Fighter George Chuvalo - head intact, heart unbroken. Col. #19

(Or) And still the man can laugh. Release Week Of: May 12, 2014

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Editor: Long? Cut paragraphs #8, #9 and #10 (All of them.) Thanks.

Last fall I interviewed George Chuvalo while he was on the book tour with his memoir *Chuvalo - A Fighter's Life*. Like no other, this inspirational memoir tells the story of one of the greatest boxers in history who fought the legends - Muhammad Ali, Joe Frazier, George Foreman - and then lost everything outside the ring.

Chuvalo is a living, breathing and yes, still laughing Canadian icon who fought his way to the top of the world of boxing while coping with unimaginable loss along the way.

Chuvalo was as tough as they come, a raging bull who fought the biggest and strongest heavyweights of his time in an inconceivable 93 punishing professional fights and never got knocked down. Never off his feet, not once in 23 years in the ring.

Our conversation took place before a live audience at Port Colborne's Roselawn Theatre in front of a sold-out audience of 300 people. Sports writers always characterized Chuvalo as a counter puncher, a battler who could take a lot of punches before coming back with his own attack. With my first question I wanted to see how a man who made a living with his fists would react.

"Your critics have described you more of a defensive boxer than ..." I didn't get to finish my sentence.

"My critics should talk to the 74 guys I put in the hospital," replied Chuvalo, rather calmly. Fortunately he did not say the critics should talk to the 74 feckless interviewers he had put in the hospital. His eyes said *that*.

"The night I fought Muhammad Ali in Toronto, he went to the hospital afterwards and I went dancing with my wife."

(Par. #8) Unlike many punch drunk boxers who slur their words, Chuvalo is not only mentally sharp, he can remember every detail of every one of his bouts. I asked Chuvalo how, with the average fighter taking as many as 200 hits to the head per match he could not possibly have received a single concussion?

(Par. #9) "No neck," he said. "I don't have a neck."

(Par. #10) Just a hunch on his part but he's probably right. The brain needs to swing like a pendulum banging off the walls of the cranium in order to concuss. Very little of a neck means not much of a swinging motion and therefore little or no damage done when hit.

I couldn't wait to ask him about Henry Cooper. Way back in the 70's I found myself in The Henry Cooper Pub in London, England staring at a wall of photos of every great fighter that ever lived including Jack Dempsey and the original Sugar Ray (Robinson).

Cooper was a small heavyweight but a quick puncher with a deadly left hook, a pugilist who out-boxed and out-foxed his opponents instead of steadily pummeling them into a purple pulp as Chuvalo did. Henry Cooper who once knocked down a young Muhammad Ali was the British, European and Commonwealth Heavyweight Champion. Canada being part of that Commonwealth meant Chuvalo, the longest-reigning Canadian champion had a legitimate chance to challenge Cooper. Except Cooper knew what every fan of boxing believed - trying to dance around George Chuvalo would be like throwing himself in front of a big, red double decker London bus. So Cooper artfully dodged Chuvalo, fighting less dangerous opponents.

One day Chuvalo was training in a London gym when he spotted Cooper's manager Jim Wicks. "Boom Boom" as George was known ambled over to Wicks and after a bit of small talk put it to the manager bluntly.

"So when are me and your boy going to meet in the ring?" asked Chuvalo.

At this point in the storytelling, Chuvalo invokes a very good English accent.

"Mister Chuvalo," replied Cooper's manager, clearing his throat, "he doesn't even want to meet you socially!!!"

And with that, perhaps the greatest compliment ever paid him, Chuvalo never got a shot. And Cooper, a smart man much beloved by the Brits, retired a champion, later to be knighted.

Hearing George Chuvalo tell me that story and laughing is a testament to the resilience of the human spirit rather than his prowess as a puncher. Because while George Chuvalo was working his way into the World Boxing Hall of Fame in Los Angeles, those he loved the most were dying under unimaginable tragic circumstances.

His youngest son took his own life with a gun. Two other sons died together of heroin overdoses. His wife, unable to overcome the grief committed suicide as well. How many people could survive such personal catastrophes let alone write about them and rise above them to the point where you can smile again and ever laugh? None that I know.

Greater than his remarkable strength in the gladiatorial sport of boxing is George Chuvalo's indomitable will to survive in life as a person. The ability to laugh is sometimes the only power that keeps the human spirit from breaking. Today George's job is to go into schools and describe to students, parents and teachers the devastation drugs can exact on family.

For comments, ideas and

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