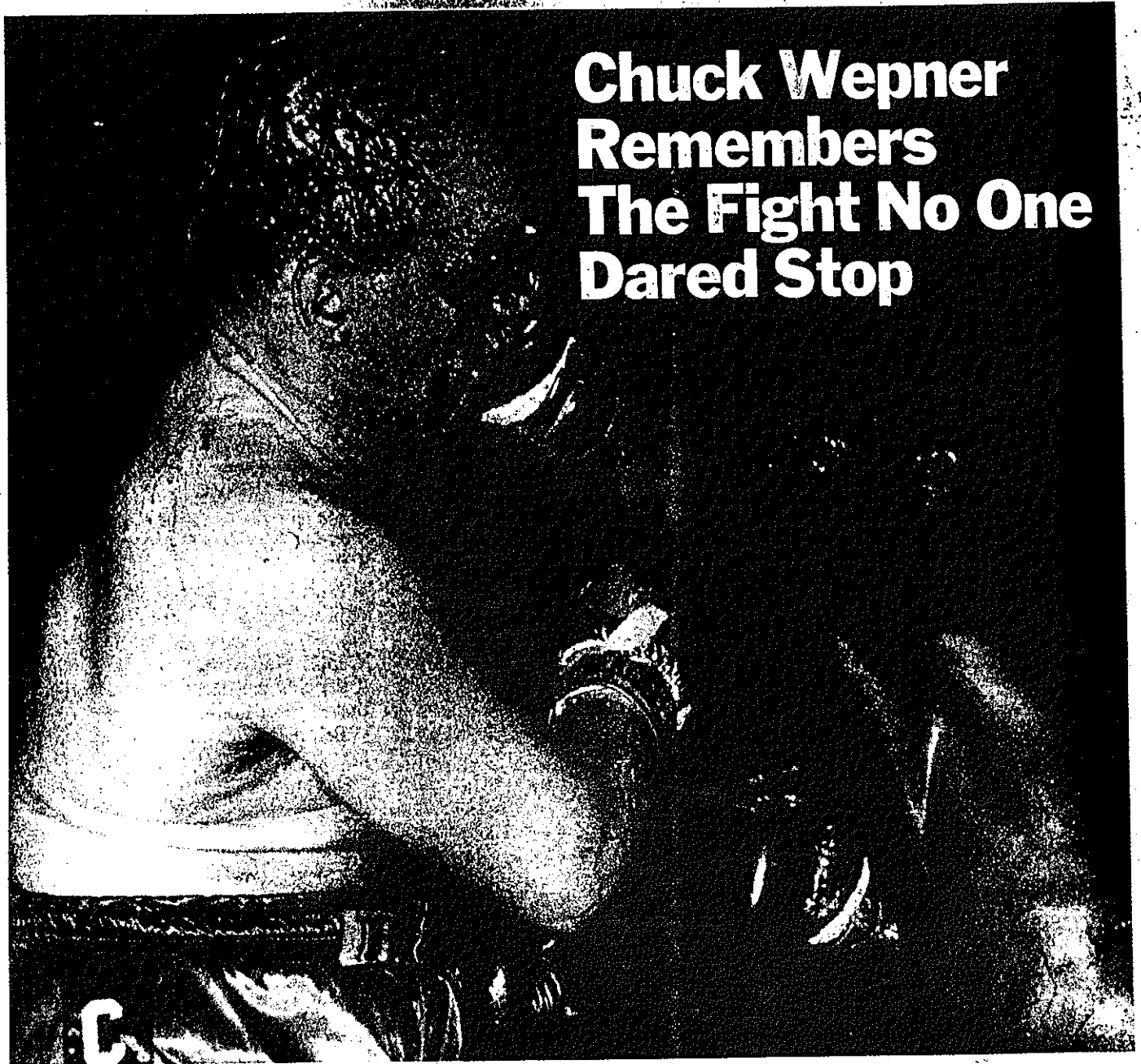


THE BAYONNE BLEEDER'S BLOODIEST BRAWL



Chuck Wepner Remembers The Fight No One Dared Stop

N O LONGER CAN Chuck Wepner come and go as he wishes. Gone are the days of driving fast cars, wearing expensive jewelry, and dating scores of women.

He wakes up when he's told to wake up. He eats when he's told to eat. He goes to bed when he's told to go to bed.

It is the first time in 50 years that

anyone has ever told Chuck Wepner what to do.

For the past year-and-a-half, the former world heavyweight contender, who fought Muhammad Ali for the title in 1975 and inspired the film character Rocky Balboa, has been serving a 10-year sentence at Northern State Prison. It is a lonely, sad place that stands near Exit 14 of the New Jersey Turnpike in Newark, where Wepner has been paying the price for possession

and conspiracy to distribute cocaine.

Recently, however, he was admitted to Northern State's Intensive Supervision Program, which allows him to live and work outside the prison's walls as long as he adheres to an 8 p.m. curfew and performs community service.

"It's a lot better than sitting in prison," said Wepner, who stands 6'5" and weighs 245 pounds—20 more than his fighting weight. If all goes well, he said, he'll be a free man in 17 months.

As he tries to rebuild his life, Wepner has returned to work as a salesman for his former employer, Majestic Wine & Spirits, in Union, New Jersey. "But always," he says, "I think about my days in the fight game."

One of Wepner's most painful days in boxing took place a little more than three miles from his home in Bayonne. At the Jersey City Armory 20 years ago next June, he fought Sonny Liston in one of boxing's bloodiest brawls.

The year was 1970, and Wepner realized that only a win over a top-10 contender could thrust him into the world heavyweight scene. So he signed to fight sixth-ranked Sonny Liston, a frightening hulk whose sinister glare often intimidated opponents before any punches were thrown.

This would not only be an important fight for Wepner, but for Liston as well. The former world heavyweight champion, age 38 (or so he claimed; some estimates ran as high as 46), could not afford another loss. A defeat would end an 18-year boxing career that had peaked eight years earlier with a first-round kayo of Floyd Patterson for the heavyweight championship of the world.

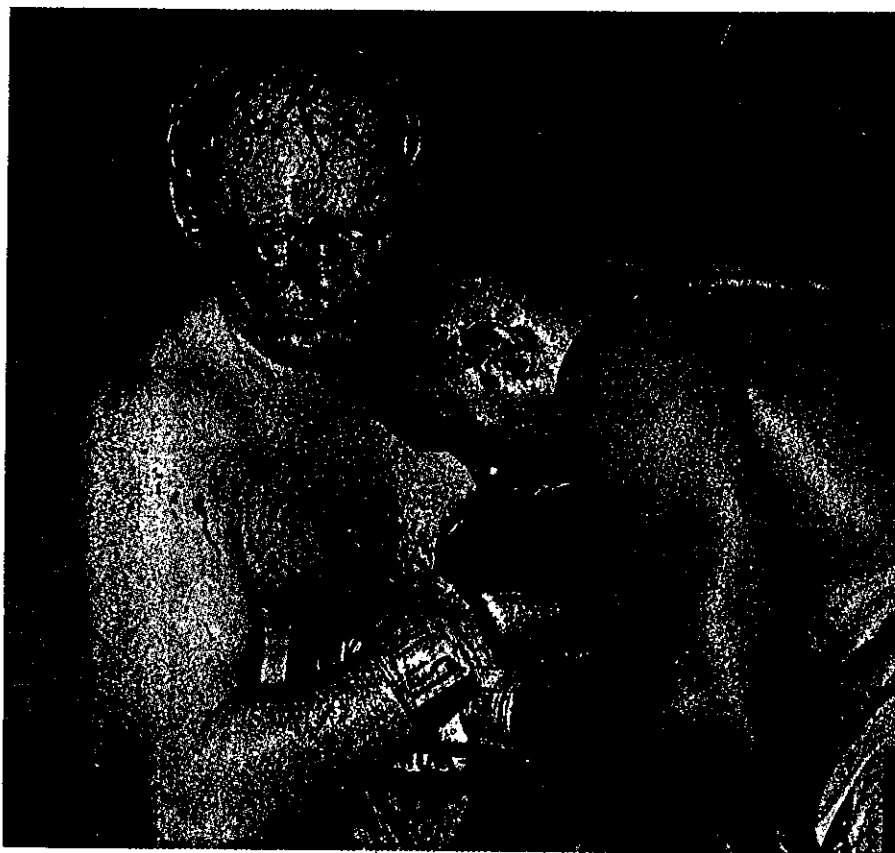
After that victory, and a second one-round humiliation of Patterson, the Liston myth took hold, with sportswriters regarding him as one of the ring's heaviest hitters ever. But the infatuation lasted only until he lost title fights to Cassius Clay in 1964 and 1965.

Although no longer a serious contender after his losses to Clay, Liston fought 16 more fights from 1966 through 1970. He won 14 straight before Leotis Martin stopped him in December 1969 in a bout for the vacant NABF title. The loss placed Liston at the crossroads of his career.

At the same time, Wepner was facing his own crossroads. Al Braverman, Wepner's manager, had always arranged his fights. But not this one. Canadian promoter Loren Cassina set it up.

In April 1970, Cassina received a message that Liston wanted to speak with him. They met in a coffee shop at the Bonanza Hotel in Las Vegas. Liston said he wanted another fight, and Cassina suggested Wepner, a stand-up, no-nonsense boxer. Liston agreed and contracts were drawn up. Wepner knew a victory over Liston would assure him of a shot with top-contender Jerry Quarry and a big payday.

(As it would turn out, the bout with



In one of the most hideous brawls of the '70s, a chopped up Chuck Wepner falls into a clinch with former heavyweight champion Sonny Liston at the Jersey City Armory in New Jersey. Wepner would require 75 stitches to close his numerous facial wounds.

Wepner was the last of Liston's career. He died of an apparent drug overdose in December 1970.)

At the Liston-Wepner press conference in Jersey City in June, the fighters were a study in contrast. Liston was bull-shouldered and boorish, with all the personality of an embalmer. Wepner, who stood four inches taller than the 6'1" Liston, was pleasant and glib and acted as if Liston didn't scare him at all.

"All this talk about Liston the cop beater, Liston the jailbird, Liston the tough guy doesn't mean anything to me," he said. "I'm from Missouri. Sonny's going to have to show me how tough he is."

Then a writer asked the former champion what he'd do to Wepner. Liston's forehead wrinkled as he flashed his infamous stare. "The outcome," he said, "is gonna be bleak. I'm gonna open Wepner's face."

Which is what happened a week later when the opening bell clanged on June 29.

Wepner fought a stupid fight from the outset. Against Braverman's wishes, he traded punches with Liston. But that was Wepner, always forsaking defense. A few of his punches grazed the slow-moving Liston. Midway through round two, Liston began jabbing at

Wepner's face, twisting his glove to the right or to the left upon impact. During one exchange, Liston broke Wepner's nose. But Wepner landed a few rights that staggered Liston. After that, Liston dominated.

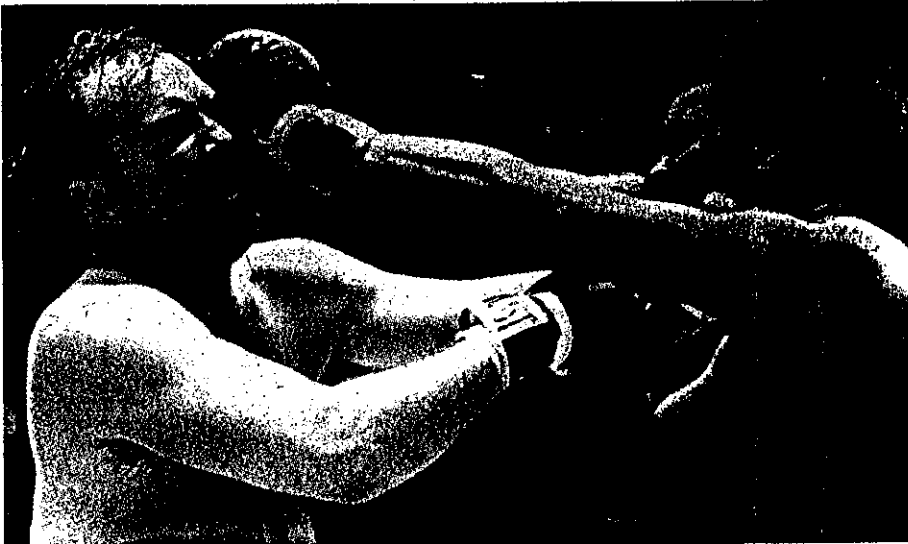
Before round three, Braverman exhorted his fighter to box defensively. "The big ape's got an 84-inch reach to your 78-inch reach," he said. "Does that tell ya something?"

"Yeah," Wepner said with a smile, "it means I'm in for a long night."

Braverman, whose sense of humor vanishes in the ring, slapped Wepner across the face and pulled his hair. "No, dummy," he said, "it means ya gotta back off once in a while or else he's gonna eatcha up."

But Wepner never took a step back. In his mind, to step back indicated weakness. He had never done it before and he sure as hell wasn't going to change now. So Liston easily pressed his advantage. He thundered uppercuts against Wepner's chin, and during rounds three, four, and five, his jab opened gashes above Wepner's eyes.

"Jab after jab after jab," Wepner recalled. "They kept coming like the monthly bills." In the fifth, Wepner slipped to the canvas after absorbing a right to the midsection. It was ruled a knockdown.



Wepner recovered from the loss to Liston and, five years later, challenged Muhammad Ali for the heavyweight crown. All won by 15th-round stoppage.

By round six, rivulets of blood were blinding Wepner. For the rest of the fight, all he could see was Liston's outline against the hot glare of the overhead lights. And all he could feel was the pounding of a left jab tearing his face apart, just as Liston had predicted.

The ringside physician, Dr. Reginald Ferrar, tried to examine Wepner after the third round and the sixth, but Abe Greene, the New Jersey boxing commissioner, restrained him. Earlier that day, Wepner had told Greene about his concern that the fight might be stopped prematurely because of his excessive bleeding. "They don't call me the 'Bayonne Bleeder' for nothing," Wepner said.

The commissioner understood. "This was Chuck's biggest fight of his career up until then," Greene said several years after the bout, "and he didn't want a soft-hearted referee or doctor to stop it early. So I got together with referee Barney Felix and Dr. Ferrar and emphasized that bleeding didn't mean a thing to Chuck. I reminded them to note this fact. I had an understanding with them that if the fight became a bad-looking sight, we'd stop it. But only after I gave Barney the signal to do so."

The fight dragged on. In round seven, a left-right combination broke Wepner's cheekbone and he tottered across the ring. How he bore the pain is beyond comprehension. Even Liston was puzzled. "Fall down, man," he pleaded during a clinch in a rare moment of compassion.

Liston then dug a left and a right to Wepner's body. In the eighth, he fired a jab to reopen the gashes over Wepner's eyes, and streams of blood squirted halfway across the ring.

Wepner's left eyebrow, soaked with blood, dangled lifelessly as he headed back to his corner. Cries of "butchery" and "murder" rang out, but the fight continued.

"All I can remember about that round," Wepner said, "is that every time I got bashed, I kept seeing the words, BOOM! THWACK, and CRUNCH appearing wherever Liston's fists struck. Just like in the old *Batman* TV show."

By round nine, blood was still pooling in Wepner's eyes. Braverman had tried to patch him up between rounds, but it was impossible to treat six cuts at once. And now Wepner had no idea where Liston was. He punched only at the air while Liston zeroed in with his incessant jab and followed with hooks.

At the bell ending the ninth, Braverman led his battered boxer to their corner. Before the fight, Braverman's shirt had been navy blue. Now it was scarlet, completely soaked with sticky, pasty blood. "Liston might've driven all the blood out of you," Braverman said, "but he sure hasn't driven out your heart."

Meanwhile, Felix stared at Wepner. What he saw was a clump of caked blood blocking Wepner's nasal passage, making it difficult for him to breathe. Slowly, Wepner sucked in puffs of air through lips that had been split by Liston's jabs. Strains of pain showed in a face that was a bleeding, chopped up pulp, made uneven by bumps, bruises, and cuts.

Felix then looked to Greene, hoping to get the signal to stop the fight. He got it.

But as he was about to wave his hands, Braverman exploded. "Don't you dare stop it!" he said. "What the

hell's the matter with you? One more round, that's all, one more round. Chuck's gotta go the distance." Wepner sat quietly, unable to see through swollen eyes.

"How many fingers am I holding up?" Felix said to him.

"How many guesses do I get?" Wepner responded.

That was it. Felix waved his hands. The bout had ended, Liston winning by 10th-round TKO.

In the words of *The New York Times*' Dave Anderson, the fight was "a bloody sacrifice that evoked more sympathy for the loser than prestige for the winner."

Wepner would require 75 stitches to patch up a two-inch slice under his left eye, a three-inch gash over the left eye where there was once an eyebrow, a nick in the corner of the eye near the nose, a 2½-inch gash over the right eye, a two-inch cut extending from the forehead to the eyebrow, and a slight tear under the eye.

In his dressing room, Wepner sat bloodied, battered, and bruised.

"Jeezus," said his father Charley, a former fighter. "Will you look at him. It looks like someone went to the butcher shop, pulled out the reddest hunk of meat, cut it open, and let the blood fly out."

Meanwhile, Wepner calmly fielded reporters' questions. Even the silliest ones.

"Was this your toughest fight?" someone said.

"No," he said, adjusting an ice pack on his face. "I think I escaped relatively unscathed thanks to my scientific boxing techniques."

The reporter pressed on. "Did you block any of his punches?"

"All of them—with my face."

"Hey," Braverman said, "if you guys don't ask some intelligent questions, I'm gonna clear the room."

"Weren't you afraid of Liston's power coming into the fight?"

"Nah, I'm from Missouri. You gotta show me. Unfortunately, Sonny did."

As the reporters dispersed, well-wishers came in to console Wepner. One of them was Sonny Liston. He gripped Wepner's still-bandaged hand and said, "Man, I ain't never done this before. But I gotta tell ya that you're the gamest guy I ever fought."

As Liston was walking away, a reporter asked him if Chuck Wepner was the bravest man he'd ever known.

"No," Liston answered, "his manager is." □