

The Dumpster

On Leavenworth Street in San Francisco, a man of Chinese origin stomps an aluminum beer can preparatory to its recycling. His female companion tends the shopping cart that holds the rest of the day's haul. One step up the recycling chain, two black men sit on a street level window ledge, sipping cans of beer displaying the same label. On the windows, taped from within, is a gallery of boxing photos. It is here one enters Newman's Gym, "where the best fighters train, since 1924."

The preceding declaration hangs over the boxing ring. Beneath the sign rests a mural of the great Rocky Mariano. The Rock's expression is more benevolent than menacing. His fists and face are more mindful of a papal blessing than of an undefeated heavyweight champion. To Rocky's right, a leering Sonny Liston looks every inch the threatening presence he was; to Marciano's left, hangs a snapshot in oil of a moment in the Ali-Frazier series. This is the domain of Don Stewart, manager and trainer of professional and amateur fighters, and director of Newman's Gym.

Don was a professional fighter himself, at 130 pounds a lightweight. Now in his 60's, he would be more of a middleweight. He still walks with the bounce of a main eventer traveling from the dressing room to the ring.

A non-member of Newman's, in Superfly garb, enters and inquires in a loud voice, who the toughest guy in the house is. Unaware of or ignoring the intruder, the boxers continue their drills, speed bags banging like jackhammers, jump ropes whirring in metronomic rhythm. The putative round ends with a gong as Don emerges from his office. In an inaudible voice, the avuncular Stewart neutralizes the situation and escorts the visitor to the door without incident. His minions watch impassively, moving like winery workers in a barrel of grapes.

It becomes quickly evident that among the many posted rules which go unenforced is one that reads "Members only, no visitors allowed." Don greets each wanderer that enters with a warmth you'd expect to be reserved for only the hottest prospects. Street people obviously high get the same Stewart smile that the would be professionals get.

Great fighters really have been trained at Newman's, if less frequently now than in the past. Jack Dempsey, Jim Jeffries, Joe Louis, Sugar Rays Robinson and Leonard, Muhammad Ali are all on the roll there. And just a week earlier, Riddick Bowe and Evander Holyfield made a publicity stop. Don Stewart may not have been around for Dempsey, but he's seen most of the rest.

Those who would ban the sport would do well to pass an afternoon at Newman's. Only a mile or so from Nob Hill, the gym lies in the midst of what, in another day, was called skid row. The student professionals do not appear distinguishable economically from the neighbors. Only their fitness gives them away. Legislators of their well-being would like to save them from earning a living from a violent sport that can maim.

Whales, spotted owls, and boxers need protection. Should we not similarly secure participants in football, hockey, and skydiving?

Supporters of the sweet science claim it builds character; it certainly builds characters. It has made people wealthy whose income without boxing would have been quoted by the hour in single digits. The relationship between labor and capital is more symbiotic than in much of the economy. Unsavory characters? Of course, but in no greater numbers than found in politics, law, or finance. Among boxing Dons, the Stewarts far outnumber the Kings.

Reminiscence is central to the sports experience, to the life experience I suppose; but it is the boxing experience. Old film captures a part, but the sport's most appealing side is found in the storytelling with the still photo as evidence. Stories and snapshots are abundant here.

Don sits at his desk, in sweats and a slightly askew Golden State Warriors cap, with a single visitor at midday. He recalls the first time that George Foreman, a troubled teenager in the Job Corps, first entered the gym for instruction. "Weighed three hundred when I got him," Don laughs. "Great puncher, a beautiful guy." He dutifully produces an old photograph of the young hulk who wears the same beaming smile as his coach. To Don, most of humanity is beautiful, a view that would seem difficult to hold in his profession.

In a rambling monologue on boxing's citizenry, Don singles out none for criticism, but leaves an impression that Mike Tyson ranks somewhere below the beautiful guy level so easily achieved by most acquaintances. He recalls a visit to the Catskill Mountain home of his late friend, Constantine "Cus" D'Amato. More than one champion was built there by the charming, literate D'Amato. A Stewart-certified beautiful guy, he took Floyd Patterson from the streets of Brooklyn to the heavyweight championship of the world. He not only taught boxing, but civility as well. Patterson was and is an exemplar of the D'Amato system.

At the time of Don's visit, Cus was engaged in a similar project with a rebellious Bronx teenager of promising boxing ability. At the dinner table, D'Amato twice warned Tyson not to slouch or put his elbows on the table. "The third time," Don relates, "he sent him to his room without the rest of his meal. The kid had a bad attitude; shook hands like a fish." Tyson's disciplined moments ended with D'Amato's death.

The pages continue to turn in the well worn scrapbook; he pauses at the maligned, tragic Sonny Liston. Know for his brooding stare, Liston's smile is as wide as Don's in the picture. Liston is surprisingly rated a B.G. by Don who sadly recalls the fighter's severe depression and early death.

The books is a virtual epitome of boxing's who's who with Don's warm smile on every page. Hidden among the household names that have passed through Newman's is one Timothy O'Rourke. "Billy Newman told me about this kid fighting in Ireland." (The

late Billy was the eponymous founder of the gym.) "I went all the way to Ireland to see this kid fight, early sixties, all the way to County Cork. Best prospect I ever had. I advance him a few thousand, brought him here, no one can touch him. He's knockin' everybody out, gonna be a heavyweight contender. Everything's going great until he comes in one day and says he's got to quit. His uncle got him a job in the fire department, and firemen aren't allowed to box! Unbelievable, but he paid back every cent. Beautiful kid."

The storyteller is interrupted by a brief hello from a friend, a small fit looking man in his late seventies. He is gone before Don can provide an introduction. "That's Newsboy Govas, fought Tony Canzonneri," he says proudly. One of the subtleties of boxspeak is the insertion of the term "fought" in place of "was defeated by." A win is "he beat, decisioned, k.o.'d;" a loss is "he fought." Boxing terminology does not usually include such sensitivity.

As the Newsboy takes his leave, he passes through the gym, pausing at one of the heavy bags long enough to deliver a combination, and with a bob of the head, ducks an imagined punch, and moves on. Don says goodbye with a wave and returns to his desk surrounded by autographed pictures of major and minor celebrities. Clint Eastwood advises to "keep on punching." Others deliver more personal messages. Closest to the desk is a glossy of George Foreman. "To Don Stewart," it reads, "a real nice guy." Signed, Jerry Cooney.