

Boxing Insider

By Mike Greenhill

The history of organized crime in America's 20th century, and in New York City in particular, has been well chronicled. Movies, books and television have brought the mobster to life, both to glorify his deeds as well as to revile them.

The connection between gangsters and boxing, nearly non-existent now, was much larger in scope in the first half of the 20th century. It is against this backdrop that author Ron Ross has penned his second boxing work, "Bummy Davis and Murder, Inc.: The Rise and Fall of the Jewish Mafia and an Ill-Fated Prizefighter."

This is much more than a boxing book. In an attempt to accurately describe Depression-era life and the characters of Brooklyn, New York (and its Brownsville section in particular), Ross has succeeded marvelously.

The story is centered around the short but fascinating life of lightweight contender Al 'Bummy' Davis (born Albert Davidoff) and his friends, relatives and enemies that pervaded the mostly Jewish neighborhood of Brooklyn known as Brownsville. Though known today as the African-American ghetto that spawned Mike Tyson, Riddick Bowe and Shannon Briggs, this area before World War II was primarily Jewish, and a place where Hebrew and Yiddish were spoken as just as often as English.

Ross deftly captures the atmosphere of this time and place with dialogue written in Runyonesque style, dripping with phrases and syntax reminiscent of the Bowery Boys, Chester Reilly or any "film noir" movies about boxing, New York or both. The era has also been covered well in some of the films of Woody Allen and Neil Simon, but Ross's characters were real, and life was more pessimistic and dangerous. His history is funny in spots, but just as frequently morbid and moving in others.

The reader sees Bummy rise from a 1920's street peddler (mixed with thoughts of becoming a cantor) on the streets of Brownsville to accomplished prizefighter, all the while courageously rebuffing the efforts of the mob in general, and the notorious Frankie Carbo in particular, to purchase Bummy's contract and thus pull Davis into their sphere of influence.

Murder, Inc., as the Brooklyn mob was known back then, was a regular Rogues Gallery of scum, including Davis's older brother Willie 'Big Gangy' Davidoff. Some older New Yorkers today say "back then in Brooklyn, you grew up to be one of three things --- either a businessman, a cop or a bad guy". Abe Reles, Pittsburgh Phil, Dasher Abbandando, Happy Maione, Louis Lepke, Albert Anastasia. Ross's description of their infamous exploits, through narrative and dialogue, makes the reader feel as if the author had been witness to all of their doings on a first-hand basis.

In the midst of this environment of loan-sharking, extortion, bookmaking and murder, Al Davis did whatever he could to walk the straight and narrow. His only two weaknesses were bad luck and a bad temper, hardly a suitable combination. Bummy was never one to walk away from a fight, and it cost him on several occasions, whether it be on the streets, in the ring, with the mob or in the Army, eventually leading to his untimely death at age 25 while chasing armed robbers out of the Brooklyn restaurant bar he had opened after his retirement.

While never one to provoke violence, Davis's rage, which never strayed too far from the surface, and his unavoidable relation to his gangster brothers Willie and Harry, put him in the position of fighting to clear his name as often as he fought in the ring. Frequently looked upon as a pugilistic villain, even in his home city of New York, Davis's undeserved reputation reached its zenith in 1940 when he was disqualified against eventual champ Fritzie Zivic for roughly a dozen blatant low blows, thrown only in retaliation for Zivic's well known and oft-used dirty tactics.

The incident led the N.Y. State Athletic Commission to suspend Bummy's license to box in New York State, and it wasn't until Zivic lobbied the commission a year later that Bummy's license was restored. Davis was unfortunate enough to be the one to pound legend Tony Canzoneri in front of the former champ's adoring public early in Davis's career, and this, along with sportswriter Dan Parker's own personal vendetta toward Davis, caused by a culinary prank administered to him by Willie Davidoff, strongly encouraged public animosity toward Bummy even before the Zivic debacle.

All of this history is so well presented by Ross that even though most boxing historians, as well as hardcore fans are familiar with the story of Bummy Davis, you still find yourself unable to put this book down, and one becomes so emotionally invested in the main character that one keeps hoping the tearful conclusion somehow ends differently, even though you know it will not. The gut-wrenching irony of a man who kept his nose clean amid a sea of sharks but still died a violent death at least provides us with the consolation that Bummy Davis succumbed while performing a heroic act.

Bummy Davis and Murder Inc. is published by St. Martin's Press, 175 5th Avenue, New York, N.Y., 10010, phone # 800-221-7945 ext. 580. It retails for \$26.95 and is available at most major bookstores, websites such as Amazon.com and Barnes & Noble.com, or by e-mailing the publisher at www.stmartins.com.

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