

**The Gerry Cooney Interview
with John Esposito
Interview Date: February 8, 2016**

Supplement to Irish Echo Article: “Gerry Cooney is Loving Life and Still Punching”

JE: This is John Esposito with the former world heavyweight boxer, Gerry Cooney. We are enjoying a wonderful lunch here at Mara’s Café & Bakery [250 South Avenue], in downtown Fanwood, NJ. Gerry, it’s a pleasure to speak with you today.

GC: It’s good to be here.

JE: Let’s begin by discussing your family background and the early years. Where were you born?

GC: I was born in Manhattan and my family moved out to Huntington when I was two. There was a lot of farmland area back in the late 1950s where I grew up. I kept the place out there until about twelve years ago.

JE: How would you describe the socio-economic make-up in Huntington when you were growing up? Was it mostly white collar, or a blue collar, working class neighborhood?

GC: In those days, I’m sure it was a mixture.

JE: I understand that your father, Tony, and mother, Eileen, are no longer living.

GC: Yes, they have both passed away. My father’s real name is Arthur, but he hated that name, so he picked up the name Tony and everyone called him Tony. My father died from asbestosis. And I think my mom died from a heart attack. She had to have a couple of arteries cleaned out, but never went to a doctor. Her brother had surgery for a similar condition and he is ninety-four years old and doing great.

JE: How many siblings do you have?

GC: I have two sisters and three brothers. My youngest sister is Madeleine at forty-nine; and Eileen, is a couple of years older than Madeleine; then my brother, Stephen is fifty-seven, two years younger than me; my brother, Michael is sixty-one and then my brother, Tommy is sixty-three. And I am fifty-nine.

[Note: Since this interview was conducted, Stephen passed away on February 23, 2016.]

JE: Describe what it was like growing up in an Irish family in Huntington, Long Island.

GC: Irish Catholic family. We went to church every Sunday. My father was a construction worker, heavy steel out, of Local 40 in New York. My father was abusive and neglectful to the whole family. He was a big drinker, an alcoholic, who grew up in a rough household himself. He

left the house when he was young. He was from St. John's Newfoundland, moved here when he was young, to Boston and worked in New York where he met my mother in Queens and they got married and that's how the family started.

JE: Besides yourself, were you an athletic family that participated in different sports?

GC: Oh yeah. The entire family was very athletic, Tommy, Michael, Stevie. We all boxed, played football and wrestled.

JE: In reading available bio materials, I learned that Tommy was in the Golden Gloves.

GC: Tommy and I went into Golden Gloves together. He was nineteen and I was sixteen. He was a heavyweight and I was a middleweight. We both made it to the finals that year and unfortunately he lost a decision against a very tough guy from the Virgin Islands. I won the middleweight championship and stayed with it, but he didn't. He went cross-country in another direction and I had boxing as a way to live. Plus, boxing helped me to express the anger I had for the way I grew up.

JE: Is the story accurate that your father hit you, your brothers and sisters for his missing tool belt when everyone told him they didn't know where it was?

GC: He took us in the garage, shut the door and beat us, until he finally realized it was his fault this time. He was drunk and did not remember where he put the belt. Tommy left home at fifteen, Michael left at seventeen, and I left at seventeen.

JE: Where did you guys go to live at such a young age? Did you get apartments?

GC: We had to get apartments. I was fortunate to move into my brother's apartment. I think I was paying twenty dollars a week, or something like that, living on my own.

JE: How did you mother deal with you and your brothers leaving home? Did she stand by your father?

GC: What was she going to do. Back in the day she said, "Listen, Gerry, what was I going to do, split you up?" She didn't want to split the family up. She didn't know what else to do. She had nothing else. She faced my father's wrath. He was terrible to her, too. I remember one time, after he left one morning, she said that she was leaving and I said, well let's go, but we never left. She threatened him, but she never would leave. She had no place to go. And she also felt that if she left him, they would separate the family and put us in foster care. That's what she was worried about.

And I remember going to see my father. I had left the house and he had asbestosis. And I use to take him to the hospital for chemo. And one morning after I drove him home from the hospital, he said to me, "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.” I was seventeen then. I then went into the kitchen and my mother was washing dishes like she always was, and I left. I was seventeen years old.

JE: After he passed away did you attempt to rationalize in your head some of the reasons why he acted the way he did and try to forgive him?

GC: I hated my father. 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.

JE: Your life up to this point seems like the real *Rocky* story in attempting to make your own way. And this was complicated by your father's passing before you turned professional. What year did he die?

GC: 1976.

JE: That was six years before the Larry Holmes title fight in 1982.

GC: I was an amateur. The last time I saw my father was when I fought the third rank Russian heavyweight at the Garden and I knocked him out.

When I got to the top of the pinnacle it was a self-fulfilling prophesy. I started drinking. I was given the shot at (Larry) Holmes and I wasn't taking care of myself.

JE: Did the drinking start prior to the title bout with Holmes?

GC: Yes, the night when I knocked out (Ken) Norton in 1981. My life went wild.

JE: Would you agree this falls under the classic example of success going to someone's ahead?

GC: No, no. Some part of us, when you are abused and neglected all the time, you feel that's all you deserve. So when something good happens to you, you try to sabotage it. When I go to orphanages and work with kids and I get them looking great and sounding great, right when they're ready, they take a wrench and throw it in the engine and mess it up again because they feel they don't deserve it. You understand.

JE: I understand, but I also thought that perhaps it may have had to do with all the trappings that come with fame and success, getting all the girls, living the good life ...

GC: No, but that helped, too. I believe that today.

JE: Were you eventually able to get closure, some peace within yourself, and forgive your father since his passing?

GC: Now, now.

JE: In what respect? How did you come to terms with all that had occurred?

GC: My father was sick. In order for me to live and enjoy my life I had to forgive him.

JE: Gerry, let's move on and return to speaking about how your career progressed. Take me briefly through the early boxing years beginning with your first fights and how you reached the Golden Gloves.

GC: I was at Walt Whitman High School and sixteen years old when I won the Middleweight Championship, and it was right around St. Patty'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.

JE: I can only imagine.

GC: And then to win the Middleweight Championship, I remember that day, and my brother and I were both fighting at the Garden. I thought that if one of us has to lose, please let it be me, because I know my brother couldn't handle that. And unfortunately I won, and he lost it.

JE: How is your brother doing today?

GC: Good. He's upstate. Two kids.

So I then got invited to the finals at the Olympic trials, but my father was sick and dying and I didn't go. And then my father passed. I had this school teacher, Geraldine Gorman, at Walt Whitman. She was an ex-nun. She said to me, "Gerry, you have to stay close to your mother for a while." So I stayed close to home for a year. I stayed with my family until early 1977.

I was mixed up a lot. You know. Most of my friends were going away to college. I wasn't going to college and had to figure out about making a life. But when I was a young kid I took to wrestling. I couldn't depend on anyone. I wasn't a team player. I had no team, I was stuck by myself. So wrestling was a way for me. I enjoyed that growing up. Then my brother Tommy ran away from home. And he went to the gym and started boxing. So I use to go there a couple of days a week to see him. I put the gloves on and started fighting and that's how I became a fighter. I was pretty good. I was tall, skinny. I could punch and six months later I went into the Golden Gloves and won the Middleweight Championship. So that led to boxing on the United States team. I won the Golden Gloves again. I went to Europe and then turned pro and met these two managers, (Dennis) Rappaport and (Mike) Jones, who were representing the boxer, Howard Davis, so I felt somewhat that I would be ok with these guys because I would be showcased with Howard Davis. So I joined on with them and that's when my career started.

My first fight was at Sunnyside Garden and I think it was a first round knockout.

JE: Do you remember the name of the fighter you beat?

GC: I don't remember the name. But my career started.

JE: And then your career began to take off. You started knocking out your opponents. How did your rankings increase to the point where you were able to get fights with Jimmy Young and Ron Lyle?

GC: Unfortunately, Don King owned everybody, except for me. He never wanted me to get the experience needed, so that when it came to fighting Larry Holmes I could win. So I was virtually fighting only once a year, but not quite at that point. But moving up I was doing fine. Nice wins. I beat "The Animal" Lopez. I knocked out Jimmy Young in four rounds in Atlantic City. I knocked out Ron Lyle and I moved up the rankings. I really needed it, but I needed other guys within the division to gain experience, so when I would get a shot at Holmes, I could win. I never got that. And my managers didn't care because they wanted the big payday. The Holmes fight was the big payday, so they didn't care and Don King wasn't giving me anybody. So I was stuck in the middle, like between a rock and a hard place.

JE: When did Victor Valle become your trainer and your relationship grow?

GC: Rappaport and Jones got Victor for me. I had met with "Cus" D'Amato (who had trained Mike Tyson and Floyd Patterson). But I didn't get along with him. I was like an hour late for our meeting because of a train problem and D'Amato says, "You're here, late for me!" I said, "F - you... I would be here late for anybody. The train was no good." And then I was introduced to Victor Valle, who I fell in love with. Smart guy, good teacher.

JE: I understand Victor passed away about fifteen years ago.

GC: Yeah.

JE: Did you have a good relationship with Valle throughout your entire professional career?

GC: Yeah. He was like a father. You see when you grow up in a dysfunctional family, you attract dysfunction. When you go to therapy and you change, then you are attracted to something different. Can you understand that?

JE: Yes.

GC: Victor Valle was a rough, tough guy. But I didn't put up with that either, you know. He was a great guy. But if you made him mad, he would get mad. And he was a great teacher. I wish I could have listened to everything he taught me back then, which I teach people now. At the time life was too fast and I couldn't hold it in. But that being said, he took me a long way. Unfortunately, I didn't get the guys I needed to fight, some of the older top ten guys who would have given me the experience I needed, the confidence, so when I got in the ring with Holmes I would have had a shot. I fought Kenny Norton and knocked him out in fifty-four seconds and then I didn't fight for thirteen months and then I fought Holmes.

JE: Mike Jones has since died.

GC: Yeah.

JE: Is Dennis Rappaport still a promoter?

GC: I don't pay attention. I don't have time for that stuff.

JE: You appear to have a bad taste in your mouth for everything that went on.

GC: You know, I was a straightforward guy and they lied to me. But anyway, listen, it's not my kind of people. What I was attracted to back then I have nothing to do with. I don't even communicate or look at that today. I was a sick kid. I attracted sickness.

JE: Take me forward from this point in your career.

GC: That was a crazy time. After the Norton fight is when my career really ended. I had a high school girlfriend who I started partying with. And I was going to fight (Holmes) for the championship, so now I really have to take care of myself, and I went crazy. 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.

JE: When you said you went crazy, what you mean? Hanging out with your girlfriend, other girls, drinking?

GC: Studio 54 ... it was just that everything was nutty, everywhere I went.

JE: And by this point in your career, you were certainly very well-known.

GC: It was crazy. I was a big deal back then. So I started partying and playing around and I got stung for it. Thirteen months later I fought Holmes and probably somewhere inside myself was fighting missed opportunity and feeling I don't deserve it, I'm not good enough. Do you understand? That's inbred in you. It takes a long time to rid yourself of that and sometimes still you have it. Once it's so deeply ingrained in you it's hard to rid yourself of it. I don't know if you can understand that. Sometimes voices come back. It's just crazy, but anyway ... but also looking back, I survived. A lot of the guys who were fighting back then are shot today. They have no life.

JE: During your rise to become the top heavyweight contender for the title, many people started referring to you as "The Great White Hope," a term which you did not like. Do you know where it originated from? Was it by promoters such as Don King?

GC: I believe it was Don King, really. And then people jumped on it. I don't know if my manager promoted it, I didn't. I had six or seven guys I grew up with, that hung out with me during this period and I had nothing to do with it. We were oblivious to what was going on.

JE: The “White Hope” label carried a race connotation because a certain element of society was looking for a “white” boxer to win the heavyweight crown for the first time since 1959 when Ingemar Johansson last held the title by beating Floyd Patterson (only to lose to Patterson in their rematches in 1960 and 1961).

GC: It was stupid. It was a dumb thing. I was a fighter, that’s all. I didn’t want that bullshit on my back.

JE: Gerry, there was so much written prior to your title fight with Larry Holmes that you guys did not like each other. True or false, or was that just fabricated media hype to build interest in the fight? It’s clear from what the papers have reported in the years since, that you and Larry have become good friends, make personal appearances together and do charity benefits from time to time. Last year you attended a parade honoring Larry Holmes with a bronze statue dedication, in Easton, PA where he lives, and is respected by the community.

GC: Listen, he was the heavyweight champ and felt threatened by me. All athletes feel threatened by the guy they’re going to fight. You don’t like the guy you’re going to fight. That’s the whole deal. Holmes was always trying to be acknowledged as a great fighter, which he was. And whatever King put in his head, I don’t know, but they were trying times. 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. Yes, we’re very good friends and do a lot of stuff together every year. I love the guy.

JE: He was always having to deal with being in the shadow of Muhammad Ali. That’s a tall order.

GC: That’s right. And that’s what really bothered him. He was angry about that, bitter. And then here I come along and people tell me that I am “The White Hope,” this and that, it was crazy for him.

JE: Sport fans always like to compare athletes from different eras, no matter the sport, and debate who was better. But in many sports, it really is difficult to do, including boxing. For example, do you believe a Rocky Marciano could defeat a Muhammad Ali or a Larry Holmes today?

GC: Probably not. Marciano was too small. He was 185 pounds. And in other sports like football, back in those days, the guys were smaller. By the 1980s the guys were a lot bigger.

JE: And when people made comparisons who was the greater fighter, Marciano or Holmes, for example, by using those “computerized” mock fights, one can see how that burned up Holmes, because he was seeking respect for the great career he was having. I recall that he was initially quite restrained and very cool about it for a long time. But then he finally exploded at the press conference that followed after his very first defeat by Michael Spinks. I remember the frustration on his face when he addressed the media and said, “Rocky Marciano could not carry my

jockstrap.” He eventually calmed down and went on to say that Rocky was a great fighter, but the media didn’t give much coverage to that portion of the press conference. It seemed they were only intent on zeroing in on the “jockstrap” comment. I think it was a bad scene all the way around for everyone that day.

So now let’s move ahead and speak about your own title fight with Larry Holmes on that sweltering evening of June 11, 1982 at Caesars Palace, in Las Vegas. Going into the fight you were both undefeated. Larry was 39-0 and your record stood at 25-0. During the entire fight you stayed with Holmes until he finally defeated you in the thirteenth round.

GC: I got dropped in the second round and I thought to myself, wow, what the f--- happened here. But I got up and fought back and then I was ok. And in fact, a school teacher, Ralph Schneider, who came out to see me, said that when I got dropped and got up, he wasn’t afraid anymore. When I got up and started fighting back he knew it was going to be ok.

JE: Looking back now so many years later, do you have any thoughts on how you may have fought the fight differently?

GC: 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. If I had three or four or five more fights it could have been different. But I could also be dead today, too. So it is what it is. I have a great life now. I have a great family. I come and go as I please. I’m loved. And I’m still in the game. I have a radio show on Sirius XM on Mondays and Fridays, plus we do fights on Saturdays.

JE: After losing the Holmes fight your head must have been spinning in so many directions as to your future. How much later was it before you fought again ... two years?

GC: It was so distasteful... the whole thing. I believe my career ended that night with Holmes. Really, the career ended after the Norton fight the year before (1981). But when I lost to Holmes it was so crazy...my managers hated each other; I was in the middle all the time. I couldn’t get any fights. I lost interest. It was not anything that it was supposed to be. You know what I mean. Amateurs will fight the next best guy. In the pros, it’s all BS. You sit around and wait and wait, it’s on, it’s off. I remember fighting (Michael) Spinks. It took two and a half years for me to get in the ring with him. And by the time I got in the ring I didn’t believe it was going to happen.

JE: You mentioned earlier that after the Norton fight everything got a little “crazy” in your personal life and you were drinking. Has that resolved itself? Do you drink anymore?

GC: I haven’t had a drink since April 21, 1988.

JE: Based on what you mentioned earlier and what has been attributed to you in print, you said that if you had beaten Larry Holmes perhaps your life wouldn’t be as wonderful and fulfilling as it turned out for you. And that you may not even be alive today.

GC: Maybe. It would have been crazy. If I had someone guide me then, I would have understood a little better, and it would have been different, too. Who knows. God didn't want it that way.

JE: It seems that you deal with reminders of all you had to endure and it continues to weigh heavily on your mind.

GC: Listen, it was a lot of work what I did and it is self-defeating in some ways. And Holmes talked about that if I had fought Mike Weaver first, then I could have probably beat him. But, you know, self-sabotage hit me.

JE: And so your last two fights were with Spinks and George Foreman in 1987 and 1990?

GC: Yeah. Anyway, I lost to those two guys and my record was 28 (wins), 24 were by knockouts) and 3 (losses).

JE: Your overall career record is nothing short of exceptional.

GC: Anyway, it is what it is, you know. Given the cards I was dealt, I did a great job. I've had a great life.

JE: Gerry, you are quite a busy man. You do a great deal of work for a number of very worthy causes. If you would, please talk about some of the community work that you do. I am aware of one such organization, is Freedom House. I recently learned from a former coworker of mine that you have participated in the Freedom House Golf Tournament to help raise money.

GC: Yes, Freedom House is a long term alcohol and drug rehab organization which raises money for people who struggle and need to get back on track and get their lives back together again. I became involved because I was lost and confused. I had no direction. No one helped me on where to go and what I was going to do, or how I was going to make a living. I was on my own since I was sixteen years old.

JE: You mentioned that tomorrow you will be going to Youth Consultation Service (YCS) in Paterson, NJ. (YCS is New Jersey's largest behavioral private health agency for individualized care for children and their families). Tell me how you are involved.

GC: I go there each week and speak with young men and women and teach them boxing. We talk about self-esteem. Through boxing you get your frustration out on the bags and learn about yourself and build confidence in yourself, not to become a fighter, but if you can learn to box you can do anything. I will be doing a "Fight Night" for YCS in June that will be in Hoboken to raise money. We also do a golf tournament and a food tasting.

JE: With all the success you received in your boxing career, you are intent on giving back to those less fortunate and dealing with personal issues.

GC: 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 about a life experience. 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. When you are home, you eat right, you drink right and you do all these things to help come into harmony with what you want to be and who you are. I didn't have any information about that. I had to learn the hard way. I try to promote that every day of my life. There are a lot of athletes that are very gracious and give their time to help the less fortunate. People are struggling. I have done hundreds and hundreds of different charities to help people.

[Gerry Cooney is involved in a number of endeavors. He founded (F.I.S.T.) "Fighters' Initiative for Support and Training," a non-profit organization which helps retired boxers make the transition from the ring to the real world by providing job readiness, training, and career assistance. He became involved with "J.A.B.," the first union for boxers and a supporter of the "Hands are Not for Hitting" program which tries to prevent domestic violence. He is a vocal advocate speaking out about drug and alcohol abuse. Gerry is the co-host of "Monday Night at the Fights" and "Friday Night at the Fights" on Sirius XM satellite radio.]

JE: You have a real affinity for helping young people. I spent Tuesday evening with you last week, then last night, and again this morning at BrawlHouse (BH) [1115 Globe Avenue, located off Highway Route 22 East, Mountainside, NJ] where you run the boxing program. I came away very impressed. To call this massive facility simply a gym is an understatement. When I was a young guy in my early twenties, and in my thirties I belonged to several gyms which all had free weights and machines. But the dedication and all-out effort the kids at BH showed me during their training sessions, including some high intense boxing workouts under your direction, far and away surpassed many of the workouts I saw in bodybuilding gyms over the years. There was no let-up or any downtime by these kids. What I saw was a real desire to excel and also please you and your assistant instructor, Tony Santana (former amateur and professional boxer). The majority of these young people were not even born when you fought Holmes in 1982 for the heavyweight crown, but they are certainly aware of who you are and what you have meant to boxing. When I watched you working with them one-on-one, the look on many of their faces was complete awe. They have a great deal of respect for you and Tony.

[BrawlHouse (BH) is a 9,500 square foot state-of-the-art sports training facility established in 2014 and owned by Christopher Jordan. BrawlHouse specializes in working with students to achieve their athletic greatness and to teach them to harness their athletic achievement as fuel to live their life with power, purpose, confidence, and focus. BrawlHouse partners with the surrounding community and offers free specialized programs to seniors, those suffering physical handicaps and the economically challenged. BrawlHouse specializes in Premier MMA, Wrestling, BJJ, Muay Thai / Kickboxing, Boxing, Yoga, CrossFit, Tae Kwon Do, and Sports Specific Functional Training. The clientele who range in age from kindergarten to senior citizen, are taught by world renowned and leading professionals, who in addition to former number one

boxing heavyweight contender, Gerry Cooney; is the four-time world Brazilian jiu-jitsu champion and Pro-MMA champion, Vitor “Shaolin” Ribeiro. The other instructors and trainers include: Donnie DeFilippis, Director of Wrestling; Craig Frost, Wrestling Instructor; Shaheed Muhammad, the Martial Arts, Karate, Kung fu and Taekwondo Instructor; Tony Santana, Boxing Instructor, a former amateur and professional boxer, USMC veteran and New Jersey Boxing Hall of Fame member, winner of 1973 and 1974 New York City Golden Gloves, the All-Marines Featherweight title (three times), the 1976 Inter-Service Featherweight crown, the Gold Medal at the 1976 World Military Championships, the 1977 National Sports Festival Featherweight title, the 1978 North Carolina Golden Gloves, and was rated number ten in the world by the WBA in 1981, and number eight by the WBC in 1982 as a professional boxer; Christopher Flores, a W.I.T.S. and NASM CPT Certified Athletic Trainer; Ginger Comstock, Yoga and CrossFit Director; and USMC Corporal Jon Veras, Martial Arts Trainer, a member of the Second Marine Division from 2007 to 2013, a combat veteran who served with honor in both Iraq and Afghanistan. After sustaining combat injuries, he was honorably discharged from the Marine Corps.]

JE: Gerry, tell me more about your involvement with BrawlHouse, specifically the boxing program which you run.

GC: BrawlHouse has given me a great opportunity to be involved with all these really great young people. It’s just a great place. I wanted a place to teach boxing. All the great trainers died. They are now teaching the kids a watered down version of fighting. I had a great teacher (Victor Valle) and I am able to pass it down: position, balance, power, safety, that they don’t do anymore. You know, if you take care of your car you’ll get fifty thousand to sixty thousand miles on your car. If you don’t you’ll get twenty-five thousand to thirty thousand miles. If you’re not taught proper boxing you’re not going to get fifty fights, you’re going to get fifteen fights and you’re going to get beat-up and want to quit. So I teach the real thing. And all the things that I teach promote power and longevity. I teach them what to expect and what they need to do. You have to teach them what’s going to happen, and if such and such happens, what are you going to do, how do you respond, and so if you are caught in that position, you can respond.

JE: What type of kids and older people come to BrawlHouse? I saw you joking with a dedicated young girl of thirteen who told us that she started coming here when she was eleven and now she’s learning boxing techniques in the ring. And I spoke to a forty-three-year-old man named Carlos who is invigorated by his workouts. He’s all about staying healthy for himself and his young family.

GC: They are kids from all walks of life and different backgrounds. That thirteen-year-old is unbelievable. She gives me a hard time (laughing). And there is one kid who came to me and didn’t know if he could do it because of anxiety attacks. I said don’t worry, you’re going to be fine. He didn’t want to get in the ring because he was afraid of looking bad. I taught him for a

while and now he's up there in the ring and you can see all the confidence he has. You take it from that night, to where he is now, and it changes the course of his life.

JE: That must be gratifying to you.

GC: Yeah, it's a nice feeling and the guy is growing.

JE: I had the opportunity to meet Tony Santana last week at BrawlHouse. He is an instructor who assists you in the boxing program. Tony told me that you both are the same age and have known each other since you were sixteen and were in Golden Gloves together. I understand that he now lives in New Jersey like you do, and is from Brooklyn, New York.

GC: I knew him when he was a fighter. He was a very tough guy and had Sandy Saddler (former featherweight champion, best remembered for his bouts with Willie Pep), as one of his trainers. When Sandy died he came with my trainer, Victor Valle. Tony could fight! I inducted him in the New Jersey Hall of Fame. I brought Tony with me to BrawlHouse because I can't be available every night because of my busy schedule. And I knew that since he was trained by Saddler and Valle, he would be able to teach similar styles and conditioning.

JE: Gerry, what are your impressions about the present state of the heavyweight division?

GC: Well, it's getting exciting again, finally. The Klitschko brothers (Vitali Klitschko and Wladimir Klitschko - Ukraine) are gone. Vitali left. He retired to become a politician in the Ukraine. Wladimir was trying to hold on but he lost the fire, and got old overnight. And Tyson Fury (England) stood up and beat him, I take my hat off to him, God bless him. And there is Deontay Wilder (USA) and Alexander Povetkin (Russia). You've got a bunch of guys coming up, so the heavyweight division is starting to get exciting again. In the next couple of years, we're going to see some good strong, tough guys.

JE: Do you think Fury is going to be around for a while?

GC: Yeah, well, Tyson Fury is 6 ft. 9 inches. He's got that long jab ... he uses that jab. He's great feinting. It's hard to catch up with him. Listen, the heavyweight division is the heavyweight division. Anything can happen.

JE: What about Floyd Mayweather (USA -Welterweight)? Do you think he will come out of retirement? He will be thirty-nine years old this year.

GC: I believe he will. Boxing has been his whole life. He went over to Europe and bought a \$500,000 mink coat. It's ninety degrees in Vegas, what's he going to do with a mink coat? He's so bored. And he's an athlete. I think he's got to come back. He's just waiting for the right guy. I think Danny Garcia or the winner of the Danny Garcia (USA – Welterweight) – Amir Khan (England – Welterweight) fight may be the guy. Danny Garcia is undefeated.

JE: The next thing I would like to speak about may be difficult for you to discuss given boxing has been a huge part of your life. Sport and non-sport fans alike would have to be living under a rock not to be aware of the headlines concerning brain injuries and football. During the past couple of years, autopsies performed on a number of former athletes revealed they suffered from Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy (CTE), a progressive and degenerative brain disease. It is apparently the result of concussions sustained by football players as well as athletes in other sports, including boxing. There is medical evidence strongly suggesting that a number of former athletes diagnosed with brain injuries have exhibited signs of dementia, memory loss, aggression, depression and committed suicide. The signs of CTE may be similar to other conditions like Alzheimer's disease and Parkinson's disease. Unfortunately, science has not advanced to the point to where CTE can be diagnosed while the athletes are still living. What are your thoughts about violence in football and closer to home, in boxing, and the future of both sports?

GC: If you got a three-hundred-pound guy banging you up on the line all day long, in practice and on the field, your body just can't take it. You know, when the shock absorbers go on your car, you change the shock absorbers. When the ball joints go in the car, you change the ball joints. You can't change the shock absorbers in our bodies. And in fighting too, it's tough. A lot of guys ... in the gym ... Philadelphia was known for that. The wars they had in the gym training for fights ... they stopped it. The commissions are watching it now. They don't let it happen anymore.

JE: Boxing has experienced its dark side with a number of deaths in the ring or occurring shortly thereafter? Two fighters who died in the ring come to mind.

GC: Benny "the Kid" Paret (1962 - World Welterweight Championship title vs. Emile Griffith); and Kim Duk-koo (1982 - World Lightweight Championship Title vs. Ray "Boom" "Boom" Mancini. There were a lot of problems.

JE: I remember when Howard Cosell (sports announcer and journalist) decided on the air that he would no longer announce boxing matches and eventually called for an end to boxing altogether.

GC: Howard Cosell got out of it when "Tex" Cobb was getting such a beating from Larry Holmes (1982) and the referee didn't stop the fight and he quit after that.

JE: The bottom line is that it has been more than fifty years since Paret died and almost thirty-five years since Duk-koo died. And with all the calls years ago to abolish boxing it has never happened. Likewise, with all the recent evidence of brain injuries and controversy in professional football, on the collegiate and even the high school level, about concussions and resulting brain damage, the National Football League continues to prosper, is bigger than ever, and football looks to be here to stay. And I would argue without question that football has replaced baseball as America's national pastime. And then there is boxing, which has never attracted the fan base of professional football and is still around. It certainly appears that both sports will remain. It's

just a matter of whether either sport can be made safer. If the NFL and the boxing commission can do something, I really question as to what degree the serious injuries can be reduced. Both are violent sports.

GC: The NFL knew about it. That's a problem! Boxing is a high risk, high reward and it's a fight game. Dr. Lisa Ravdin, from New York City, NYU ... they did a study about ...you have a gene or you don't have a gene. If you have a gene you are more prone to it. Back then they asked me if I would get tested and I said no. I didn't want to. There is supposedly a gene but all those hits they had are not good. Muhammad Ali...Parkinson's. That directly related.

JE: The New York Giant Hall of Famer, Harry Carson, has publically said he does not want his grandchildren to play football. He said golf and swimming are fine, but not football. Here is a man who was tough middle linebacker for some great Giant teams and he is concerned about what football injuries are doing to athletes. And now we have these autopsies performed on football players revealing CTE was found not just in running backs and linemen, but also in quarterbacks and receivers, who take much less hits in games and in practice.

GE: Mike Ditka (Hall of Fame tight end for three NFL teams; Assistant Coach and Head Coach for three NFL teams; and television commentator) said that if his grandson wanted to play football he'd tell him he wouldn't do it.

JE: If your children had wanted to box when they were younger, would you have said ...

GC: No, I don't want my kids fighting. I taught them how to box, they know how to box. They're bright kids. They stay in school. It's a tough game. Listen, I grew up by myself since I'm sixteen...had to find my own way...had to find my own managers...had to field everything myself with all the snakes and the crooks in this game to get to where I am. It's a very difficult business.

JE: Gerry, now that you are no longer in competition, what do you do to keep in shape? Do you have a specific workout routine?

GC: I work out pretty much four to five days a week at BrawlHouse, with other kids and that's kind of a great workout because I'm working pads and I'm hitting the bag. Sometimes I spar. I do a couple of exhibitions every year so I have to be in shape for that.

JE: What about nutrition and taking supplements?

GC: The older we get we take care of ourselves. I take a multiple vitamin and a couple of different vitamins. My wife is a great cook, a chef, I'll call her. She is very health conscious, and that way with the kids, as I have young kids. And I fit right along with that. I'm eating less and better food. I take care of myself.

JE: Let's talk about your family life. You are married to a wonderful lady named Jennifer and have three children.

GC: Yes, my whole family is doing great. Christopher is twenty-seven and graduated law school and works full time for a bank; Jackson is eighteen and a senior in high school, and goes to the magnet school; Sarah will be fifteen in June and in high school, is a dancer and likes art, photography and makeup. I love my family and have a great life.

JE: You were born in Manhattan, raised in Huntington, Long Island, and now live with your family in New Jersey. I understand Jennifer is from New Jersey. Did you have any connection to New Jersey prior to meeting her?

GC: No. A friend of mine got a job where my wife works...for two months. And in that two-month period I was living in Florida during the winter. And he called me one day and put me on the phone with my wife and we had a nice little conversation. I said when I come back to New York, we'll have lunch. So when I came back we went out to lunch and we walked down the street holding hands that day.

JE: As a native New Yorker, how do you now feel about living in New Jersey?

GC: Listen, I'm a New Yorker, through and through. But I think New Jersey is great. I have been living here in Fanwood, NJ for about nineteen years. It's beautiful here. I never thought I would live here. New Jersey is a great place to live. I live thirty-five minutes from the city. I love it here in New Jersey.

JE: We're just about finished lunch here (at Mara's Café & Bakery). Can you tell me about some other places where you like to go in Fanwood?

GC: Sure. Let's take a walk after lunch and stop in a couple of the places and say hello before we head back to the car.

[On several occasions during lunch, several customers and employees of Mara's came over to our table to say hello to Gerry and ask for his autograph, which he was happy to oblige. After we left, Gerry and I walked along Martine Avenue and made pit stops at two of his favorite haunts.]

GC: If you want the absolute best bagels, you've got to come to this bagel shop here [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]. You've got to go to Nick's Pizza. Let's stop inside. This guy's been dodging box me for some time (laughing).

[Entering Nick's Pizza & Deli we learned Nick was not in, but Gerry was warmly greeted by Nick's son and his employees. Gerry urged me to try a plain slice and one of Nick's terrific specialty pizzas, Buffalo Chicken. Before I could say that we both just had lunch, Nick's son gave

us a few complementary slices to go, which I brought home to my wife, and Gerry took back for his daughter. I sampled the Buffalo Chicken and wholeheartedly agree: excellent pizza!]

GC: My wife and I also like nearby towns like Westfield. The Starbucks [117 Central Avenue, Westfield] is great there. And there's Joe, the barber, who has been cutting hair for fifty years [Mr. J. Barber Shop, 607 S. Avenue W.]. And we love going to Theresa's Restaurant [47 Elm Street]."

GC: How have you dealt with your celebrity over the years? Although you've been out of the limelight for many years, people recognize you wherever you go as the former world heavyweight contender. Today has been no exception.

GC: It's a privilege. 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. You see, most football players when they retire are not remembered because they wore helmets. And I had a great experience from boxing. I did not get to where I could have been. But hopefully though 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. So I love life, I love people.

JE: Gerry, it's been a real pleasure getting to know you these past two weeks. Thanks for sharing so many of your experiences in and outside of the ring. I wish you continued success in teaching boxing skills to young people, all the charitable work you do for so many, and in your radio career at Sirius XM Radio.

GC: I enjoyed it. Give me a call. Keep in touch and let me know if you should need anything further.

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 PA]; The Italian Tribune; UNICO; and The Irish Echo. 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 Q. and A. interview with Gerry Cooney is a companion to the article, "Gerry Cooney is Loving Life and Still Punching," which was published in The Irish Echo. The newspaper article and this Q. and A. interview are included on Mr. Esposito's website: "Piecwork Journals": www.PiecworkJournals.com

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