

The Dakota Kid

By Pete Ehrmann on February 19, 2014



He grew up in Fargo, North Dakota, drinking and getting into fights at the weekly dances.

“Oh my God, if I was fighting today. They’re so bad I want to throw something at the TV. It just ticks me off how terrible they are...”

It still happens, though it was more than 40 years and 70 pounds ago when Andy Heilman was the third-ranked middleweight in the world. He’ll be sitting in a restaurant, and after eyeballing him for a while a stranger will leap up in a burst of recognition and whoop, “The Dakota Kid! The Dakota Kid!”

It’s “a good feeling,” admits the 74-year-old Heilman, same as it was when he was inducted into the California Boxing Hall of Fame and the San Pedro Sports Walk of Fame a few years ago.

It’s almost as good as the feeling he got when opponents like Florentino Fernandez, Jimmy Lester and Andy Kendall met him in the center of the ring for the kind of combat Heilman loved best.

“We stood there toe-to-toe,” he says. “I was a puncher, not much of a boxer at all. I just liked to scrap a lot.”

That started in Fargo, North Dakota, where the farm-born Heilman grew up (hence his later ring nickname) and drinking and getting into fights was what you did at the weekly dances. After he joined the Army and shipped out to a base in Hawaii, Heilman was doing mandatory

calisthenics with the other grunts one day and noticed a group standing nearby observing the proceedings with a superior air.

When he asked how come the onlookers didn't have to participate, the answer was that they were the boxing team. "Where's the gym?" Heilman asked.

His first time there, the coach put Heilman in the ring with the team's top gun, who knocked out two of his bottom teeth with an uppercut. The coach sent Heilman to the dentist and figured he'd seen the last of him.

"Jesus, you do want to fight!" he exclaimed when Andy returned the next day.

"I loved it," says Heilman. "Whenever I fought I felt good. I was never scared. Boxing is the best thing that ever happened to me. Without it I probably would've been in jail."

After his military hitch ended, he pocketed a bunch of amateur titles back home before lighting out for California and turning pro on March 15, 1962. Thanks to a cut incurred by opponent Mel Richardson in the first round, their bout went into the books as a technical draw. Three wins later, Heilman dropped a decision to Richardson at the Olympic Auditorium in LA—his only loss over the next four years, and reversed four months later.

Bill Miller, *The Ring* magazine's California savant, named him one of the Golden State's "best preliminary fighters of 1962." The bad news was that in winning an eight-round decision over Benny McCovey at the Olympic that October, Andy broke his right hand. Then he re-broke the mitt twice in the gym, and sat out all of '63.

Picking up the next year where he'd left off, Heilman won six and drew with Gene "Honey Bear" Bryant in a Vegas 10-rounder.

He was 14-1-2, but when *Boxing Illustrated* ranked the top 50 boxers in the major weight classes that November, the middleweight in the number 50 spot was Andy Heilman.

Less than two years later an article in the same publication likened Heilman to Fargo's most famous boxer, Hall of Famer Billy Petrolle. "It may be pure coincidence," it said, "but Heilman bears a resemblance to the old 'Fargo Express' in appearance and fighting style. A crafty, hustling young pro who is just hitting his stride at 25, Andy proved his worth punching out a big win [on May 12, 1966] over Florentino Fernandez... He decked the Cuban and had him all but out on his feet at the final bell."

What happened?

"When I got hooked up with Jackie McCoy," Heilman told Mike Schoener of the *Fargo Forum* several years ago, "that's when I got pretty good."

Onetime LA Times boxing writer John Hall called McCoy, whose stable Heilman joined in 1966, “the most respected, best-liked, most honest, most humble, most dedicated, sweetest human being—manager—trainer—cornerman doubtless in the history of boxing in Southern California.”

“A great guy,” declares Heilman simply.

McCoy’s enthusiasm for him, in turn, was unswerving. “Heilman doesn’t know how to go backwards—only forwards,” he once said. His manager’s unabashed affection for him may also have had something to do with the fact that compared to the two world champions in the McCoy stable at the time, The Dakota Kid was an altar boy. Unlike Raul Rojas and Mando Ramos, he trained diligently, didn’t chase around and make McCoy chase after him, and stayed away from drugs.

“I never touched that stinkin’ dope, and, goddammit, they got hooked on that crap,” says Heilman. “They could’ve been even better than they were.”

Fights don’t get any better than the pair Heilman had with San Francisco’s Jimmy Lester. Sportswriters voted their first one, in Oakland on November 28, 1966, “Fight of the Year” in Northern California. “...One of the greatest fights we ever had in the Bay area,” agrees promoter Don Chargin. “It was toe-to-toe for 10 rounds. They did not stop.” Heilman won a unanimous decision that time and a majority one when he and “the toughest guy I ever fought” did it again on July 15, 1969, in what Don Fraser called in *The Ring* “possibly the best fight of the year in Northern California.” The rematch drew almost 7,500 fans.

The year before, former middleweight champion Emile Griffith won a majority decision over Heilman in an Oakland 12-rounder. “It was close, but he won,” concedes Andy. In his only appearance at Madison Square Garden, Heilman met Griffith again on February 3, 1969.

After the bell ended the 10-round fight, Heilman recalls, “Jackie told me, ‘Andy, you won this fight!’ My heart started pumping like crazy. I thought, *God, this is my chance* (for a title shot).”

But the votes for Griffith—whose 31st birthday it was—were not only unanimous but so lopsided (8-2 twice, 7-3) that the normally placid McCoy had a conniption. McCoy later claimed that the Garden brain trust had designs on a fourth title match between Griffith and Nino Benvenuti and weren’t about to let anyone louse that up.

(Griffith-Benvenuti IV never did happen, and both Marshall Reed of *Boxing Illustrated* and *The Ring*’s Nat Loubet had Griffith beating Heilman at the Garden, albeit by a much closer margin than the official decision. “Heilman got the cheers even if he didn’t get the decision,” said Reed. Loubet called the Westerner “a willing, two-fisted, courageous fighter with no

title skills but a flaming determination to do battle. In Heilman [Griffith] faced an opponent who crowded him at every turn and forced the fight.”)

After winning his next four bouts, Heilman lost a split decision to Nate Collins, whom he'd knocked out before, and on October 24, 1970, he was beating Ron Wilson at the Valley Music Theatre in Woodland Hills, California, when he sat down after the fifth round and told McCoy, “I think I'm done.”

“I was getting up there—32 years old—and I could feel it was time,” he says.

McCoy didn't bat an eye at the inconvenient timing of the epiphany. “Great,” he told Heilman as he signaled the referee that the fight was over. “I was gonna tell you anyway.”

The occasional pangs the 42-7-3 Heilman feels about his abrupt exit from the ring disappear when he considers how many of his boxing contemporaries are under the ground or wish they were.

He continued working as a longshoreman on the San Pedro waterfront for more than a quarter-century, a job he loved so much Heilman cheerfully commuted 100 miles a day from his southern California home. That ended when a mammoth load of cotton bales struck him in the head and the surgery intended to alleviate the resulting headaches not only didn't do that but also made it hard for Heilman to fully raise one of his arms. He sued the doctor for \$3 million, and on the day the malpractice trial was to start the defendant's insurer declared bankruptcy. “I didn't get a dime,” Andy sighs.

Overall he feels pretty good, although at a recent physical exam he was surprised to learn he has high blood pressure. Heilman says he will bring it down by doing roadwork and punching the bag again.

It would probably also help to turn off the TV when boxing is on.

“Oh my God, if I was fighting today,” says The Dakota Kid. “They're so bad I want to throw something at the TV. It just ticks me off how terrible they are. It makes me mad just to watch.”