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The Emanuel Steward I Knew

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Getty Images

The Hall-of-Fame boxing trainer Emanuel Steward died Thursday.

Boxing took a terrible blow to the heart Thursday with the death of Emanuel Steward, the Hall-of-Fame trainer who single-handedly resuscitated a city's rich fistic history and in just a few short years developed Detroit's Kronk Gym into a fearsome juggernaut of pugilistic talent. He was 68.

A 1963 National Golden Gloves champion with a stellar amateur record of 94-3, Steward once confided to me that he would have rather been a world champion than a trainer of champions. But there were bills to pay, and at the time, pursuing a pro career would have required a move away from his family. So for a few short years, Steward imagined that he had put his boxing dreams to bed.

In 1971, though, his half-brother James developed the itch to fight, and Steward took him to the basement gym in the Kronk Community Center in Detroit. The gears of fate soon

began to click. A coach left, and before he knew it, Steward had signed on as a part-time head trainer.

"Weekend after weekend, we'd drive all over the Midwest for bouts in a broken-down car," he said. "We'd pile six or eight kids into one cheap motel room, go to McDonald's and split a few hamburgers. I was always big on our boxers looking good and sharp. I'd wash our uniforms in the sink and dry them on the hood of the car. Coming back from Chicago or Indianapolis, everyone would be sleeping. The next day, I was back to work at the electric company."

One of the kids in that car was the spindly preteen Tommy Hearns, who won the National Golden Gloves championship in 1977. Steward stayed in his corner as he began punching for dollars. As an amateur champion, Hearns was known as a slick boxer. But as a professional, Steward transformed the kid with the skinny legs and massive shoulders into a pulverizing puncher.

At the same time as the fighter now known as the Hitman was compelling national attention, the supernova that was Sugar Ray Leonard was also rising. It was just a matter of time before the two phenoms collided. In 1981, the fight known as "The Showdown" finally took place in Las Vegas. It was a contest that would be watched by 3 million viewers around the world and helped define the careers of both Hearns and Steward.

At the time, Hearns was the WBA welterweight champion, boasting a 32-0 record with 30 knockouts. Leonard was 30-1 and wore the WBC crown. The bout was an epic seesaw battle with the late momentum going in Hearns's direction. Steward recalled that even as his man was coming on, he was fearful, because of what he knew: "Ray was a better finisher than anyone in the business," he said. Sure enough, in the 13th round, Leonard exploded, drove Hearns to the canvas and then stopped him in the next stanza.

"It might sound ridiculous, but it was maybe the saddest I have ever been in my life," he recalled. "I basically locked myself in my room for a week and cried. Really cried. Eventually, Tommy came over to the house and dragged me out of bed and said that I had to get up and get back to work again. And we did." With his man always behind him, Hearns went on to win more titles and enjoy a storied career.

Steward had a jeweler's eye for the nuances of boxing technique. He was a fanatic about the importance of balance—about not getting too much weight on your front foot and being able to punch as you moved both forward and backward. He was also a fundamentalist about the details of the ring. For example, he raised the corner stool of the NBA-sized Wladimir Klitschko so that he would expend less energy between rounds when he sat down. He instructed his fighters to wear white shoes and trunks, because it made them look faster. Like his friend and rival, the late Angelo Dundee, Steward didn't try to fit his fighters into a mold but instead carefully sculpted their styles to their individual talents.

Still, Steward would always insist that secret to his success was in the close relationship he cultivated with his fighters. "I would spend hours just talking with them and not about boxing—about everything," he said. "I needed to know what their past was like. What got them excited. What they were afraid of."

During his last years, the tireless Steward became concerned that the cornerman's craft wasn't being passed along. He began crisscrossing the country doing boxing workshops. After one such session in Las Vegas, Hearn surprised everyone when he suddenly entered the room, stepped to the podium and threw his arm around his former trainer. "I love this man," he said. "He has been everything to me. I would die for this man." The look in Hearn's glistening eyes made it clear that the statement wasn't hyperbole.

Steward, a West Virginia native who moved to Detroit as a boy, was the brains behind 30 world champions, but his masterful work with heavyweight champions Lennox Lewis and Klitschko had much to do with establishing his iconic status. It is very difficult to bring heavyweights back from devastating knockout losses. Steward was Freud enough to help both of these hard-punching pugilists avenge losses and turn the tables on fighters who had turned out their lights.

"Manny always told me I was the best, but the truth is, he was the best," Lewis said. "This has been a very tragic year for the boxing world, but today we've truly lost one of its crown jewels."

In training for a November title defense, Klitschko needed time to absorb the shock of Steward's death before he could speak, but he offered this public statement: "It is not often that a person in any line of work gets a chance to work with a legend. Well, I was privileged enough to work with one for almost a decade. I will miss our time together." Earlier in his training, Klitschko said: "I can hear Emanuel Steward's voice while I spar or do things, whispering in my ear. His spirit is always here."

For over a decade, Steward also served as a commentator on HBO Boxing while he continued training fighters. Larry Merchant, his grief-stricken HBO colleague, said: "Emanuel cared so much about his boxers. I remember one time, when he was in Austria training Klitschko, and he flew back to St. Louis for two days just to be in the corner of one of his fighters in a preliminary bout. Believe me, he cared about those preliminary kittens every bit as much as he did for his many champions." Merchant summed up the life of his friend this way: "Emanuel loved the life he lived and he lived the life he loved. He left nothing in the dressing room."