



Norman Mailer turns eighty years old today, January 31, 2003. Mailer has contributed a number of valid insights into the sport of boxing, notably his lengthy treatment on the Ali/Foreman fight in Zaire. Being his birthday, here's a few of his thoughts on taking a truly professional approach to one's work, as seen through the artistry of Harry Greb, *professional prize fighter, par excellence*.

boxing

by don cogswell

I think it's important for a writer to keep in shape. But it's hard to talk about it. Harry Greb, for example, was a fighter who used to keep in shape. He was completely a fighter, the way one might wish to be completely a writer. He always did the things that were necessary to him as a fighter. Now, some of these things were extremely irrational from a prize-fight manager's point of view. That is, before he had a fight he would go to a brothel and he would have two prostitutes, not one, taking the two of them into the bed. And this apparently left him feeling like a wild animal. Don't ask me why. Perhaps he picked the two meanest whores in the joint and so absorbed into his system all the small, nasty, concentrated evils that have accumulated from carloads of men. Greb was known as the dirtiest fighter of his time. He didn't have much of a punch, but he could spoil other fighters and punish them; he knew more dirty tricks than anyone around, and the two whores were an essential part of his training methods. He did it over and over again until he died at a relatively early age of a heart attack on an operating table. I think he died before he was thirty-eight. They operated on him, and bang, he went.

The point I want to make is that he stayed in training by the way he lived his life. The paramount element was to keep in shape. If he was drinking, you see, the point was to keep in shape *while* drinking. I'm being a touch imprecise.... Put it this way: He would not drink just to release his tension. Rather, what went on was that there was tension in him, which was insupportable, so he had to booze. But reasoning as a professional, he felt that if he was going to drink, he might as well use that too. In the sense that an actor uses everything that happens to him, so Greb as a fighter used everything.

from The Spooky Art, Some Thoughts on Writing
Norman Mailer
Random House 2003