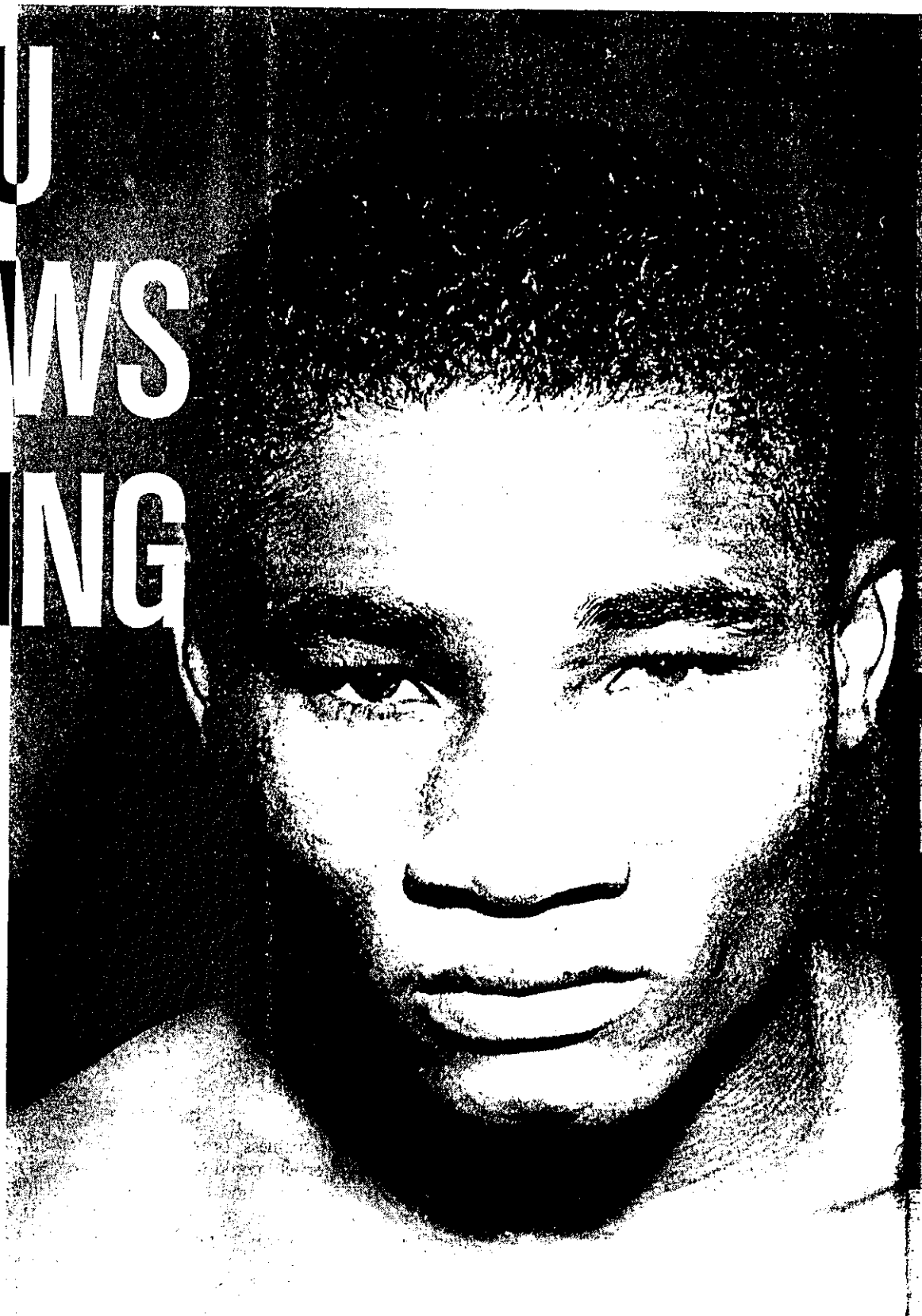


BEAU KNOWS BOXING

Beau Jack Still Shines



Walk by **By Leta Kald** Roosevelt Ivory's Fifth Street Gym in Miami Beach and you will hear the staccato drumming of boxers hitting the small bag, and the bass thud of blows landing on the big bag in a rhythm

measured by the sound of the bell. The gym is on the second floor.

"Left jab! Right hand! Keep yo' head down! Two lefts! Look straight ahead! Guard yo' face! Two rights! Hook! Hook! Keep yo' hands up!"

It is a sweltering summer day. Shadowboxing in the ring is a young man,

THE BIBLE OF BOXING

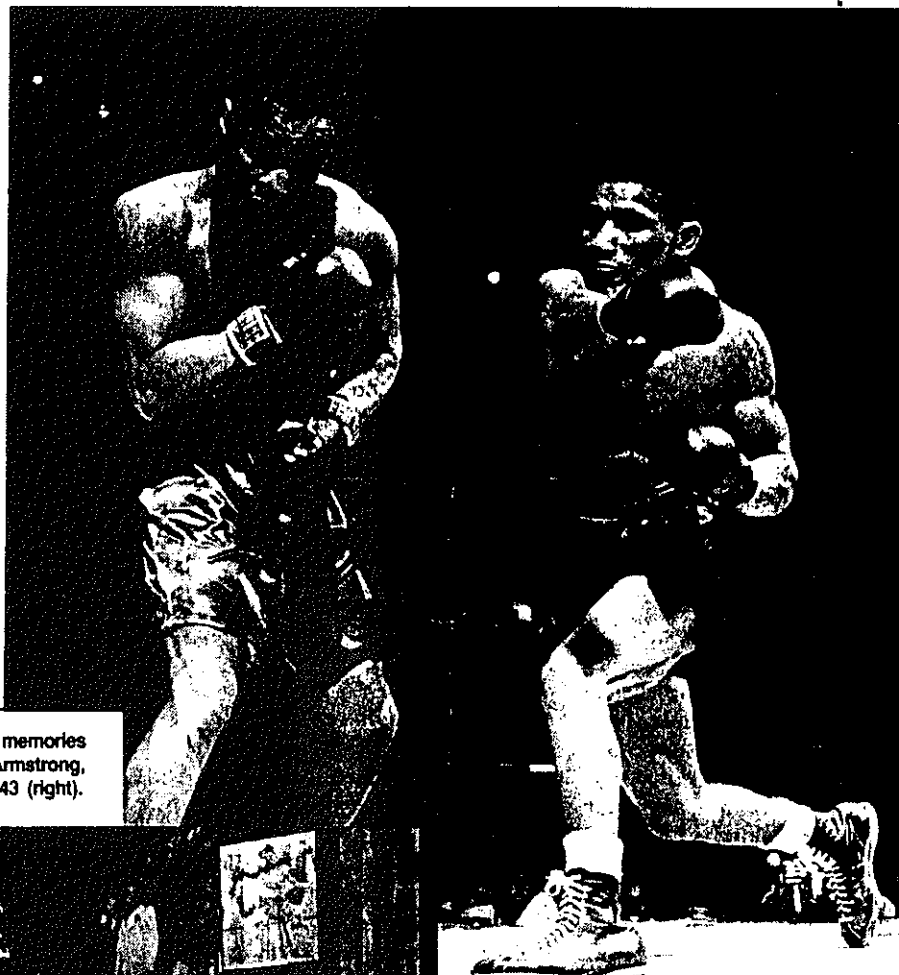
his pale skin slick with sweat. One hand curls like a paw in front of his face, while the other snaps steady punches into the air. He gasps for breath as his brown eyes brim and his jaw clenches. A relentless litany syncopates with the sound of soft shoes slapping on canvas.

"What's wrong wit' you? You think you boxin'? You ain't boxin.' You playin'!"

A wiry old man wearing a baseball cap sits by the ring. His dark face is knobby as a gourd. His one good eye stares concentratedly at the boxer. He is Sydney Walker, born in 1921 in Augusta, Georgia, nicknamed Beau Jack by his grandmother, Evie Mixom, who raised him.

Beau Jack looks sideways away from the ring as another boxer walks toward him. Muscles ripple under his dark skin, wet and sleek as a seal.

"Hey! Beau Jack! I'd sure like to



When Beau Jack (below) reflects on his career, his memories include battles with legendary foes like Henry Armstrong, whom Jack topped at Madison Square Garden in 1943 (right).



see the Tyson-Spinks fight at the Convention Center. But it costs 40 bucks, and I'm broke!"

Beau Jack squints up into the young man's face. "You been treatin' yo' mama right?"

"I sure have. Anything she say, I do!"

Beau Jack reaches into the pocket of his dingy jeans and pulls out a \$50 bill. "See that you do," he says, as he hands the bill to the young man. "Remember! You only got one mama."

Beau Jack enters his office. Faded boxing photographs hang around the

room. Strips of gauzy hand wraps flap at the window in the steady ocean breeze. Traffic noise filters up through the windows with the sandy dust. Beau Jack sips 7-Up and nibbles cookies from cellophane wrappers. He talks about his childhood and his grandmother, who wanted him to become a preacher, but may have unwittingly made him a fighter. Beau Jack smiles a toothless grin, as touching as a baby's, as he nostalgically tells about getting beat up and robbed of his pennies by older boys.

"And when I come home cryin', my

grandma gave me the whuppin' of my life and told me, 'Walkers stay and fight! Till the blood run in they shoes!'"

He tells in his soft drawl how as a kid he fought in brutal battle royals, in a ring with five or more blindfolded black kids, flailing each other, while white gentlemen spectators threw bills to the survivors.

"In them days, you didn't fight no white men. It was strictly black on black. I started fightin' because I was hongry, and I needed money. If you got knocked down, you were put out the ring. I learned to stay low and keep swingin'! Hard! And I'd win 'em all!"

When he was 18, shining shoes and fighting in battle royals at the Augusta National Golf Club, certain wealthy men, including famous golfer Bobby Jones, gave him money to go to Massachusetts and get some professional training. Beau Jack recalls them saying, "This kid ain't nothin', but he sure can fight!"

In Springfield, Beau Jack met trainer Syd Bell, who taught him how to box, how to think, and how to behave. He told Beau Jack straight away,

BEAU JACK: NO FIGHTER EVER GAVE MORE

There have been bigger winners and better fighters, but the career of lightweight champion Beau Jack was as remarkable as any in boxing history. Consider that from 1941 to 1949, Jack fought 27 times at Madison Square Garden, headlined 21 cards, and regularly drew crowds of almost 20,000. Consider that in one month, March 1944, Jack main evented in three shows



against three world-class fighters, Bob Montgomery, Al Davis, and Juan Zurita. And consider that on August 4, 1944, Jack and Bob Montgomery, who had been drafted into the Armed Forces on the very same day, met at the Garden and produced an all-time record gate of \$35,864,000. (The staggering total was the result of the sale of war bonds.)

"Beau Jack," wrote Jimmy Cannon in 1955, "you weren't the best fighter I've ever seen, but there was never a gamer one. The people respect you, and if they are moved by courage, if they appreciate decency, if they can be reached by pity, they will cherish you a long time."

The highlights to cherish:

● **KO 7 Allie Stolz, New York City, November 13, 1942:** The slick Stolz, a 3-1 favorite, was supposed to expose Jack, 41-6-2, as a clubfighter. But in the fourth, Jack landed a right that opened a hideous cut over Stolz' right eye. When the bout was finally halted, a contender had been born.

● **KO 3 Tippy Larkin, New York City, December 18, 1942:** After Sammy Angott's retirement, Jack and Larkin were matched for the vacant New York State lightweight title. Jack scored a knockdown less than a minute into the shootout and then floored his foe for the count with a right uppercut in the third. The Associated Press described the contest as "one of the fastest and 'punching-est' fights put on in the Garden in years."

● **W 10 Henry Armstrong, New York City, April 2, 1943:** Student topped teacher as Jack outpointed his idol and mentor before 19,986 fans at the Garden. The scoring in rounds was 5-3-2, 8-2, and 7-2-1. Armstrong said he was disappointed that the usually swarming Jack had "run too much." A respectful Jack said he was lucky he hadn't met Armstrong in his prime.

● **W 15 Bob Montgomery, New York City, November 19, 1943:** Jack and Montgomery met a total of four times, with each lightweight winning twice. In this, their second encounter, Jack regained the title he had lost to "The Bobcat" six months earlier. Jack, a 4-1 underdog, was expected to tire in the championship rounds. Montgomery did indeed rally in the 14th and 15th, but Jack held on to take a close—and popular—points victory. This was considered the greatest triumph of Jack's career.

● **L 15 Bob Montgomery, New York City, March 3, 1944:** The underdogs dominated this series. Jack was a 9-5 favorite in this, their third clash. (Two weeks earlier, The Bobcat had been kayoed in one round by Al Davis.) Jack fell behind over the first eight rounds, then rallied furiously from the ninth through the 13th. But Montgomery's close was spirited enough to secure a split decision victory. Jack's championship days were over.

● **W 10 Juan Zurita, New York City, March 31, 1944:** Mexico's Zurita, coming off a victory over Angott, was the reigning NBA lightweight titlist. He confused Jack by switching from orthodox to southpaw, but Jack applied enough pressure to take a close but unanimous decision. In 1944, Jack was named *The Ring's* Fighter of the Year.

● **KO by 6 Ike Williams, Philadelphia, July 12, 1948:** "Williams," Jack once said, "was the one fighter I couldn't beat." No longer a lightweight, Jack had to lose 13 pounds in 14 days and never threatened the lightweight champion. He was spent by the fourth round, and in the sixth, a hook to the jaw introduced the finishing flurry. Jack and Williams would meet twice more. Their third bout, fought on August 12, 1955, and won by Williams via ninth-round kayo, was the last of each champion's career.

—Steve Farhood

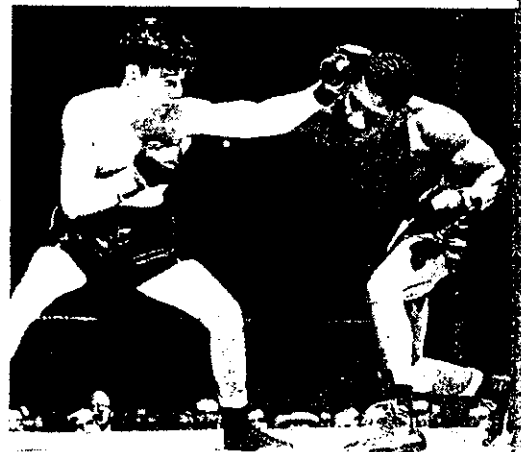
"I don't need your money, but you need me." Beau Jack followed his advice, and he attributes his successes in large part to Bell.

"There were many times, though," he says, "I thought I would never satisfy him."

Beau Jack won the lightweight title twice. Madison Square Garden sold out 21 times for him. He shows a plaque that he received for attracting the largest gross gate in history, raising \$35,864,000 for U.S. War Bonds.

"If I could do it again for my country, I would," he proudly asserts.

Beau Jack is reputed to have earned a fortune, though now he appears to be penniless. When asked how he spent all the money, he explodes, "Spend it! You could never spend all that money!" But he refuses to discuss rumors that it had been swindled away from him, claiming that he does not care about money.



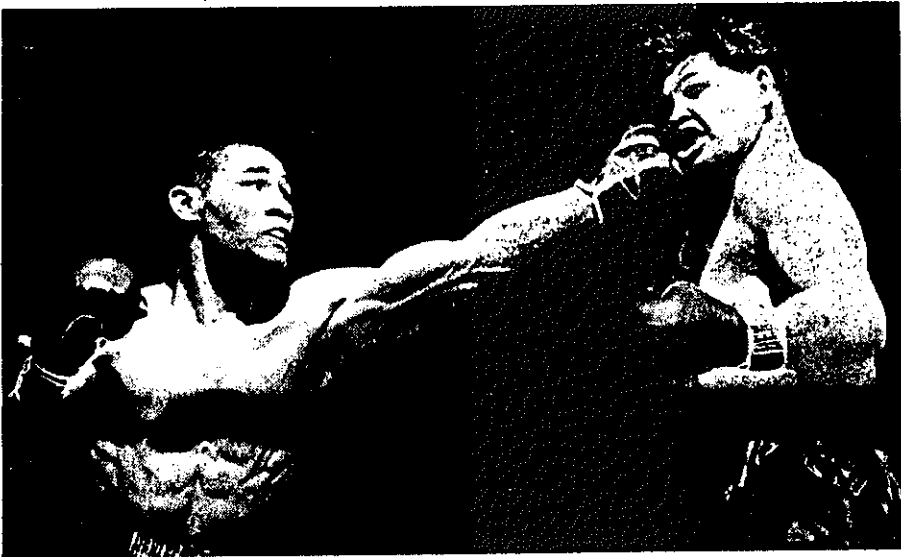
When Jack lost to Bobby Ruffin, it was his second loss in four fights. But he rebounded to regain the lightweight title in his next bout.

"All I care about is, did I do good, boxing for the people who paid money to see me fight."

Young boxers come to Beau Jack for the training that has made the Fifth Street Gym famous. They leave with much more. A tall, dark man with glasses, whom they call "Professor," can be found at the gym nearly every day, working out, watching Beau Jack train young hopefuls. They play cards together during the slow hours.

"Beau Jack is a caring individual who does more than his share," says Professor. "He teaches the kids how to carry themselves. He teaches them how to be better people, not just better fighters. He taught me that I can achieve whatever I want to do."

Another young black man in a red T-shirt and red baseball cap pulled down over his shades says, "I been



training with Beau Jack for a while. I live alone. Sometimes I can't make my rent. I kind of count on Beau Jack to lend me the money when that happens."

"Yeah," chimes in another boxer, as he swings his dufflebag over his shoulder. "You'll find guys sleepin' in here. Beau Jack feeds 'em. He always says, 'A hungry man is a dangerous man.'"

Beau Jack chuckles. "Lots of kids come in because the stars come by here—Ali, Larry Holmes, Uriah [Grant], Bobby Czyz—some a' the pros care about the kids, but others wouldn't even give 'em an autograph! And some of these kids come in 'cause they heard about me, and they want to fight like me. I'll help 'em. I'll do everything I can for 'em. But there ain't too many no more who are tough enough.

"I try to tell the kids who come in here—you got to do your best for your fans. They make you. I will never forget goin' into Madison Square Garden and hearin' my fans screamin' and hollerin' my name. That makes you try harder. You know you're not alone. They used to love to watch me fight. You couldn't keep me down. Even when my kneecap got broke right in half, I wouldn't go down. Just hopped around on one leg and kept fightin'!"

The young man whom Beau Jack had been verbally pounding in the ring comes over and hands in his gloves and hand wraps.

"When you gonna buy you some gloves of your own?" Beau Jack shakes his head and winks conspiratorially. "These kids, they get you for everything—equipment, money, almost have to feed and clothe 'em."

The young man is tall, with an adolescent gawkinsness, but his shoulders

Jack's best year was 1944, during which he outpointed Bummy Davis (above left) and archrival Bob Montgomery (above right), among others. After leaving the ring, Jack spent years shining shoes at Miami's Fountainbleu Hotel (below). The photo was taken during the 1968 Republican Convention.



and long arms are well-muscled. He is asked how he feels about training with Beau Jack.

"He's the best! But he's tough! Sometimes I think I'll never satisfy him!" He grins and turns, "See ya', Beau Jack!"

Though Beau Jack lives alone in a furnished room, he has a wife and children in Miami. Did any of his sons want to box?

"Uh-uh!" he shakes his head adamantly. "Wife would not allow it! And I didn't push it. 'Cause I knew the minute one of 'em come home hurt, all I'd hear was 'I told you so.' Nope! I decided I'd be the only one in the family to get hurt."

Boxing is always under fire because of the hurts inflicted and the underlying intent unique to the sport to seriously hurt your opponent. Beau Jack does not understand such criticism.

"Why do one person want to live another person's life?" he demands indignantly. "It's my responsibility if I want to be a fighter. I will take the punishment. If someone wants to fight, cheer him on, don't put him down."

He pauses thoughtfully.

"I never prayed to win. I only prayed for the strength to know what to do and when to do it."

Leita Kaldi is a freelance writer based in Miami Beach.