

Church of the Good Shepherd
and
St. John the Evangelist

5 Easter
May 14, 2006
Fr. Bill McGinty

“The Champ”

When I was eleven years old I took part in a boxing match at a Parish Summer Fair. It was something our school chaplain had arranged and for several weeks a group of us gathered at a boxing gym to be trained. I was paired with my good school friend John Kilbane. If the lightest weight was flyweight, then we were “Flea weights.” On the great day, the gloves were so big, neither of us got off one decent punch. An amused referee declared a draw after three unthreatening rounds and our boxing careers were over.

I had always had an interest in boxing and had read every great boxer and fight from John L. Sullivan and his fight with Gentleman Jim Corbett to Jack Dempsey’s defeat by Gene Tully in 1930.

When I was growing up in the fifties, men still talked about Joe Louis, the Brown Bomber, and his celebrated fights with the German Max Schlinenger. For weeks the talk was about the fight between Archie Moore, the Lighthweight champion, and the Heavy weight champ, Rocky Marciano. A fight Marciano won despite the fact he should have been counted out in the first. The public blamed the Ref. Jersey Joe Walcott.

But the real excitement of the fifties concerned a middleweight called Sugar Ray Robinson who won the World Title five times and three times fought Ralph Turpin the British Champion.

In 1956 aged eight I watched a young 21 year old American, beat Archie Moore by a knockout in the ninth to become the youngest ever World Heavyweight champion. He instantly became our hero and held the title for six years. His name was Floyd Patterson.

I tell you all this because Floyd died last Thursday at his New Paltz home just fifty miles from here. For several years he had suffered from Alzheimer’s disease and then cancer.

Floyd had retired in 1971 after his second defeat by Mohammed Ali. The fight game had changed from the days when the young Patterson had won weighing 183 lbs. Now it was ruled by TV agents, and big money, with giants weighing in at 280 lbs.

But despite his retirement this was not Floyd’s last fight. Together with a local priest in Newburgh, he began a program to save local kids from a life of drugs on the streets.

He had a gym built beside his home and taught them boxing. He traveled widely to fund-raise for anti-drug campaigns and for funding for youth projects. In 1981, he and Fr. Dan were appointed to Nancy Regan’s White House Commission for Drug-Free Schools. In 1988 Fr. Dan was shot at by drug dealers on the streets of Newburgh as he

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continued his work with street kids. From that date Floyd began to accompany him everywhere he went.

It was then that he decided to become a Christian. Little did he know that he was just beginning the most important fight of his life. In 1985 Floyd's wife Janet was diagnosed with cancer and the battle began to save her life. Hospitalized and then bedridden it was Floyd who cared for her and never left her side. People would see him in those years, here in the West End of Port Jervis, alone at the Saturday night service, where Fr. Dan had moved to.

Janet's recovery was long and slow, but she did survive and she did recover. She recovered with her quiet, gentle Floyd by her side. Once she was well again, Floyd and Fr. Dan went back to working for local kids and renewing their efforts to put something in the place of emptiness and despair. It was easy to see how, this quiet, kind, unassuming man, felt about poverty and kids in trouble. At an early age he had run away from a "violent home" in Brooklyn and learnt to fight to survive on the streets. In the end, he landed up in "Reform School" in Orange County, met a boxing coach called Cus D'Amato, won the Gold Medal at the Helsinki Olympics in 1952 at 17, and the rest is history.

In 1989, I came to Port Jervis for the first time as a summer supply for Dr. Dan O'Hare at the church of the Most Sacred Heart in the West End. Anyone who knows Fr. Dan, knows that he is crazy, a joker and usually up to some prank or other. After I was there a couple of weeks, he told me one Saturday, "There is someone I want you to meet." He took me into the church and there was Floyd Patterson. He was a kindly, gentleman; with a big smile and that distinctive hairstyle.

After the service we all went to Santini's for dinner, where he was well known. I didn't have the heart to tell him that as a boy, my brother and I had fought every fight with him and thrown every punch.

I noticed how calm and patient he was and what a great listener, which was just as well, because Fr. Dan never shuts up. When we all parted that night I can remember, shaking his hand, that he had the biggest hands.

Floyd Patterson won't be remembered for saving thousands of street kids, or being a great husband and father, or even being a Christian gentleman. He will be remembered by most people for two fights against the Swede Ingemar Johansson in 1959 and 1960. The first he lost, the second he won becoming the first man to regain the title.

What the same people don't know is, that in the 1980's Floyd traveled to Sweden to help Johansson when he found out he had lapsed into alcoholism. Floyd paid for his treatment at a Rehabilitation Center and was instrumental in his recovery.

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I don't suppose that they think much about canonizing old boxers in the Vatican these days, but if there ever was a man who deserved the title disciple, apostle and maybe even saint, then it was Floyd Patterson.

Somewhere, up there, a bell is sounding and someone is raising his big hand high into the air and the words of today's second reading sound true for him:

"We know that we have passed from death to life because we love one another."

In an era where heroes, even sporting heroes are hard to come by, Floyd was a hero and a decent man. In Friday's Times Herald Record, Ken McMillan said of him:

"Soft spoken words from Floyd's mouth were pearls of wisdom for impressionable kids. Patterson's best teaching tool was simply being himself, a kind hearted, generous gentleman, who carried himself well in public, speaking at community centers, and bringing the Eucharist to the house bound and the shut-ins."

Surely there is a lesson there for all of us. May he rest in peace.

Amen+