
NONFICTION | FALL 2017

Fighting To Heal

By Olaf Kroneman

I recognized the 55-year-old black man in my office as one of the best professional Detroit boxers since Joe Louis or Tommy Hearns. He'd been a contender. Now he was sick. I'd been an amateur boxer and felt the bond. I wanted to help him.

"I've heard of you. You were famous," I said.

"Back in the day," he told me.

"I follow boxing. I fought in the Detroit Golden Gloves tournament in 1968," I said. As a 65-year-old white guy from the 'burbs, I tried to establish common ground.

"Right after the riots?" he asked. "Why?"

"I wanted to understand why the races couldn't get along," I said. "Muhammad Ali was my hero. He spoke the truth to authority."

"And paid the price."

"Unfortunately," I said. "But he never sunk low enough to hate."

"Boxing can cure hate," he said. "Were you any good?"

"Not bad for a white guy," I said.

He smiled and removed an old black and white photograph from his wallet. It showed him taking a fighting pose in front of the Twenty Grand in Las Vegas. He shared the marquee with The Dramatics.

To see the image of The Dramatics on the marquee caused me to pause.

"They were at the Algiers in downtown Detroit the night those kids were murdered."

"My uncle was there too. He escaped, hid out in Reverend Franklin's church, Aretha's dad. Police were looking for him."

"Why?" I asked.

“Don’t know. Cops back then were bad news. They’d ride in Buick Roadmasters, four of them; only one in uniform and they’d stop and clobber you for nothing. The “Big Four” used rubber hoses.”

“The movie Detroit is about the Algiers.”

“Same old shuck and jive. I don’t want to see a story by a white director,” he said. “Should be Spike Lee, somebody who knows.”

Turning back to his medical condition, I told him his kidneys were failing and soon he’d need dialysis. He didn’t flinch, accepting the verdict as if he’d just lost to a hometown decision. The big money didn’t want him to win.

“Doc, I don’t want to go on the machine. What about a new kidney?”

“It’s difficult to go directly to a kidney transplant,” I said. “There’s a long waiting list.”

“Damn,” he said. “I’ve seen too many brothers decline on dialysis.”

I nodded. “Black people have a four times higher incidence of kidney failure than Caucasians.”

“How come?”

“Genetic, environmental,” then I said, “There is another option that could help. If you are willing to take a kidney that is not the best quality, an extended donor kidney, you may be able to avoid dialysis.”

“What do you mean?”

“An extended donor kidney is a kidney that may not work. It’s a risk, but there are more available.”

“If it works, I avoid dialysis?”

“Yes.”

“Every time I stepped into the ring I took a risk. I fought Ernie Shavers. He could kill you with either hand. This is no different,” he said. “Doc, what would you do?”

“I’d rather take a chance with an extended donor kidney than fight Ernie Shavers.”

“You’re not experimenting?” he asked.

The idea of medical experiments brought to mind the racist Tuskegee syphilis study that ended in 1973, the year I entered medical school. The same professors who interviewed me and evaluated my fitness to become a physician did not protest. Shame on them.

The first physician who did protest was Dr. Irwin Schatz of Detroit's Henry Ford Hospital. He complained to the Public Health Service who never replied. Shame on them.

"No, this is not an experiment," I said.

"I trust you."

I placed him in the hands of the transplant team. Three months later he received a kidney. It worked. When he returned to my clinic, he was fit. He'd gained twenty pounds, his health robust.

"Doc, I never knew how bad I felt," he said. "Funny, the kidney was from a white man. We're all the same on the inside where you can't see color. It's too dark in there."

"We have interchangeable parts. Now we need interchangeable hearts," I said.

"I've been blessed. I'm going to give back," he said. "I'll open a gym. Get the kids off the street. Teach them to box. Girls too."

"Do you think women should box?"

"Absolutely."

"Good luck," I said. "I'd be willing to donate money."

"Don't need money. I need a doctor for tournaments."

"A doctor as in me?"

"I'd appreciate it."

I was uneasy. My Christian Danish liberal background and patient advocacy often got me in trouble. I could feel it coming again. I was also concerned about liability. What if someone was hurt during a tournament? As a doctor who took an oath to do no harm, was it too dangerous for me to promote?

I learned that amateur boxing ranked as the twenty-third most dangerous contact sport. Not surprisingly, football and hockey were more dangerous but I learned that soccer, basketball, lacrosse, track and field, wrestling and competitive swimming and diving had more reported injuries. Still, as the late, great, Michigan State football coach Duffy Daugherty pointed out, "Dancing is a contact sport, football is a collision sport."

I believed amateur boxing lay in between. Still, I took out a separate liability policy. I was also concerned about venturing into black neighborhoods that might not welcome me. Then I realized that an operating room wasn't always safe. I'd put his life at risk, especially with a marginal kidney. He trusted me in a medical world that many minorities viewed with suspicion. I would trust him in his world. There was a common humanity shared by a doctor and a patient not to mention a couple of former boxers. I agreed to help him with his tournament.

At the beginning of the boxing tournament, the audience was asked to stand, put their hand over their heart, and sing our National Anthem. I was curious what the primarily black audience would do. Colin Kaepernick had just started taking a knee.

The entire audience stood and sang the Star Spangled Banner, a cappella. It seemed the fight fans understood Colin was no Muhammad Ali. It wasn't about the sentiment, which was valid, but more about the sacrifice.

In the bout, two ten-year old boys wore headgear and fourteen-ounce gloves. They boxed for one minute with a one-minute rest in between. Their form was excellent, they had been well coached, their punches abridged and made safe by the equipment. It was more like fencing than a brutal boxing match. When it was over the crowd applauded. Each boxer went to the four sides of the ring, stamped their feet, and bowed. The headgear was removed revealing proud smiles.

“Okay, check them out,” the ref said.

I examined the boxers. They were fine.

The fighters became older, in heavier divisions, in sixteen-ounce gloves with more authority in their punches. When a blow of any consequence landed, the fight was stopped, the fighter given an eight count and examined. In amateur boxing things were kept very safe: as they should be. Ten vigilant people at ringside could stop a match at any time. The doctor's decision trumped the other nine.

Females in the ring wore headgear with a faceguard and large gloves. They were ring savvy. A sexual predator would have his hands full if he tried messing with them. With a daughter and three granddaughters, I'd been opposed to women boxing. No longer. I'm taking them to the boxing gym.

The tournament was a success. My patient thanked me and offered a stipend. I declined and told him to give it to the gym to help the kids out. He brought me a gift—an oversized navy blue beret.

“This is the same kind that Jack Johnson wore in 1909,” he said. “You'll be fly for a white guy.”

I put it on. I didn't look “fly,” more like Gene Wilder in “The Silver Streak.”

I refuse to accept that progress hasn't been made against racism. In 1999 each victim of the Tuskegee syphilis study received \$37,000 from the federal government and an apology from President Clinton. They should have been paid a lot more. Obama was elected twice.

From 1894-1968, 3,446 black and 1,297 whites were lynched. We didn't know their names. Today we know Rodney King, Reginald Denny, Trayvon Martin, Eric Gardner, Sean Bell and the film "Detroit" added Cooper, Pollard and Temple. Knowing their names is to share their humanity.

Obviously we still have a long way to go.

The recent turmoil in Charlottesville broke my heart just like the troubles of Detroit did fifty years ago. Sadly I watched the candlelight vigil for Heather Heyer at the University of Virginia. I was a medical resident at UVA from 1978-81. My memory was of a fine school with a wonderful residency program. The atmosphere contained the living spirit of Thomas Jefferson with a dash of Edgar Allen Poe. The school was, and is, governed by an honor code.

I saw no honor in the barbarism of August.

I still volunteer as a fight doctor in Detroit and now Pontiac and Flint. My patient is doing very well and continues to mentor young boxing talent. We are united and continue fighting to heal.

Olaf Kroneman graduated from the Michigan State University College of Human Medicine with an MD. Dr. Kroneman interned at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, then attended the University of Virginia to complete a residency in internal medicine. He completed a fellowship in nephrology at Massachusetts General Hospital and Harvard Medical School. His work has appeared in literary magazines. His story, "Fight Night," won the Winning Writers Sports Fiction and Essay Contest, and "The Recidivist," won the Writer's Digest short story contest. His essay "Detroit Golden Gloves" was selected as Editor's Choice by InScape, honoring the top nonfiction piece. In 2010, he was nominated for a Pushcart Prize for his story, "A Battlefield Decision."
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