

## Pete Hamill

Although he has earned acclaim as a novelist and screenwriter, Pete Hamill (b. 1935) is regarded as the quintessential New York newspaperman. A columnist for both the *Post* and the *Daily News*, the onetime high school dropout eventually became editor-in-chief of both papers, and his journalism has appeared in *The New York Times*, *Newsday*, and *The Village Voice*. This piece, written in November 1985 for the latter on the occasion of Cus D’Amato’s death, echoes his introduction to journalism. Following service in the U.S. Navy, Hamill studied art on the GI Bill, and in 1958 was working as the art director of *Atlantis*, a Greek-language weekly. In the midst of laying out one edition, he suggested to editor Jimmy Vlasto that running a few stories in English might improve circulation, and the editor challenged him to try his own hand at writing one. Hamill chose to profile a promising Puerto Rican middleweight who trained under D’Amato at the nearby Gramercy Gym. Hamill was paid \$25 for what was his first published story, and the occasion boded well for both subject and author. By the time José Torres won the world light-heavyweight title seven years later, his lifelong friend Hamill had become the lead columnist for the *Post*.

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### Up the Stairs with Cus D’Amato

**I**N those days, you had to pass a small candy stand to get to the door of the Gramercy Gym on East 14th Street. The door was heavy, with painted zinc nailed across its face and a misspelled sign saying “Gramacy Gym,” and when you opened the door, you saw a long badly lit stairway climbing into darkness. There was another door on the landing, and a lot of tough New York kids would reach that landing and find themselves unable to open the second door. They’d go back down the stairs, try to look cool as they bought a soda at the candy stand, then hurry home. Many others opened the second door. And when they did, they entered the tough, hard, disciplined school of a man named Cus D’Amato.

"First thing I want to know about a kid," Cus said to me once, on some lost night in the '50s, "is whether he can open that door. Then when he walks in, I look at him, try to see what he's seeing. Most of them stand at the door. They see guys skipping rope, shadowboxing, hitting the bags. Most of all, they see guys in the ring. Fighting. And then they have to decide. Do they want this, or not? If they want it, they stay, they ask someone what they should do. Most of them are shy, for some reason. Almost all fighters. They whisper. You tell them to come back, and you'll see what can be done. They have to spend at least one night dealing with fear. If they come back the second time, then maybe you have a fighter."

I wasn't a fighter, but I came up those stairs almost every day in the late '50s and early '60s, and in some important ways I learned as much from Cus D'Amato as the fighters did. I was living then on 9th Street and Second Avenue, working nights at the *Post*, and I'd wake up around three in the afternoon and walk to 14th Street and hang out with the fighters. My friend José Torres was then the hottest young middleweight in the city and one of Cus D'Amato's fighters. He had lost by one point to Laszlo Papp in the finals of the '56 Olympics in Melbourne, and when he came to New York from Puerto Rico he placed his career in the hands of Cus.

"I didn't know anything about New York," he said. "I didn't know very much about boxing. Most of all, I didn't know anything about life. So I learned about everything then from Cus."

Cus, who died last week at seventy-seven after a long struggle with pneumonia, was one of the best teachers I ever met. He was a tough, intelligent man who was almost Victorian in his beliefs in work and self-denial and fierce concentration. For years he'd lived alone in the office of the gym, accompanied only by a huge boxer dog named Champ; there were books on the shelves (he loved the Civil War and essays on strategy and tactics and almost never read novels, although he admired W. C. Heinz's *The Professional*) and a gun somewhere and a small black-and-white TV set and a pay phone on the wall. After Floyd Patterson became champion in 1956, Cus took an apartment over a coffee shop on 53rd Street and Broadway and bought some elegantly tailored clothes and a homburg; but, talking to him, I always sensed that his idea of paradise was that room and the cot in the office of the Gramercy Gym.

“You can’t want too many things,” he said to me one wintry evening, after the fighters had gone, the speed bags were stilled, and we stood at the large gym windows while snow fell into 14th Street. “The beginning of corruption is wanting things. You want a car or a fancy house or a piano, and the next thing you know, you’re doing things you didn’t want to do, just to get the *things*. I guess maybe that’s why I never got married. It wasn’t that I didn’t like women. They’re nice. It’s nice. It’s that women want *things*, and if I want the woman, then I have to want the things she wants. Hey, I don’t want a new refrigerator, or a big TV, or a new couch. . . .”

Cus wanted his fighters to be champions, to have money and glory, but he truly didn’t seem to want much for himself. Once a bum made his way to the Gramercy from the White Rose bar across the street; Cus gave him a dollar, the next day five bums showed up, and the day after that, almost forty. The fighters laughed, as Cus dispensed singles, and then Cus said, “That’s it, that’s all. You want to come back here, bring trunks!” He was a sucker for old fighters. Once when Cus had the shorts (he had to declare bankruptcy in 1971) Ezzard Charles came around to see him; the great light-heavyweight and former heavyweight champion was a broken man, confined to a wheelchair; he needed a thousand, and Cus borrowed the money, gave it to the old champion, and never heard from Charles again. When Patterson won the championship by knocking out Archie Moore on November 30, 1956, Cus used his share of the purse to make Floyd an elaborate \$35,000 jewel-encrusted crown; a few years later, Patterson wouldn’t even talk to Cus. Cus once quoted Gene Fowler to me: “Money is something to throw off the back of trains.”

He loved style in fighters and in writers, too. His favorite sports writers were Jimmy Cannon, Dick Young, and Dan Parker, all of whom took shots at him in print from time to time (“I don’t mind, they gotta job to do and I’m not perfect”), but he also said that the sports writer who moved him most consistently was the elegant Frank Graham of the *Journal-American*. Later, when Torres became friends with Norman Mailer, Cus started to read his work, as if inspecting it for signs of moral decay. “The guy is really good, isn’t he? He’s like a Robinson, he can box, he can punch. . . .”

He cherished great fighters—Ray Robinson, Joe Louis, Muhammad Ali, Sandy Saddler, Willie Pep, Tommy Loughran—but some-

times, late at night, sitting over coffee, he'd talk about the fighter that didn't exist: the perfect fighter, the masterpiece. "The ideal fighter has heart, skill, movement, intelligence, creativity. You can have everything, but if you can't make it up while you're in there, you can't be great. A lot of guys have the mechanics and no heart; lots of guys have heart, no mechanics; the thing that puts it together, it's mysterious, it's like making a work of art, you bring everything to it, you make it up when you're doing it."

Toward the end, he thought perhaps that he had the perfect heavyweight at last in young Michael Tyson, who has now knocked out all nine of his professional opponents, six in the first round. "He's strong, he's brave, he's in condition, and most of all, he's got that other thing, the mysterious thing," Cus said, the last time I saw him. "I have no doubt he'll be a champion. But more than that, he might be a great fighter."

There were a lot of good fighters at the Gramercy in the late '50s: Joe Shaw, a fierce-punching 140-pounder; light-heavyweight Jim Boyd, who'd won the gold medal in Melbourne; two more light-heavyweights named Sylvester Banks and Paul Wright; a wonderful southpaw featherweight named Floyd Smith; and some fine amateurs ranging from bantamweight Georgie Colon to light-heavyweight Simon Ramos. But as Cus became more involved managing Patterson and Torres, the day-to-day training was left to Joe Fariello (now educating Mark Breland). Cus was away at camp with Patterson; he was up at Stillman's with Torres to find experienced professionals for sparring partners. And during the same period, Cus was waging his wars with both the International Boxing Club and Madison Square Garden. Some people thought he grew increasingly paranoid.

"If this goes down instead of up," he said to me one day as we stepped in the elevator in a midtown office building, "we're in trouble."

He laughed, but Cus meant it, too. The Mob was all over boxing when Cus brought his first good fighters out of the Gramercy Gym. The hoodlums cut into fighters, arranged tank jobs, fixed judges. Frankie Carbo was called the underworld's commissioner of boxing, a vicious punk who lived off other men's sweat and controlled a number of managers. Carbo was friendly, sort of, with Jim Norris, a rich bum with a hoodlum complex who ran the IBC out of the old Garden

on Eighth Avenue and 50th Street. There's no room here to relate the details of Cus D'Amato's sustained contest with Norris, Carbo, and the Garden. Certainly he was on the moral high ground, but the terrible thing was that his personal crusade also hurt his fighters.

We'll never know how good Patterson and Torres might have become if they'd been fighting more often, battling those fighters who were controlled by the IBC and the Garden. Certainly Torres would have made more money. I remember one main event he had to take in Boston when he was still a hot fighter in New York. The total purse came to \$28.35. Joe Fariello said, "Joe, you take the \$20, I'll take the \$8, and we'll send the 35¢ to Cus." Patterson did get rich, and Torres did become champion years later than he should have, and in the wrong division (he was one of the greatest middleweights I ever saw, but had to settle for the light-heavyweight championship in 1965). But the competitive fire of Shaw withered from lack of action; the others drifted away.

"It breaks my heart sometimes, thinking about those kids not fighting," he said to me once. "But I don't see any other way."

That was the problem. From 1959 on, Cus never worked a corner for any of his fighters; he didn't even hold a manager's license, as a result of the botched promotion of the 1959 Patterson-Johansson fight, when it appeared (but was never proved) that Cus helped bring Fat Tony Salerno in as a money man. The fighters did their best, and for some fights Cus would come to camp, work with them, talk strategy and tactics. But Patterson broke with him, and Torres was forced to go with another manager (Cain Young) to get his chance at a title. Around the time Torres retired, Cus moved upstate, far from the gyms of the city. "I like it up there," he said once. "I like the clear skies, the lake, where I go fishing. It's beautiful. Beautiful." Did he miss the gym on 14th Street? "Yeah," he said. "Sometimes. . . ."

The last time I saw him was almost exactly a year ago, on the 57th floor of the World Trade Center. We were there to watch Torres be sworn in as chairman of the New York State Athletic Commission, the first professional fighter and the first Puerto Rican ever to hold the job. "I'm so proud of José, I can't explain it," Cus said. We talked about Tyson and other things. And then I asked him if he'd ever gone back to the Gramercy Gym since he sold it in the '70s. "No," he said,

and looked up at José, who was standing with Mario Cuomo at the front of the room. "No, I don't like to look back."

And so I did the looking back, sitting in the packed, brightly lit conference room, remembering Cus talking to me when I was 20 about the uses of fear, the meaning of courage, the need to concentrate energy and purpose in all things, and how I'd tried and failed so often to follow his lessons. I'd modeled a character on Cus in one of my novels, and he'd liked the book but objected when he saw the TV movie; on the screen, John Cassavetes stood on a ring apron talking to a fighter and smoking a cigarette. "What manager would *do* that? What kind of *example* would he be showing to a kid?" I remembered that conversation, and after José was sworn in, I turned to Cus and said, "Listen, Cus, I want to thank you for everything." He squinted suspiciously at me. "What do you mean?" he said, and I said, "For letting me climb the stairs."

He nodded, turned away, and said, "You goddamned writers."  
I'm sorry I never got to explain.