

The short, bizarre life of VINCE FOSTER

More than a decade after his violent death you can still hear his name mentioned where boxing men gather

BY HENRY KRAWIEC

IF ANYBODY EVER wrote a book about Vince Foster, it would have to end at about chapter two, and it might sound like this:

On July 17, 1949, Vince Foster drove to a dance in Hatfield, Minnesota, in his brand new sedan. Like Vince himself, the car was high-powered, fast and eager. It roared forward, as though alive, as though to prove itself. Beside Vince in the front seat, an adoring girl friend clung to him, thrilled at the speed and at the nearness of her hero, yet afraid of them both. In the rear seat rode three of Foster's buddies.

There was a sixth passenger in the car on that Monday night, a passenger none of the youngsters saw; nor, had they seen him, would they have believed he was really there. For that is the philosophy of young people. They do not believe in Death.

It was the sixth passenger who held the wheel rigid as the hulking black trailer loomed out of the darkness ahead, and when the frightful crash no longer echoed through the nearby hills, and the stillness lay thickly about the scene, he looked down at the driver, who lay beside his sweetheart in a spreading dark pool. Then he beckoned, and the story of Vince

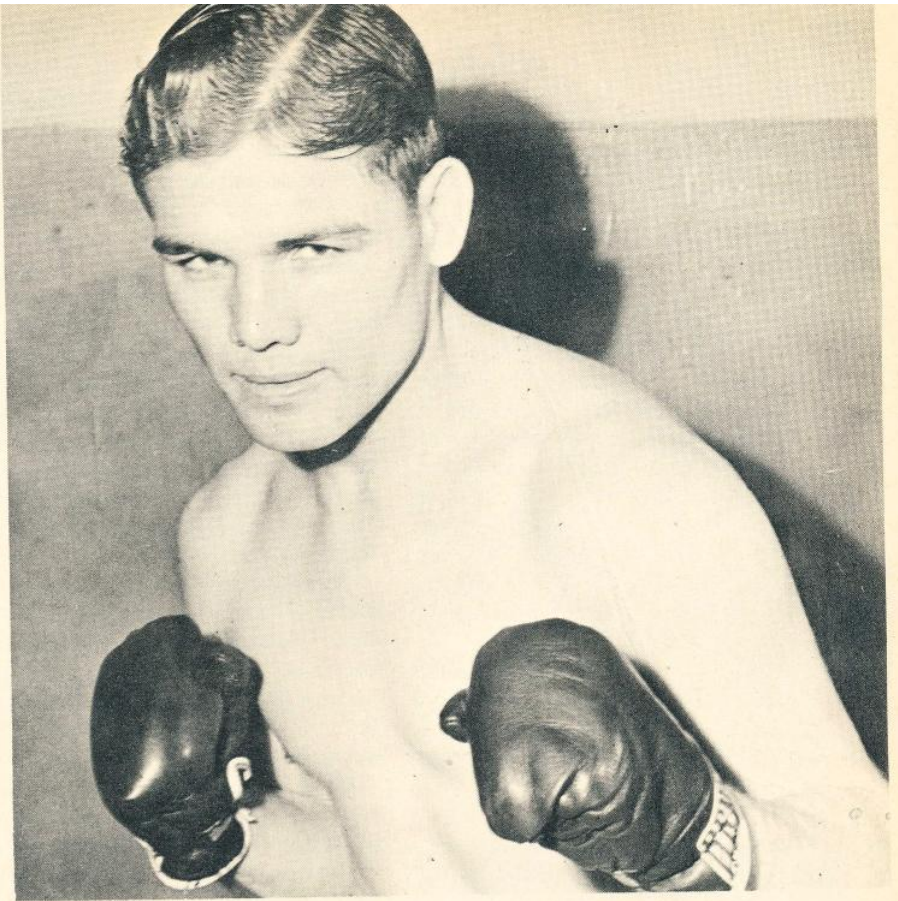
Foster, rapist, evangelist and fist fighter, ended as it had begun — in blood, screams, fear and sudden silence.

The real beginning was in 1942, while Vincent Foster was a member of the Haskell Indian Institute boxing team at Lawrence, Kansas. One day the Haskell team was challenged by a visiting team from nearby Fort Leavenworth Army Disciplinary Barracks. When the soldiers arrived, there was no doubt about the outcome of the meet — they were tough professionals, while the Indian youths were true amateurs.

"Who'd I draw?" asked welterweight Vince Foster, age 15.

His coach looked him up and down and tried to hide his concern. Foster was a skinny runt with little to show but speed and courage. He pointed to a muscular buck private who had been sent to Leavenworth after being court-martialed for going AWOL and creating a sustained disturbance. "His name's Tony Barbella. He's a rough New York boy, so box him. Don't slug with him! Good luck."

It was a good fight. Seven years later, the middleweight champion of the world, Tony Barbella, nee Rocky Graziano, recalled with admiration,



"The scrawny punk could really hit. Where he got the power from, I don't know. All I know is I had a tough time keeping him under control. It was like fighting a pint-sized Tony Zale. I knew then that this Vince Foster was going someplace."

It is a coincidence that these two should start out alike, as delinquents, and wind up as famous prize fighters, meanwhile finding religion. However, there was one big difference: Somebody Up There *didn't* like Vince Foster.

Not since the tragic endings of Ketchel, Darcy, Miske and Stribling had the public been so moved by a fighter's death. Foster's short, riotous life, in its rise from misery to joy and on to tragedy, has no parallel because the climax and ending were packed within a period of a few short months. Vince, pitiable creature that he was, resembled a moth flirting with a flame. It seemed that he knew, at times, where his path would someday lead, yet he gambled that he might turn it onto a happier course. He lost.

He lost, partly, because he had two strikes against him from the beginning — he was part Indian, a half-breed, and he was a product of extreme poverty. Like many of his un-

fortunate race, he liked liquor but couldn't hold it. And there we have the final link in the terrible chain.

Now we have all the elements of the Vince Foster story. All of them run through it from beginning to end. The poverty hit him first. His father, an itinerant laborer, married an Iowa Indian squaw; they had ten children in a tar paper shack on the banks of the Missouri River near Rolu, Nebraska. At first young Vince didn't mind being poor — everybody he knew was poor. It was when he began roaming into the towns and working on surrounding farms that he realized that there were things like money, cars, liquor and — yes, and girls to share it all. Along with the other elements, these four were to prove Vince Foster's undoing.

Then, about the time he was able to earn a meagre pocketful of spending money, he learned that there were more white people than Indians, and some of them wished there were even less Indians. They gave him a hard time. That's when he started to learn about fighting.

He learned so much that he was soon beating up bigger kids, "just for the hell of it." It got him a reputation. When he finally went to Haskell Institute, they talked him into putting his ability to work. Team work. And that's how he came to meet Rocky Graziano in a rough four rounder.

A year after the Graziano bout, young Vince moved to Omaha, there to become an amateur boxer. Within three years he was ready to make some money. It was the money that started him on the road to degradation. Every time he would make a buck by knocking some bum into the laps of ringside customers, he would blow it in the nearest bar. More than once, when the real money would run out, Vince would cash a bad check and continue drinking — and buying drinks for the house. It gave him a good name with his friends, but a bad one with the house and with the cops. For a long time he looked like a tough kid on the way to a long prison stretch. No future at all.

Not even Max Clayton, a veteran Omaha promoter, could visualize anything good for this wild kid, although he knew he had a right hand that could carry him close to the championship — maybe all the way — if he could control his love of liquor and women. Good looking in

a flat-faced, rugged way, Foster was always a killer with the girls. Many of them fell madly in love with him, some sincerely, and life was a ball from morning till night.

At last he married one of them. The most unlikely one. Her name was Dolores Johnson and she was shy, timid, far from glamorous and as unlikely a wife for the mad-living Foster as one could imagine. But no — she was perfect for him. Because what Vince Foster wanted above all else — whether he knew it or not — was the love and the home he had been denied as a boy. In a decent girl like Dolores, he might have got what he wanted.

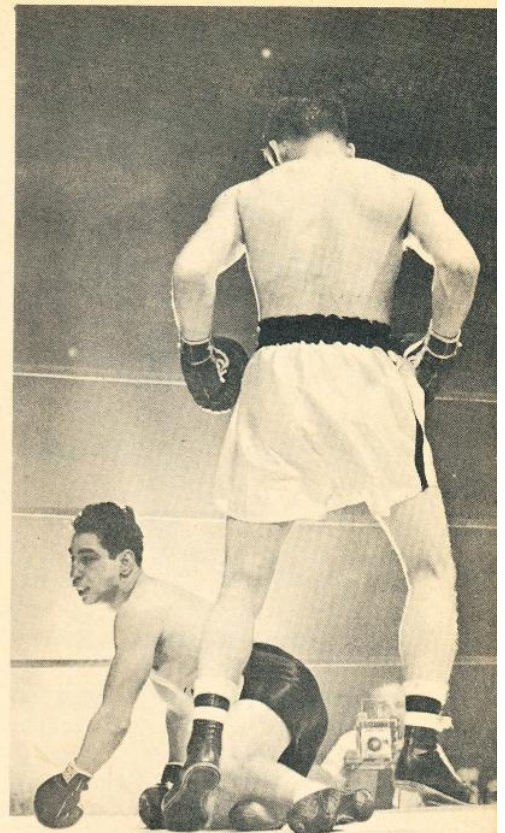
But there was one thing he wanted more — and that was to be a big shot. He wanted to overcome the stigma of his former poverty, and most of all he wanted to overcome the fact that he was a half-breed. He went about it the wrong way.

Especially when, a year after they married, his wife gave birth to a baby boy. For a day or two, Vince walked on air. This, he felt, was the beginning. . . . Actually, it was the beginning of the end. For, three days later, the child died. Vince went out on a tear, and after that, there was no stopping him.

Dolores had enough, one day, and walked out on him. This was the time young Foster needed a break. Something good had to happen to him; otherwise he might have cracked up altogether.

Something good did happen to him. He met Jack Hurley, one of the canniest managers in the fight business, and one of the last of the old timers of the Doc Kearns, Dumb Dan Morgan and Jimmy Johnston school. His last big fighter had been Billy Petrolle, the old Fargo Express, back in 1934. Since then, Jack had been looking around for another Petrolle. Not finding him, he had developed ulcers and a miserable disposition.

Finding Vince helped Hurley a lot. At first it did, because Jack didn't know how deep the bad streak had bored into Vince's very being. But then, after the months began to go by, Hurley knew. Although he moved Foster up the ladder, so high up that the boy was fast becoming famous in the Middle West, he would say, "He's a miserable little punk. I can't stand him, but he may make it if he can stay sober from one fight to the next."



Foster made sensational main event debut in Madison Square Garden by knocking out veteran trialhorse Tough Tony Pellone.

He also said, "He don't have enough brains to get a headache, but he hits like there's rocks in his gloves."

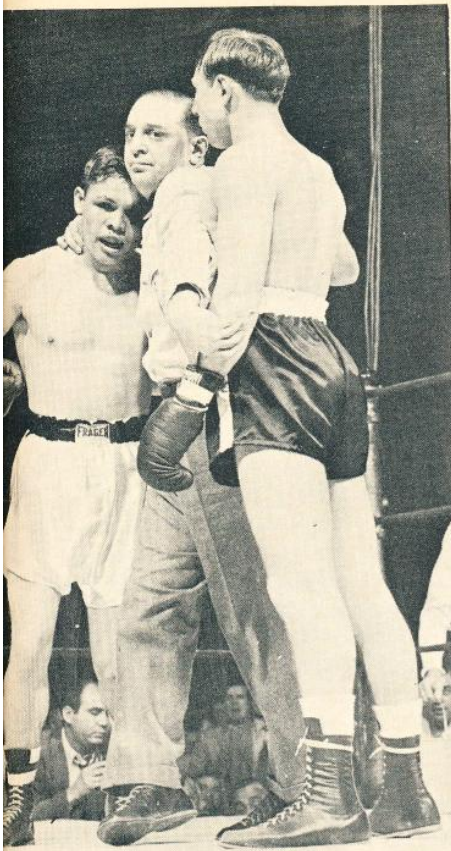
After knocking out 23 guys in 25 fights, Vince said to Hurley, "I want New York. It's time I made some real dough."

Hurley rubbed his burning stomach and sipped at his inevitable glass of milk. "I want some real dough, too. I also want to make sure I got a fighter. We're bringing in Freddy Archer. Lick him and you get New York."

Archer was a tough and experienced trial horse with a good record. A sort of "king-breaker." If you couldn't whip him, you couldn't break into the ratings.

Vince smacked Archer into the middle of last year's income tax. Hurley grinned a rare grin. Now — New York.

But first, something happened. Something rare and almost unbe-



A month after he knocked out Pellone, Vince was back in Madison Square Garden, but was stopped by Charley Fusari.

lievable. It's fifty percent of the Vince Foster story, and the thing that makes this punk kid news a dozen years after his death. Hurley tells his part of it like this:

"Vince and I were riding in a Chicago street car one afternoon and as we passed the Moody Memorial Church, the one built like a movie theatre, I remarked, 'That would make a great fight arena.'

"Foster looked at me and said, 'Why don't someone get it?' I tried to explain to him why, and then forgot about it.

"The next day, Sunday, August 22, 1948, Foster wandered all alone into the Church to check on its seating capacity. As he stood near the rear pew he heard the preacher talking to his flock. Vince told me, later, 'The words sank deep into my soul and from then on I was saved.'"

It's a gag, thought Hurley. It has to be. He sneered sourly and refused

to talk about it. Vince Foster? — religion? It was as though Lucifer had climbed back up into heaven to get back his wings.

But it was true. In a way, a small miracle had happened. From that day on, Vince Foster was not a changed man, but a *new* man, in the strictest sense of the word. Even the look on his face was different. He, who had sworn like a dead end kid at every opportunity, now hesitated to let fly even an occasional "darn". His wife, overjoyed, came back to him. He began speaking at boys' clubs and young peoples' gatherings, helping the poor in various ways and doing small but helpful things for his own people — white and Indian alike.

Jack Hurley swore his ulcers were starting to heal. He watched Vince for several weeks to see if the most important evidence would show. It did. Vince didn't take a drink or go near a bar. The transformation, thought Hurley, is now complete. Still, being a cautious sort, he kept his fingers crossed. It's a good thing he did.

But, for the moment, at least, things looked good. Jack got the New York bout. In Madison Square Garden, no less. A semi-final. The trip east was pure joy all the way.

The fight was pure joy, too. Vince's opponent was Nick Mistovich, from Ohio. Foster nearly killed him, and the New York crowd roared its approval. The Indian lad's reputation had preceded him, and everybody was curious to see him. Their first impression was a good one.

So was the second. This time, on January 14, 1949, Foster was shoved into the Garden main event. It was incredible, his merely being there. His professional career had begun barely 30 months before. People looked upon him as a living fantasy. On the other hand, he was only human. And it seemed that tough trial horse Tony Pellone would stop him dead in his tracks.

Tony was a sort of big-time version of Freddy Archer — a spoiler. Not quite good enough to clinch the title, Pellone was the stumbling block a contender had to pass if he wanted to meet Sugar Ray Robinson for the welterweight championship. Not many got past him. Surely, the betting folks decided, this rough kid from the west couldn't do it. So they made the odds 12-5 on Pellone — "Tough Tony,"

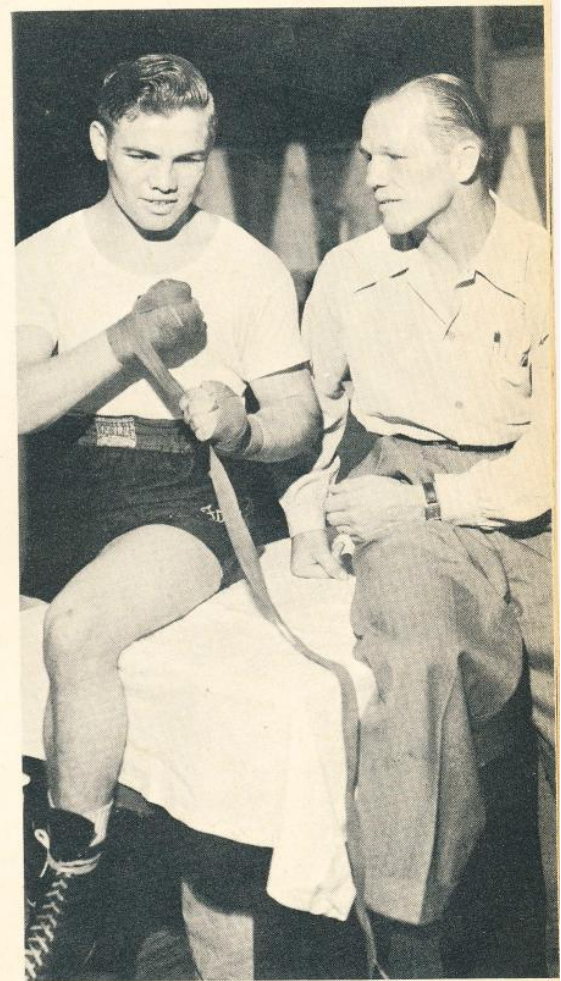
the Spoiler.

The miracle kept its shape. Tough Tony was spoiled by the punk from out west. And now Vince Foster was the hottest young attraction in boxing. *Life* magazine thought he was important enough to give him a multi-page spread, which didn't hurt his ballyhoo. The columnists raved about him. Yet, through it all, there ran the current of doubt. What with all his bible slinging and psalm singing, they asked, was Vince Foster still a sinner at heart? Was the religion bit simply a Hurley gag? *What* was Vince Foster?

The answer came in a hurry, and it nearly killed the patient Jack Hurley.

Before returning to Chicago, Hurley signed to box the clever contender, Charley Fusari, in the Garden on February 18th. Vince was to receive 30 percent of the gate — at least \$30,000. If you didn't strain to look ahead, it seemed that Vince Foster had ridden hogwild over the trident of Satan and truly earned his position with the

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Foster, left, prepares for workout in a Chicago gym. With him is Tony Zale.

GENARO

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Just as Harry Greb dominated the middleweights of that wonderful period, so Genaro dominated the little fellows. He was flyweight champion, off and on and in and out, between 1923 and 1930, winning and losing one version of the title or another. Around 1929 and 1930 he was the idol of this country and Europe, a sort of Ray Robinson character who had the French, especially, bowing before him.

During this period, Frankie was in Paris, one time, waiting for instructions from Joe Jacobs, who was in Berlin at the moment, looking into some business for Max Schmeling. He should have known better than to leave Frankie alone. Frankie took a telephone call from Milan, Italy. A promoter there wanted Genaro to fight a non-title bout with one of his better boys. Frankie accepted, in the name of Joe Jacobs.

After licking the Italian, Orlando Magliozz, he went on to Naples and there beat a Frenchman named Gleizes in three rounds. After these fights he was wine and dined like the conquering hero he was.

Finally, returning to Paris, Frankie found an angry Jacobs waiting for him at the hotel. "So, you're your own manager, are you? I hope you did well for yourself!"

Frankie grinned. "I sure did. Hell, Joe, don't be sore — you could use the vacation, couldn't you?"

Joe fumed, "Yeah, but I can use my cut of that Italian money even more. Where is it?" He held out his hand.

Frankie grinned engagingly. "Sorry, Joe — I spent it. I spent every last beautiful lira of it! Let's consider that you — er — paid for your vacation with the money. It was worth it, wasn't it?"

History doesn't record whether or not the wily Jacobs ever got his money. He probably did, one way or the other. In any case, no money troubles ever kept him from loving Frankie Genaro, the sweet little guy who was an angel in his street clothes, but a devil in the ring.

That's how they look at it over at the Neutral Corner — and everywhere else when they talk about Frankie. And they'll be talking about him for a long time. ● end

FOSTER

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angels.

Then, on February 6th, in the midst of his training, Vince Foster disappeared. He went back to Omaha. For awhile it looked okay, and Hurley, who now trusted his "saved" slugger, let him go for a day or two of fun. He deserved it. But then, like a bolt of lightning, a telegram came from Vince: "I WILL BE BACK IN A COUPLE OF DAYS." Hurley's heart sank. It didn't look good at all. A couple of days passed, then a couple more. And then, the news came out.

It came from the police in St. Joseph, Missouri.

Vince had picked up a girl in Kansas City shortly after leaving Chicago. Together, they had gone on a riotous binge. A day or two later, Vince was arrested on a charge of forcible rape.

He denied it, but few believed him. "Satan had his hooks into him too deep," said a fellow evangelist sadly, "—he was saved, but too late."

"Once a bum, always a bum," was Jack Hurley's terse comment, as he cancelled the Fusari fight while Vince waited for his fate.

He was indicted and ordered to a court hearing on February 23rd. A few days before his appearance, Foster took a train back to Chicago to see Hurley for the first time since he broke away from camp. Jack, bitter and ill, was noncommittal and cold to the boy. It has been said that, had Hurley's attitude been different, things might have turned out differently. This is unlikely, to say the least. Flip a coin often enough and it's bound to come up tails sooner or later — with a never-ending fifty-fifty chance.

Vince hunched his shoulders under the bitter winter wind of Chicago and went into Moody's Church to pray. "The Lord did this," he said later, "to put me in my place."

At the hearing, the woman involved said that she was pregnant. She demanded \$100,000. At the Moody Memorial Church, meanwhile, they prayed for Vince; at Stillman's gym in New York, they just raised eyebrows at one another and shrugged.

Most of those who knew Vince believed he was guilty of going to bed, but not of forcible rape. It looked to them like the old con game.

But it no longer matters. A settlement was made and Vince got off with his scalp still on. Relieved, determined to give his terror one last chance, Hurley put the Fusari fight back in the works, set this time for May 13th, 1949 — a Friday. At Stillman's gym, they frowned. Friday the 13th? Hurley must be nuts!

Fusari was a 6 to 5 underdog when they entered the ring, testimony to Foster's quickly-built reputation. And at first it seemed that the bettors were right. Vince slugged his foe silly, with that awful right hand banging away under Charley's heart as though it were going to chop a hole through his ribs.

But Fusari was in perfect condition; he withstood the attack and started to fight back. Vince wasn't in good condition — he slowed down, very fast. After only a minute and a half had gone by his arms hung at his sides and he gasped for breath. Charley knocked him to the canvas with a hard right. Twice more Fusari dropped him. Then Ruby Goldstein, wondering what Foster was doing in the same ring with Fusari, stopped it.

On May 26 of that year, Foster said: "I must have more time to devote to God." With those words, he retired from the ring. A few days later he was on his way back to Nebraska. The public's reaction was mixed. Generally, they felt that the prize ring's loss was the pulpit's gain. Surely, Vince would be able to do more good as a fighter of Satan than a fighter of men.

It didn't happen that way. The next news of Vince Foster made only the headlines in the newspapers of the great plains. In New York and the places where he had soared glowing across the firmament, there was just the small announcement about an ex-fighter who had smashed his car into the rear end of a trailer. The only sad part was that he had killed not only himself but an innocent girl.

They were wrong. The story of Vince Foster is sad and tragic. Yet, somehow, there is a kind of gladness about it. You get the impression that Foster lived a complete life in his 22 short years. In that short time, he packed generous quantities of fame, fortune, tragedy, sorrow, love and hatred — and, yes, a portion of glory — that together make him memorable. But not just that.

Vince Foster can be a lesson in living, for all who understand. ● end