

Duane Bobick

SPARTANBURG — When last the world saw Duane Bobick, he was the victim of a terrible accident.

The date was May 11, 1977 and the place was Madison Square Garden in New York City. The perpetrator, as the cops like to say, was Ken Norton, a sometime actor and frustrated fighter with a notion that he had been robbed of the heavyweight title in his last fight.



Warner

Bobick entered the ring undefeated and the people's choice as the next Great White Hope of boxing. He left it groggy and speechless, courtesy of a Norton fist to his windpipe 58 seconds into the nationally-televised fight.

Norton got another shot at the title. Bobick got what looked to be a one-way ticket to Palookaville.

Bobick's next four fights were against Scott LeDoux, Pedro Agosto, Kallie Knoetze and Mike Schutte, in places like Newark, N.J. and Bloomington, Minn. He lost to Knoetze, a policeman, in South Africa on a technical knockout in the third round. What followed was worse.

Rodney Bobick, one of Duane's 11 brothers, was killed in an automobile accident weeks after the Knoetze fight. Another brother had died in a hit-and-run accident shortly after Duane turned pro in 1973.

Add to this the emotional trauma of a recent divorce and a sick father unable to work, and you can begin to gauge the sadness of Bobick's life in February of 1978.

But there was more. Bobick was fighting for the Joe Frazier organization, and when Frazier announced a comeback, his people promptly abandoned Bobick in South Africa to be with their boss in the states.

Picking up the pieces

Duane Bobick was very much alone. Then, at the age of 27, he started to pick up the pieces. He got himself a new manager (sportswriter-friend Dave Wolf), a new wife, a new training regimen, and most importantly, a new outlook on life. Now 28, he says he has never felt better.

The journey back has had some interesting stops, and Saturday night it will have another. Bobick will take his 44-2 record into Spartanburg Memorial Auditorium against Henry "Bulldog" Patterson, a local fighter who stands 5-8 and weighs 189 pounds. Bobick, who goes 6-3 and 212, is not expected to lose.

It's all part of a comeback trail that Bobick believes will end with him wearing the heavyweight championship belt.

"Right now, I think my career is on the upswing," he said Tuesday, after a vigorous workout in promoter Don White's sparse and chilly back alley gym. "For the first time, I'm in the hands of people who are taking care of me, who are interested in me and teaching me about fighting."

"Before, I wasn't being managed properly. With the Frazier people, I had to do everything myself — press kits, publicity, travel. After the South African thing and all the garbage going on, I just got tired of it. I thought seriously of quitting."

Then along came Wolf, a New York writer who had taken more than a passing interest in Bobick's career. Wolf, author of a best-selling book about basketball star Connie Hawkins, had met Bobick during the 1972 Olympics and written a magazine story about him. They become close friends, and Wolf closely monitored Bobick's development as a pro. He became furious at what he thought was Frazier's mismanagement of Bobick, and after the Knoetze fight, he decided to step in.

Wolf handed the training reins over to Murphy Griffith, Bobick's amateur coach in the Navy and a well-respected boxing man. He also hired a legion of doctors to devise a special health program for his fighter. Bobick now follows a strict diet put together by a nutrition specialist and exercises regularly on "nautilus" machines designed to strengthen muscles without tightening them and losing flexibility. It all takes place, as Wolf describes it, in a New York gym that looks that like something out of "Battlestar Galactica."

Using the system, Bobick has trimmed away some old baby fat and increased his endurance.

"I feel great," he said. "It's nice to be in good shape. It makes it a lot easier in the ring when you're feeling good."

So good, in fact, that Bobick thinks it's a matter of when, and not if, he gets a crack at the heavyweight title, which due to the politics of boxing is now divided between Muhammed Ali and Larry Holmes.

"I think 1979 will tell the story. I'm ready now. We're just waiting for a deal that will be beneficial to us. If he's still fighting, I'd rather fight Ali. He's the champion. Holmes (who Bobick defeated as an amateur) is only the paper champion. You lose the championship in the ring and Ali hasn't lost it there."

If he fought Ali or Holmes, Bobick again would be viewed as the Great White Hope. It's a label he's gotten used to, but will never like.

"Look around me. My trainer is a black man. Does that make me the Black Hope? I have Chicano and Spanish friends. Does that make me the Chicano Hope? I know it doesn't hurt me at the pay window, but in other ways it's not fair."

Fair or not, it's a burden he is never likely to shed. But then it's never been easy being Duane Bobick.

"Had I known what I was getting into with boxing, I might never have gotten into it," he said in a whisper. "What I expected is not what I found. It's not all bad. It's not all good. It would make an interesting story, though."

"I've learned to roll with the punches. It's a good saying for this business."