

INTERVIEW FOR STOP SMILING MAGAZINE

Norman Mailer
John Buffalo Mailer

December 26, 2004

JBM: What is your favorite weight class to watch and why?

NM: You know, generally speaking, you find greater skills in the lower weights. Sometimes you'll see fly weights who are extraordinary, or bantam weights. Lightweights can be marvelous. Middleweights are a most exciting level to watch because, at their best they approach the power of heavyweights but they still have top speed and skill. Heavyweights are usually the clumsiest of the fighters.

Nonetheless, that's the division I find the most exciting. There is always interest in watching the big guys. Why? Because we always have this feeling "What if I get into a fight with a man that big? How would I try to handle him?" I used to feel that way when I was younger. Now I just watch.

But all right, that's not the main reason. It's because Heavyweight Champions live in a particularly peculiar psychic state. A good heavyweight can always beat a great middleweight. Why? It just seems to be true that a heavyweight who weighs, let's say 200 pounds as opposed to the 160 plus of a middleweight—that's a five to four ratio in weight—has a superior punching power of three to two. It's as if something happens in the chemistry of the body. The good middleweight usually has no chance against a heavyweight. The greatest welterweight in the world probably couldn't beat a mediocre heavyweight. Roy Jones, who was perhaps as classy a fighter, until his recent downfall, as anyone I've seen—the most inventive of all fighters, was, nonetheless, leery about entering the heavyweight class. All right, what makes it so fascinating? It's this. The Heavyweight champion may be entitled to think of himself as the toughest guy in the world, but there could be some mad man in Outer Mongolia who could kill you with his bare hands. You just don't know. So you live in this peculiar suspended psychic state: "Am I or am I not the toughest man in existence right now?" Add Karate and other various martial arts. That increases the confusion. So, heavyweights are always on the edge of being a little crazy. Therefore, I love watching them fight. Serious boxing

is always a study in character and discipline of a very rare sort and this demand is most dramatized at the heavyweight level.

JBM: I hate to tell you this, especially having grown up with boxing as the family sport, but I believe the Ultimate Fighting Championship proves without a doubt that the toughest boxer in the world is far from the toughest man.

NM: Well who are these ultimate fighters?

JBM: They come from all different disciplines, and can be paired with any weight class or other discipline of fighting. I've seen a Sumo Wrestler paired against a Jiu Jitsu master. The sumo didn't last two minutes. Likewise, I've seen a boxer, a heavyweight, fight the same Jiu Jitsu master, and he was done within one minute.

NM: But who was the boxer?

JBM: No one I'd heard of.

NM: It's different when you're up against a great champion.

JBM: How so?

NM: Hell, when you get a Martial Arts artist of the highest level fighting a great champion, you can't anticipate the amount of anxiety the martial arts guy is gonna feel. That's because the best professional heavyweights have gone through hell, literally, fights where it would have been easier to die than to continue. The exhaustion, the pain, may be heavier than any martial arts man ever had. My opinion is that if you've got a true boxing champion fighting a true martial arts champion nothing would happen. The one time I saw something like that, Mohammed Ali was fighting some Japanese who was marvelous at, I don't know whether it was Aikido, Karate, Tai Kuan Do, but it was dumb, it became the dumbest fight I've ever seen. The stupidest. It took place in Japan and I saw it on TV. The Japanese guy just got down on his back. Any time Mohammed Ali approached, he'd get kicked. The Japanese artist kicked him in the shin-bone from his prone position, or on the thigh. There was no way for Ali to reach him. Fifteen rounds of that. Dullest damn thing I ever saw. The guy didn't dare get up once to try any vertical stuff on Ali. It was no contest, if ever I've seen one. People who are not professional boxers but Martial Artists love the idea that they could take a fine boxer. But such boxers are fast—even the slower professionals are pretty damn speedy when you get down to it—the martial artist who is not used to being punched repeatedly, let alone taking one good shot to the chin. John,

I'd say lets leave this argument open. Let history decide.

JBM: Fair enough. Cus D'Amato, one of the greatest fight trainers to have ever lived, talked about how a boxer must acknowledge their fear, not deny it. What are your thoughts on that?

NM: Well I knew Cus pretty well, particularly in the years when he was training Jose Torres and Jose was moving toward the light-heavyweight championship and then won it. I wouldn't say that Cus and I were close enough to be friends but we liked each other and enjoyed each other's company. And Cus was a philosopher, the only boxing philosopher I ever encountered. But a true philosopher. And was always able to talk to his fighters at their level. He'd say to a beginner: "Look, my gym, Gramercy Gym, is two long flights up. By the time a kid like you who wants to take up boxing but never boxed before, has climbed those two long flights of stairs," —and Cus would really emphasize with his voice how long those flights of stairs were, and I can tell you they were very long indeed—"by the time he's got to the top, he's overcome his first fear."

Then he said, "When I get them ready for their first fight, I'd say, 'You're going to look across the ring and you're gonna be a little embarrassed because you're half naked and it may be in your family that people don't walk around that way. But there you are; half naked. Strangers are looking at you. Strangers who may not even like you. And you're looking at the guy have to face. He looks so strong, so powerful. You're scared stiff when you eye him. Well, I'll tell you something. He's looking at you in the same way. He's just as scared of you. And that's something you gotta remember.'" There was the ABC's of it. But Cus could certainly get more advanced when it came to building a fighter's ego. I think there's almost a physiological necessity for a professional fighter to have a prodigiously powerful ego. Mohammed Ali is, of course, the example for all times. It's as if powerful egos can take more physical punishment. I really believe there is a physiological connection. Because why do we build an ego, any of us, for our own purposes, if it is not to be able to take daily blows, the disappointments, the cutting remarks, the way in which we may be ignored in certain places when we feel, 'Hey how can they do that? I'm important.' And yet we're ignored. So the ego is there to drive us through to our objective. When it comes to boxing, that takes on prodigious dimensions. I remember when Jose was training for the light-heavyweight championship against Willy Pastranno, we sat there one night, Jose, Cus D'Amato and myself watching a fight on TV that Pastranno had had in London against a contender whose name I don't even remember now. He wasn't a very good fighter and Pastranno won the fight but didn't look all that good. And

Cus, afterward, made a small speech to Jose. He said, "Joe, I knew when we took on this fight that you would have no trouble with Pastranno. And, having watched you train very seriously for this one has reinforced my opinion, but I can tell you, having watched Pastranno in this fight, I know now as I look you in the face, I am also looking at the next light-heavyweight champion of the world." He said it in a big voice and Torres entered that fight with such confidence, that after the first round he came back to his corner and said to Johnny Manzanet, his trainer, who was a good, tough Puerto Rican, Torres said, "I am the next champion of the world!" And Manzanet shouted at him, "Shut up, you got the whole fight to get through!" (*Laughter*) At my end, I played a very small part for that one, maybe one part in five hundred. Which is I went out to watch Pastranno train, and came back to tell Jose, "He's only got one weapon. A wonderful jab. He's got a fabulous jab." I saw a very hard look come into Jose's eyes. So, I said, "If you can take that jab away from him I don't know what he can do." The look got even harder. And in the first round, Jose came out and took the jab away from Pastranno, and dominated the fight all the way. They stopped it in the ninth.

JBM: Is a large ego necessary to overcome your fears?

NM: Not a large ego, a strong, focused ego. The ego has to be ready to match the intensity of a particular fear. A large ego might be the worst kind of ego to have as a fighter. The first time you get hit hard enough to feel real fear of your opponent all the outlying regions of your ego are no good anymore. What's the use of saying to yourself, "I'm the best ballroom dancer in town. Or the greatest stud." That does you no good when you get hit in the kisser. That's when you need a rallying ground that only a particular ego can provide.

There's a famous story about Carmen Basilio, who was a very tough welterweight. One time, in a close fight, he got hit hard, and almost went down. I've never seen the position he got in before or since. His body sank to a horizontal but remained eighteen inches above the ground, because he was able to balance on one bent leg, and supported by that beleaguered knee, he managed never to hit the canvas. Instead, he straightened up. It was an extraordinary effort. Later, one of the reporters asked, "Carmen, why didn't you go to the canvas for a count of eight and take a rest. You could have won the fight, anyway." He said: "I didn't want to start any bad habits."

His ego said to him, "You don't hit the canvas. Nobody knocks you down." (He had, incidentally, never been knocked down in his career.) That's one of the differences between street fighters and professionals. One of the enormous differences. But then very few street fights are equal. One guy is usually bigger

than the other; or one gang is stronger, so you can't always talk about equality in a street fight.

JBM: Mike Tyson started as a street fighter. Where does he fit into all this?

NM: I'd say he is the showcase for its difficulty. The balance, the transition from instinct to ego. He had in Cus D'Amato a better teacher than anyone around, but he also came out of an intolerably formless amoral scene - crazy background. He had prodigious talents and fine intelligence, but his ego, given the disproportions and imbalance of his spirit, lost the power to keep him in control of himself after Cus died. Many argue that it would have been the same if Cus had lived, that even he would not have been able to control Mike, but I'll bow out on that point. I don't know enough of what really went on before and after Cus' death.

JBM: What's your take on women boxing?

NM: Oh, as Richard Nixon used to say, I'm glad you asked that. *(Both laugh.)* You know, years ago when they started, women boxers were dreadful. They were as bad as the clumsiest oaf in a gym who throws round-house rights and round-house lefts until he's winded. The easiest punch to guard against is a round house punch, right or left, you just put your gloves up around your ears and take note of them as they arrive. It's like stepping out of the way of a freight train when you have plenty of time. Your opponent gets winded very quickly throwing round-house punches. Anyway, the early women were so dreadful that I made the remark (and you know, nothing in those days was more valuable to me, you might say, than my private parts) but I said, "I'm half tempted to have a sex change operation. Because then I could be champion of the world." Just joking, but the point is that even though I was at best, a mediocre amateur as a boxer, I knew enough to have been able to beat any one of those women at that time. Now, it's no longer true. They've gotten much better. Much stronger, much faster, much tougher. Now, if I were still at my best I couldn't get in the ring with them. They've gotten very good. However, they're still a million miles away from top male fighters.

JBM: For me there's something gut-wrenching about watching two women beat the piss out of each other in a ring. Perhaps it is my old-school views that lead me to believe, women, the carriers of life, are not served best by the rough stuff society has to offer.

NM: You better watch out or you'll be put in a concentration camp, you keep with ideas like that. Wait till women take over the world. You're gone. You're toast.

JBM: You think so, huh?

NM: There will come a day when women will take over the world entirely. It's not impossible. Because men, no matter how brutal they are towards women, or no matter how awful they've been through history towards women, the fact is they needed women. If, for nothing else, they needed women for the continuation of the race. But women don't need men. Not many at any rate. Let's say there are five hundred million women on the earth. They'll only need about a thousand Semen Slaves. You see, you could be milked every day. And that way they can continue the race, and select out those male babies who could be prime specimen for future Semen Slaves. That's all women would need to run the deal. So, men do have a deep fear of what women could do at their worst, at their very worst. Now mind you, women could answer: "We don't have to speculate, we know what men can do at their worst. We've suffered through the most monstrous wars in history and men seem to get worse, the stronger the society gets, which means it's still the fault of the men, but more so." So this is just a fancy of mine, but I hold to it. Women are also dangerous.

JBM: Well certainly the way that women are treated in the work place would back up your theory on men fearing women.

NM: Oh come on! The way women are treated in the work place....

JBM: It's the truth. Women don't get as fair a shake as men in the work place.

NM: That's still generally true. But not in the literary workplace. Women dominate it totally now. Forget boxing. A young male novelist does well to become a female novelist. He'll get better reviews in the more important places.

JBM: All right, let's get back to boxing. How is it different from other big sports—baseball, football, etc.?

NM: It's one against one. Boxing bears as much relation therefore, to chess as to football. Because, in a chess game between two very good players, there is humiliation in losing. That humiliation is even greater in boxing. Of course, it's also true of all one on one sports. Tennis for example. But boxing demands one thing more. Which is hard to name. It's almost like a certain courage of the blood that goes very deep. It's what attracts us to boxing. It's the side of boxing that's not too well understood by people who say, "I hate boxing. It's so brutal." It's the amount of discipline and intelligence and restraint that goes into it. Which is why I consider boxing a social good, not a social ill. What would a lot of these kids do if

there weren't professional boxing and they couldn't make a living out of it? The answer is that a lot of them would be likely to lead violent lives. You know, when people have a little more violence in them than the average, their lives take on all sorts of very difficult turns that can't necessarily be solved by anger management courses. When there's a lot of violence in a man, society can be grateful that there are social ways that violence can be turned into an art form. A kid who starts out as a very rough piece of work comes to learn that there's something classy about getting good at this boxing. It's a way for a violent man to begin to comprehend that living in a classic situation, in other words, living within certain limitations rather than expressing oneself uncontrollably, is a way to live that he didn't have before. Because don't forget, that when you're violent and undisciplined, life is a nightmare. Any morning when you wake up could be the morning where you go too far, and hurt somebody so badly that you're in the can, or you've killed them. Or you're humiliated. Being Macho is no fun. Because macho men have to live for their triumphs and in terror of their humiliations, and there's always another guy who's as macho as you are or more. So boxing enables such kids to find a social form for themselves, where not only their strengths but their weaknesses can be appreciated. Where in effect they can be taught how to get rid of their weaknesses. They begin to learn that they have to show up on time, that they have to drill, that they can drink, but they can't drink too much, they can take pot, but they can't take too much, because the head is too vulnerable after taking pot to get hit steadily through a sparring session. Some even begin to lead lives which enable them to have a little social standing outside of the gang. And that's a huge step. Because for every ten thousand who train every year, maybe a thousand ever make it to a reasonably high amateur level and five hundred to the professional level—I don't know what the numbers are. They're probably larger than that. But the point is, in the course of it, even if they don't succeed, they get a structure to their ego, and some measure of how tough they really are. One of the worst things about being tough is if you don't know how tough you really are, all you know is that you're kind of tough, that's scary. Your ego can be shattered by one episode. But if you go to the gym every day and are subtly humiliated every day by boxers who are better than you, you begin, in the course of it, to get better. You can make some kind of peace with much that's unsettled in yourself. Boxing gives proportion to the psyche. Now there are penalties to it. You can end up less intelligent than when you started. That's obvious. On the other hand, I remember we had this boxing club where we'd go to on Saturday mornings, and then after we'd go out to eat. We'd have hamburgers and beer and I remember saying once, "Hey fellas, what would Saturday afternoon be like without a headache?" We all laughed, because it was true. On the other hand, it also occurred to me that this headache I

had from boxing was not quite as bad as the headaches I used to have on mornings when I was hung over with a splitting headache much worse than I ever got from boxing. Which also gave me the next perception which was that those of my friends who were drinkers were punch-drunk. Not from boxing. From booze. So you do pay a price for boxing, but you also pay a price for living. We all punish our bodies.

JBM: Is machismo a choice?

NM: Wait a minute. You started with the question, 'How is boxing different from all other sports?' I think there's one way in which it is profoundly different. I, of course, never did enough boxing ever to be able to answer that question with authority, but I once heard Mohammed Ali speak of fighting Joe Frazier and saying "Fighting him was like Death." And I knew what he meant. It was right after "The Thriller in Manila," which Ali won, but it was an unbelievably arduous, grueling, brutal fight. Several times within the course of that fight I think Ali felt that he was going to die if he didn't quit. So there is one element in boxing which is not unlike Evil Kneivel's stunts - which is you can die doing it. Now, very few boxers die, but there can be a feeling in the middle of a fight when you're bad used up that to go on is very dangerous. Of course, there are other activities which are, as well. You see these kids who are on roller skates and do flip-flops high in the air. They could break their neck if they don't do it properly—or rock climbing. That can be exceptionally dangerous. The thing about boxing is that the danger is always there in the middle of prodigious punishment. And so it has its own éclat, it's own honor, its own dignity. Which is that in the middle of pain and grueling dull punishment, there is also honor. Which is very, very important to certain kinds of men, violent men. Because a violent man without honor is a dreadful piece of work. So, to summarize, let me say that one of the social values of boxing is that it enables men who have difficult and unbalanced psyches to be able to strive legitimately toward their own personal honor.

JBM: Is there a correlation between boxing and writing?

NM: A very small one, but it drew me to my interest in boxing. Which is; writers do suffer. But it's at long range. You print a sentence or write a paragraph that is going to offend certain people in certain places, and you know it. Of course, it's a tricky business. The people who it's going to enrage usually don't read books, they just hear about what you've done—which is usually worse. In any event, you may pay for it but you don't know how, when or where; it's down the road. On the other hand, there does remain one huge similarity—just one, there are many, many differences, obviously—but the one huge similarity is that you've got to pull it out

of yourself. Particularly when writing fiction. There comes a point where you really have to dig down into your own vitals in order to get something out there. And in that sense it can be killing. You can really feel that you are using yourself up as you write. And boxers have that same feeling. Sometimes they have to call up something deep down in themselves in order to continue. And also, if you are a serious writer, there is the added desire to be *more* than just a serious writer - to be a writer who makes a change in the history of one's time. That's a powerful motive. And when one feels that one is not successful at that, it is depressing, just as it is depressing for a prize fighter who comes to realize that his talent is not what he had hoped for. Big, but not big enough.

JBM: You once made a deal with Jose Torres where he would give you boxing lessons in exchange for writing lessons. How did that come about?

NM: Well we did it the summer of 1973. It was after he'd retired from boxing. He'd been the light-heavyweight champion for a couple of years and then retired. He came up one summer to South Londonderry, Vermont where I was staying. He was going to write a book. He wanted to become a writer. And I wanted to become much more of a boxer. I'd done a little, but I wanted to do more. So we'd box every day. Three two-minute rounds a day, every day. I once offended him greatly because he was trying to talk up my talents to some strangers and I said, "Oh, come on, Jose, I'm safer with you than I am with my sister." That got him so mad, he walked out of the room. Don't attack the credibility of a champion!

JBM: But you meant that he was good to the point you knew he wouldn't slip up and hurt you, right?

NM: Well, he was so good, so good. Still, we'd box. And very early on, he said, "Look, Norman, I was going to give you open targets to hit, but I can't do it. I spent my life being a defensive fighter." He was one of the great defensive fighters of all time. Very hard to hit. In fact he makes the remark and I believe it, that he was only hit *hard* five times in his career. What he meant by hard, of course, is not what we mean. His measure was that he felt deranged by the punch, lost the high focus of his consciousness for a few seconds. That only happened to him five times in his entire career. So he wasn't going to give me openings to see if I could pop him. But what he did do is teach me a great deal about defense. Reflexively. He never gave instructions verbally. We'd spar and he'd see an opening - they were all over the place in the beginning - and he'd tap me. And then if I didn't protect myself better, the next time, he'd tap me a little harder. Very quickly, reflexes were built in. In time, I became a fairly good—at my level—a reasonably good defensive boxer. But teaching him to write... When it was all over, he

obviously got the better of the deal. I went from being an absolute amateur boxer to somebody who had a few skills, modest skills. Whereas, he became a published writer, and a pretty good one. Not a great one, but a good one. The thing is, it was a pleasure to teach him. The disagreeable aspect in teaching writing to most people is that most young writers are so sensitive that you don't want to ruin them with one harsh remark. So you baby them and then they are offended if you are tough on any one of their faults. Whereas fighters—because they get hurt in the ring—have instructors who are brutal. They'll say, "You dumb fuckin' idiot! How many times I have to tell ya? Keep your left up! What do ya need? A string attached to your ear?" Stuff like that. And so they learn quickly. And they're meek while learning. Until they get to be very good. So I found that I could say what I wanted to Jose. And I enjoyed that. Teaching writing can be irritating. You're dealing with mistakes that are below your own level. And I wasn't a born teacher. That wasn't my enthusiasm, it was just part of the deal. So after a while I'd start yelling at him: "How many times I have to tell ya, that ya don't say the same thing twice in two sentences?" He'd say, "Yeah, ok, yeah right, Norman, yeah, I won't do it again." And he didn't. He learned. He was just damn good at it. Because Jose is also very bright, which was one of the reasons we were friends. It was a pleasure to discover someone with a totally different occupation that you could really talk to and he could talk to you.

JBM: Somehow I don't remember being coddled as a very young writer. Not by you.

NM: Well, I learned, this is the way to teach writing. Most talented young writers are babied and babied, and then they get their first reviews. They're aghast.

JBM: It can be crushing.

NM: They didn't know the world was that cruel.

JBM: It is.

NM: So. We can leave on that.

JBM: To the cruel world. Fair enough.

END

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December 26, 2004

JBM: What is your favorite weight class to watch and why?

NM: Well, I have no trouble with that question whatsoever. It's heavy weights. And for a very simple reason. You find, generally speaking, much greater skills in other weights. Sometimes you'll see fly weights are extraordinary, bantam weights lightweights are marvelous. Middleweights are very exciting level to watch because they are in between—they approach the power of heavy weights at their best but they still have the speed and the skill of fighters at lower weights. But nonetheless, heavy weights are usually the clumsiest of all the fighters. That's the division I find the most exciting and for a very simple reason. Which is not watching heavy weights who are no good, who are at lower levels, there... there is always the interest in watching the big guy fight. And now mind you heavyweights are not the most extraordinary big people in the world compared to professional football Linemen they're Pygmies. You know a good heavyweight usually doesn't weigh any more than 220 230 tops. Linemen in professional football weigh 350 pounds, 320 that sort of thing... But the thing about it, nonetheless, from my point of view a heavy weight's a big man. So let me finish. And that weight is interesting... It's interesting to see people bigger than you fight. why? Because deep down we always have this feeling "what if I get into a fight with a guy that big? How would I try to handle him? What would I do?" I used to feel that way when I was younger. Now I just watch.

But alright, that's not the main reason I'm interested in heavy weights. I'm interested in Heavyweight Champions because they live in a very particular peculiar psychic state. It's sort of like Gladiator fighters. And that's for a very good reason. Which is, if you take a good heavyweight he can always beat a great middle weight. why? Because there's something almost in the physiology of it that just is demonstrated... I wouldn't pretend to know why, But just demonstratively over the years it just seems to be true that a heavyweight who weighs, let's say 200 pounds as opposed to the 160 plus of a middle weight—that's a five to four ratio in weight—and it's the punching power of three to two. He has to punch harder. It's as if something happens in the chemistry of the body. So the good middle weight usually has no chance against the heavy weight. The greatest welter weight in the world really couldn't fight a mediocre heavy weight. Roy Jones, who was probably as classy a fighter until his recent downfall, as anyone I've seen—the most inventive of all fighters, um, nonetheless was leery about entering the heavy weight class. As a light heavy weight he felt he didn't want to get into it. And he didn't for the longest time. Alright now, what is it about it that is so fascinating? It's precisely this. If you are the toughest guy in the world and there's some mad man in Outer Mongolia who could kill you with his bare hands and that you don't know so you live in this peculiar suspended psychic state: "Am I or am I not the toughest man in the world?" And then you do Karate and other various martial arts and that increases the confusion. And so heavy weights are always on the edge of being a little crazy. And therefore I love watching them fight because to me being a professional prize fighter is a study in character and discipline of a very rare sort and is most exemplified and most dramatized at the heavy weight level.

JBM: I hate to tell you this, especially having grown up with boxing as one of the top sports, but I believe that the ultimate fighting championship proves without a doubt that the toughest boxer in the world is far from the toughest man.

NM: Well who are the boxers?

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JBM: well there was not many. There was not many boxers. There was one or two who would step in. But, they were so crippled against the Jujitsu fighters for instance -same with Sumo wrestlers. The sumo wrestler was the first to be eliminated in these fights because it's taking all the rules away. So it's a...

NM: Look, you have a strong point there but you don't have a complete point. Hell, when you get a Martial Arts artist of the highest level fighting a champion, a great champion, you can't anticipate the amount of anxiety the martial arts guy is gonna feel in relation to this champ because professional champions, who are heavy weights, have gone through hell, literally. They've gone through fights where it would have been easier to die than to continue. The amount of exhaustion, the amount of pain, the heaviness of the situation is heavier than any martial arts mans ever had, in my opinion.

JBM: Well this actually leads me to another question...

NM: We haven't finished with that yet, I want to knock out one more element to that...Let me just gather my thoughts for a second. My belief is that if you've got a true boxing champion fighting a true martial arts champion nothing would happen. The one time I saw it was at, I forget whether it was at Shay stadium or Yankee Stadium, but Mohammed Ali was fighting some Japanese who was marvelous at, I don't know what it was Aikido, Karate or this or that, but it was the dumbest fight I've ever, ever seen. It was the stupidest fight. Wait, I beg your pardon. It took place in Japan. (We have to check on this for the transcript.) But in any event, I saw it on TV. The Japanese guy just got down on his back and any time Mohammed Ali approached him he'd just kick him. He'd kick him in the legs. There was no way for Ali to reach him. And fifteen rounds of that was the dumbest damn thing I ever saw. The guy didn't dare get up once in order to try some of his vertical stuff on Ali. It was a no contest if ever I've seen one.

JBM: Right

NM: They fought as no contest. There wasn't going to be a decision. And it was monotonous beyond measure. People who are not professional boxers but who are Martial Artists love the idea that they could take a boxer. But since boxers are very fast-even the slowest professionals are pretty damn fast when you get down to it-the martial artist who is not used to being punched repeatedly could take one good shot to the chin, so I'd say lets leave that one open.

JBM: Right.

NM: Let history decide if it's on your side or mine.

JBM: Fair enough. Cus Diamatto(sp) talked about fear in boxing and how a fighter needed to acknowledge fear and not deny it. What are your thoughts on the fear a fighter must acknowledge before going into the ring?

NM: Well I knew Cus pretty well, particularly in the years when he was training and, you know when Jose Torres was moving toward the championship and then won the championship, and then afterward. I wouldn't say that Cus and I were close enough to be friends but we liked each other and enjoyed each other's company. And Cus was a philosopher. He was the only boxing philosopher I've ever encountered. A true philosopher. And he thought about boxing all his life in the most intense fashion. And he-the remark you gave me was absolutely correct-but um, he explained it further. He talked about what he would do with his fighters. He'd say, "Look, my gym, Gramercy Gym, is two long flights up. By the time somebody who wants to take up boxing but has never really boxed before, has climbed those two long flights of stairs," -and Cus would really emphasize with his voice how long those flights of stairs were, and I can tell you they were very long indeed. I don't know, I think maybe forty steps to each stairway-"by the time he's got to the top he's overcome his first fear."

Then he said, "When I get them ready for a fight, I'd be talking to them before their first fight, I'd say, 'You're going to look across the ring and you're gonna be a little embarrassed because you're half naked and it may be in your family that people don't walk around half naked. But there you are; you're half naked. Strangers are looking at you. You're looking at the other guy; he looks so strong, so powerful. You're scared stiff when you look at him. (unintelligible) I'll tell you something. He's looking at you in the same way. He's just as scared of you as you are of him. And that's something that you gotta remember.'" Well that was the

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very beginning. That was the ABC's of it. But he got, more and more advanced and he took a turn which was very interesting. Which was, Cus would work on building the fighter's ego and I really think there's almost a physiological connection if the fighter has a prodigiously powerful ego. Of course Mohammed Ali is the example for all times. It's as if they can take more punishment. I really believe there's a physiological connection. Because why do we build an ego, any of us, for our own purposes, is to be able to take the little rocks every day in life. The disappointments, the small, cutting remarks that other people make. The way in which we may be ignored in certain places where we feel, 'Hey how can they ignore me? I'm important.' And yet we're ignored. So the ego is there to drive us through to our objective. And when it comes to boxing it takes on prodigious dimensions. So I remember when Chegui Torres was training, when he was training for the light heavy weight championship with Willi Pestrano(sp), we sat there one night, Jose, Cus Diamatto and myself watching a fight that Pestrano had had in London against a fighter whose name I don't even remember now. He wasn't a very good fighter and Pestrano won the fight but he didn't look terribly good winning it. And Cus, afterward, made a small speech to Jose. He said, Jo, I knew when we took on this fight that you would have no trouble with Pestrano, that you would win. And opinion, having watched you train very seriously for this fight has been reinforced by your good conduct in training, but I can tell you, having watched Pestrano in this fight with that fellow, I know now as I look you in the eye, I am looking at the next light-heavy weight champion of the world." And it was so strong, that Chegui entered that fight with such confidence, that after the fifth round he came back to his corner and said to Johnny Manzanett(sp) -his trainer who was a very big, tough Puerto Rican-he said, "I am the next champion of the world," And Manzanett shouted at him, "Shut up, you got a fight to go through!" (laughter) In fact I played a very small part, maybe one part in a hundred. I wouldn't even call it one part in a hundred, maybe one part in five hundred, in Jose winning that championship. which is I went out to watch Pestrano train and I studied him for a whole day while he was training and when I came back Jose said, "Well, what did you think of him?" I said, "Well, look, he's only got one weapon. He's got a wonderful jab, a fabulous jab." And I saw a very hard look come into Jose's eyes. And I said, "If you can take that jab away from him I don't know what he can do." And then, then (he something-garbled) the look got even further. And in the first round, Jose came out and took the jab away from him. He was jabbing better than Pestrano. I think he felt that great wisdom comes from the mouth of babes, because he believed in what I said. He thought I'd taken the jab away(?)...Nothing else to fight him with... (there is a lot of noise here, I cannot really make it out.) In the larger sense, that was true. He ended up winning the fight. You'll have to look it up whether it was the 7th or the 9th round; the fight was stopped. But he dominated the fight entirely all the way.

JBM: Is a large ego necessary to overcome your fears?

NM: It's not a large ego, it's a strong ego. The ego has to be strong enough to match the intensity of the fear. A large ego might be the wrong kind of ego. A large ego is not good at everything. It might be the worst kind of ego to have as a fighter. The first time you get hit hard enough to really feel fear in your opponent all those outlying regions of ego are no good to you. It's no good if a fighter can say to himself, "I'm the best ballroom dancer in town and the greatest stud, and in fact if I wanted to I could be a painter." That's no good if he gets hit right in the kisser. At that point what he needs is a rallying ground that the ego provides.

There's a famous story about Carmen Bassillia (sp) who was a very, very tough welter weight. In a given fight one time, very close fight, he got caught; hit real hard. And almost went down. I've never seen that position before or since. Which is, he started on the ground, his body was (?? two words) to the ground. One leg was out in the air, one knee was bent. And with that one knee that was still bent he straightened up and never went down, never hit the canvas. It was an extraordinary effort. Later, some of the reporters asked him, "Carmen, didn't you want to take a rest? why didn't you go to the canvas for a count of eight, you could have won the fight anyway." He said: "I didn't want to start any bad habits."

The ego is involved right there. His ego along with all the other

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concentrations was, "I don't hit the canvas. No body knocks me down." So no, the ego is...That's one of the differences between street fighters and professionals. One of the enormous differences. Which is with street fighters ...Ah, first of all a very few street fights are equal. One guy is usually bigger than the other; one gang is usually stronger than the other-or at least the people you got with you are either more impressive or less impressive than the people the other guys got with him or you may be fighting all alone, so you can't talk about equality in a street fight. (Sounds like some of those are very good excuses if you heard) You know, even if the gang that's with you and the other guy wins you can always say, "Oh, they were all gettin' in my way. You know, I'd rather fight alone than have all those dumb-asses around with me." So you always have cop-outs in street fighting. And, of course there, those cop-outs continue in professional fighting. It's rare to see a fighter who doesn't complain in subtle or obvious form that he was robbed after a close fight, but nonetheless, it's much more restrained, much more professional, which is one thing we can get into about professional fighting and why I think boxing, on balance with all its corruption and all of its horror stories and everything that's bad about it and the occasional fighter that even gets killed in the ring, with all that I still think, on balance, it's a social good. But that we can get into.

JBM: What is it about Americans that makes us love a good fight?

NM: Oh, you can't restrict it to Americans. People in Bangkok love a great fight. Boxing is popular all over the world.

JBM: Yea, fighting has always been around since the dawn of man...

NM: You can't make it Americans. The British love boxing. Boxing started in Britain.

JBM: What is it about humanity?

NM: The question is too large. You'd have to go into our animal roots. Yea, I don't know if I could respond in novel fashion. See my interest in questions, and you can have this in the interview if you want to, is that I'm only interested in a question where I can contribute something that others have not necessarily done already. Why else be interviewed?

JBM: I think that's a good idea.

NM: I think it's a good measure.

JBM: What has Mike Tyson done to boxing?

(Tape stops abruptly. Tape resumes.)

JBM: What's your take on women boxing?

NM: Oh, I'm glad you asked that, yes I am. (both laugh) You know years ago when they started the first women boxers were dreadful. I mean they were as bad as the clumsiest oaf in a gym who comes in to box his first day. You get a big strong dumb guy in the gym who has no skill and no talent who throws round-house rights and round-house lefts until he's winded and the easiest punch to guard against is a round house punch, right or left, you just, you know, put your gloves up around your ears and see them coming. It's like stepping out of the way of a freight train. Once you realize, it's very easy to step out of the way of a freight train if you see it coming. These punches are not scary. You just wait till the other person gets winded. They get winded very quickly throwing round-house punches. Anyway, the women were...They were dreadful. These early women fighters, they were so awful. That I made the remark-and you know nothing, in those days was more valuable to me you might say than my private parts-but I said, you know, I'm half tempted, I was joking of course, to have a sex change operation because then I could be champion of the world. I mean I was, at best, a mediocre armature as a boxer, but I knew enough that I could have beaten any one of those women at that

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time. That is no longer true. They've gotten much better. Much stronger, much faster much tougher. I wouldn't, at my best, as I say I was never that good, but now at my best I couldn't get in the ring with them. So they've gotten very good. However, they're still a million miles away from the top male fighters. And one question that's never talked about, never discussed and I don't know the answer to it... It's such a simple question but nobody discusses it...what about their breasts? what kind of protection do they wear for their breasts? what about breast cancer? That's a question that never seems to come up. I think they wear some sort of armor around their breasts don't they?

JBM: No, I don't believe so. I think there's a kind of sports bra that is put on.

NM: What's a sports bra?

JBM: It's a very tight spandex bra that keeps the breasts in. But generally the female boxers who do well are not incredibly well endowed.

NM: Well I would assume they weren't. After all, I don't know what boxing would do to one's milk, but I don't imagine it would improve it.

JBM: For me there's something gut-wrenching about watching two women beat the piss out of each other in a ring, you know? I think it's just my views on women in general as the carriers of life and men are there to take the brunt of the rough stuff.

NM: You better watch out or you'll be put in a concentration camp, you keep with ideas like that...

JBM: I could be shot...

NM: Wait till women take over the world you're gone. You're toast.

JBM: I'll be used for milking, but ah...

NM: Seminal milking.

JBM: Exactly...

NM: Let me just insert here my own theory, which I think you've heard. That there will come a day when women will take over the world entirely. It's not impossible. Because men, no matter how brutal they are towards women, or no matter how awful they've been through history towards women, the fact is they needed women. They needed women, if for nothing else, they needed women for the continuation of the race. The women don't. All they need is maybe, I mean, what's the number...Let's say five hundred million women on the earth. Or whatever the population of the earth is. But you only need about a thousand Semen Slaves. You see you could be milked every day. And that way they can continue the race, and they could then take care of all the male babies except those who could be prime specimen for future Semen Slaves. And they could run the deal. So in that sense, men do have a deep and perhaps well seeded fear what women could do at their worst, at their very worst. Now mind you, women could answer with real power: "We don't have to speculate, we know what men can do with their worst. We've suffered through the most monstrous wars in history and they seem to get worse the stronger the society gets which means it's still the fault of the men, but more so. So this is just a fancy of mine that women are also dangerous.

JBM: Well certainly the way that women are treated in the work place would back up your theory.

NM: Oh come on! Let's stop that liberal crap. The way women are treated in the work place...

JBM: It's true. It's the truth. Women don't get fair a shake as men in the work place.

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NM: They get a much better shake today than they got fifty years ago.

JBM: That's true.

NM: And uh, I'll tell you, in the literary workplace women dominate it totally now. You wanna have a sex change operation? A young male novelist does well to become a female novelist. He'll get better reviews in the more important places.

JBM: What are the ways that you think boxing is different from all other sports--the big sports--baseball, football...

NM: Well, there are obvious quick answers. It's one against one. And it bears as much relation therefore, to chess as it does to football. Because, in a chess game between two very good players, there is a degree of humiliation in losing. And that degree of humiliation is even greater in boxing. So one of the troubles with one on one sport is the humiliation in losing. You have it in Tennis, too, but there's a huge difference. And tennis demands, skill, agility, speed intelligence...All those elements. But boxing demands one thing more. Which is hard to name. It's almost like a certain courage of the blood which goes very deep. It's what attracts us to boxing. The other side of boxing that's not too well understood by most people who say "Oh, I hate boxing. It's so brutal." Is the amount of discipline and intelligence and restraint that goes into it. The reason I consider boxing a social good, not a social ill, is that what would a lot of these kids do if there weren't professional boxing and they couldn't make a living out of it? And the answer is that a lot of them would have no recourse but to lead violent lives because the violence...You don't become a boxer unless you have a certain amount of violence in you...and this violence is not easily um, ...You know, when people have a little more violence in them than the average, their lives take on all sorts of very difficult turns. Now you have these sort of social Liberal courses in anger management for example, for husbands who can't keep themselves from hitting their wife from time to time, or just even speaking nastily to their wives and so forth, the point I'm making, when there's a lot of violence in you, society itself can be grateful that there are social ways in which that violence itself can be tapped and turned into an art form. And that is boxing. In boxing, what happens is a kid who starts out as just a very rough street kid comes to learn that there's something...It's classy to get good at this boxing and to live within its restraints. It's a way for a violent man to begin to comprehend that living in a classic situation, in other words, living within certain limitations rather than expressing himself all the time, is a way to live that he didn't have before. Because don't forget, that when you're violent and undisciplined, life is a nightmare. Any morning when you wake up could be the morning where one of a couple of things could happen. Either you go too far, and you hurt somebody so badly that you're in the can, or you've killed them. Or you're humiliated. Being Macho is no fun at all. No fun. Because macho men have to live for their triumphs and in terror of their humiliations because there's always another guy who's as macho as you are or more. So boxing enables them to find a social form for it. Where not only their strengths but their weaknesses can be appreciated. Where in effect they can be taught how to get rid of their weaknesses. (Well, remind me a little later about Jose and writing. We can finish with that.)

So they begin to learn that they have to show up on time, that they have to drill, that they have to watch out, that they can drink, but they can't drink too much they can take pot, but they can't take too much pot because the head is too vulnerable after taking pot to get hit steadily through sparring, if nothing else, and so they begin to lead lives which enable them to have a social existence. And that's a huge step. Because for every ten thousand who train in boxing every year, maybe only a thousand ever make it to a reasonably high armature level and maybe only five hundred make it to professional level--I don't know what the numbers are. They're probably larger than that. But the point is, in the course of it, even if they don't succeed, if they're not that good, they get a measure of their ego, get a measure of how tough they are. One of the worst things about being tough is if you don't know how tough you are, all you know is you're kind of tough, it's scary. You never know if your toughness is going to be challenged...challenged in that you're being

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humiliated. But if you go to the gym every day you are subtly humiliated every day by boxers who are better than you. In the course of it, you begin to learn and you get better. And so you can make some kind of peace with everything in yourself that's unsettled. Boxing settles people. Now there are penalties for it. You can end up less intelligent than when you started. That's obvious. On the other hand, I remember we had this happen at a boxing club, we'd go to on Saturdays, and then after we'd go out to eat. We'd have hamburgers and beer and stuff like that. And it occurred to me, I once turned to everybody else in the club and grinned and said, "Hey fellas, what would Saturday afternoon be like without a headache?" And we all laughed, because it was true. On the other hand, it also occurred to me that this headache I had from boxing was really not quite as bad as the headaches I used to have when I was hung over...on nights when I'd gone out and drunk huge amounts for my own body...huge by relation to my own body, and woke up the next day with a splitting headache that was intolerable. Much worse than I got from boxing. Which also gave me the next perception that half the people in New York who were my friends who were drinkers were punch-drunk. But not from boxing, from booze. So you know, let's cut the crap. Finally, you pay a price for boxing, but you pay a price for living, no matter how you live. We all punish our bodies. You know, there's that old joke; when you're young your body works for you and when you're old you work for your body. So the, um... Have I made my point or not?

JBM: I think so. Is machismo a choice?

NM: Wait a minute. What was the start of that though? You started with the question, 'How is boxing different from all other sports?' I think there's one way in which it is profoundly different and I, of course, never did enough boxing ever to be able to answer that question with authority, but I think there are periodsI've heard fighters say to one another... I once heard Mohammed Ali speak of fighting Joe Frazier and saying "Fighting him was like Death." And I knew what he meant. It was after the Thrilla in Manila which he won, but it was unbelievably arduous, terrible, grueling brutal fight. And I think what he felt was that several times within the course of that fight he was going to die if he didn't quit. And he did quit. So in that sense, there's one element in boxing which is a little bit like Evil Kneivel's stunts, which is you can die doing it. Now very few boxers die, but there can be a feeling in the middle of a fight when you're exhausted that to go on is very dangerous. And there are other activities which are dangerous. You see these kids who are on roller skates and do flip-flops through the air and land on their skates, stuff like that where they could break their neck if they don't do it properly-or rock climbing can be exceptionally dangerous. The thing about boxing is that the danger is always there in the middle of prodigious punishment. And so it has its own éclat, its own honor, its own dignity. Which is in the middle of pain and just grueling dull punishment...there is also honor. Which is very, very important to certain kinds of men, between violent men. Because a violent man without honor is a dreadful piece of work. To summarize let me say that one of the social values of boxing is that it enables men who have difficult and unbalanced psyches to be able to serve legitimately with their own personal honor.

JBM: Is there a correlation between boxing and writing?

NM: A very small one which I always loved, it's what drew me to my interest in boxing. Which is; writers suffer at long range. You write a sentence which is going to offend certain people in certain places and you know it. Well, first of all, it's a tricky business. You never know who's going to hear about it and who is not. The people who it's going to hurt usually never even read books, they just hear about what you've done, but in any event you will pay for it but you don't know how, when or where; it's down the road. On the other hand, there is one huge similarity-just one, there are many, many differences, obviously-the one huge similarity is that you've got to pull it out of yourself. Particularly when writing fiction. There comes a point where you really got to dig down into your own vitals in order to get something out there. And in that sense it can be killing. You can really feel that you are using yourself up as you write. And boxers have that same feeling. They have to call...they have to call up something deep down in themselves

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in order to continue. And also, the desire if you are a serious writer, the desire to be more than just a serious writer. To be a writer who makes a change in the history of one's time...Is a powerful motive. And when one feels that one is not successful at that it is depressing, just as it is depressing for a prize fighter who comes to realize that his talent is not what they had hoped for.

(Break in tape-discussion. NM: where are we? JBM: We're at 474. NM: Good. So we still have time. Any more questions? JBM: Umm... NM: We don't have to, I think we have plenty. JBM: I'm sure we have plenty.)

JBM: Well I always found the partnership between Jose Torres and yourself, the deal that you made of you teaching him how to write and he would teach you how to box fascinating. Just as a story in and of itself, I don't know...

NM: Well we did it one summer, I think it was the summer of 1973 as I recall. It was after he'd retired from boxing. He'd been the light heavy weight champion for a couple of years and retired. He came up one summer—he was going to write a book. He wanted to become a writer. And I wanted to become much more of a boxer. I'd done a little boxing but I wanted to do more. So we'd box every day. We'd box three two minute rounds a day, every day. I once offended him greatly because he was trying to talk up my talents to some strangers and I said, "Oh, come on, Jose, I'm safer with you than I am with my sister." And that got him so mad he walked out of the room. To him it was equal to one's wife saying, "Oh, you're full of shit!"

JBM: But you meant that because he was so good you were safe, right?

NM: Well, he was so good, he was so good...But what happened was we'd box. And um, very early on he said, "Look, Norman, I was going to give you open targets to hit, but I can't do it. I spent my life being a defensive fighter." He was one of the greatest defensive fighters of all time. Very hard to hit. In fact he makes the remark and I believe it. That he was only hit hard five times in his career. What he meant by hit hard of course, is not what we mean. What he meant was that he was deranged by the punch. In other words he lost the high focus of his consciousness for a few seconds. That only happened to him five times in his entire career. So he wasn't going to give me openings to see if I could pop him. But what he did do is he taught me a great deal about defense. And reflexively. He never gave me instructions verbally. What we'd do was, we'd spar and he'd see an opening, and they would be all over the place in the beginning and he'd tap me. And then if I didn't protect better, the next time he'd tap me a little harder. So very quickly these reflexes were built in and in time I became a fairly good—at my level—a reasonably good defensive boxer. But teaching him to write...When it was all over, he obviously got the better of the deal because I went from being an absolute armature who knew nothing about boxing to somebody who had a few skills, modest skills. Whereas he became a published writer, and a pretty good one. Not a great one, but a good one. The thing is, it was a pleasure to teach him because the onus and annoyance and the disagreeable aspect in teaching writing to most people is that most young writers are sensitive; and they are so sensitive that you don't want to ruin them, you don't want to injure them with one harsh remark. So you take it very easy with them and you baby them and you carry them and they are offended if you are tough with them. Whereas fighters—because they get hurt in the ring—their instructors are brutal to them. They'll say, "You dumb fuckin' idiot! How many times I hav'ta tell ya? Keep 'yer left up! What do ya need? A string attached to ya ear?" Stuff like that. And so they learn quickly. And they're very meek in the ring, almost always. Until they get to be very good. Fighters on the way up are talked to like they're dumb children. So I found with Jose that I could say what I wanted. Because teaching writing is irritating. You're dealing with mistakes that are below your own level. And I wasn't a born teacher. That wasn't my enthusiasm, it was just part of the deal. So after a while I'd start yelling at him: "How many times I have ta tell ya, that ya don't say the same thing twice in two sentences?" He'd say, "Yea, ok, yea right, Norman, yea, I won't do it again." And he didn't. He learned. He learned more quickly than any one I ever tried to teach to write—maybe I've tried to teach four or five people to write over the years—he

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learned more quickly than any of them. And he was just damn good at it. Because Jose is also very bright, which was one of the reasons we were friends. It was just a pleasure to discover someone with a totally different occupation that you could really talk to and he could talk to you.

JBM: Somehow I don't seem remember being coddled as a very young writer by you.

NM: Well, then, (sounds like of course) I taught him before I started to teach you.

JBM: This is true.

NM: And I learned, yes, that's the way to teach writing.

JBM: Well once you get something out there to the world it certainly helps.

NM: Actually, it's important to teach writing that way. Because what happens is, most writers are babied and babied and babied and then they get their first reviews and they're aghast.

JBM: They're crushed.

NM: They didn't know the world was that cruel.

JBM: It's true.

NM: So. We can leave on that.

JBM: To the cruel world. Fair enough.

NM: All right.

END

(Total word count: 6,512. Total type time: 4 hrs 40 min. Norman, you speak very quickly, with a lot of information when not dictating the novel. It's fun, but boy you made my fingers fly with this one, Buddy. Fine interview.)
Personal and un-solicited Note from Dwayne:

I would, if I were editing this piece, wish to lay a thought or two upon the essay (when discussing the rare occasion of fighters dying in the ring) The Death of Benny Paret (p. 464 of T.O.O.T.) -which is one of the greatest works on boxing ever penned. How it would such a circumstance play out now if it were a woman instead of a man, considering the gender thrust of the commentary and the overtly politically proper times we are living in?