

Winner of the October 2002 Short Story Contest:**On Assignment****By Cliff Rold**

"What the hell kinda' sport is basketball anyways. You run back and forth and jump a lot. Good athletes I guess, but they embarrass themselves. You ever seen that O'Neal throw a punch? Friggin' joke."

The young reporter's laugh did nothing to drown out the noise of the gym. By his calculations the old man was still there after sixty years. That didn't even count the years before he had taken over. "Mr. Carris.," he began, but the old man had turned his back and was looking at a picture on the wall.

"Sam, right?" he asked the young reporter. The young man nodded his head. "See that picture, Sam?" He asked, gesturing toward a large black and white photo near the entrance. "That was me before the games in 32." On the wall was a picture of a tan, gaunt fighter. Dark, wavy hair and dark eyes offset a boy's smile. A lightweight, perhaps a featherweight, the reporter assumed. He was still figuring how the weights worked out. The old man in front of him wasn't much bigger than the kid on the wall. His skin was now loose and the hair, still wavy, was white. The only thing left was the eyes. Still dark. "Olympics wasn't so big back then for the fights. Most of the best kids turned pro early then. The way it was run, there was no big signing bonus so if you could, you went ahead and got paid. I was still real proud."

"Mr. Carris.," he began again, hoping to catch the old man's attention. "Mr. Carr..."

"So who did you shoot to have the paper send you down here to talk to me?"

"Excuse me?"

The old man smirked. "Look, no one covers this sport on purpose anymore. Least no one your age. There's a few, but not like there used to be. And you're stuck working a newspaper in Fresno to go with this deal."

"It's not so bad."

"Well, be careful. This game gets in your blood. You get hooked on it. I figure you'll write this story and move on."

"Someone must like boxing still Mr. Carris. You have a good group of kids here."

"There's thirty kids here in a city with half a million people. If you take away the kids who weren't even born in the country, there'd be about twelve. And they only come in the evening. When I was a kid, the place was packed all day. I remember when Young Corbett fought for the title. There were ten of you news guys in the gym all day and when he lost the title to McLarnin all ten of them took it hard. It was a different time."

Mr. Carris motioned for him to follow him off the gym floor into the deli he ran in an adjoining room. "So, what did you want to ask?"

"If the turnout is so small, how could you afford to reopen the gym?"

"This. The deli. Look, I put some away all these years. The gym was shut in this town for a couple years and I didn't like it. The deli brings in a good lunch crowd and

pays for keeping her open. People like to look at the pictures. It's funny. I get guys who couldn't tell you anything about the kids fighting today, but they are in awe of a picture of Dempsey or Robinson. They even like to listen to an old man tell a story."

Sam smiled at that. He had to admit that the gym had its own charm. He'd never been in a boxing gym before. When he was studying journalism at UCLA, he dreamt of following the Dodgers or Lakers on the road. Instead, he was covering minor league baseball in the San Joaquin Valley, which to him was a matter of killing time. There was also the matter at hand.

"So they say that Vance is the best prospect around here in awhile?"

"Since Mac Foster was coming up. Hector was good, but the heavyweights get 'em going."

"Hector?"

"Lizzaraga. He was featherweight champ a few years back."

"I wasn't following."

"You don't follow it. It's ok. We been over that." The old man stepped behind the counter and began making a sandwich. He was blunt, but not rude. Sam liked him, liked the way he personified what he imagined the old grizzled fight man must be.

"So, why keep going then? I mean, if the turnout isn't good, and the interest from the press and the public isn't good?"

The old man didn't answer. He was busy making a sandwich, the ingredients of which Sam couldn't quite make out. When he was done, he handed a plate to the young reporter. "Try my Pastrami on wheat."

"Thanks." He took a bite and nodded encouragingly.

"Vance is gonna' be something. He's only had ten fights pro, but I've known him long enough. Seen him when he was kid and worked with him and his dad at the gym in Madera while this place was shut and we were putting it back together. He's got all the tools. He's big and hits hard and has sneaky speed. They'll all worry about his chin, but he got tagged enough in the amateurs that I know he can take it."

"And he'll be here soon."

"Yeah. He worked out this morning. You can come back tomorrow morning at nine. We're having him spar six rounds. Next fight is in a week and I'd just as soon have him fresh. Couple more and we can start fighting contenders. You want a Coke or anything?"

Sam had just taken a bite of his pastrami on wheat. He waited until he had chewed it down and could swallow before asking for a glass of water instead.

Mr. Carris walked to the spout and Sam took in the walls around him. The open space of the gym didn't make the numerous old promotional posters stand out the same way this smaller room covered in press clippings and photos did. The pictures really were something. Old fighters he recognized, and many he didn't, gazed at him from their frames. One wall was a collage, a collection of color pictures cut from boxing magazines. Some showed men standing victorious while others showed men prone on their backs waiting for a referee to end their endeavors. One of the photos was of a woman with blood splashed across a tank top and sporting a bruised eye. That was the only one of its kind.

"So is Vance what keeps you in the business at your age? I mean, you've been training since you stopped fighting in, what?"

"'42."

"Right. '42."

Mr. Carris waved off Sam's attempt to return to his initial question. "Finish your

sandwich."

Sam watched Mr. Carris as he finished his sandwich. The old man was meticulous in cleaning his counters and cutting boards. He even ran a towel over the water spout. The project to reopen the gym had been well covered locally and some of the older writers at the paper thought of him as a local treasure. Sam wondered if he had been sent to the gym to cover a rising contender or get a better feel for his new community. He handed Mr. Carris his plate when he had finished his sandwich and kept quiet while the old man washed it. When that task was completed, he thanked him for what passed for both lunch and dinner that day.

"You looked hungry." Mr Carris said while exiting from behind the counter of his deli. "C'mon. Vance isn't here yet so you can come out and watch the kids for awhile."

Sam still hadn't had his questions answered, but he figured he could wait for a moment. They walked back onto the floor of the gym, and Sam paid closer attention than he had before to the assortment of aspiring fighters at work. While the sound of pounded heavy bags and the clipping of ropes against the concrete had distracted him, the trainees themselves hadn't really caught his eye. The ages of the individuals varied. There were men in their thirties who looked equal parts desperate and tired. There were teens who looked focused if not a bit angry.

In the center of the gym floor was the ring. It's blue mat was speckled with blood and spit stains and it's red, white and blue ring ropes looked faded. Once a month on a Saturday night, the ring held the hopes of local amateurs honing their craft in live competition. On these days, it was a practice floor and onto it stepped two combatants that Sam noticed right away. "Aren't they a little young?" Sam asked.

Mr. Carris, whose eyes were focused elsewhere, turned his focus to the ring. "Not really. One is eight and the other is seven. The younger one and his brother are actually third generation around here. Their grandfather and I were good friends and their father cracked the top ten for a couple months." He pointed at a man working with one of the teens at a speed bag on the far wall of the gym. "That's their dad over there. Jose gets up every morning at five and goes to work at the beer company and comes in here every night to work with the kids. His and the other ones. He usually lets the other trainers, Marty or Joe, work with his boys. All of the trainers are volunteers."

"What about the other kid?" Sam asked of the older of the two boys about to spar. "He's new. His grandmother signed him up about a month ago when he got suspended for fighting. I don't know if we've let him spar before. Hey Marty," he called to the man working with both boys. "Is this his first time?"

Marty nodded yes and Mr. Carris smiled. "Watching 'em go the first time is a riot. You'll like this."

Sam watched as the two tiny pugilists had their gloves, which looked to be about the same size as their arms, laced up and the headgear attached. The eight year old looked a little dazed. "So let me ask you Mr. Carris, after being around this since the twenties and thirties, have you given any thought to retiring?"

"Hush. Let's watch the kids." Marty had the two boys come out of their corners and begin their sparring session. They both seemed to be concentrating heavily on following all of the motions they had been taught so far. The dipping of their shoulders and balanced footwork was exaggerated and deliberate. The older boy flicked out a slow, plodding left jab and the younger reacted swiftly. He countered over that weak assault with a right hand and a left hook that sent his opponent down

to one knee. The older boy went from dazed to embarrassed. He hopped up and nodded at Marty, and then tore into his younger foe.

Flailing away without discipline or care, he nearly ran over three generations of gym life. The younger boy looked perplexed. He tried to keep working his jab, but the frantic pace left him unsure of what to do next. He wasn't being hit by any of this novice assault, but he certainly wasn't dealing with it either. The older boy backed him into the ropes and Sam wanted to laugh. Mr. Carris did. Neither boy stood any taller than the second rope, and they both tripped and fell to the floor when they were forced to lean against it.

Marty called both boys apart from each other. "Fellas, slow down a little. Miguel," the seven year old, "when someone is rushing you like that don't back up and throw a jab. Stand your ground and throw it. It'll throw the other guy off balance. And Darnell," the eight year old, "if you get knocked down, don't lose your patience. Take a deep breath and start over with what we've been working on. Alright, let's try again."

The two boys started out the same way again. Deliberate, into a weak jab from Darnell and then a quick combination that left him on a knee again. For the second time, his balance and pride were more exposed than an actual pain having occurred. That sting of his pride showed in his eyes, and Sam awaited a renewal of the panic wave and windmill punching that had followed the last knockdown. He was not disappointed.

The same sequence as before played out, with Miguel being pushed into the ropes. Only this time, Darnell stopped when he had gotten him there. He took about three steps back and took his deep breath. Sam glanced at Mr. Carris and saw his laugh turn into a look of serious interest. Miguel stepped towards Darnell, who threw his jab again. Only this time the jab was sharper. The two boys went flicking their jabs until Darnell was able to land a right cross as well. He was so excited that he instantly reverted to his windmill effort again. Miguel, ready for it, stood his ground as coached and fired a couple of hooks to the body before dropping Darnell with another left hook. Darnell looked enraged by his inability to find his balance and Marty separated the boys again. Mr. Carris nodded, his dark eyes narrowing.

Marty gave each boy a couple of tips, and Sam took particular notice of Darnell being told to not get excited by landing one punch. They were soon sent back to their sparring. The jabs kept them focused, and Darnell landed his right cross again. He stepped back and returned to his jab. The intensity of their youthful exchanges picked up tempo as Darnell became comfortable in the ring. Miguel got lazy on his own jab for a moment and was sent to the same knee that Darnell had been on three times before. He got up and the two boys carried on ably for a few moments more before Marty called time. Mr. Carris pinned his eyes on Darnell and simply said, "Maybe."

Sam wondered why he felt so entertained by two grade school boys scuffling but couldn't deny that he was. Mr. Carris stepped into the ring slowly, his age showing as he ducked between the ropes. He talked to both boys, encouraging them for what he felt they had done correctly. Sam noted a gleam in his eye and caught a hint of the boyish smile in the photograph near the front door. It was hard to believe in that moment that this man could possibly be his age.

When Mr. Carris had finished, he walked back to Sam. "They're hardly young you know. I was five the first time my father had me spar with my older brother."

"Get started young, maybe they don't have to fight so long." Sam pondered aloud. Mr. Carris shook his head. "It all depends on how good you get." He replied.

Sam still hadn't heard an answer to his questions of why the old man continued on when he should have long since retired. He meant to begin that inquiry again but a commotion at the back door diverted the entire gym's attention. All eyes turned toward the figure making his entrance. "There's Vance," Mr. Carris said. "C'mon, I'll introduce you."

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