



A treasured elder...

William David Besmanoff

Former heavyweight prizefighter still going the distance

Treasure
Our
Elders

Willie Besmanoff busily studies scrapbooks jammed with newspaper clips, photos and souvenirs of when he was one of the top heavyweight fighters in the world.

"I was a boxer, not a fighter," Besmanoff quickly points out to the Treasure Our Elders interviewer. True, and in his 73 years, he was also a professional baker, small businessman, construction worker, civic booster, husband, father and grandfather. Today he lives comfortably at the spacious Moultrie Creek Nursing & Rehab Center in St. Augustine, his home for the past six years. A heart condition and recurring balance problems have slowed him only slightly, and at 210 lbs., he is but five pounds above his old fighting weight. His shoulders remain broad, his fists massive, his eyes piercing and his smile, ready and gentle.

Between 1952 and 1967, Besmanoff boxed in 92 professional matches against such pugilistic legends as Zora Folley, Archie Moore, Sonny Liston, George Chuvalo and in 1961, 19-year-old Cassius Clay fighting in only his tenth professional bout. Clay (three years later he changed his name to Muhammad Ali) won by TKO in the seventh, sending Besmanoff to the canvas twice in that round. "I was knocked down, but never knocked out," Besmanoff says with great pride of all his fights, including 62 amateur contests before he turned pro.

German-American

Besmanoff was born the older of two children to a German mother and Jewish-American father, a physician, in Munich, Germany in 1932. The couple divorced before Besmanoff was eight years old. His father returned to the U.S. as World War II broke out in Europe, and Besmanoff's mother moved the family to Berlin to live with her parents. His maternal grandfather was a prominent businessman and transportation executive who raised young Willie as his own son and looked out for the family during the extremely difficult war years.

Besmanoff vividly recalls the constant Allied bombing raids late in the war, one of which caused the partial collapse of his school while he and his classmates were inside. Trapped for almost two weeks, Besmanoff was rescued by his grandfather



Tough Guy:

Besmanoff's scrapbook documents an exciting career and stirs many memories; at right, Besmanoff pounds Argentinian fighter Alex Miteff during a 1958 fight in Seattle; Besmanoff's solid upper body, lightning left and keep-coming-at-you style made him a fearsome and formidable opponent.



who had organized a digging party to help get them out. "I remember sitting down on what I thought was a log, but it was a badly burned, dead body."

Budding boxer

Boxing for Besmanoff began after the war, when at age 13, he joined an athletic club organized by American GIs in occupied Berlin. Within four years he was its undisputed champ and became something of a hometown celebrity. By early 1952, Besmanoff held the German lightweight title and was named to the first West German Olympics boxing team even though, technically, he was considered an American.

While still a teenager, Besmanoff was approached by managers and trainers who urged him to turn pro, which he did on August 15, 1952, against Hans Schreiber. Besmanoff lost in the fourth round, but would fight 14 bouts after that before seeing

his second loss. His American debut came February 25, 1957, at the famous St. Nicholas Arena in New York City. The half-German half-American was an instant crowd favorite, as much for his charisma as his impressive 34-5-7 record at that point. It was while he was in America that Besmanoff's manager, Lou Burston, arranged a reunion between Besmanoff and his estranged father whom he had not seen or heard from in 16 years. "He told me he wanted my mother back, but she said she wouldn't leave Germany. That was it."

On the road

Besmanoff relocated to Milwaukee, Wisconsin — a city with a large German-American population — and spent the next ten years touring the U.S., fighting seven or more times a year and building a name for himself. He fought with great intensity inside the ring, but carried no personal animosity toward any of his opponents

outside the ring. He stayed in touch with many of them over the years, including Muhammad Ali.

Flipping through his scrapbook some more, Besmanoff pauses at a yellowed newspaper clip from 1960, describing the “American Heavyweight Title” fight between Besmanoff and Archie Moore. “There’s ‘Old Baggy Pants,’” Besmanoff says, pointing to a photo of Moore. “We went at it for ten rounds in Indianapolis until he hit me right square on the nose and I started bleeding pretty bad. I think I would have bled to death if the referee hadn’t stopped the fight.” Besmanoff boasts of having never sustained any serious injury in over 150 fights and never seriously injuring any boxer. “I was lucky. I was very lucky.”

Bowing out

By the late 1960s, the ring losses started to outnumber the wins, and at age 34, Besmanoff sensed it was time to call it a career and return to being a full-time baker, a trade he learned while a young man in Germany. He used his boxing winnings to open a bakery in Melbourne Beach, and later, another in nearby Satellite Beach. Still another newspaper clipping (*Once Punching for Dough, Now Punching the Dough*) described how people loved to



Nice Guy:

Besmanoff towers over his then four-year-old daughter Barbara in a pre-fight photo taken circa 1964. At right, Dad and daughter today.



come to the famous ex-prizefighter’s bakery for a loaf of his signature bread and to hear some great boxing stories. Besmanoff later went to work for Publix and moved his family from city to city in Florida as he helped get their in-store bakeries up and running. Eventually, he settled down in St. Augustine, where two of his three daughters live with their families.

Fond memories

Was he ever scared in the ring? Besmanoff insists he never was, even when things were not going well for him. Moultrie Creek administrator Brian

Ferguson agrees and recalls locating a *Sports Illustrated* video of one of Besmanoff’s old fights and sitting down with him to watch it. “He lost that particular fight, but he was fearless all the way through.” Ferguson says at the end of the fight the two sat in silence until Besmanoff turned to him and said, “I remember every one of those punches. Some of them hurt a lot. But I feel good now and it’s great to have memories to share with everyone. I’ve had a good life. I’m a very lucky man.”

FHCA honors William David Besmanoff and treasures his many contributions to our state and nation.

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