THE EVERYMAN OF BOXING
by Gerald Astor
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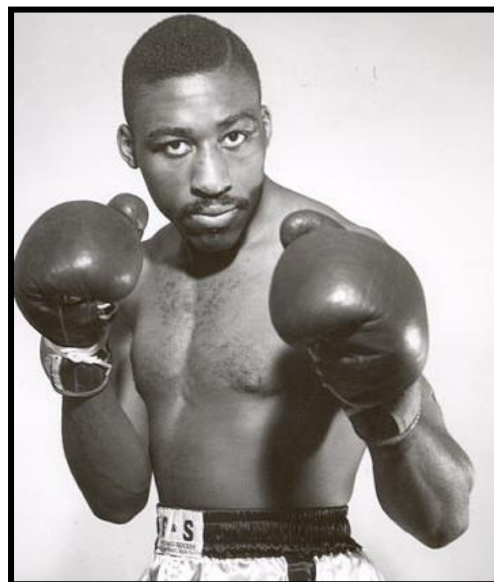
In the last days of his career, Randy Sandy, a boxer for 13 years, epitomizes the plight of the better-than-average fighter. His history is a bittersweet description of a once flourishing profession that is now declining in practitioners and rewards.



Randolph Sandy is a neatly groomed, mustachioed six-footer whose suits, sportswear and haberdashery bear a quiet distinction. He often carries a tan attaché case, giving the impression that he is taking paper work home to his six-room brick house in The Bronx. In the dining room Sandy says grace over a comfortable meal with his wife Ruth, his mother and his two young sons. After dinner he plays with 2-year-old Eric, whom he calls Big Shot, or cuddles 10-month-old Mark. When the children have gone to bed, Sandy, Ruth and his mother watch television in the living room, where, among some silver trophies, stands a placard reading "Christ Died for All Our Sins."

Sandy suggests a young white-collar worker immersed in the struggle that sociologists call upward mobility. But Randolph Sandy is a boxer; his tan attaché case contains clean towels, a T shirt and wrappings for his hands. His place of business is a Manhattan gym. Sandy is not one of the eight reigning champions, nor is he even one of the three or four top contenders in any class, the fighters who might be expected to get big money when they fight. At his best not long ago, when he was fighting the likes of Rory Calhoun, Joey Giardello, Spider Webb, Dick Tiger and Emile Griffith, he lit up boxing with a Roman candle flash of potential. Now he qualifies merely as an "average" fighter. Randy Sandy's importance at the moment is not as a fighter but as a symbol of the predicament of the journeyman performer in the present chaotic condition of boxing. An economic system isn't judged by its millionaires but by the well being of the majority of its citizens. Boxing is not Floyd Patterson, it is Randy Sandy.

As a professional fighter, he belongs to a small and rapidly declining group, like blacksmiths and railroad firemen. Not more than 1,500 worked at Sandy's profession last year. The Ring Record Book listed 1,100 U.S. fighters, and these fought in some 5,000 fights, but since they were often meeting one another, there were only 2,500-odd bouts. But even these figures are misleading insofar as they suggest the earnings of average fighters, for few of them fought often enough to provide a livelihood even if they won. The middleweight category, in which Randy Sandy belongs, has been severely depleted; only 200 middle-weights are currently listed for the U.S.

Randy Sandy reached his uncertain position in this hazardous business as a result of native skills and the lack of opportunities. His father died when he was 8 years old, leaving his mother to bring up seven children. In Harlem he ran, jumped, climbed and threw better than his contemporaries and became a top athlete at the local Police Athletic League center. He took up boxing as just one more sport available to him in the Police Athletic League. Simultaneously, school seemed to offer little prospect of advancement. " 'Randolph, you is going to grow up to be a bum,' my third-grade teacher told me," Sandy says. "I had an older sister told me the same thing. I thought they could tell right out what would happen to me, and I figured I'd be wasting my time working in school."
He flourished in local amateur events organized by the PAL, the Golden Gloves and the AAU. In 1948, when Sandy was 17, he came to the notice of Syd Martin, a trainer who is a gentle soul troubled by man's inhumanity to man. ("Personal relationships is gone to hell these days," says Martin. "Say hello to a guy and he don't even answer.")

Martin became something of a father to Sandy as well as his fistic tutor and shortened his name to Randy in search of a catchy name for the box office.

Under Martin's teaching, Sandy progressed so rapidly that he was national AAU welterweight champion in 1951. He reached his peak as an amateur that year, when he toured Europe with an AAU team. Exhibiting a photograph of the 1951 Golden Gloves team, Sandy points out a small, almost frightened-looking boy named Floyd Patterson.

After the AAU tour, Sandy turned professional to support his family. "Oh, I liked the idea of being a big shot in the neighborhood well enough," he says, "people asking me who I was going to fight. But before long I got tired of this. They asked me foolish questions."

On November 2, 1951 Randy Sandy entered the ring at St. Nicholas Arena to fight somebody named Charley Douglas in a six-rounder. Sandy knocked him out in the fifth. Three weeks later Sandy beat Jackie Cummerlander, a welterweight who had won his first four fights. From there on, Sandy's career ran right on the schedule of the typical TV-age promising fighter. He won six more in a row. Late in 1952 he met Willie Troy, a rugged middleweight with 15 straight victories. Troy made it 16 straight victories with a TKO and handed Sandy his first pro defeat.

Sandy bounced back fast, winning five in a row and drawing another. Then up popped Troy again. This time, in Washington, Sandy was knocked out in the seventh. Still, his career looked bright—at least economically. He had become a main-event fighter on television. He fought often enough to make a $7,500 down payment on a house in The Bronx. "I always told you I was going to buy you a house when I was a little boy," he said to his mother. The annual charity fund-raising event at P.S. 68, where his third-grade teacher had told him he was going to be a bum, was now designated Randy Sandy Night. It was attended by politicians of varying prominence, up to the borough president of Manhattan.

Sandy's manager was Hymie Wallman, a furrier with a longtime interest in fighters and a man who knew all the wrong people in the right places to control boxing in 1951. At the start of Sandy's professional career, Wallman departed from the usual practice, under which a manager supports a fighter until his earnings begin, and allowed the welfare department of New York to take care of the Sandy family while his boy was coming along. Sandy soon reached a bracket where his purse should have been about $5,000 a fight, but somehow, when Wallman finished paying expenses and taking his own cut, Sandy's share often came to less than $1,000. The fighter complained. "I told him I wouldn't fight for less than $1,000 a fight, at least $100 a round. We didn't have no contract anymore, and Hymie agreed to give me $1,000. I never cared how much he was getting as long as I got at least my $1,000."

Syd Martin encouraged Sandy to invest in real estate. He said, "You put your money away and buy that house." (Ike Chestnut was in the same situation as Sandy. He bought himself a Cadillac. He doesn't have the Cadillac any more, but Sandy still has his house.) A month before the Sandy family actually moved into the new house, he went into the Army for a two-year hitch.

After his discharge in 1956 he resumed his professional career with a fight in Houston against Alfonso Flores. Sandy won on a knockout in three rounds Then he ran into Herman Calhoun, better known as Rory, at St. Nick's. Calhoun was undefeated in 20 fights. In the first minute of the first round Sandy missed a left, stepped back, and Calhoun's right caught him on the point of his chin. He went down but was up at the count of three. He took the mandatory eight count in a neutral corner but went down again under a flurry of body blows followed by a right uppercut. A right to the body sprawled him on the ropes, and this third knockdown in one round added up to an automatic TKO under New York State boxing rules.

Sandy rallied for five successive wins. With a modest stake from these fights, he married Ruth Middleton and set up housekeeping. But his relationship with Hymie Wallman had deteriorated to the point where Sandy had become a fighting gypsy, meeting opponents in Houston, Las Vegas, Syracuse, Chicago, Boston, Hamilton, Ont. and other points far from home. In the familiar pattern of the promising fighter, the troubles with the manager

now became melodramatic: in 1958 Wallman confessed to distributing $100 bills and other gratuities to a New York boxing judge. Hymie lost his managerial prerogatives.

Now Sandy found it almost impossible to get fights in New York. He traveled through Europe, where he was the victim of an astounding number of peculiar decisions. Disgusted, he came back to the States, and found boxing in the doldrums. St. Nick's was closed, and fights were held on off nights at the Academy of Music on 14th Street, a cavernous, 3,525-seat movie palace, where the ring was placed on the stage and a spectator at ringside had the illusion of having blundered into a dress rehearsal. Beyond the ropes and the canvas, the fighters faced the shadowy, half-empty orchestra pit; above them were gold trimmed balconies as ornate as the Golden Horseshoe at the Metropolitan Opera House. Fighters at the Academy of Music were paid in part with tickets which they were expected to sell to friends, neighbors and small shopkeepers. There were only 1,430 fans scattered about under the lofty crystal chandeliers when Sandy met Emile Griffith. Griffith had a record of 13 straight victories, and Sandy had lost 11 of his last 15 fights. "He was always in the adverse psychological position of fighting in the other guy's backyard," said Syd Martin, explaining the losses. Sandy demonstrated flashes of brilliance, took a split decision from Griffith and set back Griffith's progress toward the welterweight championship.

But the boxing environment was closing in steadily. When Sandy fought Henry Hank in Detroit in October 1960, Wallman persuaded him to take 25% of the gate instead of his usual $1,000 guarantee. Sandy lost a close fight. He received $250 and terminated his association with Wallman completely. Acting as his own manager, he arranged a sequence of fights, the last of which was with George Wright in Tacoma, Wash., where he dropped a close decision in January of 1962. He received $500 and expenses and hasn't fought since.

In spite of all these reversals and the downward drift of the recent past, Sandy retains a spark of the optimism that is a prerequisite to a boxing career. He has a new manager, George Sheppard. He keeps in condition. Four or five times a week he sets the alarm clock for predawn and takes a seven-mile run along Pelham Parkway. After running, he goes back to bed and tries to sleep. By this time Ruth is out of bed, has done the laundry and made breakfast for the children before leaving for her job as a bookkeeper. Later in the morning Sandy watches television. "I like some of those stories that run from day to day," he says. In the afternoon he takes the subway to the CYO gym. After the workout he goes to another gym where he is training two fighters for another manager. It is on these trips that Sandy carries his tan attaché case. "I won't carry a canvas bag like some fighters," Sandy says. "I won't carry my gloves in my hand if they don't fit in the case. I'd rather make two trips to the gym than do that, because I don't want somebody to say, look, there goes a pugilist. I want to be known for myself."

Ruth looks at Sandy's boxing future with understandable lack of enthusiasm. "It's been going on so long," she says. "I don't care about it anymore." Syd Martin says that Randy can fight for another three or four years. What he can do in addition to fighting is perplexing. He studied to be an electrician at Chelsea Vocational High School, but he hasn't a license to practice and has no prospect of obtaining one. Few employers want to hire a man who is going to absent himself periodically to train for fights. Last fall he earned some walking-around money as an extra in David Susskind's film production, Requiem for a Heavyweight. The plot of the film, burdened with melodramatic claptrap, turned on the tragedy of a first-rate fighter, Mountain Rivera, who is revolted by the need to take part in the farce known as wrestling in order to make a living. The film tragedy of Rivera, however, didn't impress Randy Sandy. "Wrestle?" he said, "Why not? I've known for a long time that fighting is a business, and I'm fighting to make money. Wrestling is also a way to make money."

A man of pride

While Sandy is willing to work as a film extra or even a wrestler, he retains pride in himself as a fighter. When somebody asked if he hadn't picked up a few dollars once as a sparring partner for Giulio Rinaldi, Sandy firmly replied, "I was not a sparring partner. They asked me to work with the man and I did. I did not get paid like a sparring partner—they gave me a gift—and I worked when I felt like it."

Sandy's stubbornly proud attitude and his grimly hopeful outlook are characteristic of professional fighters in this period when boxing revenues—aside from the big heavyweight matches—are down to about half of what they were at the start of his career. Among the 1,100 U.S. boxers listed in current ring records there are the same familiar, eager beginners with the same sort of promising record that Sandy made when he started back in 1951 and 1952: people like Mike Pusateri of Brockton, Mass., who had 14 fights last year and won them all by knockout, six in the first round, six in the second, two in the third; or Tod Herring of Houston, who won seven last year, to make his total victories in three years add up to 18, but who was also knocked out for the first defeat of his professional career. And then, too, some of Randy Sandy's contemporaries are still carrying on; Vince Bonomo, a Florida middleweight, had 16 fights and won 10 of them. The Mexican welterweight, Gaspar Ortega, seems to have been the busiest boxer of the year, fighting 16 times, winning 13 of his bouts and defeating the late Benny Paret, among others, but losing to Emile Griffith in a try for the title.

Randy Sandy's life is now on the edge of this turbulent side of the fighting business. A boxing friend told him he wanted to fight just one more year and make a stake. "I tell him, "Don't decide like that,' " Sandy says. " 'If you gettin' beat bad, quit right away.' He took a bad walloping on his next fight and retired. I'm glad, because he was getting unstable." Unstable is Sandy's word for a fighter suffering from too many thumps on the head.

Sandy, still unready to end his own career, leads a life of moderation. He eats two careful meals a day, simple, high-protein foods but no fish or tea. A non-smoker, he indulges in an occasional glass of Cherry Heering, a taste acquired during his European travels. Syd Martin says, "If I see he isn't getting anywhere I'll tell him to hang up his gloves." Sandy says, "I still think I can make it as a fighter. I feel that while I matured early mentally, because I had to support my family, I matured late physically, and I'm still able. But I've got to start to support my family. Ruth's been carrying us, and this can drive a man crazy."

Once when Sandy was thinking of quitting, he met Joe Brown, then the world lightweight champion. An ex-carpenter from Baton Rouge, Brown had been fighting for 11 years—86 fights in all—before he won the championship. "He told me he had been knocking around just like me," Sandy said, "and suddenly he got his chance and he became champion. I've been fighting for 13 years, and to start doing something different is very hard for me."

"Boxing is a hard way to make an easy dollar," said one fighter not long ago. In the late afternoon of his career as a fighter, Randolph Sandy offers a balanced view of his own 13 years: "Fighting done a lot for me even though I haven't always been treated fair. I have the home, a wife and two children. Fighting made me a better fellow than I would have been."