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THAT TIME 'IRON' MIKE TOLD ME A SECRET



When Mike Tyson was a boy, he made a promise to Muhammad Ali -- and stayed true to his word. (Getty Images)

By Michael Perrota

Two years ago at the 44th annual New Jersey Boxing Hall of Fame induction ceremony, I was hunting down legends for a boxing book. At the Venetian banquet hall in Garfield, N.J., a crowd of 500 ex-pugilists and their families gathered over prime rib and beer to tell the tales about how cynical -- but how great -- the old days of smashing the heavy bag were. There were more hugs than handshakes, and the same old stories never sounded better.

With some exceptions, most of the inductees were the grinders who fought in venues that are long gone. They might have even given a top-ranked fighter a run for his money.

Maybe they got a title shot. *Maybe.*

Two months earlier, an invitation to the dinner was sent out announcing the inductees. At the bottom, the organization issued a disclaimer.

"Note: Marvin Hagler & Mike Tyson will not be attending."

I thought it was probably for the best. You never knew when Tyson might go off the rails. Crowds wanted to see him, wanted to cheer him. But then a new outburst would occur, and the media would pounce. His absence at the Venetian wouldn't have come as much of a surprise.

Not long after arriving at the ceremony, though, I spotted the wrecking machine I knew as "Kid Dynamite" walking on the balcony. For three seconds, this information was mine alone. The whispers turned into pointed fingers.

I took my place at the bottom of a spiral staircase, listening to Henry Hascup, the organization's president and the master of ceremonies, as he began his introduction.

"He has been called the meanest man on earth ..."

And the baddest. And the toughest. And the scariest. Any will do.

"He is the youngest heavyweight champion of the world," Hascup continued. "He is the one, the only, the legendary, 'Iron' Mike Tyson!"

Even my camera knew to flinch as Tyson came down the stairs. The damn shutter speed was all over the place as I could only get three shots off. Tyson didn't look on the verge of combusting, but he didn't look overly happy to be at this banquet, either.

He shook hands. He listened to compliments. He took pictures with the young amateur fighters surrounding him on stage. And for the first

time, Iron Mike cracked a smile.



Courtesy of Michael Perrota

There were other legends present. Chuck Wepner, The Bayonne Bleeder, was in the crowd. Former heavyweight champion "Merciless" Ray Mercer was being inducted that night as well. Yet all eyes were Tyson.

* * *

Tyson has made two life transformations, which is one more than most make. The first you already know -- legendary trainer Cus D'Amato taught Tyson, who was a troubled teenager on the path to jail or death. He brought him into his home in Catskill, N.Y. Cus became Tyson's father figure and made him a promise.

"Do what I tell you, and you'll be the world champion one day," D'Amato said.

D'Amato died a year before he could see Tyson earn a title. But on Nov. 22, 1986, Cus kept his promise, and Tyson won the strap from Trevor Berbick.

The second transformation is still a work in process, and probably always will be. Some may know the new Tyson from "The Hangover" (which is, incredibly, seven years ago now, so not that "new" at all). Tyson likes the more updated perception of Tyson, too, apparently. He poked fun at that image a bit in his cartoon, ["The Mike Tyson Mysteries"](#) on the Cartoon Network (the second season is in full swing). He seems to enjoy performing in his one-man onstage act, "Undisputed Truth," and it's a hit with fans.

Tyson's speech to the crowd that night in New Jersey was short but heartfelt. He repeatedly expressed gratitude for his induction and recognition of his achievements. He pointed to the amateur fighters on stage, some as young as 12. "Those boxers are the future of this sport," Tyson said. "That's what a night like this is all about."

And that's all that was expected of him at the dinner. He showed his face. He gave his speech. It was time to make a quick exit. No one would think less of him.

But that's not how the new Mike Tyson operates. He leaned into the mic and made an announcement.

"OK, so now if anyone wants any pictures with me, it's time to lineup," he said. "I'm not allowed to stay out late anymore, or my wife is gonna kick my ass!"



Courtesy of Michael Perrota

And just like that, the tables emptied to line up. Adoring fans can't just shake his hand. This was their chance to tell him a little secret or the common trait they have or about that time they were in the same place he was and shared a moment with him.

"Mr. Tyson, I saw you that one time at Caesars Palace," one person said. "It was 4 a.m. and you were walking near the black jack tables. Remember?"

Clearly, he remembered none of them. But he kept smiling and nodding and moving on to the next person.

He turned no one down.

Middleweight legend Bernard Hopkins got on the microphone and scolded the audience to respect the other inductees. Tyson had about 50 yards or so to go through the front door to exit. He could only take one step before another fan was in his arms.

"You can't measure the impact of having Mike Tyson at this event," Hascup said later. "These people will remember it forever. He is not a fighter. He is an icon."

I noticed Tyson's been mumbling to himself for the past hour.

"They used to hate me, man," he said. "They used to hate me."

My eyes rotated between him and his bodyguard, a goliath. Want to talk to Mike? You needed to clear it with him first.

I shook Tyson's hand. He looked at me briefly, smiled, and continued his walk. He kept his head down. I could tell he was counting the minutes to being in his limo with the music blasting, away from everyone in this world.

We were 20 yards from the door. How many questions Tyson stuck around for would be up to me, not him.

"I love fighting in New Jersey," he said. "Atlantic City was like a second home to me. I was comfortable there."

He didn't need to be reminded of successes at Trump or Resorts. He already knew.

"I was undefeated in Jersey -- 13-0. Every damn win was a knockout."

So I hit him with the Michael Spinks fight in 1988, his defining moment as champion, when he unified the organizational championships with the lineal championship in less time than it took a dad to buy his kid popcorn at the event.

He was lukewarm to it.

"Yeah, that was a big fight for me," he said, unimpressed. His head stayed down. His pace got quicker. The exit was looming.

"Larry Holmes," I blurted out. "Two fights earlier, you knocked out Larry Holmes. Let's talk about..."

Tyson jolted back and grabbed my shoulder. The motor was now burning oil. He pulled me in close. His eyes seemed to want to swallow mine.

"Larry Holmes! Larry Holmes! Nobody wants to talk about that fight! That's my favorite fight, man!"

I've thrown a rock into the peaceful river.

* * *

Six months before he flattened Spinks, Tyson fought Holmes in January of '88. Holmes was 38 years old and coming off a two-year layoff. For three rounds, the old man used everything he could -- his height, his infamous jab, his experience -- to prevent Tyson's full-out charge. But in the fourth, the animal was unleashed. The last minute of the fight was the longest of Holmes' wonderful career. It started with one of the most beautiful combos in heavyweight history. Larry was too proud to let one knockdown stop him, but lunging Tyson hook after lunging Tyson hook kept connecting. With seven seconds left in the round, the third knockdown squashed the fading legend.

No one had ever done that to Larry Holmes, before or after that fight. In 75 matches, it was his only knockout loss.

"But I had to win that fight because I made a promise, you see," Tyson said.

A promise?

"No one knows this story, man. It's kind of a secret. About the promise I made."

Promise to who?

"Muhammad, man. I made him the promise. I owed it to him. Because of what happened between Holmes and Ali."

Oh. That fight. The one you skip over if you're a Muhammad Ali fan. In 1980, the roles were reversed for Holmes. At that time, *he* was the young buck and Ali was the aging icon. It was the worst defeat of Ali's career -- a battering mercifully stopped by trainer Angelo Dundee after the 10th round.

Tyson was 14 years old that night in '80. He was upstate with Cus D'Amato, riding in who-can-remember's car to who-can-remember where. He wasn't allowed to speak in the car. Not a word.

"Cus was furious, man," Mike told me. "Furious about the night before. He told me 'No talking today!' And I wouldn't dare speak. I just sat there. Head down, trying to stay out of trouble."

D'Amato never managed Ali. Never trained him. But they formed a bond in the later years of Ali's career, Tyson said.

"Cus loved Ali," he said. "We all did."

Tyson then recalled the conversation between D'Amato and Ali.

"How could you let a guy like that beat you? He was your sparring partner years ago!" Cus screamed over the phone to Ali as the young Tyson sat in the background and absorbed what was going on. "He's not half the fighter you are!"

That kid Holmes is no joke, Ali told Cus. Strong as a bull. Besides, he was sick that night. He had taken thyroid medication that ended up draining him of his strength. That *had* to be the reason for the loss.

"Next time, I'm going to beat him," Ali said over the phone. "Now put the kid on."

A young Tyson took the phone. He and Muhammad talked occasionally -- about sticking with Cus, about staying out of trouble and other words of encouragement. Tyson usually didn't say much, but that day he made him a promise.

"I'm going to beat him for you one day, champ," Tyson told Ali. "I'm going to knock out Larry Holmes for what he did to you. I'm going to beat him for you. And for Cus."

Eight years later, he did just that.

* * *

There was no slowing down Tyson after he talked about Cus, Larry and Muhammad. He loved those men, and love is what he's all about these days.

I pictured Holmes falling to the canvas and Tyson looking up, hoping D'Amato knows he kept the promise. Just like D'Amato had kept his promise to him years earlier.

"They used to hate me, man," Tyson laughed to himself after he revealed his secret to me, as he continued to pose for pictures. He grabbed the hands of two ballroom workers, who lost their nerve to talk in front of the champ. They stood star struck. He engulfed both of them in his biceps for a photo.

"These are the people that matter. The grassroots people! People who come from nothing, and have nothing handed to them. They gotta fight for everything. I was them. These are the people I love!"



Courtesy of Michael Perrota

Every handshake that night from fans was a thank you for those magical, championship moments. Every hug said we were there on the bad nights, too. That night in Tokyo against Buster. And Evander. Lennox. Prison. Those hugs said, "We know. We understand. Stick with us, champ. Because we've stuck with you."

Mike and I eventually got to the door. No one was left but the two of us, with a few stragglers getting one last look at greatness. He had taken a picture with *everyone* in the building who wanted one. He was still overwhelmed by the crowd's reaction.

"I'm not used to love, you understand, bro?" Tyson said. "I'm trying to be all about love now. But this is all new to me."

Soon, the champ was gone. And the night breathed easy.

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