

The Boxer

While working as an automatic screw machine operator at Dill Manufacturing Company in the year 1940 I decided to learn how to box. I don't remember how I acquired a well-known Cleveland ex-boxer as a teacher or how much I paid Harry "Hurry Up" Wilson. He had been a lightweight boxer during the 1920s and 1930s. He acquired his Hurry Up nickname because he knocked out so many boxers in the early rounds. Hurry Up lost the greatest match of his career to the national lightweight champion.

Each week for three months I met Hurry Up in his garage—converted into a gym containing a canvas ring (more square than round) for boxing, workout equipment including weights and a bench, a [punching] bag and jump ropes plus other boxer needs. I enjoyed hitting the punching bag and rope jumping. After a few lessons I developed somewhat of a rhythm hitting the bag and skip jumping with the rope. Hurry Up's demonstrations on the bag and with the rope were almost as graceful as a ballet dancer's activity.

Hurry Up taught me basic techniques in punching, weaving, and avoiding punches plus other foot and hand movements. I practiced punching into his gloves and a type of cushion he held. Eventually we did a modified version of boxing, more in a gentle, harmless style. He was careful about not hitting me with lethal force. Our primary relationship was boxing, seldom digressing into conversations about racial problems or political and religious topics. In the 1940s Blacks and whites had distinct borders on habitat. No Black would dare to casually enter a white area, unless he was on a work detail. The worst areas of white aggressive acts were the Italian and Yugoslavian enclaves of extensively ethnicized Cleveland.

On the other hand, whites could enter and leave the Black ghetto without menacing or violent incidents. My friends and I frequently went to Black night clubs to enjoy jazz music. We also ate delicious barbecued ribs at Hot Sauce Williams'. Both were in the center of the Black ghetto, off 55th Street. During that dark period of American history, Hurry Up and I maintained a pleasant and relatively close relationship, yet we never invited each other into our homes or expanded our social intercourse beyond boxing. After the boxing lessons I never saw Hurry Up again.

I bought a four-piece set of boxing gloves, a punching bag and jump rope. I still have the rope, since the 1940s. I may have told two or three friends about it but never invited them to enjoy boxing.

During 1943 I entered the U.S. Navy and practiced boxing technique whenever a gym had any equipment. My boxing career consisted of one bout, while our ship was docked at Brisbane, Australia, a Canadian Naval ship anchored nearby. A Canadian sailor yelled, "Do you have anyone who can box?" One of my friends answered, "Yes, we have one." Thus that's how the only bout of my career began.

On the deck about fifteen sailors from each ship congregated around a temporary ring. One Canadian offered to act as a referee, and one of ours agreed to be the time keeper for the three-round bout.

The Canadian was a little smaller than me but well built. During the first round we danced back and forth at first then he began to jab me with his left hand. I seldom could hit him. He had

remarkable agility and weaving technique. I knew I was in trouble, realizing he was far better than me. We finished the first round without many damaging blows from him. The second round took a heavy toll on me. He skipped in and out, hitting me harder each time, while I flailed at him, barely nicking his face or body. Thoroughly battered by the end of the second round, I said “Sorry, I can’t go the third round.” That was the end of my ignominious boxing career. Before departing from their ship one sailor spoke to me: “Don’t feel bad. Bob was once the featherweight Golden Gloves Champion of Canada.”

Emil Abramovic 12/15/2010