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Bent Nose Row

Joe Maslanka

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Ratta-tat rhythms and muffled blows fill the gym. Kids punching heavy bags, dancing with leather ropes. Musty sweat, balm, and wet canvas fill my nostrils. The humidity grabs the back of my throat as I strut in with my jeff cap cocked to the right and the collar of my black leather jacket turned up. All eyes turn.

A tall, wiry kid in the ring stops shadow boxing. “Look at this kid. Who are you, the fuckin’ Fonz?”

“I’m lookin’ for Mr. Torzelli.”

“Oh yeah, kid, and what do you want wit him?” The other boxers encircle me.

“I’m joinin’ the gym.”

“Fresh meat,” declares one boxer while another mentions putting me on “bent nose row.”

A voice bellows across the gym.

“Who told youse to stop training? Get your asses back ta work.”

“This kid says he’s joinin’ the club, Pop.”

“That’s right, boys. Say hello to our newest member and first Polish kid in the club, Johnny Mascheski. Come wit me, kid.” I follow, gaze glued to the floor.

Joey Torzelli, the kid in the ring, is tall, slim and fast. He yells as I get to an archway leading to the lockers, “Hey, Polish-kid, straighten that cap out, we don’t wear ’em like dat.

What kinda-a-music ya like?”

“Bruce Springsteen.”

“He’s a fag, you listen to disco now. You got that, kid?”

“Yeah? I don’t think so.”

“It’s bent nose row for you, punk.”

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“Calm down, leave the kid alone,” Mr. Torzelli commands. The rhythms return. “Kid, best to always be a gentleman. These kids been at dis for a while, you just smile and take da crap, you’re da new guy. Be humble, kid. Your fists talk for ya. That’s true here and in life, you got it?”

“Yes, sir.” With that, my initiation into the North East Philly Boys Club begins.

The North East Philly Boys Club—or “NEP,” as it’s called—was founded five years ago, in ’73, by Steve Torzelli. He was a former Philadelphia boxer of local fame. He never won a major championship, but he piled up an impressive record. It was enough to enshrine him in the Pennsylvania Boxing Hall of Fame. He worked his way up the Union ladder from roofer to local rep. He carries heavy influence in our community.

Dad took the family to see *Rocky* a couple years ago. I have been jacked to be a boxer ever since. My father is a local businessman, owns the neighborhood taproom, he’s got some connections, and you have to know someone to get into the NEP. He wasn’t calling in any favors until he was sold on my dedication.

So, I banged around at the local Civic Center with the Police Athletic League. I went as far as stringing rope beneath the parking lot lights at the family bar and got guys from school to fight every Friday night. Crowds would gather. Dad would stroll out to watch. One night he caught me whopping the shit out of some jock from my high school. Impressing my father was a tough deal, but I did it. He called in the favor and got me into the NEP; the happiest day of my sixteen-year life.

After many threats, cheap shots, and Polish jokes, I begin to blend in. My cap sits straight, my collar turned down. The nasally sounds of The Bee Gees blowing out of the gym

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boombox is enough to bleed my ears, but I suck it up. I get good concealing my appreciation of “The Boss” and even better at keeping my head down. The initiation ends.

Fourteen of us make up the club, ages ten to eighteen. The majority are juniors and seniors from the local high school. There is one Puerto Rican kid, one black kid; the rest are either Italian or Irish. I am the first proud Pollack. I take a lot of shit for that, but I follow Mr. T’s advice. One day, his sons Joey and Stevie grab me in the locker room.

“Hey, Polish kid? You’re doin’ good, man.”

“Thanks, Joey.”

Stevie leans down. “Listen, Johnny, you’re one-a-us now, anybody fucks wit you, in school, anywhere, you just say somethin’ and we take care of it, you understand?”

“Sure, but ain’t nobody bothering me, it’s cool.”

“Alright, but remember, you’re wit us now.”

“Got it.”

We work out six days-a-week, our day off is Sunday. Heavy training runs from Monday to Friday. Aside from roadwork, hitting the heavy bag, speed bag, jumping rope, and sparring, we do ungodly amounts of calisthenics and toss a medicine ball around. We never lift weights. Mr. T feels it slows a boxer down. He wants us fast and slim.

“If you’re white, fight like you’re black. Fast, be fast, grab da need for speed, be slick in dat ring.” He’s like a poet as we spar in the stifling gym. Sweating our balls off, we pay the price for the respect we get at school and in town.

During the height of summer, we don sweats over plastic body suits and run for miles. It’s brutal, but the brutality is a badge of honor. When kids know you are in the NEP, they step aside. Even the football jocks. Nobody screws with us, not even the teachers. Mr. T schools us

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on being gentlemen. We smile, say very little. Nobody talks or brags about being in the NEP, and it earns us that much more of a rep. I figure it's because people know we can fight. We are a tight tribe of warriors

The police chief and local politicians frequent the NEP. They are always here on Saturdays, fight day. After three months of training, I earn my way onto the Saturday morning card. We fight kids from other gyms throughout Philly and South Jersey. Fights start around 10 a.m. and finish up at 4 p.m. Immediately after the fights, we gather at the local diner, with the tab picked up by the Roofers Union.

We starve ourselves most of the week; but Saturday at the diner, we can eat whatever. I scarf cheesesteaks, fries, milk shakes, anything on the menu. We eat 'til we burst, then go home and crash.

A tall, rail-thin black kid from the Camden gym quickly becomes my Saturday nemesis. Several inches taller, he presents all kinds of obstacles. We will fight many times.

Our first bout ends in a draw. The next week takes a similar course, until I drop under his long, spindly arms in round two. This "human whip" catches me hard on the back of the head. I don't go down, but my eyes go black. My heart pounds in desperation, trying to keep my hands up, hoping to find the ropes with my back. I can hear the sandpaper sound of his shoes shuffling across the canvas toward me. I pray for the bell. He is bearing down on me. Does he know I can't see a thing? Suddenly, my sight comes back. It's like a TV being turned on. He is directly in front of me. Breathing heavily, heart pounding, I tackle him football style, climb on his chest and rain punches on his face.

Both corners break us apart. Mr. T throws me into the corner, smacks my face. He orders me to go shake hands. I receive one hell of a lecture on composure, sportsmanship, and being a

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gentleman. Joey ruffles my hair as I sit in the locker room. I look up and he winks. “The wild Pole, baby!”

Most embarrassing, my father was in the crowd. At home, he gives me a smile, tells me to learn to “be cool.” Later that night, I hear him telling everybody at the bar about the end of my fight. The way Dad carried on made the loss by disqualification easier to digest.

On Monday, the news is delivered that I will have to fight the “human whip” from Camden again. Mr. T works on my composure. He makes Joey try to rile me during sparring sessions. He taunts me, tap-tapping me with little jabs, leaving me to stumble about the ring like a drunk. I lunge out with my right hand, catching him flush on the chin while he shows off. I send him back-peddling into the ropes and on his ass.

He gets up, wipes his gloves. “Party’s over, Pollack, say hello to bent nose row.” Again with “bent nose row.” Holy shit. How many times they gonna try to send me there? He comes at me with fury and speed. Like being thrown into a wind tunnel with leather blades. I never go down, avoid bent nose row, and maintain my composure. Bring on the Whip.

Saturday’s fight will last one-and-a-half minutes. With composure intact, I stalk him like Frazier on Ali in their first fight. His long gangly arms strike at me. Pop, on my head. Jab, in my eye. Bang, on the side of my head. I spit my mouthpiece at him.

He is momentarily mystified by my spit-filled rubber projectile. I bull-rush him, push him into the corner, flogging him with windmill punches and haymakers. He drops to his knees and crawls out of the ring. “That motherfucker’s crazy.” More slaps in the face from Mr. T, lectures, and another disqualification follow.

We will meet again the following Saturday. I roll my eyes at the news. After a slap, Mr. T works with me all week, patiently showing me why I am being frustrated by this kid.

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“He’s catching ya wit one punch. That’s all he’s got. Just calm down, see it comin’, and know what to do.” So, all week he repetitiously throws the Camden kid’s patented punch at me. I twist my torso to the rear, and fire back with a right hand, like a human gate.

Saturday comes. Like snapping a light on in a darkroom, I see everything he’s got. He can’t hit me. “Here it comes, kid!” Mr. T yells. He never touches me that Saturday. I pummel him to a unanimous decision. He comes back two weeks later, TKO. We never see the “Camden Whip” again.

This is the moment I grow up in the gym; I love it. After scrubbing toilets and mopping floors at Dad’s bar from age twelve, taking shit from patrons, I discover pride when I walk through the bar. All they ask about is fighting for the NEP. Shit, man, my heart pounds and my strut tightens when I hear kids say, “hey, ain’t he in the NEP?” Man, there is nothing better than being part of a group like this. I am one of the good guys.

“Kid?”

“Yeah, Mr. T?”

“Come in my office, I wanna talk to ya.”

I enter Mr. T’s office. The walls are adorned with his old boxing posters, photos of us battling on Saturdays, fights put on in the community, letters from well-wishers and donors to the club. His desk is neat and meticulous. He takes a swig of coffee from a big mug and clamps an unlit cigar in his mouth. Staring at me, grinning, he tilts back his chair.

“You’re doin’ good. You become a gentleman and a heck of a fighter.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Whatcha plannin’ for da future?”

“Future?”

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“Yeah, you’re outta high school in less than a year, whatcha gonna do, kid?”

“I’m thinkin’ drive a truck, join the military, maybe go to college.”

“Really?”

“Sure, why ya ask?”

“Cause ya gotta future here, son.” His chair squeaks as he leans forward, eyes widening behind his thick, black-framed glasses. He pulls the cigar from his mouth. “You can be a gladiator, box in da night, work for da union in da day. You’ll make good scratch, kid. Think about it.” He eases back into his chair.

“Yes, sir, I will. Thank you.”

I watched Joey and Stevie Torzelli drop out of high school the past two years. They are driving nice cars, a hell of a lot nicer than my 1970 Matador. They wear sharp clothes. I know I have to finish high school, but to know there is a gig waiting right-out-the-block, making bucks. I pump my fist, leap in the air, and crank up Springsteen on the cassette player. I can’t wait to tell my folks tonight. Unfortunately, they are not as enthused.

Dad pounds his meat-hook-sized fist on the kitchen table. “Fuckin’ gladiator? What the fuck is that?”

“Dad, I’ll be workin’ for the union.”

“You mean be a goon for the union?”

“No way, Mr. T’s a great guy. He taught me to be a gentleman.”

“Mr. T is a great guy, I like him. But things ain’t always as they seem. What the hell is this driving a truck shit, or military crap? Your ass is going to college, you’re only gonna be seventeen when you graduate, your mom and I still got the say.”

“Dad, I don’t know. I can make money right-out-da-gate, go to college later.”

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He just shakes his head and walks off. I figure he's just bummed because his dream was always college. He's the first in the family to get a degree, he wants the same for me. But the thought of not being part of the NEP, I can't imagine that.

On a cool April evening, Friday night. We are packing up at the gym to get ready to fight at the local country club. Billy "Fat Billy" McNeil's father is a local construction company owner. All his guys are union. He is a big shot at the country club and arranged to put on a fight there. I am not selected to fight on this night, but will work our corner with Mr. T. We are fighting the First Street Gym; tough kids from Manayunk, PA.

I look out at the crowd and there's my Pop. He typically comes to the fights and will drag someone from the bar with him. On this night, he brings Sal Martinelli. Sal is a human bowling ball, low center of gravity. He comes from South Philly, where he owns a small plumbing business. Sal is an opinionated kind of guy. Pretty rare when he is not arguing something at the bar; he only pops in when he does jobs in the Northeast. His big, black mustache cuts through the crowd. I spot him right away. He and Pop look tuned up.

There have been six fights this night and each gym has taken three, all by decision. So "Fat Billy" will decide if we win or not. He fights last, probably because his dad set this thing up.

Two rounds in, and Billy's not exactly getting the best of his guy. In fact, I doubt he's winning. I set his stool up for the final round. Mr. T pulls his mouthpiece out.

"You gotta give it more dis round, ya hear me, boy?"

"Fat Billy" stares at him, breathing heavily. Billy got into the gym due to his dad's influence. He got his nickname when he joined, for obvious reasons. He worked hard and improved his appearance from fat to flabby. He might not have been ready for this fight, but he is holding his own.

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“Alright, move to this kid’s left and come over top of his jab. You can do it. Finish strong.” I squirt water on the back of his neck. Mr. T pulls him from the stool.

Not quite in fighting shape, Billy holds on for most of the third round and walks back to the corner to await the decision. I catch Mr. T winking toward the judges’ table. A unanimous decision is awarded to Billy. His hand is raised. Just a smattering of claps come from the crowd. Cutting through the scant applause is the bellowing voice of Sal Martinelli.

“Bullshit!” Everyone looks his way as he lifts his rotund frame from his chair. “This is bullshit, that kid ain’t won. What kinda snow-job decision is this? Boo, boo, raise the other kid’s hand, ya hack!” I see my Pop reach to get him back to his chair, but Sal keeps on going. With a laser stare through his black hornrims, Mr. T sizes him up.

No one says a word as we walk through the crowd and back to the lockers. A shadow comes over me as I kneel to pack gloves into duffel bags. Mr. T reaches a hand to pull me up, holding a finger up to keep me in place. The locker room clears. I can hear a clock ticking as half the lights flicker in the gym. The glare from his glasses hide his eyes.

“Johnny, kid?”

“Yes, sir?”

“Who’s da guy wit your Pop?”

“I ain’t never seen him before. Ya know my Pop’ll just grab anyone from the bar to drag along for a night.”

Resting his hands on my shoulders, he places one hand on the back of my head, accentuating each word with a pat. “Find out who he is.”

“Okay.”

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“He seemed to not enjoy himself. I want to make sure there was no problems. You know, as a friend of your Pop’s. As a courtesy, okay?”

“Sure, sure, I’ll do that.”

“Good, kid, let me know.”

I rush home to tell my dad. We lean in close at the corner of the bar and I whisper the locker room conversation. I share my uneasy feeling. He lets out a sigh. “Johnny, be cool.” I watch him walk to the pay phone. We won’t discuss this again.

Going the whole following week without hearing more about the incident, I am called to Mr. T’s office on Friday. With his sons standing on either side of my chair, Mr. T slowly reaches into his desk and produces a letter, he has me read it.

Not only had Sal threatened to expose the NEP, but he took personal shots at the gym’s Union affiliation, threatened to go to the Philadelphia Bulletin. He hit Mr. T right where he lived. The letter leaves no return address but is signed, ‘A Concerned Fan of Boxing.’

“This is da guy? The guy we asked you to get us information on? Now, tell me whatcha know cause we gotta square this shit.” Mr. T leans back in his chair waiting for my response.

Stevie kneels and puts an arm around my shoulder. “Think hard, Pop wants to make this right.”

“Wish I could help. My dad says he just grabbed the guy that night and brought him to the fight. Dad said he ain’t a regular. He said he don’t know where he lives, but he ain’t from the neighborhood.” My leg jimmies as silence falls over the tidy office. It is broken by the creak of Mr. T’s chair as he gently begins to rock back and forth.

“Kid, promise me if you ever see this guy stop by your old man’s joint that you’ll try to find out more, can you do that?”

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I promise Mr. T and walk calm-but-quick to my Matador. As I reach for the door, I realize I left my keys in the locker. Moving like a cat after a canary, I can hear Mr. T talking to his sons in the office.

“I think Johnny might be protectin’ one-a-his old man’s customers. We’ll find this motherfucker. Got balls to write a fuckin’ letter like this, disrespect us at our event, and make threats? Let’s find this piece-a-shit and deal wit him.”

Not sticking around to hear his son’s responses, I move swiftly to the side entrance, out of the gym, gunning the Matador out of the lot. I get home without saying shit to my old man.

That Friday night fight at the country club kept re-playing in my head well into the summer. Mr. T interrogated me for several weeks after that initial sit-down in his office with Joey and Stevie. Then one day it stopped. They just quit asking about “the fat slob from fight night.” It was two weeks before graduation. Channel 6 News reported that they had found the body of a man floating in the river.

“Where the fuck you been, kid? You missed two days this week. Don’t tell me you’re still celebrating graduation? You ready to be a gladiator for us, boy? Ya ain’t gonna be one if ya don’t stay in shape.” Mr. T stands on the skirt of the ring, watching Joey spar.

“I joined the Marines, sir. I leave August first for Parris Island. I want to thank you for everything.”

He steps off the skirt, grabbing my hand to shake it.

“The Marines? Holy shit, kid, don’t get shot. Stop by and see us sometime.” With no lengthy goodbye, I exit the gym, the ratta-tat rhythms fading as I get to my Matador. Four months pass. Flashlight in hand, under the covers in my Parris Island squad bay bunk, I read my father’s letter and press clippings of a police investigation into the Northeast Philly Boys Club.