magazine. He thinks it's disrespectful to women and he didn't want to cooperate with a story. His wife, Teresa, talked him into it. I like to think it was a little easier because the assigned writer was a woman around the age his mother would be if she'd survived.

It was a clear January afternoon in Golden Valley, Arizona and Johnny Tapia was in trouble. He was trapped in a shabby house trailer surrounded by gray-clad Mohave County sheriff's deputies. For nearly an hour a deputy with a loudspeaker barked toward the trailer: "Come out with your hands in the air." Faces popped up and then slid away in the windows, but there was no other response. The 36-year-old Tapia, five-time world champion in three different weight divisions, the pride of Albuquerque, hid inside the trailer with two of his cousins. The nine deputies were responding to a

tip. They were after one cousin on charges of aggravated assault and armed robbery. That cousin had asked for help so Johnny went on the run and tried to shield him. For Johnny, family loyalty is everything.

With the deputies squawking outside, Tapia used his cell phone to call his wife Teresa in Las Vegas. She jumped into a car and drove hard for the Arizona border. The deputies, wary of weapons, backed an armored truck up to the house trailer and hooked a tow-rope to the door handle. Revving the truck, they yanked open the door. Within minutes, the three men emerged, one at a time, to be handcuffed. A search of the trailer found cocaine and marijuana.

A dejected Tapia sat in the cool desert air on the running board of the armored truck, his fighters' arms cuffed behind him. One cousin was routed up the dirt road and on to Albuquerque for trial. Tapia was released from custody within hours. Teresa picked him up at the sheriff's office and drove him the 90-odd miles back to Vegas. "He was talking on the ride back," says Teresa. "He seemed fine."

Back in their big Vegas home shortly after midnight Tapia was in the downstairs bathroom, vomiting. Teresa saw him come out to the living room, grab his chest and collapse to the floor unconscious. As she rushed to his side, her cousin, Ruth Montoya, grabbed the phone to call 911. Although the newspaper the next day says Johnny hit his head when he fell, the 911 operator's notes refer to "possible overdose, taking painkillers and attempted suicide." Emergency medical technicians took Tapia to the hospital, where he was placed on life support. He now admits he had been "using cocaine for days."

This was the fourth time the popular and dynamic fighter had technically, if briefly, died from a drug overdose. No opponent has

been able to stop him in 57 pro bouts. He's never been knocked out in the ring. But his own deliberate escapes from consciousness have been effective. Boxing trainer Freddie Roach visited him in the hospital in Las Vegas on January 11, 2003 and was frightened by what he saw. "He didn't respond even when they were sticking needles in him," says Roach. "He was like a corpse lying there." The doctors asked Teresa if she wanted to pull the plug.

Tapia's future had the bleak look that prompts newspapers to update their obituaries. At best, it seemed, Tapia would never box again. While he was hooked up to a respirator, the hospital was bombarded with so many calls from fans, friends and media that a special Tapia information phone line was installed. Even in a sport where drugs are common, Tapia is extreme.

After 36 hours Johnny woke up and asked for a cheeseburger. Medical tests showed no sign of damage to his brain or heart. After two days he checked himself into a drug rehab center. When he completed the standard three-week course, he re-upped and stayed on.

Tapia has been in a dozen rehabs before, often under court orders. This time is different, he says. "I wanted to do it. The other times I was forced to go in." But that last little death was "terrible, terrible," he says. "I've used up my nine lives. Next time it's for good. I want to live with my wife and my family."

Last September—nine months after the siege and nine months after his coma—Tapia claimed nine months of sobriety and moved back to his beloved hometown of Albuquerque, New Mexico. "He's a changed man," says his wife. But in most ways, he is the same man.

There are those who say he should retire, but on September 26 he returned to the boxing ring in Tingley Coliseum. Tapia

didn't want an easy opponent. He demanded a fierce prospect who would test his ability to become a champion again. He chose to fight snake-tough Carlos Contreras, a Mexican fighter 10 years his junior who vowed to knock Tapia out.

Tapia's motto, "Mi Vida Loca," is tattooed across his belly. His crazy life is a complicated saga. He is a brilliantly disciplined and determined boxer. Over the course of his 15-year pro career he has held five world titles in three different weight divisions: flyweight (115 lbs.), bantamweight (118 lbs.) and featherweight (126 lbs.). Now in the twilight of his career, he's a future shoo-in for the Boxing Hall of Fame.

He's an engaging and genuinely nice man, a loving husband and father. But when the drug lust rises in Johnny Tapia, things go bad. Outside the ring his life is riddled by overdoses and tangles with the law. In recent years he has been diagnosed as bipolar and hospitalized more than once for suicidal depressions. Half laughing, he counts on his fingers the drugs his doctors have tried to beat back his depression, life-long hyperactivity and attention-deficit disorder. Ritalin when he was a kid, of course. More recently Labutrin, Depakote, Lithium, Zoloft, his fingers peel back one at a time. His collection of police reports fills a three-ring binder with 125 pages. The charges are for driving under the influence, aggravated assault, and possession of controlled substances. He's been diving into the dark his whole life. Now he's staring into the abyss. He says he's kicked drugs and will quit boxing soon. The question is, which withdrawal will kill him?

Before a fight, most boxers' dressing rooms are quiet and serious places. Only corner men are allowed—everything is focused on the coming event. Under the grandstands of Tingley Coliseum on September 26, 2003, it's like that in Carlos Contreras' dressing

room. But around the corner, Johnny Tapia hosts an open house. Darren Cordova's mariachi blasts out of the boom box, and dozens of hilarious pals sail in and out. Tapia is in constant motion. He smiles as he interrupts his shadow boxing with greetings, hugs and introductions all around: "He saved my life that day!" "We grew up together!" He is eager for their family news, reminiscences and jokes, pushing for it, soaking it up. He's as interested in them as they are in him. "It's always like this," says Teresa.

"I don't want it to be a funeral," says Tapia. "I'm doing what I love. It should be a celebration." His compact body vibrates, bouncing with excitement. But his white T-shirt still shows no sweat. He has a classic fighter's build: skinny legs, big shoulders, wood-solid arms and a round shaven head on almost no neck, the better to absorb punches without effect. His battered pit-bull mug creases in folds around alert eyes, and shifts with his flexible moods.

The friends come in Italian suits and working denim. They are businessmen, musicians, boxers, old friends from the neighborhood, and probably the elderly woman who sells him Snickers bars at the mini-mart. Tapia talks to every one of them. He's everybody's brother. They call him Johnny or JT. They bring kids to meet him. One Tapia pal recognizes another as the cop who arrested him and the two re-enact the capture to Johnny's delight.

A video crew, reporters and photographers, complicate the jammed room. Tapia insists on posing with various friends. Two tall screenwriters who are scripting a movie of Tapia's life stand against the wall, as corner men glide through with ice buckets and equipment.

An on-camera interviewer catches JT with the question, "What do you think about in the last 24 hours before a fight?" "If it weren't for Darren's music I'd be thinking all crazy," says Johnny. Then he

reaches for Teresa, "I wouldn't be able to do this without my wife. She's my rock. I love her so much."

The women in the room are politely ushered out to the hall for a few minutes so JT can change into black and silver trunks that convey a tuxedo dignity. Tapia's hometown flyweight rival, Danny Romero, appears and the two talk like the friends they have become since Tapia trounced Romero and took his title in 1997.

Somebody remarks that people with bipolar syndrome can turn on their manic phase when they need it. But this is normal for Tapia. He pours out energy to feel it reflected back. He's not so much a star as a spotlight that shines on other people. His friend Rudy Lopez calls it respect. "I thought I knew what respect was," says Lopez, "but Johnny demonstrates it all the time. He puts everybody else first, above him."

Most boxers rest the day of a fight, but he's torching what seem like thousands of calories in this pre-fight party. There is a grueling 10-round bout to come and he's lost 27 pounds in a month to make the contract weight. His tattooed skin is uncharacteristically loose. He's only 5'6" and 126 pounds. How much energy can there be in his small frame?

Tapia has to sit still as cut man Ruben Gomez wraps his hands. Engineered layers of tape and gauze transform his fists, but Tapia chews a plastic drinking straw and keeps an eye on the room, swapping cracks with the watchers.

Twenty-six-year-old Carlos Contreras hopes to stop Tapia in front of his home crowd. Contreras is built of piano wire and is raring to build his reputation on the back of an aging, failing ex-champion. Flexing his wrapped hands, Tapia says, "This is my town. The buffalo is back."

The stillness comes over him as Gomez paints his scarred fore-

head with a clear mixture intended to protect him from cuts. His opponent is said to butt heads freely. Tapia closes his eyes for this process and is silent as the mixture dries. The party is over. The glad host is gone. His attention turns inward. As if some signal has sounded, the crowd thins to its essentials.

Tapia hugs the arriving priest, a genial silver-haired man in civilian mufti, who is a long-time friend. With the priest and his corner men, Tapia disappears into the big bathroom next door. The priest dons his vestments and offers prayer and a blessing to the kneeling Tapia.

Afterwards, Tapia turns his back on the room and begins intense warm-up exercises and stretches. This is Tapia the fighter, concentrated, crossing himself repeatedly. Tucked into his trunks is a gold medal of St. Ignatius, the warrior, a gift from the priest. Trainer Eddie Mustapha Muhammad tapes the red leather gloves onto Tapia's fists, then holds mitts for the fighter to punch in machine-gun combinations. Tapia stretches his face and jaw, grimacing fiercely. He catches himself glaring into a camera and apologizes to the photographer, "I'm not looking at you mean or nothing."

Then it's time. "I need my robe! Where's my rosary? Father, I need a prayer." The priest rushes to him. Tapia tugs the hood of his satin robe down over his eyes and jogs out into the hallway. The priest is at his right shoulder, Muhammad is at his left. The corner men and Teresa guard the rear, with media types trailing behind. The noise of the crowd is clear now, and mariachi music blares. As Tapia breaks through the vapor of the smoke machine and into the spotlight, the thousands in the arena leap to their feet with a sustained roar. The path to the ring is railed off, and bodies cram the edge. Hands reach for him as he moves past. The ring announcer

shouts out into the crowd, "Ladies and gentlemen, Johnny 'Mi Vida Loca' Tapia!"

His voice has that hoarse boxers' squeak that suggests punches to the larynx. He's had his nose broken a couple of dozen times. Some of the rumpled scars around his eyes came from cuts in the ring. He's had three surgeries on his left shoulder, most recently after his November 2002 loss to Marco Antonio Barrera. But his hands, his weapons, have never been injured. He can't tell you what miracle has allowed him to abuse his body so brutally and still come back again and again to world-class condition. "It's just a blessing," he says.

Freddie Roach has trained many champs. He calls Tapia "the best boxer in the world." Mike Tyson thinks JT is one of the greatest fighters ever. Tapia is fast, intensely busy and bewilderingly hard to hit. If he can't get you one way he'll pull 50 other tactics out of his arsenal. He has knocked out half of his opponents and made life a leather hell for the rest. He has lost three decisions, two of them debatable. His old rival Danny Romero says Tapia's "greatest gift is that he's very intelligent. He'll move you around, interrupt you so he can be faster." But what elevates him in the hearts of fans is that if he gets hit his instinct is to fire back more and harder. The more you hurt Johnny Tapia, the more fight you have on your hands.

He is a gracious sportsman. No trash talk from Johnny Tapia. He respects his adversaries, and by the end of the fight he loves them. He hugs opponents at the final bell, chatting eagerly with them and consoling them if they've been stopped. He has nothing but praise for them in post-fight interviews. "Anybody who's willing to step into the ring," he says, "deserves respect."

His friend, sports agent Bob Case says, "When Johnny enters a room, the lights blink." But Johnny is open about his failings. He'll

tell the worst to anyone who asks—what he was jailed for, why he was hallucinating, neither bragging nor apologizing, just stating facts. "There's no use trying to hide what's in the papers anyway," he says. "If they don't like the way I really am, they don't like me." He clearly wants to be liked. "When I first met him," Case says, "you would walk into his house and he'd want you to take the television home. He thought he had to give you things so you'd like him." In the ring between rounds he spots the red eye of the TV camera and sends a sweaty message to his hometown. "Albuquerque, I love you!" The city's area code, 505, is embroidered on the back of his trunks.

"He's a great fighter," says writer Lucius Shephard. "He should retire. But when he does he'll die. Boxing is all that's keeping him alive." Tapia disagrees. Obviously he exults in boxing; "my natural high," he calls it. But he will tell you flatly what it is that keeps him alive. "If my wife ever left me," he says, "I'd be dead in a month," he says. "Maybe six weeks if I was lucky." His eyes slide sideways, checking Teresa's reaction. She doesn't smile.

After a hurricane decade of marriage, they hold hands, whisper and gossip. She goes to training camp with him. She doesn't like to go shopping without him. He has to know where she is, dashing into their home office to check on her two or three times an hour. "Tree," he calls her, and the house rings with "Tree! I've gotta tell you something," or "Tree, come and see this!" She is his wife and nurse, his business and boxing manager. She is also his chief bodyguard. When he slips away from her, it is the worst kind of danger sign.

According to Tapia, his friends and reporters who have covered him for more than a decade, Johnny doesn't mess around on his wife. Dennis Latta of the Albuquerque Journal says, "Whatever Johnny

does, he does 100 percent, and Teresa is his drug of choice."

He thrives in the limelight. She likes to engineer events behind the scenes and watch them unfold. He's a physical dynamo with the reflexes of a mongoose. She lives in mental hyper drive. "She reads all the time," he says, pointing at the wall of novels and biographies in the office. He's a TV news freak, eager to talk about Korea or the NBA draft. They both grew up in Spanish speaking households. "I can get by in Spanglish," says Tapia, "Teresa understands it better, but I speak it more easily." She graduated from high school honors classes. He graduated in what one reporter calls "special ed." She says in many ways he's the smartest man she's ever met. He's a people reader, taking in enormously varied information at a tremendous rate. "He can walk into a crowded restaurant," says Teresa, "and in one minute tell you who everybody is. People he never met, he can tell you who they are—an undercover cop, a pimp, a drug dealer. A good guy or a jerk. He remembers everybody's name."

Boxing analyst Larry Merchant says Tapia was "a 5 to 1 underdog to survive his own childhood." He never knew his father who he believes was murdered before Johnny was born in 1967 in Albuquerque. He was diagnosed early as hyperactive with attention deficit, but he was tough. At the age of seven he survived when a bus he was riding in drove off a 100-foot cliff. He was thrown free, suffering only minor injuries, while the pregnant woman next to him was killed.

When Johnny was eight years old, his mother, Virginia, was beaten and stabbed 26 times with a screwdriver. She managed to crawl out of the quarry where she'd been abandoned before collapsing near a street light. Johnny says he woke up that night and saw his mother being hauled away, chained in the back of a truck. But when he ran to tell his grandparents, they thought he was dreaming

and told him to go back to bed. Tapia's mother spent four days in a coma in the hospital before she died. Her family found her on the second day when a newspaper article described her as a Jane Doe. Johnny wasn't allowed to visit her in the hospital, which still grieves him. "I never got to say goodbye," he says, "I never got to say I love you." The murderer was never caught and the specter of her death haunts Tapia. Virginia was 32 years old when she died, and Tapia feels guilty at outliving her, as if every year he lives beyond her is a betrayal.

Her murder is the core image in the depressions he describes as "a bunch of hurt. A bunch of anger. It's a struggle. When I'm using drugs and drinking I don't think of it." He's been saying these things routinely to the media for years. But his stock answers barely mask his discomfort. There's a risk of real gloom descending. When pressed he deflects the conversation, changes the subject or questions the questioner about his own life.

Tapia doesn't like profanity in front of women. "Johnny fired a world-class trainer," his friend Bob Case says, "because the trainer was talking about banging some broad and that he had a golden shower on the woman. Johnny doesn't want to hear degrading talk about women because of what happened to his mother."

Virginia's parents adopted Johnny. His grandfather was a former amateur boxer and a city employee. There were 14 children in the original family, and the grandparents also raised 10 of their grandchildren. "In a three bedroom house," Johnny points out.

The Tapias' old neighborhood in Albuquerque is half a century worth of small wood or stucco houses packed close on snug lots. Some have chain link fences and bars on the windows and doors. The general neatness is a product of elbow grease rather than money, and the streets and sidewalks are deserted on weekdays with

adults at work and kids at school. The blue-collar decency belies the daily misery caused by drugs. New Mexico has the highest per capita overdose rate in the nation.

Family, fighting and drugs formed Johnny's life. He refers to all of his grandparents' children and grandchildren as brothers and sisters. Some are aunts and uncles, some are cousins. One of Tapia's brothers is currently in prison for stabbing another brother to death. Back in 1992, Johnny was acquitted on charges of intimidating a witness in a cousin's murder case. Counting off their names on his fingers, Tapia confirms they have all spent or are spending time in prison. "Every one. It's all drugs," he says.

His uncles found it entertaining to make the small boy sniff paint till he was dizzy and sick. He was sent out to steal syringes and he watched people tie off and fire up. Overdoses were so common there was a standard routine for tossing the unconscious into the shower and turning on cold water to revive them. Though his grandparents were aware of the drugs around them, Johnny says it was never done in their face, "out of respect for them."

When Johnny was nine his uncles would set him out in the playground to take on all comers age 8 to 15. "If he won," Teresa says, "He'd get the pride of winning, them being proud of him, and a dollar." If he lost, "I'd get my butt whipped," says Johnny. "It was just one of the challenges I had to overcome to be allowed to hang with the big boys. I had to learn to fight for the family." Bob Case calls it the human equivalent of cockfighting and believes the uncles were betting on him.

Johnny's uncles and cousins boxed as amateurs, as had his grandfather. When his grandfather noticed his street fighting skills he had the boy join the boxing program at Wells Park Community Center. Two nondescript cream-colored buildings form the

Center that dominates a full block of playgrounds near the Tapias' old home. The first time he sparred, a more experienced kid hurt him. "I kicked him where it counts and the coach threw me out of the gym and said come back when you really want to learn how to fight," says Johnny. "I came back and went on boxing and went undefeated for five or six years."

He went to the gym to train, then home for more training with his grandfather. He studied videos of fighters he admires: Sugar Ray Leonard, Julio Cesar Chavez, Roberto Duran, Salvador Sanchez. "I'd watch some move and then go try it out on the bag, thinking, How do you do this? I was training all the time. Following in my Grampa's footsteps. He'd been a coal miner and he had black lung, but he'd get me up early in the morning and go running with me."

Over the next nine years he had an amateur record of 150 wins and 12 losses. Fighting in the 112 pound Junior Fly division, he won the National Golden Gloves, PAL and Junior Olympic championships. When he was 21, Johnny turned pro. Fighting seven or eight times a year as a flyweight, he stormed the division, winning the USBA title. He had a promotional contract with boxing powerhouse Top Rank. He was being offered soft drink commercials and other endorsements.

Tapia says he never did drugs while he was an amateur, "Because I wanted to be champion of the world and I wanted my Grampa to be proud of me." By the time he turned pro, drugs were "an on and off thing." In 1990 Tapia was undefeated in 22 pro bouts when he tested positive for cocaine three times. He was banned from the sport until he could clean himself up. "I was out for three years and seven months. That was the worst time of my life," says Tapia. He was homeless, jobless, in and out of jail, and strung out on cocaine and heroin.

Teresa Chavez first ran into Tapia at a party in 1992 when she was 20 years old. He approached her and she brushed him off. "I had no idea who Johnny Tapia was," she says. The snub only challenged him. He kept cropping up. He went out of his way to meet and befriend one of her brothers. He started hanging out with her cousins. "My grandmother had known him for years," says Teresa, "because one of his favorite things was going to the Senior Center to dance with the old ladies. They were friends."

Stubborn, with her own rebellious streak, Teresa was uninterested until Tapia arranged for her and a group of underage friends to get into a local bar. That night, her older brother Robert told her to stay away from Tapia, that he was a junkie and nothing but trouble. "I looked at Johnny with new respect after that," admits Teresa.

He was living on the street. He made money fighting in the back rooms and beer coolers of bars. "The only rule was that no guns were allowed," says Teresa. "He'd sit me in a booth and tell me to wait. He'd come back after a while looking roughed up with a case of beer under one arm and some money."

As one reporter put it, "Johnny could charm the venom from a snake." Teresa's mother adored him. Her grandmother let him live in her house. He begged Teresa to marry him until the older women got sick of hearing it and urged her to say yes just to shut him up. In 1993 Teresa and Johnny were married by a justice of the peace at the Wells Park Community Center.

On the afternoon of their wedding Teresa was sitting on her mother's sofa surrounded by wedding guests when one of Johnny's cousins approached her. "If you want to see what you married," he said, "go look in the bathroom."

She opened the bathroom door and found Johnny with a nee-

dle in his arm. He tried to shove her out of the room. "What a mistake I had made," she says. "It was a slap in the face. Reality." Johnny got into a fight on the lawn and the police arrived. They let him go if he agreed to leave immediately on his honeymoon.

Her bridal night was spent alone in a sleazy motel. He said he had to make a phone call, took her car and didn't come back. "I was too humiliated to call anyone and tell them I was alone," says Teresa.

The next morning her mother took her to the hospital, where Johnny was in a coma from a drug overdose. The doctors told the weeping Teresa that they didn't know if he would make it and if he did there might be brain damage. They asked if she wanted a priest. Then Johnny woke up, ripped the tubes out of his arms and ran out of the hospital with the gown flapping over his bare butt. He thought the cops were coming for him. Teresa drove slowly around the hospital until he came out of hiding, then took him home.

There was a pattern. He'd disappear on a drug binge, come back days or weeks later to be nursed back to health. Then he'd do it again. She tried moving him out of Albuquerque to a town nearby. She went to Mexico with him, where his grandparents paid to have a witch pray over him. In their first year together she had two miscarriages and decided not to try for children again. Her mother and grandmother urged her to stay with Johnny, insisting he was fundamentally good. But Teresa had had enough.

She got her own apartment in Albuquerque and worked two jobs, focused on saving money, getting a divorce and starting over. Johnny was in jail. His manager, Paul Chavez, begged her to take Johnny back when he got out. Tapia could fight again if he could get clean, but he had easy access to drugs in jail. Teresa told Chavez to take Johnny into his own house to clean him up. "He said, 'What

if he robs me? Or kills me?' It was obviously OK if Johnny robbed or killed me."

She finally agreed to do it on her own terms. Her tiny one-bedroom apartment had iron bars on all the windows and doors. Johnny agreed to be locked in for two months. She'd saved enough money to quit her jobs and lock herself in with him. Her mother brought food every day and shoved it through the bars of the window. The first weeks were horrible, with Tapia screaming in withdrawal, then raging or weeping, begging for at least a beer. "We fought like crazy. He hated my guts," says Teresa.

At one point Johnny erupted in fury at the confinement. He ripped through the apartment breaking dishes and ornaments. Snatching a heavy iron-framed mirror from the wall, he swung it at Teresa, meaning to hit her, but it smashed on the floor. Fed up with being threatened, Teresa grabbed a shard of mirror and leaped at Johnny, stabbing him in the thigh. Shocked and bleeding, Johnny ran around the small rooms, yelping and spraying blood. Furious, Teresa "pulled a Johnny" herself, yelling and throwing things. He showed her his leg saying, "Look what you did to me!" and she kicked the wound. He was afraid of her then. When her anger subsided she said, "Let me look at your leg." "No, you'll kick me," he said. But she promised: "No, I won't, Johnny." The cut was a mess. Fetching a set of hidden keys she let herself out of the apartment, locked Johnny inside, and ran down the street to a pay phone to call for a ride. After a quick trip to an emergency room for stitches, they locked themselves in again.

The fourth week, she says, "We actually started talking. Finding out a lot about each other and feelings that he had of inadequacy as an adult that stem back to childhood problems." He began to get in shape, running in place and doing jumping jacks and sit-ups and

pushups in the apartment. "He started to transform into this awesome human being. That's when I fell in love with him. Because I knew there was a good person under there, and he didn't mind it anymore that we were locked in." Johnny gets a goofy grin remembering Teresa's apartment. "It was a safe place," he says, "where Big Macs just appeared, sliding through the bars."

After eight weeks he started training for a fight. She would let him out for an hour in the morning to go running with Chavez, then again for two hours in the afternoon to go to the gym with Chavez.

In March 1994, Tapia and his trainer flew to Oklahoma for his first legal bout in years. Teresa drove with relatives to see her husband fight for the first time. She was terrified he'd be hurt. On the phone before the fight she begged him not to go through with it. Johnny knocked out Jaime Olvera in the fourth round. In July he won the North American Boxing Federation championship, stopping his opponent in the third round.

"He got paid $10,000 for that fight, one of his biggest paydays at that time," says Teresa. "After the managers' cut, we had $7,000 left. We were going to pay bills." The couple stopped at a café for lunch and Johnny began to pick at Teresa, deliberately trying to set off an argument. He'd been clean for seven months and she says she had forgotten the signs that he wanted to use again. Back on the road he pulled over, pushed her out of the car and drove off. Then he made a U-turn and came back. She expected him to invite her into the car. Instead, he grabbed her purse, took all the money, threw down the purse and drove off again. She made her way home by bus.

Late that night an Albuquerque cop got off duty, changed into his civvies, climbed into his personal car and headed home through

deserted streets. He pulled up behind a pick-up truck stopped at a red light. The truck's passenger door opened and a man climbed out and waved at the cop, asking if he wanted to buy. The cop rolled down his window and the passenger trotted over with a plastic bag of white powder. Then the driver's door of the pick-up opened and Johnny Tapia stepped out and waved at the cop, who recognized him immediately. The cop arrested them both for cocaine peddling. The white powder turned out to be laundry detergent. Teresa saw news of the arrest on TV, bailed Johnny out and cleaned him up again.

The pattern was set. "Every three or four months," says Teresa, "He'd slip up. He'd take off. I wouldn't see him or hear from him. But in the ring there was nobody who could touch him."

In October 1994 he won his first world title, the World Boxing Organization championship, in his hometown. Johnny cried for joy in the ring.

In 1995 he was training for a tough defense of his world title against Olympian Arthur Johnson. One of Teresa's brothers was recovering from an overdose and she had been spending days and nights with him in the hospital. She came home to find Johnny gone. According to the police reports, he showed up high at five in the morning and threatened Teresa with a gun, accusing her of having an affair with his boxing rival, Danny Romero. He shoved her around and, when she went to call the police, left the gun behind and ran away. She filed charges against him. The police couldn't find him and he came back later that day. He didn't remember what he'd done.

Their lawyer made a deal that Johnny wouldn't have to appear in court until after the Johnson fight. He squeaked by with a majority win. Then, with the check for his $60,000 share of the

$100,000 purse, Tapia disappeared once more. He had to be in court the following week. He surfaced again in a hospital. Someone had driven up to the emergency room door and thrown him out onto the pavement. Overdosed. As soon as he woke and was released, he disappeared.

Tapia now faced serious prison time. Desperate, Teresa went to Judge Frank Allen. The judge laid out the requirements—get Tapia out of the state and put him into rehab and probation programs. He didn't want to see or hear about him any more. Top Rank, Johnny's promoter, put Teresa in touch with Oscar De La Hoya, who had a mountain training camp in Big Bear, California. "De La Hoya said, 'Bring Johnny to Big Bear. My trainer will train Johnny for you. He can train at my gym. We'll help you make arrangements. You can get a temporary house.' Oscar was great," says Teresa. She lined up the necessary treatment programs in the vicinity—all without Johnny's knowledge.

Fearing that Tapia would miss a court date during his latest binge, she tricked him into returning home. When he walked in the door, her family and Johnny's doctor were waiting in the living room. They physically held him down while the doctor administered a tranquilizer that put Tapia to sleep. With the doctor monitoring his condition, they kept Tapia tranquilized for days, allowing him to emerge for the court appearance and then medicating him again. They packed without his noticing. Teresa, her mother and her brother put him in a car and took off for California with Tapia drugged. Whenever he woke enough to eat during the trip, they drugged his food. Teresa's mother, Annie Gutierrez, says they did it, "so he would be calm. We didn't want to but we had to." He was still in a stupor when they arrived at the house in Big Bear and wrangled him up to the second floor bedroom. His house in

Albuquerque was all on one floor. Teresa stopped medicating him and he woke up during the night and fell down the stairs. "He was screaming and yelling, 'Teresa, I don't know what's wrong with me. I'm hallucinating so bad I see places I've never seen before.'"

For a month Tapia hated the exile from Albuquerque. Then he decided to be a good sport. "Oscar was a good influence," says Teresa. "He would tell Johnny, 'You have a lot of talent, you have to do the right things. We have more to prove because we are Hispanic.'"

Tapia's ring name had been "the Baby Faced Assassin," but the years and the scars were draining the juice from that moniker. It was De La Hoya and his trainer Roberto Alcazar who gave Tapia his new name. "Whenever I walked into the gym," Johnny says, "they'd say 'Ah, mi vida loca!' Because I was so crazy all the time."

The eighteen months of court-supervised exile from New Mexico kept Tapia clean, fighting regularly, and taking frequent drug screens. When there was a bout in New Mexico he had to ask permission from the court and file a detailed in-and-out flight plan. By the time the restrictions ended, Tapia had his own gym and house in Big Bear and stayed on. But the binges began again. Teresa tells of a period when Tapia was taking methamphetamine instead of his usual cocaine. The bodyguard who usually lived with them was away so the Tapias were alone. A blizzard shut down the roads and snowed them in. Johnny was strange, not sleeping. Teresa tried to stay awake to watch him: "What if he wandered out in the snow and froze?" She finally dozed off and woke to find him leaning over her bed with an unblinking stare and a hammer in his hand. "I was afraid to make a sudden move. Johnny's never hit me," Teresa says. "He's shoved me or pulled my arm when he was high. But this was different." She slid out the other side of the bed,

grabbed her Bible in case he was possessed by demons, and threw a pillow at him. "He kind of came out of it," she says. "He looked at the hammer as though he didn't know what it was, and dropped it." While he sat hunched on the floor, staring at nothing, she took the hammer, gathered the knives from the kitchen, wrapped everything in a sheet and buried it under the snow behind the house. When he came out of it he didn't remember a thing.

After Johnny was abducted and taken to Big Bear in 1995, his old manager, Paul Chavez, refused to work with him. Teresa became Johnny's manager. Four of his world titles were won under her management. He is one of the few in boxing's "little guy" divisions to earn a million dollar purse. She negotiates contracts with promoters and television networks, accepts or rejects opponents, and handles all finances and business affairs. "Johnny always waits outside or in another room," she explains. "Fighters never sit in when contracts are being negotiated because it would hurt them. They are talked about like meat."

Teresa struggles to maintain her calm during bouts. "He is always looking at me during fights. If I show him a worried expression he gets worried. When it's fight time he is not my husband, he is my fighter. You can't baby a fighter because he is out there putting his life on the line, and he needs every ounce of ferociousness to do what he has to do. I have learned not to hinder that. You have to be strong. You can't show your fear because he reflects your emotion and absorbs it."

A cruel reality of sports is that you spend a lifetime developing skills that become your identity. You are still young when you must stop and become someone else entirely. When Johnny Tapia retires from the ring the change will be almost as dramatic for his wife as it will be for him.

Teresa is trying to figure out what life after boxing will mean for both of them. She has been negotiating with producers for a movie of Johnny's life. There is a book deal in the offing. Meanwhile she is buying and renovating a building in Albuquerque as a boxing gym where Johnny can train other fighters. Various charities would like him involved. There's a restaurant and bar business that might be a good investment. She's considering Tapia cigars, Tapia tequila, Tapia clothing. Asked if she can be sure Johnny won't end up dead broke in a gutter, her eyes flicker. "He might still end up dead in a gutter. But he won't be broke."

Johnny Tapia doesn't look doomed on an August afternoon in the blue pool out back of his house in Las Vegas. He and his two adopted sons are in the water for hours. His 11-year old son, Salo, demonstrates his submarine skills and confides, "My dad's been teaching me since I was two." The toddler, Lorenzo, charges off the diving board as merrily as his dad and big brother. The session ends in giggles when Tapia hoists the toddler out and runs in through the patio doors to kneel on the carpet, changing a diaper. "I didn't think I'd ever be a father," says Johnny.

The big stucco house has a bewildering number of rooms, including Johnny's memorabilia museum, a fully equipped boxing gym and Teresa's office. Thick walls keep out heat and noise. It is a gated community of similar houses and by late afternoon what Teresa calls Tapia Day Camp has the backyard swarming with neighborhood kids swimming, playing basketball and bouncing on the trampoline. Johnny is everywhere, coaching, encouraging, playing. The children clamor for his attention and he is tireless, or maybe driven. His restless motion provides protection as much as pleasure. If he were forced to sit still the storm in his head might take over.

Their house is always bustling with live-in relatives, visiting friends and business associates. "I have to have a lot of people around all the time," says Teresa, "because I never know what Johnny will do."

A guest suite in the Las Vegas house was fitted with special locks for Johnny's drug binges. Teresa would barricade herself in the suite with the children. "I'd take lots of videos and toys and books and food, and the cell phones, and tell them we were camping out. I didn't want them to know what was going on."

Once he crept through the house with a big knife, sliding the blade beneath each closed door he came to. "Now Johnny's happiest time," says Teresa, "is when he falls into bed at night and knows he's managed to get through another day. His hardest time is waking up, when he knows he has another day to face."

Teresa Tapia has fears about the move back to Albuquerque. But she says life with Johnny has convinced her that if an addict wants drugs he can find them on the moon.

But Tapia tries to do good. There is the tale of the diner waitress who served meals to the Tapias for months. One day, she broke down crying because her husband had been laid off from work. The family, with two kids, was living in their car. Within 24 hours Johnny Tapia bought them a decent house. Then there was the exhausted single mother walking in the heat carrying groceries with her small children. Driving past with Teresa, Johnny stopped to give them a ride and ended up buying them a good used car. His purse for the comeback fight in September went to buy wheelchairs and computers for the disabled.

Sometimes there are mixed messages about what's good. Maybe family loyalty should end short of going on the lam with a violent cousin. And Bob Case worries about Tapia's inclination for

impromptu fights even when he's cold sober. "If you're a fighter and you hit somebody, give them the keys to your house and your car, because they own it."

The drama is part of Tapia's charm, Teresa agrees. "We joke about it. Johnny says, 'If I don't give you any problems, how are you going to handle it?' I say, Johnny, I don't think that will ever happen. But I think I could do with twenty years of peace and quiet."

There was neither peace nor quiet on September 26 in Tingley Coliseum. Spotlights and big screens flash ring close-ups to the highest reaches of the grandstands. It is obvious that the creaking arena on Albuquerque's permanent fair grounds had hosted a rodeo the week before. But the crowd is oblivious to the scent of horse manure and the confused pigeons loose in the far-off rafters.

The fans of Albuquerque have cheered and groaned through Tapia's tabloid roller-coaster life. Tonight some 4500 were there to hail his resurrection. "Without the crowd I'm not who I am," says Johnny. The shout goes up the instant he appears in a cloud of smoke. The familiar chant is "John-ee, John-ee" in a collective baritone.

The roaring generates enough heat to make him young again for the space of his 58th pro fight. Or maybe it just pays to be hyperactive if you're a fighter. It was the 28th bout for 26-year-old Carlos Contreras. Fighting out of the hungry warrens of Juarez, Contreras is strong, skilled and intent on a win.

When the bell rings, Contreras charges and Tapia nails him with a three-punch combination—jab, hook, right hand. Tapia's left arm, practically disabled after his last bout against Barrera, is back and it is fast. His reflexes are tuned high. His old legs pivot constantly to fresh angles. Tapia doesn't have to stay at a distance or run. He makes you miss from inches away. He is so elusive that

Contreras grows desperate by the third round and twice tackles him to the floor. Contreras tries everything: grappling, head banging, elbow-flying fouls and straight hard punching. The referee is irritated, but Johnny Tapia seems to enjoy it all.

Tapia pays Contreras the compliment of gut-wrenching hooks and jaw-jarring uppercuts—the respect of a nose-to-nose battle. With the tenth round in complete control, Tapia offers the pointed insult of turning to greet New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson at ringside. "But then Carlos hit me," Tapia explained later, "so I had to get back to it." The kid stays dangerous to the final bell, and Tapia comes through with a solid win against a tough, young and determined opponent.

The crowd's voice shakes the roof. Black and silver balloons rain down. Tapia lifts Contreras on his shoulders, and asks the crowd to honor him. Not as polite as Tapia, they boo.

At the press conference afterward, Tapia's face is bruised, swollen and cut. But he says he is ready for more. He hopes for two or three more bouts and then a championship fight soon. He wants to retire on a winning note. "This was a big experience," he says. "People say I'm too old, don't have anything left after the coma. I was really nervous. But I'm glad to be home. I couldn't believe the atmosphere with everybody screaming."

Speaking through a translator, Carlos Contreras says he hadn't expected Tapia to be in such good condition. "He's a little crazy, but in Mexico, craziness is recognized as part of sanity," Contreras says.

As for the craziness that has no part in sanity, Tapia says, "I'm trying. I want to live with my wife and boxing and my kids. I'm trying." But when boxing is gone, what will replace that electricity in Tapia's high voltage life?

"I don't know how his story is going to end," says Teresa. "I'd love to think that in thirty years we'll be old together and surrounded by family. But when I ask Johnny how he sees himself in the future, he says he's not even sure he'll wake up tomorrow."

Jess

Jess Sandoval was not famous, but for his many students he was an important man. This ran in the CyberBoxingZone.com.

Jess Sandoval was a dangerous featherweight and a zootsuit dandy in 1940's Los Angeles. WWII interrupted his boxing career, landing him on a U.S. Navy destroyer in the Pacific. Fifty years later, when I met him, he was still hatchet-faced, a careful dresser, and a gentleman. He had strict notions of courtesy and the right way to do things. No rap music in his gym. No cussing. His voice was a whisper, probably from breathing acid fumes in the chemical factory where he spent too much of his non-boxing life. But he never strayed far from boxing. After work everyday for years he trained the fine Ramblers amateur team for the Jewish Community Center in Portland. His best know pro fighter, Middleweight Mike Colbert, fought twice for the middleweight crown, and stayed in the top ten world rankings for a decade in the 70's.

Jess had a warrior aesthetic. He saw beauty in a clean, bone-crushing punch. He respected courage. But he was a gentle trainer, fussing over the welfare of his students in a way that was downright motherly. When a boxer caught a cold, Jess gravely recommended

chugging hot red wine spiked with lemon, followed by swaddling in heavy blankets and a long sleep.

One of his fiercest rules was to stay warm after a workout. He'd hobble after a fighter headed for the door to make sure the jacket was zipped, a sweater hood up, or a scarf wrapped snug around the throat.

Jess told stories to fortify his points. His story sessions usually took place after a workout with him perched on a folding chair to ease his ailing legs and the fighter resting next to him. The gym noise rose and fell and Jess' whisper required sharp attention, with your eyes on his face as he spoke. His "Bundle Up" tale still sticks in my head.

I can't reproduce his exact words, but the story was about a hot prospect he'd known back when Jess was a youngster himself. The guy was a bantamweight in Los Angeles in the 1950's. He was talented and he worked hard. Finally he got his first main event, a tough ten-rounder at the Olympic Auditorium. He won all right, and he was ecstatic. Completely jazzed.

He took a shower and got dressed and went out with his friends to celebrate. His hair was wet from the shower, and his body was hot from the fight. But he was a proud guy who looked good with his shirts draping off his wide shoulders and tucked in at his slim waist. He didn't wear a coat. It was January in Los Angeles, a chilly night.

His pals took him to a nightclub and things happened. He wasn't a drinker, but a brawl started and the cops came. The fighter was Mexican so naturally he was the one who got arrested. He sat all night and most of a day in a bare jail cell with a window that had bars but no glass. No blanket, no coat. By the time he got out and went home, he had pneumonia.

He didn't get well. The pneumonia became tuberculosis. He

lay on his narrow bed in the back room of his mother's house. He was a guy who liked clothes but he told his mother, when I die you got to throw all my clothes out the window into the alley, and all my blankets and sheets. And you got to burn the whole pile so nobody else will use them and get this disease. But he had a younger brother who envied his clothes, and his mother was crying so hard that he didn't trust her to do the necessary.

Late one night he knew the time was coming. He opened the window to the alley and threw out all his clothes from the closet. He threw his sheets and blankets out on top of them. Then he leaned out the window and squirted on lighter fluid, and dropped a match. While that pile of rags burned, he lay down in his underwear on the cold bare floor and died.

"So when I tell you to bundle up after a work out," Jess would whisper, "there's a reason. You wear a coat. I don't care if you're just going to your car and then home. I don't care if it's August. You wear a coat and a hat because you don't know what can happen between one moment and the next. And I know you don't want all your fine clothes on fire in some alley."

Jess died in his sleep, and his fighters cried for days.

The Rumble in the Rectory

I officially disapprove of all non-sanctioned, un-official boxing events. Too dangerous, and mostly against the law. Nonetheless, if a fight breaks out in a bar I jostle for a view of the action. If it lasts long enough, I take notes. So I'm not one to quibble over a church fundraiser, and whenever Father Joe steps into the ring, it's for a good cause. This appeared in the CyberBoxingZone.com on November 7, 2006.

Some religious scholars want boxing banned, but the five hundred or so cheerful parents, kids, and other parishioners who crammed into the gleaming old wooden gym of Holy Redeemer Catholic School in North Portland last Saturday night, were delighted with what went on in the ring. I'm not altogether sure the bout was legal, but it was fun.

Dramatic posters billed this fund-raiser as "The Rumble In The Rectory" and announced the heavyweight main event as "The Priest vs. The Seminarian." The priest, photographed with a demonic twist to his eyebrows, was Father Joe "Judgement Day" Corpora, the pastor of Holy Redeemer Parish. Father Joe is a blocky guy in his 40's, a little over five feet tall and carrying a wide but solid 247

lbs. The Seminarian, shown looking worried and wearing a T-shirt reading, "Got Prayer?" was Jim "Whom Shall I Fear?" Gallagher, a fit six-footer in his 20's, who is pursuing his Masters in Divinity at Notre Dame University.

The crowd was warm and noisy by the time the main event began. Hot dogs, popcorn, soda pop, and homemade brownies and cookies flew out of the concession stand. Two preliminary bouts—inflatable fat-suit quasi Sumo matches—sparked plenty of laughter. Then the lights went down leaving only the big brights over the ring and the real shazzam started.

First out was "Whom Shall I Fear?" Gallagher. This may be the first time in history that the word "whom" was etched on a boxer's ring garb, and it was richly gratifying to the grammarians in the room. The line is the title and refrain of Psalm 27, as in:

"The Lord is my Light, my Salvation…Whom Shall I Fear?"

Gallagher rolled out of the dressing area surrounded by a screaming entourage of college girls in purple sweatshirts with the "Whom Shall I Fear?" logo. Apparently Gallagher's chief second was his younger sister and her pals came along as a cheering section.

Once "Whom Shall I Fear?" was in his corner and properly welcomed by the crowd, "Whom" appeared. The music was "We Will Rock You" and the entire crowd roared along as Father Joe "Judgement Day" Corpora jogged to the ring. Crass secular types may have risked metaphorical reference to silver-tipped grizzlies when Father Joe took off his robe, but the faithful were holding their collective breath.

The bell was the lid of a cooking pot but referee Brian Walsh seemed to know what he was doing and the ringside physician was attentive. Both boxers wore headgear and the rounds were two minutes long.

The boxers quickly adopted roles befitting their respective physiques. Gallagher flapped out a jab and then side-stepped to get out of the way. His occasional hook and right hand were mere distractions. Father Joe marched forward with busy combinations to the body. Occasionally, Father Joe would catch Gallagher on the ropes for a hectic moment as the crowd chanted "Go Father, Go!"

Between rounds Gallagher's pretty corner girl could be seen demonstrating the upper cuts she wanted him to throw. It was good advice but "Whom Shall I Fear" didn't take it. One can't help but suspect that Gallagher was reluctant to inflict actual damage on Father Joe.

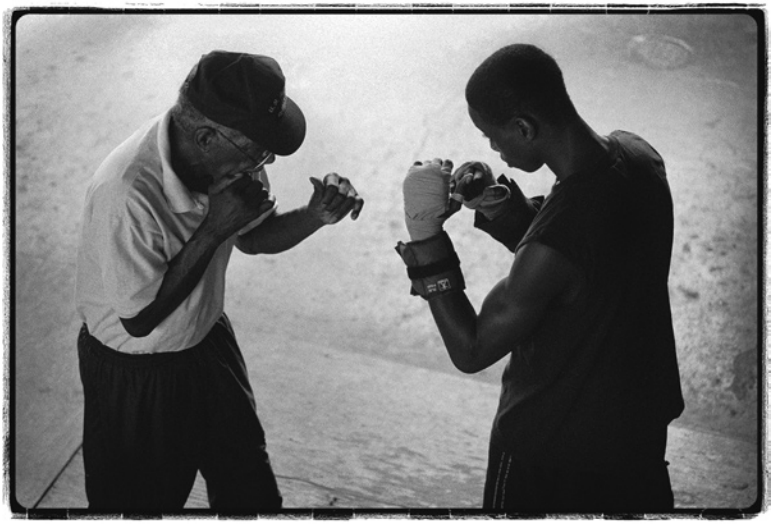
The padre's intentions didn't appear so benevolent, but I have seen Father Joe work out at the Knott Street Boxing Gym and can testify that his hook and right cross pack a soul-shuddering wallop. He did not choose to shatter Gallagher's ribs. Enough said.

To lighten the atmosphere in the sixth round, Father Joe pretended to bite off Gallagher's left ear and spit it out onto the deck. Gallagher staggered back clutching that side of his headgear. The ref leaped in to make sure Gallagher could continue, and docked Father Joe points for the fiendish foul. The crowd loved this, naturally. Come to think of it, my hat would fly off in surprise if, in fifteen years or so, Mike Tyson could equal what Father Joe did on Saturday night—ten busy 2 minute rounds, with the action hottest in the 9th and 10th.

The judges gave a unanimous and well-deserved decision to Father Joe. The crowd cheered mightily. "Whom Shall I fear?" took it with grace. The proceeds went to benefit Hurricane Katrina victims and the scholarship fund for Holy Redeemer School. We all went home happy.

I kept thinking, though, about Father Joe waking up early the

next morning for Sunday Mass. Hard to elevate the Host when your arms ache like Billy Blue Blazes. That's one tough priest.



Epilogue:
Imagine A Square

A good boxer is a miracle of chaos mathematics. When I think about the complex variables required to bring the right kid to the right coach in the right place at the right time, I am amazed that it ever happens at all.

It's a crapshoot for a novice walking into a gym for the first time. You want to learn to box, you need a coach to teach you. But not all coaches are created equal. An experienced fighter in a new town knows how to call around and find out who to work with. But a greenhorn rarely has a specific coach in mind. They choose a gym because it's on their way to work or school, or they find it in the phone book. They assume that any coach will do. In this gym, once a kid talks to a coach, he's linked to him, belongs to him. The coaches are rivals, possessive of their fighters. None of the other coaches will even pass the time of day with the kid for fear of being accused of "buzzing" another coach's fighter—the fistic equivalent of cattle rustling. They will slag another coach behind his back, sneer at his failings as revealed in the stumbling footwork or flailing elbows of his fighters, but they are bland and civil face to face.

They would sooner fry than tell a kid he's accidentally picked an idiot instead of a real coach, and thereby, in the first thirty seconds of his boxing career, doomed himself to failure.

The kid came through the side door on a winter afternoon, just off the school bus. He was a skinny thirteen or so, with a kit bag in one hand and a sack of books hanging on his shoulder. He stood looking around with a hungry curiosity we'd all seen before. He wanted to box.

I was warming a folding chair against the wall with the other gym rats—retired guys who were there just to get out of the rain, parents and reporters and other such scholars. We all pretended not to see the kid. If he came up to us, asked a question, one of us would have to answer and none of us wanted the responsibility of pointing him to one of the coaches in the gym that day. A half dozen or so new fish between the ages of eight and thirty strode through that door in any given month, and I wasn't the only chair jockey who sweated until each ones' fate was determined.

This particular spit-crusted, roach-infested storefront gym has five separate volunteers willing to call themselves "coach", but two of them are ignorant posers. At best you'd call them beginners. One of the others was a fine boxer himself, but he couldn't teach a fish to swim. There are two skilled, experienced coaches in the gym: call them Clyde and Ruben. They are both fine with the basics, but Clyde teaches the long-armed jab-and-move style, while Ruben favors the inside techniques of plant-and-hook. They are grudgingly respectful of each other, but they are both too proud to go looking for fighters. They'll ignore a newcomer unless the kid marches right up to them. The wannabe coaches will greet them at the door like used-car salesmen.

This kid walked in the door knowing none of this, probably

knowing only what he saw in a Rocky movie or what an uncle told him about the old days. He stood there gawking, oblivious to the minefield of micro-politics that surrounded him, absorbed by whatever fantasy or personal torment had driven him through the door. By some accident of luck, the lesser coaches were busy with their fighters and didn't swoop down on him.

It was cold outside and the big front window was steamed over so the street traffic was only visible as sliding light and the two older pros skipping rope near the glass were blurred silhouettes. The air was filled with rhythmic hisses, pops, drum rolls, and wet, staccato smacks that can bewilder an ear unfamiliar with the sources. Some kids come in trying to look tough, but this one just looked eager. He knew what he wanted, he just didn't know who to ask.

The bell rang to end the work round, and the noise fell off. One of the pros near the window let his rope drop and took two steps toward the kid. "Help you?" The kid lurched forward and started talking fast. I couldn't hear what he said but his voice hadn't changed yet, still thin. I sat back and began to breathe again. Another lucky break. The pro was knowledgeable and wouldn't steer the kid wrong. Sure enough his big head nodded slowly and he said, "You want to talk to Clyde." Then he walked the kid over to the heavy bags where Clyde was supervising fighters, and introduced him.

In his late sixties, Clyde could probably still whip anybody in the gym. He'd retired undefeated as a pro some forty years before and hadn't added one extra pound to his rangy middleweight frame in all that time. His neat silver beard rode up into the creases and folds of his mahogany cheeks. His battered nose detoured in the middle and spread out slightly left of center. His eyes had a blue sheen hinting at the glaucoma his doctors were

fighting. But he could still see well enough.

On a bad day Clyde would have snorted derisively and told the kid to get somebody else to work with him. This was one of Clyde's good days. He wasn't squinting or shielding his eyes. His walk was limber so his hip wasn't bothering him. He looked at the kid. The kid looked up at him.

The kid would have been just as anxious to please one of the posers if fate had steered him that way. He couldn't know that Clyde had taught dozens of national amateur champs in his time. Clyde asked the standard questions: How old are you? What do you weigh? Does your Mom know you're here? How does she feel? How about your Dad? You do any other sports? Are you right or left handed? He was listening for attitude as well as answers.

There are excellent coaches who will work their hearts to shreds teaching anybody who comes through the door. But that's not Clyde. Clyde says, "I ain't got time to waste and I don't need the aggravation." But somehow the scrawny kid passed Clyde's first test. Probably said "Sir" fifty times. A few minutes later the kid had shucked down to a T-shirt and sweat pants and was doing jumping jacks while Clyde put the finishing touches on his other guys' work for the day.

The kid's kit bag had wraps spilling out, and brand new bag gloves peeping red through the open flap. When Clyde ambled over he told the kid, "You won't need that stuff for a while." Clyde introduced the kid to the big mirror on the wall. The glass is so coated with dried snot and spit and congealed sweat that if you stand too close your face gets lost in the haze, but this mirror would be the kids' chief tool and friend for weeks if he stuck it out.

The other gym rats were focused on the sparring in the ring, but the first lesson in geometry and physics was coming for this

kid, and I couldn't take my eyes away. His own center of gravity was about to be revealed to him. Clyde always begins the same way. With the kid standing six or eight feet from the mirror, Clyde tells him to take a stance, set his feet. Then, using one bony finger, Clyde pushes on his shoulder and knocks the kid off balance, has him scrambling to stay upright. He lets the kid try his feet in different positions. "Are you solid?" Clyde asks, and the kid nods. Still the lone finger tips him over easily. "Guess you weren't solid after all," says Clyde.

He points at the gritty floorboards in front of the kid and says, "I want you to imagine a square." Looking down, the kid seems to see a big, chalked square. Defining the size of that square, Clyde shows the kid where to put his feet inside it, how to set them, how to check his position in the mirror. Then he uses his index finger to push on the boy's shoulder. The kid doesn't move. Clyde pushes at him from different angles, but with his feet in the proper position the kid's balance is right and he can't be tipped over. He is solid.

No matter how often I see this it still gets me—the first time a kid meets a coach, the first lesson. It's a brief moment when the glass clears and you can see possibilities branching into the future. An ignorant coach is a bad teacher who can injure his students. A good coach is the opposite. Every skilled boxer met a good coach along the way. Considering the many alternatives it's a kind of miracle when it happens.

The kid was grinning, delighted. He hadn't clenched a fist yet, or moved a single step in any direction. The lesson would go on for another hour, gradually adding movement and form. If the kid comes back for more, a complex world of effort and pain, pride and beauty is open to him. Maybe he'll walk out the door and never come back—take up soccer or video games instead. Still, in

these first five minutes he's learned something he didn't know and won't forget. He may never realize how much luck it took to get him this far.

Postscripts and Updates:

Cuts

My ranting had no effect at all. Corner men are still not required to prove they know anything to get a license. Looking back I can see that Zevedo's helpers probably learned their lesson. If he ever fought again, they probably hired a cut man to work the corner. There's a long history of trainers and corner men and managers learning at the expense of their fighters. The fighters come and go but the sidemen stay.

Buckaroo Boxing

Louie Loy lost to Hector "Macho" Camacho, who went on to a famous career. All the other fighters mentioned here fought for a while, and then went on to other lives.

Fists of Fury: Francisco Roche

Francisco Roche fell off my radar after January of 1986 when he lost a decision in his last fight. His career record stands at 11 wins, 9 losses, and one draw, with 4 wins by knockout. Those numbers don't begin to reflect the raw excitement of his every performance.

Sugar Blues: Leonard vs. Hagler

Both Sugar Ray Leonard and Marvelous Marvin Hagler have been enshrined in the International Boxing Hall of Fame.

Sugar Ray Leonard's final fight was in 1997. His career record was 36-3-1, 25 KO's. Leonard became a professional boxing promoter and, as of this writing, is the host of the cable TV reality show, *The Contender*.

Marvelous Marvin Hagler never fought again after losing to Leonard. He took his 37 million dollar purse and moved to Italy where he starred in several feature films and does regular boxing commentary for British television. His career record stands at 62 wins, 3 losses, 2 draws, with 52 wins coming by KO.

Who Is This Arguello?

Arguello stopped Pat Jefferson in the fifth round of their fight on October 25, 1985 in Anchorage. In February of 1986, Arguello stopped Bill Costello in the fourth round in Reno, Nevada. Arguello did not fight again until January of 1995 when he tried a comeback fight against Scott Walker and lost a decision. He fought no more, but returned to Nicaragua where he made his peace and hosted his own TV and radio shows. In 2004 he was elected vice-mayor of Managua. Alexis Arguello is an honored member of the International Boxing Hall of Fame.

The Fight: Hagler vs. Hearns

Both Marvelous Marvin Hagler and Thomas "Hit Man" Hearns went on to fight many more times, usually against impressive opposition, and often in hugely celebrated events.

One Ring Circus: Ali vs. Frazier IV

Jacqui Frazier-Lyde went on to fight for and win two women's light heavyweight world titles and ended her boxing career with a record of 13 wins, 1 loss, with 9 KO's. As of this writing she is still a working lawyer.

Currently Laila Ali is still boxing, has won five world titles and has a record of 24 wins, no losses and 21 KO's. In addition to her modeling and product endorsements, Ali came in third in the 2007 *Dancing With The Stars* television competition, and served as co-host with pro wrestling legend Hulk Hogan for the cable TV series, *American Gladiator* in 2008.

Ali divorced Johnny "Ya-Ya" McClain in 2005. In 2007 she married NFL player Curtis Conway, becoming step-mother to his three children.

The Knockout: Lucia Rijker

As of December of 2007, when she turned forty years of age, Lucia Rijker never fought Christy Martin. The two were contracted to meet in July of 2005 for the largest purse ever paid to a woman, a million dollars, when Rijker ruptured an Achilles tendon in training and endured many months of rehabilitation. Rijker's last fight was a win in Amsterdam in 2004. Her record stands at 17 wins, no losses, and 14 wins by KO. Since then she has made several appearances in television and movie productions. Katya Bankowsky's prize winning documentary, *Shadow Boxers*, is focused on Rijker. She was also the boxing consultant for *Million Dollar Baby*, which won the 2005 Oscar for Best Picture. In that film, Rijker played the villain, Billy the Blue Bear.

Beauty and the Beast: Hagler vs. Duran

Roberto "Manos de Piedra" Duran was named *The Ring Magazine* Comeback Fighter of the year in 1983, and again in 1989. His last fight was on July 4 of 2001, when he lost a unanimous decision to the also aging Hector Camacho. In a pro career that began when he was sixteen years old, Duran became world champion in four different weight divisions, Lightweight, Welterweight, Light Middleweight and Middleweight, from 135 to 160 pounds. Injuries suffered in an automobile accident in 2001 caused Duran to retire from the ring. He is still involved in boxing as a promoter, and he was inducted into the International Boxing Hall of Fame in 2007.

The Unhappy Warrior: Holmes vs. Cooney

Larry "The Easton Assassin" Holmes defended his heavyweight championship for three more years until losing to Michael Spinks in April of 1985. Holmes fought on, defeating many good contenders but failing in each of four more title challenges before his final bout, a unanimous decision victory over Eric "Butterbean" Esch in July of 2002. His career record comprised 69 wins, 6 losses, and 44 wins by KO. Holmes owns and runs several successful businesses in his hometown of Easton, Mass. Larry Holmes was inducted into the International Boxing Hall of Fame in 2008.

"Gentleman" Gerry Cooney took two years off from boxing following his loss to Holmes. With other lay-offs of a year or more, he fought five more times before retiring, losing by technical knock out in two more title challenges against Michael Spinks and George Foreman. His last bout, the loss to Foreman, took place in January of 1990. His career record is 28-3-3, with 24 KO's. Gerry Cooney is a businessman in his hometown on Long Island.

Minsker's Mettle; Debut; The Big Risk

Andy Minsker's last fight was in 1991, but he broke with manager Billy Baxter years before that. There was, as I recall, a problem with injuries to Minsker's hands, but the critical moment came when Baxter insisted that Minsker leave his long time trainer and move to Las Vegas to work with a new trainer. Minsker refused. His pro career consisted of 15 fights, with twelve wins, two losses, one draw, and three wins coming by knockout. Though Minsker's pro career may have disappointed him, the rest of his life has been busy and rewarding. He was the star and subject of Bruce Weber's feature documentary, *Broken Noses*, which focused on Minsker as trainer of the Mt. Scott amateur boxing team. He also had a small role in Weber's film, *Let's Get Lost*, about jazz trumpeter Chet Baker. Minsker married and got involved in business marketing from athletic wear to a mint chew intended to replace tobacco. When last seen he was honcho of his own custom auto upholstery shop, and he continued training amateur boxers.

Defending Tyson: The Bite Fight

Evander "The Real Deal" Holyfield still fights occasionally, though he lost his multiple heavyweight championships to Lennox Lewis in November of 1999. As of this writing, Holyfield's professional record stands at 42 wins, 9 losses, 2 draws, with 27 wins by way of knockout. He is a multi-millionaire and, whenever he decides to retire, he will be honored for his many victories against excellent competition by being inducted into the International Boxing Hall of Fame.

"Iron Mike" Tyson was suspended for a year following the fight described here. He returned to the ring in January of 1999 with a fifth round KO win over Francois Botha. Tyson fought once

or twice a year until 2005, against opposition of dwindling significance. As of this writing Tyson's professional record stands at 50 wins, 6 losses, with 44 wins coming by knockout. His life before the Bite Fight was disaster heaped on scandal. Since that night he has faced criminal charges, lawsuits, divorce, tax problems, bankruptcy and more. The many millions he earned in boxing have evaporated, but a documentary on his life and a proposed biopic are in the works. He may have many adventures yet. I have no way of judging any of these circumstances. But on that one fight, I have a definite opinion.

Fight or Die: The Johnny Tapia Story

In February of 2007, Johnny Tapia turned forty and fought his last fight, announcing his retirement after winning a decision in front of an enthusiastic crowd in Albuquerque. Some three weeks later, on March 12, Tapia was discovered unconscious from a drug overdose in a hotel room, and hospitalized in a coma in Albuquerque. That night his best friend, Teresa's brother Robert Gutierrez, and their nephew, twenty-three year-old Ben Garcia, were driving through the mountains on their way to visit Tapia in the hospital when their car crashed and both men were killed. The family was devastated by grief. Tapia resumed consciousness and returned home within a week. His career record stands at 58 wins, five losses and two draws, with 28 wins by knockout.