

On Chuck Davey
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In the 1950s, television was just the three television networks: CBS, NBC, and ABC. Well, actually there was a fourth, the Dumont network, established to sell Dumont brand television sets, but it was short-lived. Boxing matches were prime time programs on all four networks. The Friday night NBC boxing show came out of arenas in New York City, and CBS's Wednesday night bouts were from venues around the country. As a kid, I faithfully watched Wednesdays and Fridays--I don't remember doing more than glancing at the Dumont fights.

Boxers who caught the public's fancy and brought increased viewer ratings made repeat appearances on the Wednesday and Friday shows. They would run up a series of victories (in retrospect I'm realizing that often it was against overmatched opponents in order to ensure wins and re-appearances) and in the process became celebrities in the same way that repeat winners on American Idol do these days. One of the stars, so to speak, of the Wednesday CBS show was a Michigan welterweight (147 pounds) by the name of Chuck Davey. Along with many people around the country, I got caught up with Davey's fate and rooted for him as he won fight after fight and finally got a shot at the welterweight champion, a Cuban fighter named Kid Gavilan. This was in 1953.

I wrote the fragment about Davey that follows this introduction back in 2002. I had learned that a kinescope of Davey's title fight with Gavilan was available through the university library. Kinescope is a motion picture film of the broadcast television picture. That sounds as if it would be poor quality, but while it is not up to the standard of today's taping process, it is quite realistic. I remember watching the fight on my 17-inch Zenith console TV when it happened, and I was curious to see how viewing it now would be different from the way I remember it from back then. As well, I was, and am still, interested in the process of identification (why is someone a Red Sox fan?) and celebrity-creation (with entertainers, politicians, etc.), and I thought that looking at this old boxing match might inform that interest. Most important, however, I wanted to look again at Davey from the perspective of my adult interest in sports and their personal and

cultural meanings. In particular, I wanted to view Davey through a lens that in recent years I have used to assess athletes: the concept of the gentleman, and within that, the idea of a sportsman.

The most celebrated fighter of my lifetime has been Muhammad Ali. Ali was certainly a superb fighter, but, in my view, he was neither a gentleman nor a sportsman. He was ignorant, vulgar and boorish, a self-consumed braggart, and corrupt in his personal life (an adulterer and physical abuser women). Ali belittled and taunted opponents, and left the sport of boxing as soon as he quit fighting. I had looked into Davey's life some and had come to the preliminary conclusion that he was the anti-Ali, as it were. Davey couldn't fight like Ali, but he was a gentleman and a sportsman, and to me that counted, and I was concerned that I was living in a culture where those qualities don't matter for much, if anything.

So I watched the kinescope of the Davey-Gavilan title fight. I added what I had learned about Davey from other sources to my response to the kinescope and wrote a couple of pages. I thought the writing might be the beginning of something I would publish about Davey. As it turned out, however, nothing came of it. I ran the idea of an article on Davey by the editor of *Ring* magazine (I had done some writing for *Ring*), who said that Davey wasn't anybody he thought his readers would be interested in. With that turndown, I filed the writing away and didn't look at again until now.

Reading what I wrote five years ago, what most strikes me doesn't have so much to do with Chuck Davey and whether he was a gentleman and sportsman, but rather, me: how different I am now from 2002, and, more, how that difference, not the Ring turn-down, is the biggest reason I didn't continue with the Davey project, say, turning it into a scholarly article, or even a book for a general audience on men and sport.

The writing ends with my phone call to Davey's home in Michigan and, as it turned out, conversation with his daughter. Right after that phone conversation, I lost virtually all of my hearing, and that was one of the last, if not the very last, phone call I made for almost five years. With the loss of my hearing, I have become--in a general way, as a person--far more inward, cut off, than before, much more within myself, in my own world. The book I wrote made up of my interviews with seventeen people, *One Sheaf, One Vine*, was published in 2004, but the interviews were completed

before I lost my hearing in August of 2002. What I'm realizing is that after I lost my hearing, not only couldn't I do a book like that, I really didn't relate to that kind of project anymore: it wasn't "me" any longer. I had planned on going to Michigan to interview Davey and his family, but with the loss of my hearing that became somehow outside my frame of reference, something I just don't do. And more and more, I'm seeing, I have come to prefer it the way it is. Even though now I can minimally use a phone (a new word processor for my cochlear implant), I still don't even think of calling anyone, or really, connecting with anybody about anything. I'm not clear whether that will, or should, change. That's a personal issue I need to work through.

Saying this is not to imply that I consider myself less of a person than I was in 2002. Actually, it is just the opposite. I am limited in ways that I wasn't before, that's undeniable, and in that sense I'm less than I was; but on balance, the hearing loss has resulted in my becoming better, not worse, overall. While I would give just about anything to be able to hear normally again, I think I'm a more sensitive than before, and more insightful, and more reflective, and more capable and productive. I'm a more decent human being than I was, I believe. The hearing loss has grounded me, centered me: I am more the person I really am now. I recently read a biography of Beethoven and was taken by the assertion by the biographer that Beethoven's compositions were actually better after his hearing loss than before. The artist Goya's biographer—Goya went deaf in his later years—claims that while Goya's paintings were different after the onset of his deafness, they were just as good as before. That, I believe, applies to my own work, teaching and writing.

My experience seems to be teaching me that everything bad that happens to us short of death, even the most painful and debilitating things--the loss of a job or a cherished relationship, public disfavor and rejection, serious illness, the death of a loved one, whatever it is—contains within it the opportunity for growth and creation and a more honorable and richer, more gratifying, more rewarding, life. This is not to say that these bad things don't hurt us, or that they don't diminish us—indeed, I am saddened and diminished by my hearing loss (as well as some other losses I've experienced these past few years). It is to offer that they don't *only* hurt and lessen us. They also--at least potentially--enrich us, uplift

us, open up new possibilities. In every hit short of our own inevitable death is a gift. Amid the grief and regret and diminishment, we need to find the gift, the opportunities, the new paths, the new capabilities, and take action to make those real in our lives.

The 2002 Chuck Davey fragment:

Chuck Davey was a white, left-handed boxer from Michigan who was featured on the CBS Wednesday night Pabst Blue Ribbon fights in the early 1950s. Davey became a television star of sorts and, with much hoopla, signed to fight Kid Gavilan for the welterweight title in February of 1953. The Gavilan fight drew 20,000 people in the Chicago Arena, the largest indoor crowd for a welterweight fight up to that time, and perhaps ever, I'm not sure. The gate was the largest for welterweights up to that time. Thirty-five million people saw the bout on television. [2007: last week's top-rated television program was watched by 13 million people.]

I watched a kinescope--this was before videotape--of the Davey-Gavilan fight and found it fascinating. It was of the entire Pabst Blue Ribbon show, beer commercials ("Bill the Bartender") and all. Announcer Russ Hodges (the same Russ Hodges who called Bobby Thompson's home run to win the National League pennant in 1951) handled the fight alone--no color commentary.

The Davey-Gavilan match was treated as a major event: phrases like "magical evening," "one of the most dramatic evenings in boxing history," and "tremendous fight" were thrown out during the almost twenty minutes (without commercials) of pre-fight festivities. After Hodges set the scene, there were films of the weigh-in. Then it went to a meeting hall for a presentation of an award by the American Legion to a representative of Pabst for providing entertainment to disabled veterans. Then there was an interview with the governor of Illinois and the head of the International Boxing Club.

And then dramatically, bathed in spotlights in the darkened arena, the fighters came down aisles from opposite far corners and up the stairs and into the ring. Davey had on a white robe with a shamrock on the back and was accompanied by the strains of the Michigan State fight song (he was billed as a college guy). The boxers' gloves were laced on in the ring rather than in the dressing room. Other fighters climbed into the ring to be introduced, among

them, the former heavyweight champion, Ezzard Charles. Then the national anthems from both Cuba and the United States. Then the ring announcer gave pitches for upcoming events in the Chicago Arena, a college basketball double-header and an NHL hockey game.

Anticipation was building.

Finally came the introductions of the two fighters and the fight itself. It turned out to be a one-sided affair; Davey wasn't in Gavilan's league. He resembled the tennis player John McEnroe in a pair of boxing trunks, while Gavilan looked like, well, Kid Gavilan, one of *Ring* magazine's top twenty fighters of all time. Davey looked out of place in the same ring with Gavilan. It was as if I had turned up in a scene from the movie "Casablanca"; what's Griffin doing there with Bogie and Bergman?

Davey bounced up and down constantly and stayed busy shooting out right hand jabs and an occasional left cross. Everything from Davey was to Gavilan's head, no body punches. Davey held his right arm bent at a ninety-degree angle, with his glove forehead high. To jab from this position he would snap his forearm down and straighten his arm. It looked like someone throwing a dart. Nothing Davey landed appeared to have the least effect on Gavilan.

Gavilan laid back like a coiled rattler, and then, two or three times a round, he would erupt in frightful ten- to fifteen-second flurries with both hands to Davey's head and body. Every so often, Gavilan flashed the "bolo punch" for which he was famous, an underhand right that looked like someone rolling a pair of dice with a flourish. Davey was knocked down four times in the fight. On one of those occasions, a vicious right hand punch from Gavilan to his temple propelled him through the bottom two ropes and onto the ring apron. The bout ended with Davey surrounded by his cornermen and the doctor at the end of the ninth round. It had the appearance of an emergency room scene. When the bell rang for round ten, Davey's chief second, Izzy Klein, waved his arm to the referee to stop the fight.

Although out-classed, Davey showed great courage and determination throughout the bout, as well as grace and good sportsmanship in the interview with Hodges afterward, referring to Gavilan as "a great champion." Gavilan told Hodges that Davey "is a good fighter, but he needs more experience."

As I watched the old kinescope, I thought to myself, I wonder where Chuck Davey is now? If he is still alive, he'd be seventy-five years old. I wondered about what went on back then--the television build-up and then the crushing defeat--meant to him at the time, and what he has done with his life since that fight. It would be great to talk to him about all of that, I decided, and to tell him that as a kid I had waited all day, counting the hours, until his fight with Gavilan, and how excited I was.

I have looked into Davey's life some. He is considered by many to be the best collegiate boxer of all time. (Yes, at one time there was college boxing.) He was undefeated and a four-time All-American (the only one ever) as a member of the Michigan State University team. He won four NCAA championships, the first one at seventeen-years-old. By the way, the finals of the NCAA boxing championships in those years would draw as many as fifteen thousand people. Davey was an alternate on the United States Olympic team in 1948. In the Olympic trials, he fought two future world champions on the same day, beating Johnny Saxon and losing a decision to Wallace "Bud" Smith. During his pro career, he beat some name fighters, including Rocky Graziano, Johnny Saxon, Ike Williams, and Carmine Basilio. Interestingly, Hodges never mentioned any of this background during the telecast of the Gavilan fight.

After Davey's retirement from the ring, he was Michigan Boxing Commissioner for fifteen years, a founder and president of the United States Boxing Association, and served four terms as Vice President of the World Boxing Association. He is a member of the Michigan Sports Hall of Fame and the World Boxing Hall of Fame. He has been married for forty-eight years and has raised nine children and is the grandfather of twenty. In 1998, a tribute to him was entered into the Congressional Record of the United States Senate.

I phoned Davey's home in Birmingham, Michigan. His daughter Maureen answered the phone. Her father, she told me, couldn't answer the phone himself because he had broken his neck two years previously in a swimming accident and was paralyzed from the neck down. He has great difficulty talking, Maureen said, because he is on a ventilator. Maureen and I talked for fifteen or twenty minutes. She told me that she was sure her father would be

happy to work with me as much as he is able to if I decide to write something about him.

That is the end of the fragment I wrote in 2002. Just now (October of 2007), I checked online and found that Chuck Davey died on December 4th, 2004. I'll never meet and know him. This news of Chuck Davey's death brought home to me how we need to be vigilant to our opportunities in life, because they are fleeting. There is always something good to do in life, but we can't turn back time and do the good things we could have been done before but didn't. We need to live with the realization that when each moment of our lives is gone it is gone forever.