

Heavyweights lighten ex-boxer's heavy heart

By Mike Latona
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — How can you love somebody who, at one time, you had literally beaten to a pulp?

"In a lot of ways, boxing is the most honest of all sports. It's a crazy bond," observed George Chuvalo. "Every person I fought, no matter what happened, I always had good feelings for him."

Good feelings for people like The Greatest, Muhammad Ali. And Joe Frazier.

These former world heavyweight champions, both of whom fought Chuvalo in the late 1960s and early 1970s, reflected the bond of which Chuvalo spoke by showing their support in his time of need.

Two other ex-boxing champions, Carmen Basilio and Willie Pep, joined Ali and Frazier for a knockout head table Thursday, Aug. 18, at the Mapledale Party House.

The dinner not only acknowledged the boxers' outstanding careers, but also their huge hearts.

It was a night where all 950 in attendance were reminded that, for people like Chuvalo, a boxer's bloody existence inside the ropes can actually be less painful than life outside the ring.

In 90 professional fights against the likes of Ali, Frazier and George Foreman, the burly Canadian was never knocked to the canvas as he compiled a record of 70-18-2.

Recent events in his life, however, have threatened to knock Chuvalo right out emotionally.

Now 56, Chuvalo has endured the loss of three family members in recent years. His son Jesse committed suicide nine years ago, and George Jr. died of an overdose last fall. Both were heroin addicts. Then, just days after his second son's death, Chuvalo's wife, Lynne, took her own life by swallowing a bottle of pills.

Chuvalo is now attempting to endure these devastating losses by reaching out to both old and new friends.

"You get cynical and sometimes you get bitter, and then a moment like this comes around and you're reminded that people are beautiful," Chuvalo said to the banquet gathering last Thursday.

The dinner was arranged by Tony Liccione, a Hamlin resident and president



S. John Wilkin/Staff photographer

Former heavyweight boxers George Chuvalo (left) and Joe Frazier ham it up during a press conference at Rochester's Strathallan Hotel, prior to a benefit banquet for Chuvalo at the Mapledale Party House. Proceeds from the dinner will go to the George Chuvalo Foundation and St. Joseph's Villa in Greece.

of the Rochester Boxing Hall of Fame. Liccione said the idea took hold soon after he heard of Chuvalo's family tragedy late last year.

One by one, said Liccione, boxing luminaries came forward wishing to help out by waiving their appearance fees for the event. In addition to the former fighters, head-table guests included Larry Merchant, the Home Box Office boxing analyst who served as master of ceremonies; and Bert Sugar, publisher of *Boxing Illustrated* magazine.

"It turned out to be the biggest event in Rochester boxing history, and we never set out to do that," Liccione remarked.

Proceeds from the banquet will net about \$15,000, Liccione estimated. Most of the money will go toward the George Chuvalo Foundation, which will support children from abusive backgrounds in Chuvalo's home city of Toronto. Addi-

tional funds will benefit St. Joseph's Villa, which serves similar causes in the Rochester area.

Chuvalo told the *Catholic Courier* that while he has received various forms of encouragement from the public in recent months, "this is pretty unique in terms of the people involved."

The former boxer, who was Canada's top heavyweight over a 21-year period, was overcome with emotion while expressing his appreciation to the banquet attendees.

"I'm having a bit of a difficult time because it's hard to talk about things that are so dear to you," said Chuvalo. "This makes me feel that it's worth being alive; that I want to love people."

Chuvalo concluded that his efforts toward assisting youths will serve as a coping mechanism in his future.

"I need to know that my sons and wife didn't die in vain," he said.

SportShorts

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PENFIELD — The ninth annual Holy Childhood Ladies' Golf Tournament, held July 11, raised approximately \$25,000, according to Helen D. daCruz, development director at School of the Holy Childhood, 100 Groton Parkway, Henrietta.

The event took place at Shadow Pines Golf Club. Proceeds will help education and training programs at School of the Holy Childhood, which serves mentally retarded children and adults.

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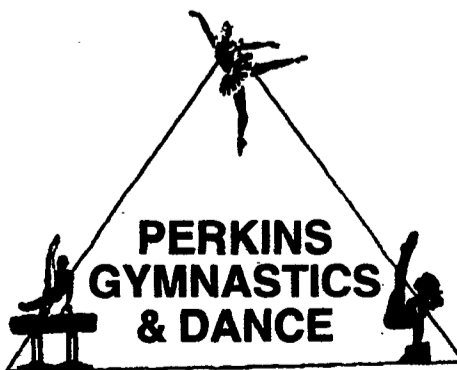
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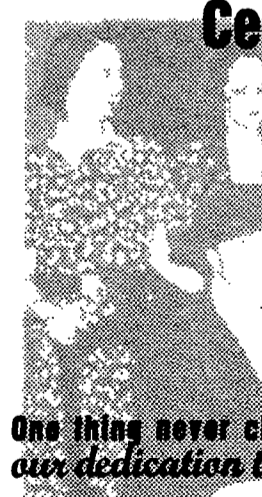
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