

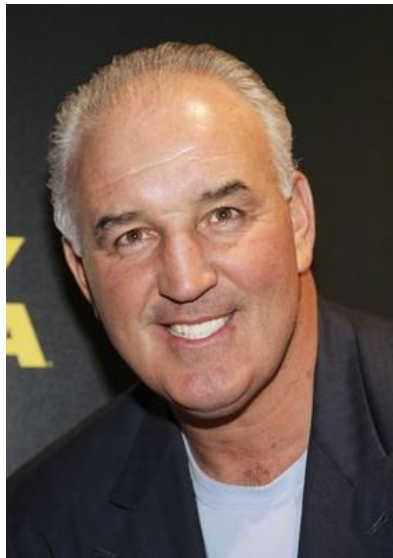
The Irish Echo



TAP into Scotch Plains Fanwood
Your Neighborhood News Online

Gerry Cooney: Loving Life and Still Punching

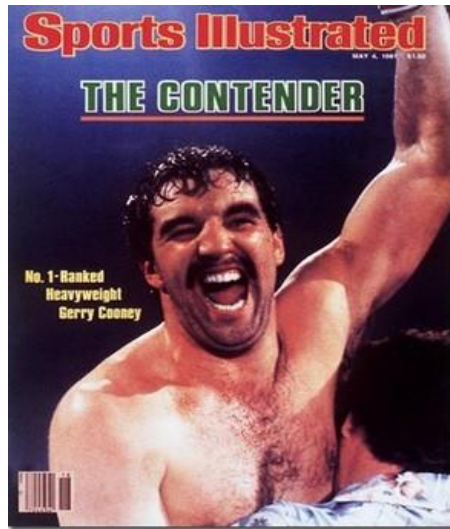
Fighting Irish: Fanwood's Local Legend Gentleman Gerry Cooney



Gerry Cooney today



Gerry Cooney the young Heavyweight



Sport Illustrated Cover – May 4, 1981



Foes once, friend now – Larry Holmes and Gerry Cooney



Gerry Cooney is involved with many charities, including YCS.

By JOHN ESPOSITO

Published: March 16, 2016 [reprinted in various forms by *The Irish Echo*; and *TAPinto – Your Neighborhood News Online*]

*In the clearing stands a boxer
And a fighter by his trade
And he carries the reminders
Of every glove that laid him down
And cut him till he cried out
In his anger and his shame
“I am leaving, I am leaving”
But the fighter still remains*

- The Boxer - Lyrics by Paul Simon (1969)

FANWOOD, NJ -- The dense fog and icy remnants from the year's second snow fall make for poor visibility and a treacherous drive when turning off Rte. 22 East in Mountainside. My evening appointment lay ahead at a state-of-the-art sports training facility.

Entering BrawlHouse (1115 Globe Ave. Mountainside), I am met by its amicable owner, Christopher Jordan. The athletic institute provides specialized programs for young and old in wrestling, CrossFit, mixed martial arts, boxing, jiu-jitsu, and yoga.

I walk past multiple training stations and eventually come upon a tall, distinguished looking gentleman in workout clothes who runs the boxing program. He has neatly combed gray hair and doesn't much resemble the 25-year-old with the thick mane of black hair I remembered from HBO World Championship Boxing and countless magazine covers some 35 years ago. Then comes a flash of that famous Irish grin and it gives the man away.

Gerry Cooney greets me in his unmistakable soft-spoken voice, “How are you, bro?” only to turn away briefly and finish tying his student's gloves. “Now, remember, jab! ... I want to see you use that jab. Relax. And have fun!”

He turns back to me and says, “You're next.”

I answer, “In my next life.”

We laugh and shake hands. The ice is broken and it's time to learn where life has taken the big man so many years later.

Beginnings

The center of former heavyweight boxer, Gerry Cooney's universe during his formative years was family, friends, and athletics in the one-time farming community of Huntington, New York. He is the third oldest of Arthur “Tony” and Eileen Cooney's six children (two girls and four

boys). Gerry's family was solid blue collar, with his father employed as an iron worker. His mother raised the kids, kept house, and cooked hearty meals for her growing tribe.

The Cooney household espoused the traditional mores of many Irish American families following the second World War: ethnic pride, belief in hard work, and self-reliance. They were practicing Catholics who attended Sunday Mass, dutifully performed household chores, and participated in athletics (wrestling, football and boxing) out of a love for sports.

The framework within every home requires a solid foundation. Unfortunately, the underpinnings needed to support the Cooney unit had all the earmarks of a dysfunctional family.

"My father was abusive and neglectful to the whole family," says Gerry. "He was a big drinker, an alcoholic, who grew up in a rough household himself."

With total clarity he speaks of the time his intoxicated father cross-examined the children about the whereabouts of his missing tool belt. "He took us in the garage, shut the door and beat us until he finally realized it was his fault. He was drunk and did not remember where he put the belt. Tommy left home at 15. Michael left at 17. I left at 17."

In his later years, Tony developed asbestosis which ultimately took his life. Gerry would regularly drive him to the hospital for chemotherapy. One morning after returning home following treatment, Tony said to his son, "If you can't live in my house, under my rules, get your hair cut, and get home when I tell you to be home, I'd rather crawl to the hospital myself on my hands and knees than have you drive me."

For a period in his life, Gerry felt only hate for the father he desperately wanted to please. "I grew up with a voice in my head where he always told me five things: I was no good; I was a failure; I would not amount to anything; don't trust nobody; and don't tell anyone your business."

"I was mixed up a lot. Most of my friends were going away to college. I wasn't and had to figure out about making a life. I couldn't depend on anyone. I was stuck by myself. Then my brother Tommy ran away from home. He went to the gym and started boxing. So I use to go there to see him. I put the gloves on and started fighting and that's how I became a fighter. I was pretty good...tall, skinny. I could punch ..."

Making His Way

In 1976, Gerry and Tommy made their way into the Golden Gloves, both making the finals, with only Gerry winning the championship. Boxing was showing the youngster a way to live and express the anger he had suppressed under his father's abuse.

"I was at Walt Whitman High School ... when I won the Middleweight Championship, and it was right around St. Patrick's Day and crazy around the Garden. We use to fight in the main arena ... with 21,000 people. To be this young kid, who was beaten and abused his whole life, to be in the corner of that ring with the lights off and then the spotlight goes on you, and they introduce your name, is a big thing."

Cooney was invited to the finals at the Olympic trials, but didn't go because his father was dying. Tony Cooney died in 1976, before his son would turn professional, leaving young Gerry devastated.

He was selected for the U.S. boxing team where he won the Golden Gloves again, went to Europe and turned professional. He bonded with a new trainer and surrogate father, Victor Valle, who would guide Gerry to the pinnacle of his career, culminating in the heavyweight championship bout with Larry Holmes.

Cooney unfortunately never received enough quality fights with older, Top 10 guys that would have provided him with the experience and confidence necessary to prepare for his eventual title fight. But the wins kept coming just the same.

“... But moving up I was doing fine. Nice wins. I knocked out Jimmy Young in four rounds in Atlantic City. I knocked out Ron Lyle and I moved up the rankings ... And then I fought Kenny Norton and knocked him out in 54 seconds.”

What Price Success?

Unbeknownst to most boxing fans, Cooney regarded his pummeling of Norton on May 11, 1981, as actually the beginning of the end of his career.

“And (13 months later) I was going to fight Holmes for the championship, so now I really have to take care of myself, and I went crazy ... it was just that everything was nutty, everywhere I went ... Studio 54. I was a big deal back then. So I started partying and I got stung for it.”

Cooney also believes the demons that haunted him as a teenager, the abusive father who said he was a loser and wouldn't amount to anything, greatly contributed to what was playing out inside him.

“And I think that was also the upbringing, the self-sabotage, and in case I lose, I'll have all this to say why I lost ... and probably somewhere inside myself was fighting missed opportunity and feeling I don't deserve it, I'm not good enough. Once it's so deeply ingrained in you, it's hard to rid yourself of it. Sometimes voices come back.”

Race Card

As the championship bout with Larry Holmes loomed closer, there were further distractions. Many people began referring to Cooney as “The Great White Hope,” a term he disliked and believed was circulated by promoter Don King. The “White Hope” label erupted into a media frenzy, which built interest in the fight, but carried a race connotation that incited a certain element of society seeking a “white” boxer to win back the heavyweight crown for the first time since 1959, when Ingemar Johansson defeated Floyd Patterson.

“I had six or seven guys that hung out with me during this period. I had nothing to do with it. We were oblivious to what was going on. It was stupid. I was a fighter, that's all. I didn't want that BS on my back.”

The media attention on Cooney frustrated Holmes, who despite an incredible career, continued to live in the shadows of the legendary Muhammad Ali.

“Listen, he was the heavyweight champ and felt threatened by me. You don’t like the guy you’re going to fight. Holmes was always trying to be acknowledged as a great fighter, which he was. And that’s what really bothered him. He was... bitter. And then I come along and people tell me that I am “The White Hope,” ...it was crazy for him. You have to realize what had occurred had nothing to do with us. It was the outside people, the small-minded people that created all that. We’re very good friends and do a lot of stuff together every year. I love the guy.”

Final Bell

On the sweltering evening of June 11, 1982, at Caesars Palace, Las Vegas, the brave contender from Huntington fought courageously against the “Easton Assassin.” Both men were previously undefeated. Then in round 13 the end came for the wobbly, but still standing Cooney when the fight was stopped. Boxing immortality was denied and the valiant quest to become the heavyweight champion was gone forever.

“I got dropped in the second round ... but I got up and fought back and then I was ok. People would say I couldn’t go the distance. I was trying to go the distance instead of just going and fighting. But I had no experience. But I could also be dead today, too. So it is what it is ... who knows? God didn’t want it that way.”

Aftermath

In defeat, Gerry Cooney proceeded to up the ante on his celebrity lifestyle. Drinking, drugging, smoking, carousing, bar fights, and an arrest for disorderly conduct became the order of the day. He lost interest in boxing and trained haphazardly. There would be five more fights before calling it a career. Following the same unrestrained lifestyle, he won his next three fights but then lost to Michael Spinks in 1987 by TKO in the fifth round.

Cooney hit bottom the following year. Past demons resurfaced and the old feelings of inadequacy from the father-son divide returned. Sobriety lasted only three months before a return to drinking. Finally determined to conquer his addiction, he had his last drink on April 21, 1988, a date indelibly stamped in his brain.

The end of the storied career would come on January 15, 1990 at the Atlantic City Convention Center. He was knocked out by George Foreman in the second round. Cooney once told a reporter this final fight helped him turn the page. “OK, I’ve had a great time. I got knocked down, I got up and dusted off my pants.”

When one door closes, another opens

- Alexander Graham Bell

The Good Life

Gerry Cooney has made his home in Fanwood for the past 19 years. He has a lovely wife and three children that he adores. The man who made his reputation as a professional athlete now proudly displays the names “family man” and “boxing legend” side-by-side on his resume.

“I love my family and have a great life,” he says. “I look at it as a privilege to sign autographs and make people happy whenever I can. It’s a nice feeling to be remembered.”

But there is a more compelling side to this great athlete. By his own words and deeds, the man, who will turn 60 this summer, is enjoying the most special time of his life. He is living a life of service, a believer in giving to those less fortunate through his involvement with many needy organizations, charities and orphanages since his retirement. He founded “Fighters’ Initiative for Support and Training,” a non-profit organization which helps retired boxers transition from the ring to the real world by providing career assistance. He became involved with “J.A.B.,” the first union for boxers. He has supported the “Hands are Not for Hitting” program which tries to prevent domestic violence. He makes weekly visits to Youth Consultation Service, a behavioral private health agency providing individualized care for children and their families. He has provided his support to Freedom House, a drug and alcohol rehabilitation center. Gerry is the head boxing instructor at the aforementioned BrawlHouse, with the able assistance of fellow instructor, Tony Santana, who is also a former amateur and pro boxer. He co-hosts “Monday Night at the Fights” and “Friday Night at the Fights” on Sirius XM satellite radio.

“When I was a kid there were no answers. I had to bump along the road and find a way. I like to be available to help kids not do the next bad thing. I want them to walk the straight path. It’s the same as I train fighters today. It’s not about hitting the bags and skipping rope. It’s about the whole life experience. You live your life like you’re training. I try to promote that every day of my life.”

And how does the transplanted New Yorker feel about living in New Jersey, where he is an approachable local celebrity to his Fanwood neighbors? The man who regularly walks the streets of his adopted town sporting an Irish wool cap, waving to passers-by and signing autographs, has much to say on the subject. “Listen, I’m a New Yorker, through and through. But I think New Jersey is great. I have been living here in Fanwood for about 19 years. It’s beautiful here. I have a wonderful family. New Jersey is a great place to live. I live 35 minutes from the city. I love it here.”

Gerry is quick to show this writer around town and point out some favorite haunts ... Mara’s Café & Bakery [250 South Ave] where we enjoyed a great lunch. “If you want the absolute best bagels, you’ve got to come to ... Fanwood Bagels & Deli [32 South Avenue] ... and a couple of doors right down here is the best pizza place in the world, Nick’s Pizza & Deli [42 South Martine Avenue]. My wife and I also like nearby towns like Westfield ... there’s Joe, the barber [Mr. J. Barber Shop, 607 S. Avenue W.], and we love Theresa’s Restaurant [47 Elm Street].”

The Best is Yet to Come

“I had a great experience from boxing. I did not get to where I could have been. But hopefully through my journey, I will have talked to somebody who will get to that level in some area of their life, whether it’s a mechanic, a doctor, a fighter, or a football player, that’s the dream.”

And Gerry has never forgotten the man who caused him so much pain and anger growing up in Huntington. He has made peace with himself as well as Tony Cooney. “My father was sick,” he says. “In order for me to live and enjoy my life I had to forgive him.”

The man affectionately known by a generation of fans as Gentleman Gerry, continues on his journey. Through perseverance, self-searching, and solid family support, the Irishman with the devastating left hook has opened a new door to a happy and satisfying life, and is still punching after all these years.

This is an expanded article that has been reprinted in a condensed form with permission of *The Irish Echo* on March 16, 2016. Another condensed form of this article was reprinted by *TAPinto – Your Neighborhood News Online* on March 16, 2016. The expanded article, as it appears above, is the complete work of authorship by the writer.

John Esposito is a freelance journalist. His work has been published in *The Star Ledger*, *The “Bergen” Record*, and *Morris County Daily Record* [in New Jersey]; *Greenwich Time*, and *Stamford Advocate* [in Connecticut]; *The Philadelphia Inquirer* [in Pennsylvania]; *The Italian Tribune*; *UNICO*; *The Irish Echo* [in national distribution]; and local New Jersey community newspapers. He was a special correspondent for the online newspaper, *NewJerseyNewsroom.com*; and has written for numerous magazines. Mr. Esposito has interviewed such acclaimed writers as Pete Hamill, Mary Higgins Clark and John Updike.

This complete article and the Q&A with Gerry Cooney appear on Mr. Esposito’s website: www.PieceworkJournals.com

Facebook Page: www.facebook.com/Piecework-Journals-by-John-Esposito-492572960923211/

John Esposito lives in New Providence, NJ with his wife and two children.