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Nathan Liff may be 95, but his memory, love

"My first boxing memory was in 19 — I think — 15. Frank Klaus lost the middleweight championship to George Chip. I was a kid then. . . . "

By Shelly Anderson
Post-Gazette Sports Writer

No one knows how old Nathan Liff is. His mother told him he was born in Russia, three days after a neighbor's barn burned down, that he was brought to Pittsburgh as an infant and that he lost one of his shoes on the boat.

Relatives believe Liff is about 95. His eyesight is far from sharp. He strains some to hear things, even with a hearing aid.

Still, he gets around OK in his Squirrel Hill high-rise apartment, a place where there are a few appointments that have grown old with him and become antiques, but nothing in the main rooms to suggest his life around the ring.

If you bring up the subject, he'll gladly dig out a briefcase filled with photos, letters and mementoes. But most of his boxing knowledge and memories are in his head.

Liff is a living time capsule on the subject of boxing. He has lived and loved the sport all his life. He can talk about Klaus and Harry Greb and Billy Conn and Muhammad Ali and Mike Tyson all in the same sentence. He remembers when boxing was big in Pittsburgh and the Steelers struggled to survive.

His stories cover most of this century, from his childhood hawking newspapers during bouts to an undistinguished career as a featherweight, his time as a manager, his days as a boxing promoter.

Liff loves to share those vivid memories, and he has just the kind of gravelly voice to take you back through boxing's glory days.

It started way back when

The Klaus title fight in Pittsburgh, Liff recalls, actually was in 1913, on Oct. 11. Klaus, from Braddock, and Chip, from New Castle, were the first in a long line of champs from Western Pennsylvania.

Liff's regular post as a newspaper boy then was at city hall, but he also got to work big events. That put him ringside, all of 10-years-old but already keen on the sport.

Other than the year, records indicate Liff's memory about that match — and all of his stories, for that matter — remains accurate.

"Frank Klaus was a big favorite, a world champion," Liff said. "He had just gotten back from France.

"In those days, there were only six rounds. He was playing with Chip. In the sixth round, Chip threw one from what we call center field with a right hand and knocked him out and won the title."

Not long after that, Harry Greb became Pittsburgh's biggest star. Greb was a feisty middleweight who often fought, and beat, men in higher weight classes.

Liff was at New York's Madison Square Garden on May 23, 1922, the night Greb bloodied Gene Tunney and won the middleweight title. It was the only career loss for Tunney, an eventual heavyweight champ.

A couple of years earlier Liff had worked in Greb's corner. Liff was in Canton, Ohio, to sell souvenirs at a Bulldogs game. (The Bulldogs were a pro football team that featured Jim Thorpe.)

Greb happened to have a fight slated there against George "Knockout" Brown, Nov. 17, 1919, and Liff was invited to "swing towel" between rounds in exchange for a dollar. It was a pre-air conditioning thing.

"You swing the towel to give him air," Liff said. "You had to be in shape to swing towel. You had to get it up high [and snap it down]. Some guys, they didn't do it right. They didn't give them enough air."

Liff remembers the no-decision fight with a cornerman's insight.

"Brown was a No. 1 or No. 2 contender," Liff said. "Greb was hitting him at will. [Greb's manager, James "Red"] Mason kept fighting with Greb every round — 'Take him out, take him out' — wanting him to knock him out.

"Finally, the fifth, sixth round, Greb got up and said, 'Look, you take him out. I'm not going to break my hand on that guy. He's crazy in there.'

"Yeah, sure, I swung towel for Greb 10 rounds."

Another time, after he had become friends with Mason, Liff was working with a couple of boxers on a trip to Philadelphia. Greb also was in town, and Mason took them out for steaks at a place Liff recalled as the Reading Station at 12th and Market.

"Greb, the poor guy, couldn't eat because everybody kept bothering him," Liff said. The popular boxer eventually had to escape and order room service at his hotel.

"Yet when people saw [Greb] in Pittsburgh, they just said, 'Oh, that's Harry.' It was the same way with Billy."

That was Billy Conn, a light heavyweight champion and easily the biggest local name in boxing through the years.

Greb died in 1926 at age 32 during what would now be routine nasal surgery. He didn't live quite long enough to see the real golden age of boxing in Pittsburgh or to meet Conn and other stars of that era who idolized him.

Liff knew them all.

Greb lived in the no-decision era, when boxers often fought dozens of times a year. A lot of the bouts were non-sanctioned — maybe the scheduled referee didn't show up, for instance. The fights were real, but they were mostly for entertainment and bragging rights.

Those days were gone by the 1930s, when Conn and others were ushering in boxing's heyday in Pittsburgh.

Late night moves

"Natey," as Liff was known then, began promoting bouts at Duquesne Gardens which, he said, seated about 6,100. The big night there was Wednesday, often with four bouts on the card. Liff's rent was 10 percent of the gate.

Liff considered himself as much a matchmaker as promoter. He would scout the gyms during the day, attend fights in the evening.

Late at night, when bouts at Duquesne Gardens and other popular venues such as Motor Square Garden in East Liberty had wrapped up, members of the boxing community would gather at various coffee shops.

Liff liked to go to one in Webster Hall in Oakland. That's when deals were cut, contracts were sketched out.

"If I put on four bouts, I'd try to put four boxers on and four sluggers," Liff said. "We'd mix and match."

With all the late nights, his wife, Marian, started to wonder.

"She used to say, 'What do you do until 1, 2, 3 in the morning making matches? What kind of business is that? Gangsters?' "

Marian was a bookkeeper, so one night Liff brought her along, telling her she could type up the contracts.

She trusted him after that, and she wasn't interested in tagging along anymore.

Marian and Liff's second wife, Sara Louise, are both deceased.

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A taste of fame

For seven years prior to World War II, Liff was nearly famous. He ran Eagles Rest, a lodge and training facility on about 27 acres outside of Millvale.

The Liffs lived there and rented the establishment out for banquets, but it was mostly popular as a summer outdoor camp for boxers, some of whom stayed there for stretches. It included an outdoor ring and other recreational and training equipment.

The list of big-name boxers who trained there, who came to eat the good steaks Eagles Rest was known for, who came to know Liff, is impressive.

Among them were Conn and other local champions: welterweight Fritzie Zivic, middleweight Billy Soose, lightweight Sammy Angott. The place also gained national notoriety and hosted greats such as heavyweight champion Joe Louis and Henry Armstrong, who won titles in three weight classes.

"One time when Billy Conn fought Teddy Yarosz and trained on a Sunday before the fight, there were two, three thousand people up there watching him train," Liff said.

Liff and Conn were close. You can still sense it when Liff talks about Conn.

Liff's dog, Ginger, used to wake Conn up at daybreak and the two would set out on a training run.

Conn could be cantankerous, as was the case before another of his fights against Yarosz, also a local great.

"Yarosz was already on top and Billy was just a kid," Liff said. "Ray Foutts, who managed Yarosz, was a good friend of mine. So Foutts came to me and says, 'Do you think Billy would mind if I bring Teddy out for a [traditional pre-fight] steak?'

"I said sure. So later Billy's there playing with Ginger. I said, 'Look, don't start no trouble. Foutts asked me if he could bring Teddy out for a steak, and I said yes and he was worried whether you would mind. I told him you wouldn't mind.' "

" 'You can bring him out on one condition,' " Conn answered. " 'You tell me where you're sitting so I can knock him in your lap.' "

With some opponents, though, Conn made friends. Louis was one, perhaps because of the Eagles Rest connection.

"I remember he came to visit Billy Conn," Liff said. "They were going to a club, the Beacon Club. It's a Jewish club in Squirrel Hill."

It was a place known for gambling.

"Joe says, 'I don't want to go up there. I'll be the only colored guy,' " Liff said. "Billy says, 'You'll be the only honest guy up there. Joe, c'mon, they'll be glad to see you.'

"Hell, they wined and dined Joe. They gave him steaks. Everybody liked Joe. He was a gentleman."

Boxers and their fans weren't the only ones who hung out at Eagles Rest. Managers, trainers and other promoters were often there.

One of the promoters was Art Rooney, a good friend of Liff's. Rooney, who was Liff's age, had a fledgling pro football team — the Steelers — he was trying to keep afloat.

"He had the patience," Liff said. "Any other human being would have given the team up. He had to beg and borrow to pay the men $2, $3, $5 for playing football in those days. The fellow kept himself broke and never gave the team up."

Rooney, of course, was rewarded with wealth and four Super Bowl championships before he died.

Still looking ahead

Liff retired more than two decades ago. In all his career, boxing and big money never met. Now, any big fight is a multimillion-dollar deal. He remembers getting $50 for going 10 rounds in a bout in Columbus once.

It's not that the sport has passed Liff by, though. He still follows it closely and would like to see one big change.

"I would like to see the government take charge of boxing," he said. He believes that would help alleviate grandstanding in the ring and would help ensure the highest standards for referees.

You won't find Liff claiming that boxing was better in any particular era. But you can stump him. Just ask him who was the best.

"That's a hard question," he said, then answered not with one name but with several that span some 70 or 80 years.

Benny Leonard, a lightweight camp in the 1910s; Greb and Jack Dempsey, heavyweight champ in the 20s; Louis in the 30s and 40s; Sugar Ray Robinson, middleweight champ in the 50s and 60s; Muhammad Ali, heavyweight champ in the 60s and 70s; Sugar Ray Leonard, a welterweight champ in the 70s and 80s.

Liff also mentioned Mike Tyson because of his potential. Tyson, derailed by legal problems, never fulfilled his destiny.

There's one more contender on Liff's list, of course: Conn in the 30s and 40s.

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Article
About Nathan Liff
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Nathan Liff holds some of his cherished memories — training with light heavyweight champion Billy Conn and celebrating (Liff is in the back row on the left) after Lee Sala knocked out Joe DeJohn.

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