

## Q. & A.

# An ex-champ recalls how it used to be

## *LaMotta got \$2 million and six broken noses*

By Michael Hirsley

**UNTIL RECENTLY,** Jake LaMotta was a veritable old-time boxing cliché: He's gone through 125 fights, six broken noses, and four wives.

He began fighting in the streets as a kid, turned professional and fought his way to the top, became middleweight champ, and made \$2 million. Then he lost his title, his money, and his reputation. He admitted that he deliberately lost a fight. In an unsuccessful comeback try, he was knocked down for the only time in his boxing career.

Retirement turned seedy. He bought a Miami nightclub. When a 15-year-old prostitute was apprehended there, he was jailed for 6 months. He went broke. Among the jobs he hustled was bouncer in a strip joint.

**BUT NOW,** at age 55, Jake LaMotta is getting a second chance at fame. And money.

Academy Award-winning actor Robert DeNiro is preparing to play LaMotta in a movie based on the fighter's autobiography. LaMotta will get royalties and a job as technical adviser.

While he and his fifth wife were here recently for his induction into the Italian-American Boxing Hall of Fame, LaMotta talked about what makes a fighter, what has happened to his sport, and what he thinks of Muhammad Ali and "Rocky."

An edited transcript of the interview follows:

**Q—**There's a lot of boxing on television these days. Is the sport making a comeback?

**A—**Yes. The real reason for it, I think, is because of Muhammad Ali. Being as colorful and the showman that he is has helped it a lot, and they've got a couple of other interesting boys around now.

**Q—**A lot of people think that boxers of a few years back might not think Ali is comparable with some past champions. What do you think?

**A—**Yeah, he's as good. He's a showman and he fights everybody, and I would say that he's one of the best heavyweights of all time. I think on any given night, Ali would have had a great fight with Joe Louis, [Rocky] Marciano, or [Jack] Dempsey. I would put them all in the same class.

**Q—**What actually happens in a fight, from the boxer's point of view?

**A—**You kind of feel your opponent out in the first round, and then you act on instinct after that. You know what you're going to try to do after the first couple of rounds, but when you're out there fighting, it's mostly reflex and instinct.

In my day, you had to be in good

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# Ex-champ LaMotta recalls glory days

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shape — real good shape — to beat your opponent because there were a lot of good fighters around. Fighters in the first 20 could be fighting for the championship today. Boxers trained to take punishment because it was an occupational hazard. You get ready for it like a bridge painter or a worker on a tall building does.

**Q—Who hit you the hardest?**

**A—**I fought a lot of tough guys, if you look up my record, guys like Sugar Ray Robinson. I fought guys that nobody else wanted to fight, and nobody else wanted to fight me, so we fought each other. But one of the hardest punchers of all time came from Chicago, fella by the name of Bob Satterfield. Tremendous puncher. And I fought him here. Great fight.

[Together with his great punching power, Satterfield also had a vulnerable chin. In a 1946 bout in Wrigley Field, LaMotta knocked out Satterfield in the seventh round, just after Satterfield had staggered him with a left hook.]

**Q—Have you seen the movie "Rocky"?**

**A—**Yeah, I saw the movie. In fact, the

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same guys who made that movie are making my film, my life story. They're thinking of doing a Broadway play with the same cast next year. They haven't decided on a name for the film, but there's a very good chance they'll call it "Jake," because the advertisement, they claim, will say "Rocky was fiction, but Jake is true."

**Q—Did you think Rocky was realistic?**

**A—**Well, the real professional boxers saw a lot of flaws in it, but it doesn't really matter as long as the people are entertained. The underdog came out on top — and that's America, you know. America's always for the underdog.

**Q—After you made it to the top, then lost the championship, how did you convince yourself you could make a comeback?**

**A—**I tried to make a comeback because it was the only thing I knew. I liked boxing. I loved it. It was good to me and my family and gave me a lot of security. It's rough when you can't fight anymore.

I tried a comeback because I know nothing else. I was retired, I had money, but I didn't know what to do.

**Q—Does it bother you to think that if you had remained retired, you would never have been knocked down in your career?**

**A—**Yeah, yeah, it was just once in my life. I went down for a count of one, and got right up. It was more or less like a slip. But it's still a record I'm proud of.

**Q—There was one other time that you were supposedly knocked out. You admitted to a Senate committee that you deliberately lost a fight, took a dive. How did you come to be testifying before the committee?**

**A—**I needed money then, and I gave the story to Sports Illustrated. When their story came out, the Kefauver committee picked it up, started an investigation, and I had to go to Washington to testify in 1960. It happened because I needed money.

**Q—You had retired in 1947 with \$2 million. What happened to all that money?**

**A—**First of all, that's what I grossed. Uncle Sam got a lot of it. And, in 10 or 15 years, you can spend it awful fast. I made a bad investment in a bar, and I

lived pretty good, spent more than \$40,000 a year.

**Q—What makes a great fighter?**

**A—**The difference between a good fighter and a great fighter is not that much. There were a lot of good fighters who could have been champion, except they lacked that one little thing. It's not describable. It's like instinct, a desire to win, pride, just a little something that makes great fighters different.

I started fighting when I was 8 years old, fighting in clubs for pennies and nickels. I fought three, four, five times a night. I had over a thousand fights before I turned professional. And that's not counting street fights. I started amateur boxing in reform school, and I won a few amateur championships before I turned professional.

**Q—Does it bother you to see boxers making a lot of money for a minimal amount of actual fighting these days?**

**A—**Definitely not. A fighter deserves every penny he could make. It's true there is a lot more money today. Like Muhammad Ali, in one fight, made \$6 million. In one fight, he made three times more money than I made in 15 years in fighting. How do you like them apples? I was born too soon.