



Johnny Duke fought the good fight.

Sherman Cain, March 8, 2006

WETHERSFIELD - People streamed into the D'Esopo Funeral Chapel throughout the afternoon and early evening on Tuesday. They weren't streaming out. That's because many stuck around for a while to tell or listen to a story about Duke.

The calling hours were for Johnny Duke. His real name was Giulio Gallucci. But not many knew his real name. And no one ever called him Johnny. Everybody called him Duke. The amateur champions he molded, the friends he made, even some family members, they all called him Duke. Duke was buried today at the Cedar Hill Cemetery in Hartford. He was always a fighter. He gave his bout with cancer all he had, but cancer doesn't fight fair, and Duke died last Saturday. He was 81. He spent about 60 of those years training fighters. He did most of his good work at the since-razed Bellevue Square Boys Club in Hartford.

Everybody knew Duke. He turned out so many amateur champions that his name was known in boxing circles throughout the United States. Duke also had friends in high places. Among the many pictures and stories that could be viewed at D'Esopo was a letter Duke had received. The letter started out like this: "It has come to my attention that you have established a highly successful boys club in the basement of a formerly vacant house." The letter was mailed in 1970. It was from the White House. It was signed "Richard M. Nixon." That's right, the President of the United States wrote a letter addressed to Duke at his Hartford home. Looking at that letter will make a cynic nod his head and say, "Wow, that's impressive." Growing up in Hartford, I knew all about Duke. Hartford was a two-newspaper town then and there were numerous accounts of the many amateur champions he produced. The first time I actually met him is when I wrote a story about a boxing exhibition his kids put on at Cheney Tech in Manchester sometime in the late 1970s. He spent the next 25 or so years calling me "Mr. Cain" or "Mr. Sherman." When he called me "Mr. Sherman," I knew he was happy to see me. When he called me "Mr. Cain," well, that sometimes meant he wasn't all that thrilled with something I wrote.

Even when Duke was mad, however, he couldn't stay mad long. He would eventually have you grinning over some unbelievable story he'd swear was true. Every now and then, the American Medical Association will call for the abolition of boxing. Obviously, nobody from the AMA ever met Duke. I'm not saying Duke saved more lives than the chief surgeon at a hospital near you, but the surgeons wouldn't win in a landslide.

In a crime-ridden area where reaching the poverty level would have been a step up, Duke's boxing program kept more kids off the street than a police sweep. The Bellevue Square Boys Club was a life raft in an ocean of despair. It's amazing how many kids jumped on that life raft, yet Duke managed to keep it afloat. Some of his kids would get into trouble and end up in jail. They'd get out of jail and Duke would take them back in the gym. They'd have to do the work. This club wasn't a place to hang out. It was a place to learn how to box.

Fortunately, Duke was well enough to attend the inaugural induction ceremonies for the CT Boxing Hall of Fame on Dec. 1st of 2005. He was in a wheelchair, but he handed out boxing key chains and members of his family were at the Mohegan Sun Ballroom to see Duke rightfully inducted with the first class. After all, Duke was simply the greatest amateur trainer in New England history.

Duke's Bellevue Square boxers dominated the Western Massachusetts Golden Gloves tournaments for several years. That tournament is now called the Western New England Golden Gloves and was held for the first time in Connecticut at The Colony in Vernon earlier this year. I have a suggestion for Western New England Golden Gloves director Paul Cichon. Rename the tournament the Johnny Duke Western New England Golden Gloves Tournament. It would be a fitting tribute. Invite members of Duke's family to the first week of the 2007 tournament and present them with a plaque commemorating Duke's accomplishments in the tournament. Cichon has a good sense of history, so he likely won't have to be nudged into this. He's probably already thought about something he could do to honor Duke - who was a trailblazer in the area of amateur boxing. Duke's family has established a memorial fund. Donations may be made to the Johnny Duke Memorial Fund, care of attorney John Gale, 363 Main Street in Hartford. The fund will be used to support amateur boxing programs in Connecticut. That would be exactly what Duke would have wanted.

Anyway, if there's a big boxing gym in the sky, I know who will be in charge. It will be the guy with the Q-tip in the back of his ear.

