

Sports

Boxing: Service planned for 'Sonny'

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Former Illinois Golden Gloves boxer Duncan dies at 81

GALESBURG - A member of Galesburg's most well-known boxing family died recently.

Howard Andrew (Sonny) Duncan, Jr. passed away at his home in Colorado Springs, Colorado on Dec. 26 at the age of 81.

Coached by his father, Andy, once a highly successful boxer and coach himself, Duncan was an Illinois Golden Gloves boxer in the 1960s and reached the national semifinals. He later coached the Galesburg Boxing Club under the auspices of the Police Benevolent Association which produces several boxing champions.

"I knew of Sonny like so many kids of that time," said Jim Jacobs, who later became close friends with Duncan. "When we'd go to the YMCA in the late 50s and early 60s and saw him train, we were just in awe."

A memorial service for Duncan will be held at 11 a.m. Jan. 31 at First Baptist Church in Galesburg. Burial will be held at 2 p.m. in Oak Lawn Cemetery.

"He was a tremendous guy," said Joe Dennis, a Silver Gloves national champion coached by Duncan in the 1970s. "I worked out with him four or five days a week from age 9 through 13. He really loved boxing, he was a funny guy, really patient and a very good instructor."

Duncan was also the older brother of Carlos Duncan, who continues to run a boxing gym in the Weinberg Arcade where Sonny's teams worked out.

“He was 50-7 as an amateur,” said Carlos. “He had the full package: good speed, good power and a thinker also.”

“He was very slick - a counterpuncher,” said Jacobs. “As a counterpuncher, you make them miss, then you hit them back. He had an array of defensive skills and he was a master at blocking punches.”

With degrees in criminal justice from Bradley University, Duncan served on the Galesburg Police Force for 21 years.

Many of the same approaches to his police work, he applied to coaching.

“They called him a peace officer when he was on the Galesburg Police Force,” said Carlos. “He’d chill out and say, ‘Let’s talk about this.’”

“I never saw him yell at anybody,” said Dennis. “He was always encouraging.”

Duncan left Galesburg to become technical director of USA Boxing at the Olympic Training Center in Colorado Springs. He later served with the El Paso, Colorado sheriff’s department for 15 years.

But his boxing involvement continued when he became chairman of the National Junior olympic Boxing program and served on the 1996 Olympic boxing staff. He also coached and managed several international boxing teams.

“We both went to the 1996 Olympics,” said Carlos. “He was more into the managing part of it. He took care of all the organizational stuff.

“He traveled all over the world. We went to several international competitions together as coach and team manager.”

Jacobs is a retired teacher who took up boxing in his 30s with Duncan as his coach, he eventually joined Duncan as a coach in the program and the two became close friends.

“In the late 70s, once we sat down and started talking that’s when I started knowing Sonny the man,” said Jacobs.

“You understand that boxing is secondary.

“These young men you’re working with aren’t likely to go on to be pros,” he added. “What you want to instill in them are values they can use in life.”

“If I could put a definition of what makes a brother in the dictionary, I would put Sonny’s picture next to it,” said Carlos.

“He was the best brother anyone could have.”

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