

SPARRING WITH NORMAN

THOMAS JACOMO

Editor's Note: Thomas Jacomo was a longtime friend of Norman Mailer. As executive director of the Washington Palm restaurant, he knows everyone of any importance or self-perceived importance and presides over perhaps the main, nonpartisan power meeting spot in the nation's capital.

IT WAS AROUND 1970 OR 1971. I was running a hotel in Manchester, Vermont, called the Avalanche Motor Lodge. Nearby was a nightclub called The Roundhouse. People knew I was a big boxing fan and told me Jose Torres, the light heavyweight champion of the world, was over there. So of course I ran across the street.

I was young, full of piss and vinegar, and I ended up sparring with Torres, kidding around with him, and he says, "I want you to meet my friend Norman Mailer." I didn't know who he was, but Jose says, "We've got a ring set up at Norman's house over here. Why don't you go a couple of rounds with him?"

So I said, "Yeah, I'll do it."

Jose was hanging around with Norman, who was teaching him how to write. Jose was writing a book called *Sting Like a Bee: the Muhammad Ali Story*.

I go over to Norman's house. Sure enough, he has a regular ring set up there—gloves, headgear—and I think, *What am I getting myself into?* Also, he outweighed me by about twenty-five pounds.

I get into the ring. Bing, bing, bing—we fought on and off for two or three weeks. We never really hurt each other. In fact, he made a rule a couple of years later that we're never going to hurt each other, although I did give him a couple of good shots.

Norman was a boxing fanatic. He got an offer to do the *Dick Cavett Show* in New York, which was a very big deal then. Norman and Jose were going to get in the ring and spar a couple of rounds on the show. I was Norman's second and Jose had a friend of his as his second in the ring.

I'm teasing Norman, saying, "You know what's going to happen, don't you? Jose's going to get in the ring. He's going to see the lights, he's going to snap and think he's in a real fight and knock you out."

Norman said, "Nah, nah, he won't."

We practice a long time in the back of my restaurant. I'm instructing him and raising my elbow to demonstrate how to block punches and I say, "Hit him here! Make it sound good!"

After all the rehearsal, we get to New York for the show and I'm in Norman's corner. Jose throws a left hook to the body. Norman's supposed to have his elbow over here to block it. He lifts his elbow and gets hit right in the gut. I hear the wind come out of Norman and I think, *Oh my God, he's going to fall down, right on national television!*

I start yelling to Jose in Italian so no one else will know what I'm saying, "*Aspetti! Piano! Piano!*"—Stop! Easy! Easy! But he's Puerto Rican, he speaks Spanish, and doesn't know what I'm saying.

But we survived that night and went up to Gus D'Amato's apartment to watch it on TV. And that was one of the most exciting nights Norman and I ever had.

Another time we were up in Vermont. Norman was crazy: he decides we're going to go hiking and boating with his kids on a lake. The water's one inch from coming into the boat and I say, "Norman, I hate to tell you this, but I can't swim."

"Tom," he says, "Don't worry. If the boat goes over, you hang onto it. I'll rescue the kids and take them to the shore and I'll come back and get you."

I said, "F-that! Take me back to the shore first; the kids can swim."

* * *

I was a pretty hot dog skier and one day Norman tells me, "My son Michael wants to learn how to ski." He was about seven or eight.

I said, "Okay. I'll take the afternoon and give Michael a few lessons." And the old joke was, *Bend your knees, look out for the trees, twenty dollars, please.* That was a private ski lesson up there.

So I'm teaching Michael how to ski. He caught on pretty quickly, so I left him alone for a while to practice.

That night, Norman's supposed to be at my house for a spaghetti dinner. I'm sitting there waiting for him . . . waiting for him. . . .

Finally the phone rings. It's Norman. "I'm just coming back from the hospital. Michael's just broken his leg."

That was the end of my ski instructor career.

* * *

The other great story—I'd just broken up with my girlfriend and my heart was broken.

I was playing ping-pong with Norman at my hotel. He's been married six times, so I say to him, "How do you get over the hurt and the pain?"

Norman says, "Tom, once you get through the flesh, down to the bone, it doesn't hurt anymore."

I said, "Ooh, great advice, Norman. Thanks a lot."

* * *

I miss a lot of things about Norman Mailer. What I miss most is his intelligence. He was the smartest man I ever spoke to in my entire life. He analyzed everything. Nothing just went by him.

Despite what a lot of people said, he wasn't tough at all. He had a heart of gold. Any time I needed anything, he was always there for me.

And he liked to laugh. I made him laugh.