

GETTING HIS CUT

Former heavyweight Chuck Wepner finally got actor Sylvester Stallone to pay up for using his likeness in the creation of the Rocky character. Now Hollywood is telling the story of 'The Real Rocky'

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Chuck Wepner looked better than he should have, given the years of abuse that his face and body had absorbed in the boxing ring. At 72, the 6ft 5in, 230-pound Wepner remained lean and unscarred – or, shall we say, less scarred than the pummelling he took during his 14-year career would have foretold. Years ago, if you would have placed him side by side with some of his rivals, Sonny Liston and Muhammad Ali, you would have called it even odds that Wepner would have been the one who was either dead or in some steep state of physical decline. Instead, as Liston lies in his grave and Ali has become a still life due to his ordeal with Parkinson's disease, the erstwhile 'Bayonne Bleeder' remains in full bloom, as witty and as quick with a colourful story as ever.

We were sitting across from each other in a private room at a Philadelphia night spot. The exceptional documentary on Wepner called *The Real Rocky* had just premiered to an appreciative audience at a theatre across the street. Some friends of the production had assembled

to celebrate the event and I had been invited to come along, given that Chuck and I had a friendly relationship that dated back some years. By occupation a liquor salesman, Chuck eyed the clear liquid in the glass before me and asked, 'Is that a martini?' When I said that it was, he replied with a trace of longing in his voice: 'Yeah, I used to drink those until I walked into a joint one night and shot out the mirror behind the bar.' That was back during his wild, pre-prison days, which were not without some amusing elements if you remove the prison sentence, the cocaine addiction that led to it, his divorce and assorted other problems. Chuck Wepner had some Mike Tyson in him back then, which prompted me to offhandedly ask him if he knew Tyson.

'Sure, I was with him in a club in New York,' said Chuck, a glass of spring water cupped in his large hands. 'He was there with a woman, couple of them I think. Suddenly, one of them goes crazy. Apparently, Mike grabbed her ass. She goes running off into a back room and says she's going to call the police.'

So what happened?



'Mike follows her into the back room,' Wepner continues. 'They are in there for half an hour or so. Then, here she comes out the door. She has a big smile on her face. Five minutes later, Mike walks out the door and sits back down with me. He says, "Everything is fine".'

Wepner eyed him and asked, 'Mike, what went on back there?'

Tyson smiled and explained, 'I wrote her a cheque for \$5 000.'

Wepner deadpanned replied, 'Christ, Mike. I would have let you grab my ass for \$2 500.'



Chuck Wepner is one of the true originals on the American sports scene. For years, the ex-United States marine laboured in the obscurity of venues such as the Sunnyside Gardens in Queens, the Armory in Jersey City and the Plaza Arena in Secaucus, only to be chosen as an unlikely opponent by Ali in 1975. No one gave Chuck a prayer that evening in Cleveland, but he held on for 15 rounds and even had Ali on his back before losing on a technical knockout. While he found himself celebrated back home in North Jersey for his courageous

effort, chances are he would have vanished from our consciousness were it not for the fact that Sylvester Stallone, then a struggling actor, became inspired by Chuck and came up with the idea for the film *Rocky*. Along with the five sequels that followed, the *Rocky* series grossed more than \$1 billion in box office sales, not a penny of which Sly passed along to Wepner until big Chuck sued.

Hollywood has rediscovered Wepner, who lives in a condominium that overlooks Bayonne Bay. On the heels of the acclaimed Jeff Feuerzeig ►

Chuck Wepner attends a press conference to announce his lawsuit against Sylvester Stallone over the Rocky series of movies

documentary, *The Real Rocky*, which is a biographical chronicle of Wepner that delves into his legal battle with Stallone, producer Mike Tollin is scheduled to come out this year with the film, *The Bleeder*. The picture stars Liev Schreiber and Naomi Watts and is called *The Bleeder* because that is precisely what Wepner did – bleed. In fact, few practitioners of the pugilistic arts spilled more blood than Wepner, of whom it was once said had more stitches sewn into his face than a three-piece suit. During a visit with him one day at his condo, I remember he received a phone call that could well have been some scene from a film.

'No, Mr Wepner is busy,' Chuck said into the receiver. 'He has a newspaper guy with him. Who is this? OK. Just a second, let me ask.'

Chuck held a hand over the receiver for a beat and then rejoined the conversation. 'Look, Chuck says he is giving blood in a week and a half to the local Veterans of Foreign Wars. OK? Thank you.'

I asked Wepner as he hung up, 'Who was that?'

'Somebody from the New Jersey Blood Drive,' he said. 'I get six calls from them a year. Geez, who in the hell gives six pints of blood in a year?'

Chuck shrugged and with a chuckle observed, 'I should have told them I gave at the office.'

Few gave more generously. In his bout against Liston at the Jersey City Armory in 1970, Wepner looked like he had just

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Wepner's seconds attend to him during his title fight against Muhammad Ali in Ohio in March 1975

crawled out from under a building that had fallen on him. Doctors sewed up his carved-up puss with 72 stitches, which prompted someone to ask Liston: 'Is Chuck Wepner the bravest man you ever fought?' Liston pondered the question and replied, 'No, his manager is.' Give or take a stitch here or there, Wepner had a career total of 329. 'Supposedly, only Vito Antuofermo had more: 365,' Wepner says. To exceed that sum, Wepner used to plead with his manager, the conniving Al Braverman: 'Come on, Al, get me a few more fights. I want to be No 1.' The line on Wepner was: All you had to do was look at him and he would bleed.

By sheer appearance, Wepner looked like a character out of the old Brando picture, *On the Waterfront*. So did Braverman and trainer Paddy Flood, who would have been awarded a Phi Beta Kappa key if they were handing them out for guile. Both were aggressive horseplayers (which as a callow youth I had been delighted to bear witness to). But it would become an occasional problem for Al, who once found himself in arrears to the local wise guys to the tune of \$3 500. Chuck told me, 'They had him against the wall when I walked in the dressing room. I said, "What are you doing to my manager!" They said, "Stay out of this, Chuck."'

Wepner laughs. 'I got \$1 100 and some change for the fight,' he says. 'So I gave it to the guy. He counted out \$600, handed me back \$500 and said, "Here, keep this for yourself. But he better pay us what he owes us".'

Given what he had been earning in the ring, which had been scarcely enough to buy a set of tyros, Wepner ended up in clover when Ali came along and offered him \$100 000. Ever the equal opportunity employer, Ali looked upon Wepner as promotional revelation. Ali even began wearing buttons that proclaimed, 'Give the White Man a Chance'. Wepner told me that during a commercial on a TV talk show before the bout, Ali leaned over and said, 'Chuck, call me a nigger.' Wepner told him no. Ali urged him. 'Come on, Chuck,' he said. 'It will build up the gate.' Wepner held his ground. 'No,' he told Ali. 'I have a lot of friends who are black.' But when they came back on the air, Ali shouted to the audience: 'Do you know what he just called me?'

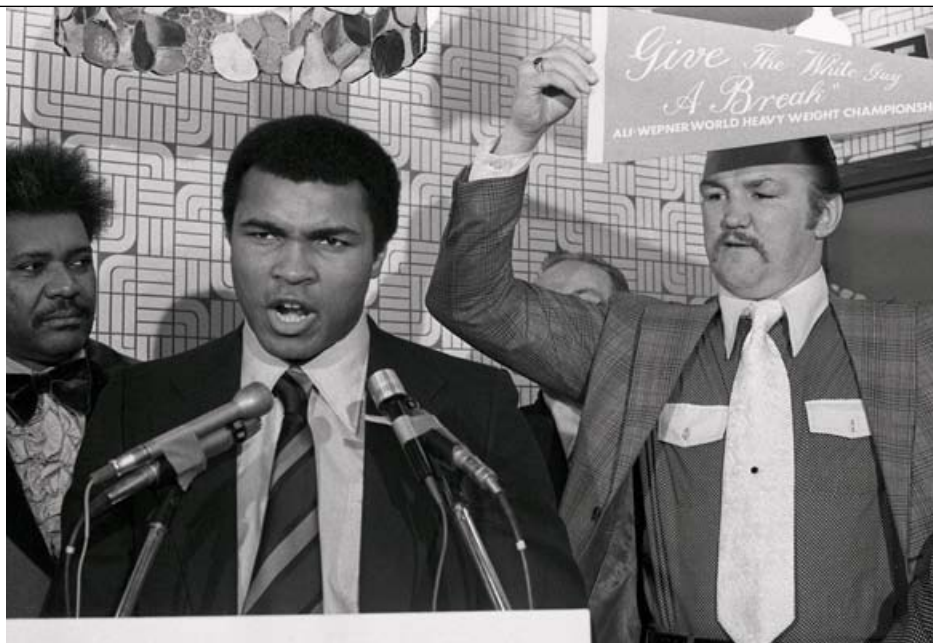
Unbeaten in bar rooms but eminently beatable inside the ring, Chuck was a 40-1 underdog that evening in Cleveland. The 'Over-Under' was 'four or five rounds', which Wepner says he cashed in on. 'No way was I going to allow him ►



to take me out in five rounds,' he says. Wepner was so sure he would win that he purchased a powder blue negligee for his wife and told her: 'Honey, I want you to wear this tonight, because you are going to be sleeping with the heavyweight champion of the world.' With that conviction, Wepner stepped into the ring, where he found a flabby Ali who had not been prepared to go 15 rounds. In keeping with the strategy that Braverman and Flood prepared for him – which is to say, pour on the pressure – the large and ungainly Wepner proved to be a problem for Ali, who handled Chuck as if he were a piano he was trying to squeeze through a narrow doorway. With blood sliding down his face, Wepner sailed out of his corner in the ninth round, backed Ali up and then: Boom! Ali went down. While Ali would later say that Wepner had stepped on his foot – which film footage would appear to back up – Wepner still claims that 'Ali was embarrassed more than anything'.

Courageously, Wepner persevered as Ali suddenly came to life. By the 15th round, Chuck looked as if his face had been caught in an airplane propeller. Referee Tony Perez asked him where he was. Although Wepner answered him correctly, Perez stopped it, explaining to Chuck: 'Your eyes are glassy.' In his corner, Ali collapsed to one knee. Braverman and Flood escorted Wepner back to his corner. With his cuts stitched up and bruises on his face, Wepner went back to his hotel, where he found his wife sitting on the edge of the bed in that powder blue negligee. Innocently, she asked him: 'So, does Ali come to my room or do I go to his?'

For years, people would come up to Chuck Wepner and say: 'Boy, you must have made a killing on those *Rocky* movies.' It was that obvious to everyone that Stallone had used Chuck as his inspiration for 'the Rocky', the South Philadelphia legbreaker who becomes a legend in the boxing ring when he goes the 15 rounds with the flashy black champion, Apollo Creed. Even Stallone himself acknowledged that Wepner had been who he based his character on. He said it in TV interviews and he said it more than once. Consequently, everyone just assumed that Wepner had made some money, perhaps even big money. Chuck concocted a story that he accepted a flat fee of \$70 000 instead of taking one percent of the film. But he says he only said that so he would not 'look like a



Ali and Wepner at a press conference to hype up their world heavyweight championship fight

Wepner proved to be a problem for Ali, who handled Chuck as if he were a piano he was trying to squeeze through a narrow doorway

dummy' and that the truth was this: 'I never got a dime. Nothing.'

Stallone always told him not to worry, that he would take of him. Wepner says that Stallone had 'always been full of promises but nothing came of them'. At one point, Stallone asked him to audition for a small part in *Rocky II* but Chuck was not used. Wepner says he liked Stallone, and that he loved what he did with *Rocky*, but it began to aggravate him that Stallone continued use him to promote the *Rocky* franchise. Wepner says 'the final straw' came in 1997 when Stallone was shooting the film *Copland* in North Jersey and did not offer him even a small part. Chuck stopped by the set and Stallone exclaimed, 'Hey, everybody, Chuck Wepner is here'. Stallone introduced him to co-star Robert DeNiro and said, 'Don't worry, Chuck. I'll be in touch with you.' But he never was.

So Wepner sued.

Experts told him that the case was a longshot but as Braverman had once told him, 'Life is a longshot'.

Years passed.

And Stallone settled with him out of court.

I asked Chuck how he did.

He said the confidentially agreement he signed prohibited him from saying.

But with a smile he added, 'Just say I got a piece of The Rock.' ■

Kram is a celebrated writer for *The Philadelphia Daily News* and a regular contributor to *Business Day Sport Monthly's American Read*.