

## Meeting Up with a Hero by Kelly Nicholson

“So, have you heard of Boone Kirkman?”

I hadn't.

My cousin Danny and I were in Tacoma, around the spring of 1966 and swapping choice bits of what we knew about boxing. He attended a local high school, and was fairly in touch with the Sea-Tac fight scene. I was fifteen, living a couple of hours down the I 5 freeway near the Columbia River in Vancouver, Washington.

Like other kids in our neighborhood, I was crazy for sports, following telecasts and poring over ring news and morning boxscores in the *Portland Oregonian*. By this time I had read a couple of Nat Fleischer's books and had absorbed a fair amount of fight history, particularly from around the turn of the century, And like most everyone, I was revved plenty about Muhammad Ali, whom we continued to call by his more familiar name of Cassius Clay.



“He won the Nationals last year. And two pro fights, knocked ‘em both out in the first round.”

I was all ears.

“They're saying that this is the guy who's gonna beat Clay.”

*Quick update: It is now August 7, 2019. Standing inside, I recognize Boone immediately as he approaches the glass door of his hangout, the Yankee Grill in downtown Renton. My 18-year old son Chace and I are meeting him here for breakfast and a chat that I have long wanted to have. It has been more than 40 years since I saw Boone in action last at the Seattle Center Arena. We settle in for a brief reminiscence about his time in boxing and after.*

### 1965: A Young Bomber out of Renton

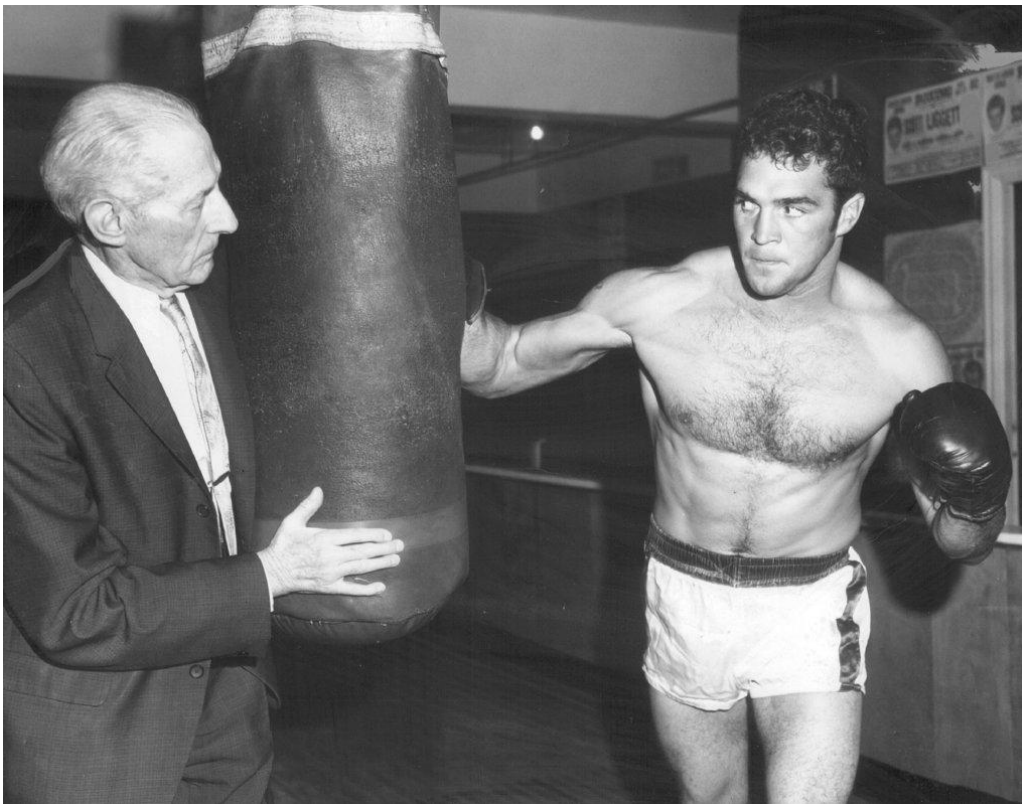
Born in Vallejo, California, raised in the area of his family roots in Renton, Washington, Boone was a tough kid with the makings of a fighter. Steered by his father Oehm Kirkman into amateur boxing, he had a rude start, and like many a young mixer with natural gifts, he learned quickly that the raw goods were not enough.

“Handspeed and heart,” said the venerable Grantland Rice long ago, “are what boxing is all about.” Some kids quit after a tough sparring session. Some last. Boone wavered, but he stayed. In time he won Golden Gloves and Diamond Belt tournaments in the Northwest, and had the local scribes taking notice. An inveterate body banger, he exploded onto the wider scene in the 1965 National AAU tournament in Toledo, Ohio. When he stopped the heavily favored Fleming Mosley, himself a knockout artist, in the finals, he had his first real exposure.

## An Old Maestro

Boone caught the eye likewise of “Deacon” Jack Hurley, a veteran trainer, manager and public Svengali who had newsmen hanging on his every word. Jack had given a boost years back to the careers of men like Billy Petrolle and Harry “Kid” Matthews, making them decent dough in the bargain. He charged his boys half, not the customary one-third, for his service, but most often he was worth it.

He got hold of Matthews, a veteran light-heavyweight, in 1949 and steered him on a winning streak that had the press singing Harry’s praises. Jack would maneuver him into a fight with heavyweight contender Rocky Marciano in the summer of ‘52. Born in 1897, Jack Hurley had seen much in his day; he knew the game and he knew human nature. He could cast light on his fighters like no one else in the business. He also knew pure gold when he saw it. One look at Boone and you thought he had arrived from Olympus as a gift from on high. As it would turn out, he never fought a prelim bout in his career.



Boone signed with Jack, and a media frenzy was starting. I still remember my delight in the commentary of local Portland KGW sportscaster Doug LaMear, a wry fountain of good sense whose love of boxing all but flowed out of our glowing black and white box into the living room. Featured one night was footage of one of Boone’s recent fights, showcasing him at work with a hapless foe against the ropes. In the background was Hurley’s commentary: “I tell Boone to be careful when he’s got a guy in trouble with those body shots,” said Jack, “I tell him not to go to the head when he has ‘em in trouble, ‘cause otherwise he’s liable to *kill* ‘em.”

Whereupon the victim, walloped like a dirty rug, sank to the floor.

At fifteen, I was having my first religious experience.

## Mania in the Northwest

In May of 1967 at the Seattle Center Coliseum, with ten wins to his credit, he fought Eddie Machen, a boxing wizard who seven years earlier had taken on dreadnaught Sonny Liston when every guy in the division was running the other way. Eddie was a bright kid but a troubled one, serving three years for armed robbery before turning pro in 1952. He went twelve with Sonny and was upright at the finish.

A year prior, Machen had schooled a young Jerry Quarry over ten rounds in Jerry's home venue of Los Angeles. This time it was a different story. Though he did clip the Renton prospect with a right hand that Boone still remembers (*"It was a good thing," he says to me now, as we knife into our morning feed, "that I was young and in shape"*), he fell in three under a hail of shots, making Boone one of three men (*Ingemar Johansson and Joe Frazier, he reminds me, were the others*) who would beat him inside the distance. It was Eddie's last ring battle. Long afflicted with depression, he would be found dead in San Francisco five years later, fallen from a second story window in an apparent suicide.

Boone's stock meanwhile was going like a rocket through the ozone. Five weeks later Hurley matched him, again at the Coliseum, with the formidable Doug Jones, who had given a young Cassius Clay a scare in their ten rounder at Madison Square Garden four years prior.

Heroes, of course, sometimes exceed in the imagination what any man of flesh and blood can be. With Kirkman drawing sell-out crowds and his opponents crashing like trees, it seemed he could do no wrong. (It was around this time that I entertained my oh, so fetching Sophomore English teacher with a mind's-eye composition that climaxed with a showdown of Boone and 1964 Olympian Joe Frazier.) I seized hungrily upon the *Oregonian* the next day only to learn that he had been stopped with a busted-up eye at the end of the seventh round.

At least, it had not been one-sided. Jones had been getting hammered in that last frame, and Boone actually thought he had won when the referee stepped between them. My grief lifted less than two months later when he reversed the outcome, stopping Doug in six. I got to see my first pro fight in the flesh when my father and I went to Portland Memorial Coliseum, the night before I turned 16, to watch Boone score a ten round decision over journeyman Wayne Heath. (The good fortune continued when they televised the Muhammad Ali – Zora Foley fight the night following. It was the last bout Ali would have before charges of draft evasion would interrupt his career for three and a half years.)

## Hitting the Wall – and a *Postscript* in Toronto

There followed a streak of ten wins, during which time Boone achieved ranking in *The Ring* magazine. After he knocked out Amos "Big Train" Lincoln in July of 1970, he was matched on November 18<sup>th</sup> with Mexico City gold medalist George Foreman, 23 – 0, at Madison Square Garden in New York. It was a co-main event feature preceding Joe Frazier's heavyweight title defense against Bob Foster.

Boone's relationship with Hurley by now was souring, owing in part to his lack of available sparring partners leading up to the event. Shoved down in the opening seconds, he got to his feet and tried to bob and weave his way into George with shots to the body. Though he got home with a couple – some accounts have it that he actually broke one of Foreman's ribs in the fight – it was not a winning

strategy. George loved guys who got down low and came at him, marching square into his two-handed wrecking ball leverage. Felled in the first round, Kirkman was stopped in the second.

Boone needed time off after this one. He sought out the wilds that he had enjoyed with his father from an early age and began a serious study of mountain climbing. It would become his favorite pastime in later years, the high peaks of Rainier and St. Helens providing him with a cold, clean break from the haphazard world below.

He returned to action in January of 1973, reeling off ten wins, followed by successive losses that had him thinking of retirement. Yet he would achieve some measure of satisfaction in an odd venue. In April of 1975, half a year after being confounded and finally dropped in the eighth round by former champion Muhammad Ali, a still adrift George Foreman agreed to face five men in a set of three-round exhibitions at the Maple Leaf Gardens in Toronto. Boone was one of them.

Scarcely one account of this event anywhere does not rely on the word 'carnival' at some point – ABC's Howard Cosell, at his sardonic best, termed it a *biz-zarre occasion* even the before the opening bell. Co-anchor Ali, seated next to Howard with promoter Don King, yammered from the get-go about his own upcoming public appearance, shouting endlessly over Cosell's commentary. (It was a toss of the coin as to which sound was more apt to get the volume nixed.)

Seeking to re-establish his role as a destroyer, Foreman had promised a veritable execution of each man within his nine-minute distance. The show, in the process, degenerated into near chaos, hostilities continuing a couple of times after the ref had waved it off. Badly outsized journeyman Jerry Judge, second in order, managed to wrestle George to the canvas after they traded words and the former champ clipped him a couple of *gratis* shots following the halt. Charlie Polite, number four, responded to George's nose-to-nose staredown by sneaking a smooch before going to his corner. He went the distance, mimicking the "rope a dope" strategy of Ali as the originator of that tactic howled at him with glee.

Boone was on last, and while this event may be remembered for its absurdity, when the smoke cleared it had yielded a show of his fighting spirit. After what happened in 1970 at the Garden, you might have expected him to be gun-shy. Instead, he dug into Foreman in the first round with everything he had.

A sudden rally from George cut it short. A left hand clout put Boone on his back, looking just like had in New York. But then came a surprise. With an "oh, well" try-again look on his face, Kirkman hoisted himself up and went back into the fire. Amazingly, he kept after George in the second, rocking him to his soles with a hook of his own that told the younger man this end of the deal was no joke. He kept it coming in the third, sinking shots into Foreman's gut, blood streaming in the final seconds from a gash over his left eye, unfazed at the bell.

At the end of those three rounds, he had held his own against the much bigger ex-champion. The two men traded good wishes at the close, the one civil expression, it seemed, in the whole telecast. (While it may be a minority opinion, I have always thought, too, that George was due some praise for this assignment, however ungainly the result.)

## A Final Run

After a decision loss to Randy Neumann in September of 1975, Boone again departed from the game. But he managed one last string of wins beginning in April of '77 when he outhustled Joe "King" Roman at the Seattle Center Arena. (I was in grad school at the University of Washington at the time, and sending columns to *Ring* editor Nat Loubet from around the Portland and Seattle circuit for his "Rings Around the World" summary. This piece of work was a nostalgic treat.)

Three months later, again at the Arena, Boone had a go with veteran Ron Stander, a beefy, hard-slugging Omahan who had knocked out Earnie Shavers early in each man's career. In 1972 Ron had gone five with Joe Frazier without hitting the floor. Boone again showed that he knew his way around a ring, pounding out a victory in seven rounds with savvy moves and stern counter-punching.

After wins over Puerto Rican champion Pedro Agosto and journeyman Charles Atlas, he turned down painfully thin offers to fight Larry Holmes and Gerrie Coetzee. He called it a day, ending his career at 36 – 6, an .857 batting average, as it were, in an era that has been called the hottest in heavyweight history.

## Perseverance, in the Ring and Out

*We're finishing up at the Grill – Boone overrides my earlier instruction to the server to put it on my card. He is afflicted these days, he explains, with Bell's Palsy, which has his face partially paralyzed and his right eye swelled. He has suffered cancer on one ear, and is diminished in the other.*

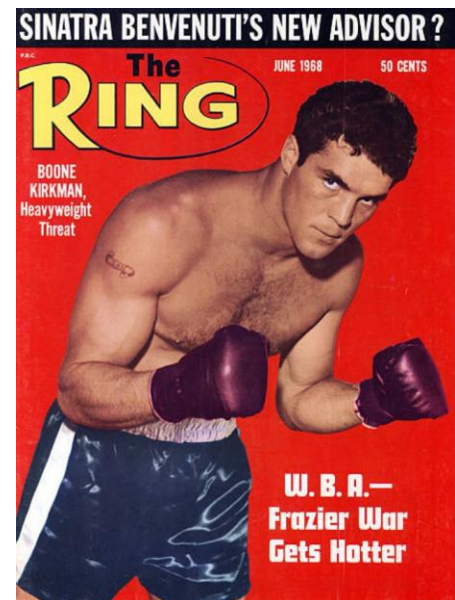
*Unlike a lot of fighters, though, he was mindful of the dangers of his profession, and has said more than once, in conversations like this one, "I hope I got out in time." He watches what he eats and drinks, saying "I like to have a clear mind." At 74, he has six years on me. His memory is pellucid.*

*It has been a great trip. My son and I have made our usual rounds and made some new ones. In a short while, after seeing the house Boone's great-grandfather built (it is a beauty) and taking a photo at the mural nearby celebrating his career, we head down the I 90 corridor to our beloved Pendleton, Oregon. Now and again one hears of a fighter "leaving it in the ring," when he has given his all and his guns are empty. Having seen Boone up close against Wayne Heath, Jimmy Ellis, and several others, I will venture that I never saw a man in my life who fit the description better.*

*"I awoke last night to the sound of thunder," goes an old 70s refrain by Bob Seeger, "how far off, I sat and wondered." This trip has been also a rite of passage: I overheard myself being called, at the local AIRbnb, "an old guy." The following night, an attendant at the ballpark, when a few of us went to see the Mariners, called me (albeit affably) "Pops".*

*Things don't always go as planned in this life. A man may envision, say, being a world champion athlete, or having an ideal marriage, or raising a son who is flawless, after he has done a flawless job of it himself. Rarely does it happen in such neat fashion. Sometimes bad luck hits, sometimes not. Now and again we strike good fortune, and maintain it, if we are wise, by our own continuing efforts. In Boone's case, marriage a third time has been the proverbial charm – he and wife Terese have now been together some three decades.*

*Win or lose, every man, in his better moments, knows that he faces a deeper challenge than the ones that take place under the lights and in front of an audience. It is an inward test of his staying power amid tides of fortune that do not always bend with his wishes. Now and again we hear a lament over this world's hard obstinacy and injustice. But then again, such a world calls forth from us qualities of character that would not live otherwise. Amid fortune's daily ebb and flow, a genuine human being, one who is devoid of pretense, is a true find. He is also, to my thinking, a hero. This morning, on this life-stage of our way Home, my son and I have met one.*



- 1) A young Boone in fighting pose
- 2) An exhibition with George Foreman in Toronto, 1975
- 3) Boone late in his career, ringing up a victory
- 4) The cover of *The Ring*, June 1968