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MAKER OF CHAMPIONS *Carlo Rotella*

I was sitting on a folding chair at the Larry Holmes Training Center in Easton, Pennsylvania, watching the ex-champion Holmes, who was forty-six years old and had a fight coming up in eight days, tussle with Linwood Jones in the raised ring. Jones, a professional sparring partner whose craft is to give the other man a useful workout, is big all over, round-faced, and battered in the midsection with hard fat. Holmes, who is also large and also has a build more U- than V-shaped, poked Jones in the face with half-jabs, only occasionally straightening out the punch into its rigorous true form. When he does throw it correctly, Holmes still has a perfect left jab: a crisp straight-arm whipped out from the shoulder with the muscles corded up along its prodigious length and his opponent's head rattling at the end of it. Mostly, though, Holmes worked at protecting himself by trapping the sparring partner's arms, so that the two lurched around the ring stamping and blowing. When Jones got an arm free of Holmes's grip, he threw short hooks to the body, some of which landed, and thunderous wide-swinging hooks at Holmes's head, which all missed and looked to be thrown mostly for effect. The big swings were protestations of the earnestness with which employee pursued employer, the point being not so much to hit Holmes in the head as to assure him that the punch would have done damage had it landed.

Saoul Mamby, a retired light-welterweight who held the World Boxing Council title from 1980 to 1982 and now served as Holmes's chief second, called out encouragement from his position on the ring apron outside the ropes. Mamby kept up a lilting, cautionary patter—"everything comes from the jab . . . from the jab . . . don't load up, now, don't load up . . . that's right . . . thaaat's right . . . put 'em to-

gether . . . now you're having fun"—but Holmes did not appear to be having fun, nor did he appear to be changing anything he did in response to Mamby's wheedling. He set up in front of the fat man and hit him when and how he wanted to, which was not all the time and not always with sufficient force to mean anything. Everything about the measured, baleful manner of Holmes in the ring says, to cornermen and spectators as well as to his opponent, "I already know how to fight. I'm almost fifty years old. Don't bother me." He came impassively back to his corner between rounds of sparring and stood facing Mamby, one gloved hand on the top strand of the ropes, spitting patiently into a once-white bucket and clumsily wiping Vaseline with the other glove onto his face and protective headgear. Holmes was big and dark and old, wearing dark sweat pants and a gray T-shirt soaked through everywhere with his sweat. Mamby, little and light-skinned and younger than Holmes, with a head of soft, curly hair and a soul patch beneath his lower lip, seemed used to being ignored. He contented himself between rounds with carefully squirting water into Holmes's mouth from a squeeze bottle. He had to rise up on tiptoes, reaching over the ropes to shoot all the water into the much taller man's mouth.

While I was watching the action an older gentleman sat down next to me. He was closer to Mamby than Holmes in size, closer to Holmes than Mamby in color, and looked to be about seventy; the kind of seventy one would expect to enjoy after a life of clean living and regular strenuous exercise. "I want you to do me a favor, son," he said. "Will you teach me how to fight?" I smiled and reached to shake the hand he extended. "Earnee Butler," he said; "I figured," I answered, since he could not be anybody else. Easton is a town, not a

city, and he is the only elder statesman of the prize ring in residence. He launched into a quick autobiographical sketch via a series of questions. Did I know he had fought 104 pro fights, including one against Jimmy Doyle? That sounded like a lot. Did I know that he had taught Holmes the basics? I had heard something like that. "See that jab?" he said, "I taught him that jab." I said I thought it was a great jab, the best in the heavyweight division for a long time. He made an open-handed "there you have it" gesture and continued: did I know that he had also worked with Mamby? I did not. Soon he was telling me that fighters always forget who taught them their craft, that fighters are more interested in money than in learning how to fight or honoring their teachers. When they get a little money they stop listening.

"There's things I could still show him," Butler said as Holmes set himself up on the ropes and egged on his next sparring partner, a smaller, trimmer fighter named Art Bayliss who rushed in to throw combinations. Bayliss, who was the Pennsylvania cruiserweight champion, moved in and out looking for openings and punched with more conviction than Jones. Holmes rolled grimacing on the ropes and blocked punches, cuffing Bayliss with his left and occasionally dropping his right hand to hit solidly under the heart. "But I stay out," Butler continued. "You can't tell them anything. See that other fellow, the short one in the corner. I taught him, too. That's Sal Mamby?" Butler leaned close and prodded my elbow when he talked; there was a musty but not unpleasant smell about him, like that of a house filled with broken-in, lived-with things. His eyes were large and wet. For a man who fought 104 fights, he did not have a lot of scar tissue on his face. I thought that he must have had a good jab, too, the kind that scuttles opponents' balance and timing, preventing them from landing hard punches.

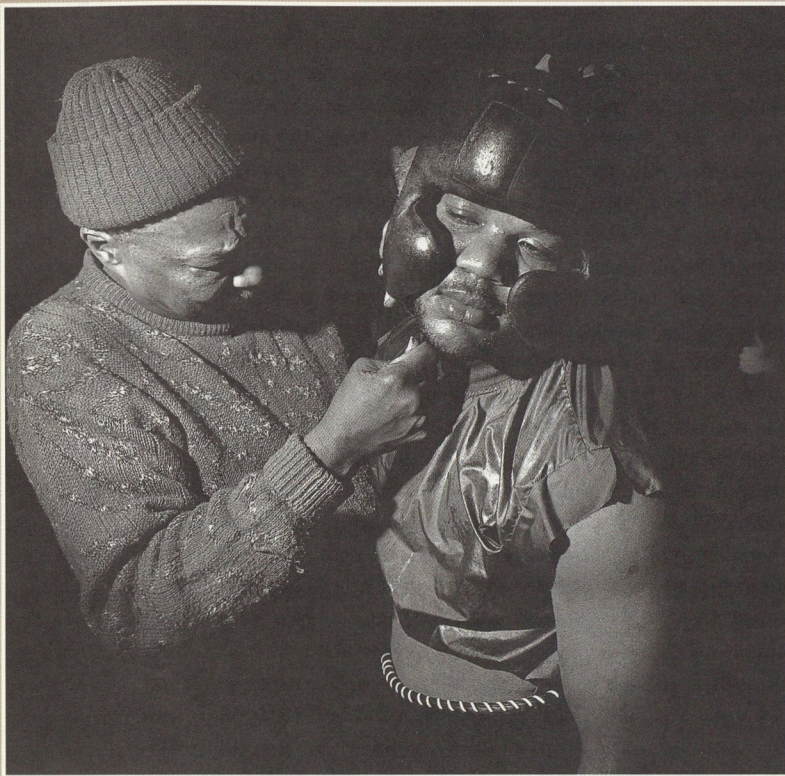
We watched the sparring peacefully. Butler leaned over now and again to tell me things: that his mother had been careful not to let him know how proud she was after his first fight; that the purpose of learning to fight was self-defense rather than hurting others; that he had taught Holmes and Mamby; that his wife, a good judge of character, had told him to watch out for Don King (who wooed Holmes away from Butler with promises of big money). He produced a business card and gave it to me. "Do you have any children?" he asked. Not yet. "OK," he said, "because if you had a son I would teach him how to fight." I asked about the various kids and young men going through their paces in the gym. "I help them, most of them," he said. "That's mostly what I do. But I tell them, you got to work hard and you got to listen. If they don't pay attention, I don't bother. See that fella in the corner there. That's Sal Mamby. I taught *him*."

Holmes, having finished eight rounds of sparring, leaned forward into his corner with both forearms across the top strand of the ropes and his head down. Shoving Jones around and weathering the assaults of Bayliss had worn him down, and he was breathing heavily without bothering to conceal it. He had sweated so much that he looked as if he had showered with his clothes on. His seconds struggled to

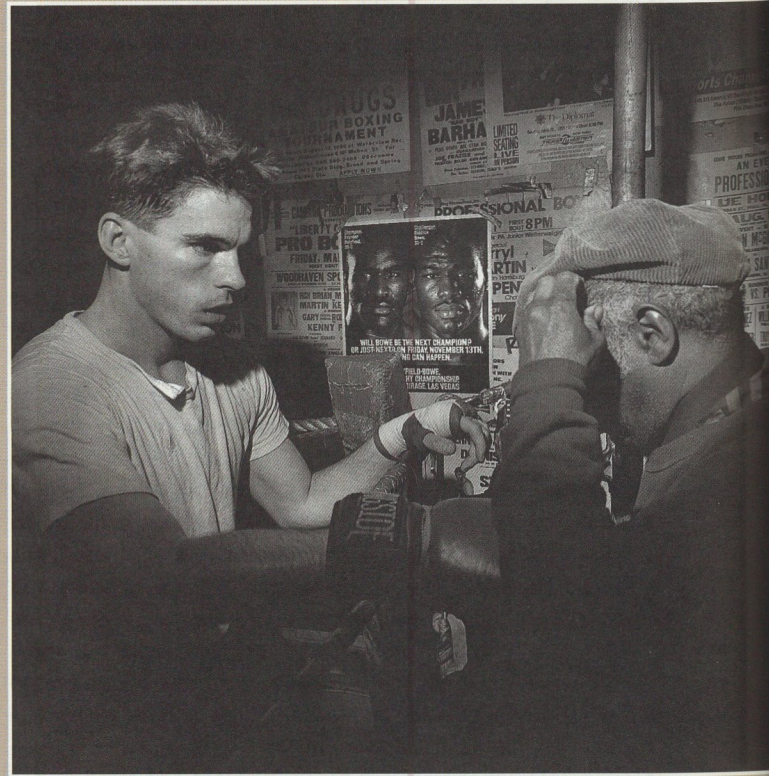
take off his headgear, gloves, and foul protector. Freed of the gear, Holmes began shadowboxing in the ring to warm down, but he came back to his corner massaging his side and burping with difficulty. He said something I did not catch to Mamby, who stepped lightly away from the corner, saying, "If it will make you feel better. . ." Holmes hooked the bucket with one foot and positioned it in front of him, then stood over it with his back to the room. Straightening up and turning slightly to the right, with his left hand on the ropes and his right hand to his mouth, he struck a stylized pose resembling that of Tarzan when he gave his signature call in the movies. After a moment Holmes brought his hand away from his mouth, looked down, and vomited a reddish watery cascade into the bucket. Holmes is tall, and the vomit fell far enough to make a sharp report when it hit the bucket's insides. He went back to his Tarzan position and repeated the operation six or seven times. He showed no signs of distress, standing straight and not spasming at all. He made no noise other than a low gasp between the last two repetitions. Each successive shower was clearer, more watery and less solid. At some point in the process Mamby said conversationally, "You ate late today," and Holmes nodded before putting hand to mouth again. Holmes's entourage of seconds and advisers stood around respectfully, waiting for him to finish. They, and the handful of spectators who had wandered in to watch Holmes train, approved of this performance: if one eats too late, we all silently agreed, this seems to be the correct way to handle the problem. We nodded and half-smiled at one another, pleased in a right-tool-for-the-right-job way. When he was done, and the bucket sat in a vile pool of near-misses, Holmes went back to warming down and Mamby went for a mop.

The purging improved Holmes's mood considerably. He washed his mouth out with the squeeze bottle and returned to training with new vigor, climbing down out of the ring to get on the Stairmaster and charging at it while joking with his seconds and singing occasional nonsense syllables. The rest of the fighters in the gym felt the change in climate and went lustily at their own work.

One of them was a young man of modest size and shape, with a pale, dedicated face, who I will call Richard. (He does not want his parents to find out that he boxes, so I will not use his real name.) He had hit the heavy bag early, before Holmes got into the ring, then jumped rope facing the ring (rather than the mirrors lining the gym's back wall) so he could watch the master spar. Now done for the day, changed into jeans and a sweatshirt and toting his gym bag, Richard hung around to talk with the various sages in Holmes's crew as they waited for the boss to finish on the Stairmaster. From my seat across the room I watched him huddled with a thick, serene guy named Cliff. Putting down his bag, Richard broke away to sketch a sparring problem: "See? See?" he seemed to say as he stomped back and forth and threw for-example punches, "It's a problem." Cliff offered a solution with understated movements that filled the gaps left by Richard: you just



Champs Gym, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, January 1993



February 1993

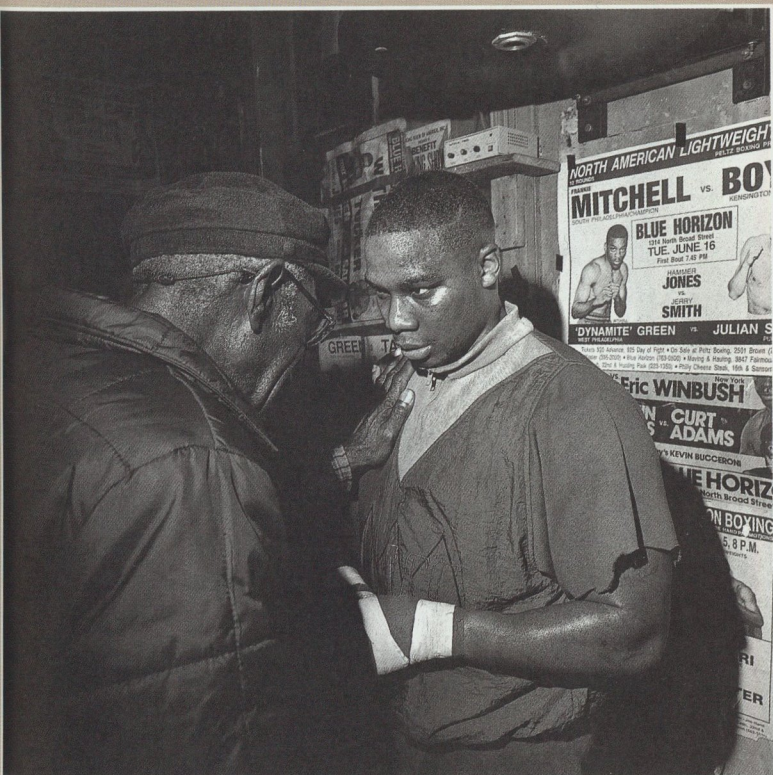
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take a small step here, and turn your shoulder like so, and you don't have a problem any more.

I knew Richard slightly because he was a student at the college where I teach. He ran in the local cemetery every other morning, and weekday afternoons he walked the mile and a half from College Hill across town to the gym—and back again, uphill, unless someone gave him a ride home. “Besides schoolwork, this is about all I do,” he once told me. Once I watched him spar in the ring after Holmes was done for the day. Richard moved forward, throwing the fundamental one-two combination (left jab, right cross) upon which Holmes has built his fortune, while Angel, a short high school kid preparing for an upcoming amateur fight, leaped in and out to deliver flurries of hooks and overarm rights. Richard was bigger and stronger than Angel, and, throwing straight punches inside the arc of Angel’s wilder swings, Richard should have given him a pounding. But Richard’s footwork could not get him in close enough. He had to lunge forward with his upper body and arms, rather than driving with his legs, to make contact with his opponent. Consequently, his punches lacked snap and he tended to be off bal-

ance. He pursued Angel diligently, and hit him a few times, but took too many punches in return. At the end of the day, with a welt on his nose and angry red marks on his face despite the headgear, Richard had seemed disappointed in his showing but undiscouraged. He had gained some experience, perhaps he had learned something about spacing, and the lesson had not cost him too dearly. “It’s a good thing he couldn’t hit that hard, at least,” he told me later. “Some guys hit so hard you have a real problem.”

This time, Richard was going home unmarked. When I gave him a ride up the hill I asked why he was not sparring these days. “I thought I better go back to basics,” he said. I agreed that was a good idea. The unspoken addendum “because it looked like you were going to get your head bashed in” hung in the air between us for a moment and evaporated. We fell to talking about the appeal of boxing. “It’s helped me a lot,” he said, “even in my personal life. You know, the fact that it’s painful, that there’s pain, makes you have to be disciplined. You have to work, stay with it.” Maybe because I was a professor, he mentioned Joyce Carol Oates, Ernest Hemingway, and the sense of history that permeates the air of a box-



January 1993

Boxers and Trainers

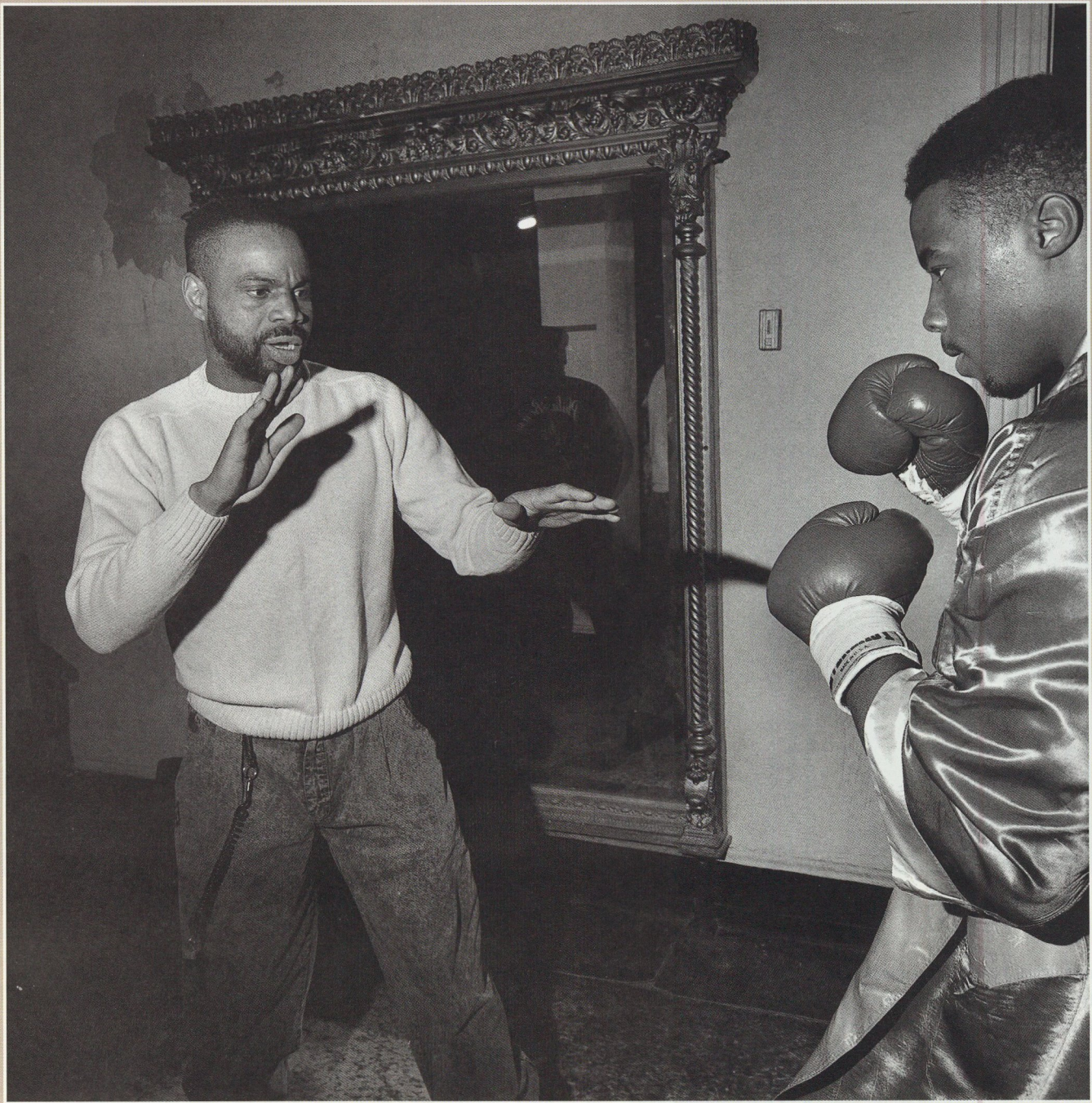
Larry Fink

Over the past eleven years, Larry Fink has photographed the sport of boxing as it is practiced in neighborhood gyms and in larger arenas of the northeastern United States. ►

ing gym. I think he was humoring me. (I do not mind being humored, if it is done with good intentions, so I told him about two recent versions of the Iliad that render the boast of the boxer Epeios to the Achaean army in Muhammad Ali's distinctive voice—they are the only versions in which Epeios says “I am the greatest”—thereby reversing the conventional flow of literary influence from past to present.) When we got back to the groomed precincts of College Hill, the considerably more hard-boiled town having fallen away behind us, I pulled the car over to let him out. I said, “Good luck,” and meant it. He was game, curious, and sincere enough to get himself hurt. I hoped that his mentors at the gym would help him teach himself what he needed to know before that happened.

Holmes won the fight he was training for, and the next one, then retired. Then he unretired and fought some more. He has been retiring and unretiring for the last decade, but as he approaches fifty the balance of risk to gain must soon tip, finally, past the point where another fight would be worth it to him.

Holmes has always seemed to draw strength from a heightened sense of scarcity and grievance: there is only so much money in the world, only so much respect; there are only so many championships (even in this debased age of multiple governing bodies and titles). He has treated the task of winning in the ring as a zero-sum process of taking his share away from other people. It has been, as he sees it, a solitary struggle against enemies in the ring, where the opponents keep getting younger, and enemies everywhere outside it: boxing people who have withheld the recognition he deserves, promoters who have robbed him, people in town who resent his fortune. For the better part of three decades, Holmes has been going to the gym to get his own, to harden his body and sharpen his skills for the war of each against all. Between family life, minding his investments (which is what he does all day when he is not training), and negotiating the routines of the fighting day—sleeping and eating right, running, getting loose, keeping his footwork precise, blocking punches, recognizing openings in his opponent's style and hitting into them, matching the form of each move-



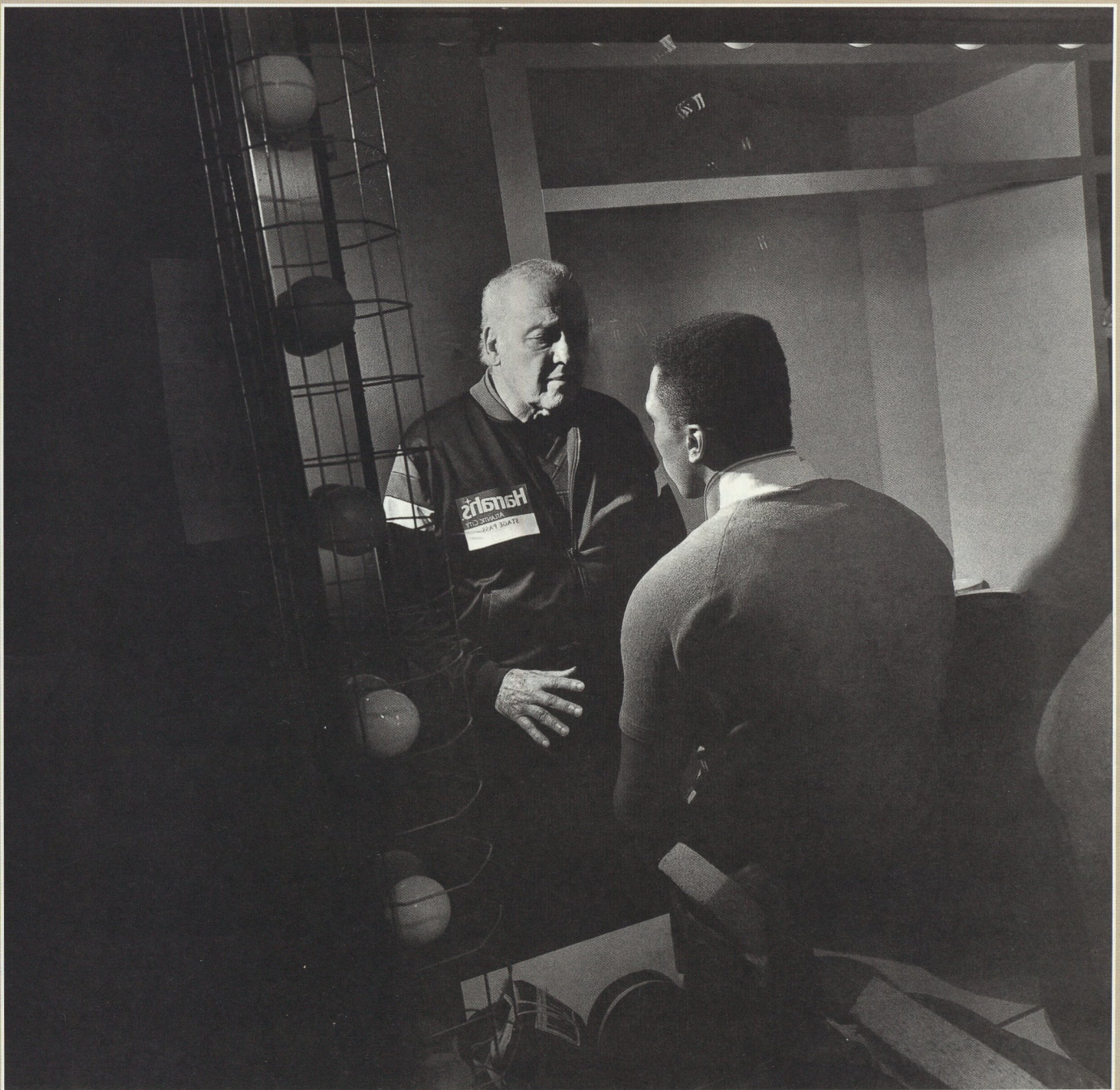
Backstage at the Blue Horizon, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, January 1992

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ment to its purpose—he has not had much left over for the other fighters in the gym.

Now he talks about passing on to young fighters the reserve of technical skill and ring experience he has accumulated. He has taken a particular interest in Angel, who has been winning amateur fights, and Holmes says he wants to “teach him how to jab . . . how to break a jaw.” That kind of teaching will require concentrated, patient attention to a student, which will mean a major change in the way Holmes in-

habits the gym. Single-minded and surly when he trains for fights, Holmes has not made a habit of devoting more than throwaway energy to the young apprentices around him. Once in a while he encourages somebody to work harder or yells at somebody to stop fucking around. One day I saw him interrupt his warm-down to bellow, “Bad habits, bad habits gonna cause you problems,” at a girl with a blond ponytail who was jumping rope in front of the wall of mirrors. He spent a minute showing her the right way to do it: the skinny



Atlantic City, New Jersey, December 1990 From the series *Boxing* by Larry Fink ■

twelve-year-old girl watched carefully, nodding, while the big sweaty grandfather jumped, light and quick and in lovely balance, whipping the rope expertly back and forth and side to side, saying "Like this . . . see?" They both had their hands wrapped.

If Holmes has not devoted himself as an active fighter to instruction, he has been on display, and those with initiative could teach themselves by observing him. For people like Bayliss, Angel, Richard, and the little blond girl, who have

been going to the Larry Holmes Training Center to train alongside or against an ex-champion, the model of learning at his gym has been that of a master's studio. It has been up to the lesser practitioners and apprentices to derive profit by observing Holmes go about his business at the end of a very long, accomplished career. He has provided them with his example and with access (for a modest monthly fee, which he has been known to waive) to the gym, where they could find lessons and even teachers like Earnee Butler and

Holmes's cornermen. To learn from Holmes, other fighters have had to meet him more than halfway, by devoting themselves to boxing and by working from his example. Richard was in this sense a model student: his daily journey down the hill from college was in some ways the longest made by any of the gym's regulars.

Since I moved to Easton two years ago, I have spent many hours watching Holmes in the gym. I go there to get away from some things and to go toward others. I get away from college; from a world dominated by eighteen- to twenty-two-year-old students who do not always come halfway to their teachers, and by professors in the habit of coming more than halfway to make up the difference. I go toward the feeling of being in the town of Easton, and not on College Hill looking down at it; toward the insular profession of pugilism an ocean away from the subcontinent of the academy. I get away from being a teacher; from the constant setting up of oneself as telling, helping, asking, modeling, evaluating; from the duty of showing people why and how they should devote themselves (at least for fourteen weeks) to doing what I do; from being part of a process in which everybody depends on everybody else's initiative and perseverance to accomplish anything. I go toward writing: I am at the gym to "gather material," I can tell myself, from which I will build an essay, maybe a book, the published prose for which academics reserve the descriptive term "my work." Having come down the hill after teaching class, I take special pleasure in the self-interest of finding what I can and using it without sharing the project with collaborators, and without considering responsibility—except to the material, and perhaps to a reader someday.

Of course I am running in a circle, because what one sees at the Larry Holmes Training Center is teaching and learning: things done wrong and corrected (or done wrong repeatedly, and suffered from accordingly); things done right over and over until they are habits that give shape to works and days. And, of course, everybody in the gym depends on the others in order to accomplish anything—especially me, since I am there to watch. Even Holmes, the master, needs his sparring partners: Linwood Jones, who leans intimately on his boss, shouting "Hit me! That all you got? Hit me! Yaaah!"; Art Bayliss, who surges in to test the palisade of Holmes's elbows and fists. Without them, Holmes could not prepare his body and technique for the next fight. When he was a young man aspiring to greatness, Holmes worked as a sparring partner for Muhammad Ali, Joe Frazier, and Earnie Shavers, soaking up all the ring craft he could from the best fighters around. As an old fighter sparring with younger men, Holmes has to teach himself all over again, every day, in front of everybody else in the gym, to fight like Larry Holmes. Every serious fighter in the gym is teacher and student, is in fact his (or her) own most dedicated pupil.

When he gave me his card, Earnie Butler said, "That's yours. Read it—both sides." He said it as if reading both sides was a particular procedure, known to insiders, with which to get the most out of the equipment. On one side was printed:

If you can take discipline and hard knocks
Earnie Butler will teach you how to box

Earnie Butler
Maker of Champions

Home
258-3042

Gym
253-8271

On the other side:

If We meet and you forget me,
you have lost nothing;
but if you meet JESUS CHRIST
and forget Him, then you
have lost everything.

It got me thinking what the two messages on the card, both framed with the contingent "If," might have to do with each other. The front of the card is about taking care of yourself: sharpening and strengthening yourself through disciplined application, learning to protect yourself by doing things regularly and the right way. A teacher, or an opponent, can help you with that. The back, even for those of us with no particular commitment to Jesus, is about the opposite impulse: opening yourself to others, and to what they know; cultivating the generosity and receptiveness of spirit that grow from moral confidence. Students can help you with that. Teachers, like students, learn to balance the two impulses, which is something I try to bear in mind as I go up the hill and down the hill: do enough of what's on the front of the card to enable yourself to think as the back of the card asks you to. ■