

Spider's a real battler

SPIDER JONES at one of his favourite hangouts, Florida Jack's boxing gym in Toronto.



Boxing gave street kid a way to leave his criminal past behind

Watch his hands. They move like a boxer's when he talks, punctuating his words. Watch his eyes. They slide to and fro, like a street gangster's, alert for a rival's knife.

Charles "Spider" Jones has prowled the ring. He has prowled the street.

And he has gone the distance. At 54, he stands in Florida Jack's boxing club on Yonge St. near Bloor, dressed to kill. Elegant camel overcoat. Steel-blue suit and mock turtleneck taut on a still-trim fighter's form.

Looking good, Spider Jones.

Florida Jack's walls are lined with posters and photos of the greats and their fights. Frazier, Ali, Chivalo, Sugar Ray Robinson, Joe Louis, Hagler vs. Hearns, Tyson vs. Riddock.

The gang from TD-Canada Trust customer service vent their corporate frustrations on punching bags.

"Ladies and gentlemen," says Florida Jack, like he was announcing a fight. He introduces Spider.

The bankers cheer, elator around for pictures.

Looking good, Spider Jones. Today, in London, Ont., Spider will be given a Premier's Award. They go to college success stories. He will get one because he has taken life's best shots and still stands.

Ready to rumble? Round 1: Charles Jones is 5. A 40-watt bulb casts cruel shadows round his two-bedroom home in a poor part of Windsor. Sewer rats rustle.

The undertaker is gaunt, sallow, dressed in black. He dumps the body of Charles' brother Dennis, 18 months, into a bag. Pneumonia. Charles, in a big bed with five of his eight siblings, hears his mother's "From that night on I was morbidly afraid of the dark." He wets his bed until he's 13. Too afraid to make the trip.

Bully named Red

Round 2: Charles is in Grade 4. He wins his first fight, against a bully named Red who called him "nigger."

Charles is suspended, thrown in remedial class. Future wrestler Abdullah the Butcher is there. So is a future executive of the Lebos bike gang. Lucky teacher.

Charles quits. The street calls. Round 3: Charles is 14, running with The Mobsters, a Detroit gang. They wear cheap fedoras and black raincoats. They run numbers, burgle homes and fight.

Charles is slashed down his back on his right wrist.

His cousin Leroy is beaten to death. Two other Mobsters are stabbed and set alight in the trunk of a car.

Round 4: Charles is 16, hanging with a hood named Bumps, "so ugly, he had to sneak up on a glass of water." Bumps gets him to a "smoker," an unsanctioned fight. Elbows and knees are okay, but you can't kick. Charles wins, makes \$30.

Round 5: At a fight in Toronto, local legend Sully Sullivan says Charles boxes like a guy named Spider Webb. Spider it is. "Sounds a lot better in a ring than

Charles," Spider says.

Round 6: The 1967 race riots explode in Detroit. Streets on fire. Mobs. Rooftop snipers. "It was getting real bad by then, anyway. Murder City." Spider packs a snub-nosed .32. He does jail time.

"I was headed for an early grave." He flees to Toronto.

Round 7: Spider has a good left jab. He wins New York, Michigan, Ontario and North America Golden Gloves.

Round 8: Spider meets Jackie Robinson in a west-end club. "She was a little brown-eyed lady. I fell for her right away." Jackie's now 49. "She's the only person on earth who can ease the troubled waters of my emotions," Spider says, in the grand language of boxers.

Dead-end jobs

Round 9: Spider is stuck in dead-end sales jobs. "I didn't have what it took to turn pro as a fighter." Jackie persuades him to join Seneca College's upgrade program.

He panics the first day. "Forget the street fights, the sparring with Ali and Chivalo. I'd never felt this kind of fear." But he gets Grade 12, then his diploma in TV and radio.

Schools call. He goes to 100 a year, tells his story (See www.spiderjones.com).

"Low self-esteem is the number one predator today," he says. "If I can get that message across to two kids at every school ... that's my purpose."

In Florida Jack's, novice heavyweight Aloysius Young Ali, 28, works a medicine ball in the ring. "It doesn't matter where you come from," Spider tells me. "It's where you're going."

And how you get there, I think. Helluva fight, Spider Jones.

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