Medium at Large:
Case Studies of Japan's Biggest Fighters

Loren Goodman

Middleweights in Japan are different than middleweights anywhere else in the world because of an arbitrary rule imposed by the JBC[1]: no boxers are ranked above middleweight (160 lbs). This results in an unusual mind frame: since they are the heaviest class, middleweights are "the heavyweights" of Japan, and are thus expected to fight "like heavyweights." To the Japanese, this means with power: hard, dramatic punches, and little or no movement or technique. The JBC rule also forces anyone seriously interested in boxing to get down to 160 lbs, which has resulted in some interesting figures (huge, dehydrated middleweights) and weight-loss behavior. Although Japanese middleweights are expected to provide the explosive spectacle of stereotypical heavyweights, they are forced to adhere to the weight restrictions imposed upon every other class (true heavyweights have no weight restriction; they must simply be above 200 lbs).

Although there are a handful of heavyweight boxers in Japan, one reason the JBC imposes the middleweight limit is that there are very few boxers at the higher weights. At this time, there are less than sixty active middleweight boxers in the country. Though the JBC ranks the top twelve boxers in the country at each weight class, the middleweight class sometimes has less than twelve ranked boxers, because the JBC cannot designate twelve boxers who they feel meet the quality level necessary to enter the national rankings. This reveals another peculiar characteristic of Japanese middleweights: they are forced to fight within a very small pool of competition. Not only is it difficult for them to find fights, they also have trouble finding adequate sparring partners. They often wind up fighting their sparring partners. The fact that the competition pool is so small makes it even more interesting when Japanese boxers attempt to challenge for regional and world titles outside Japan. In this paper, I present the stories of seven boxers whose careers and stories overlap and intertwine, weaving the signature fabric of this unique and exclusive sub-culture. The seven are as follows: Senrima Keitoku, Teraji Hisashi, Nishizawa Yoshinori, Yokozaki Tetsu, Kevin Palmer, Amada Hiromi, and Ishida Nobuhiro.[2]

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[1] Japan Boxing Commission.

[2] There are a few more middleweight boxers whom I wish to include but have not yet interviewed: Suzuki Satoru, Inazawa Toshiyuki, Hozumi Naotaka, Yoshino Hiroyuki, Vinny Martin and Takehara Shinji. Without their stories, this study remains incomplete.

Senrima

I vividly remember my first encounter with former middleweight champion Senrima Keitoku. It occurred in the dressing rooms at Osaka Furitsu Taiikukan,[3] the first time I went to see professional boxing matches in Japan, on Valentine's Day, 2000. Mr. Senrima was excited to see me, shouting in the exaggerated English of an excited Japanese, "Are you a boxer?!"

Not long before I moved to Nishinomiya in October 2001, I found out that Mr. Senrima's Gym was only twenty minutes walk from the foreign student's dormitory I had lived in for two years. I began to join him for weekend basketball games at the neighboring North Korean junior high school where his oldest son, Kon-myung, was on the team. I wish I had known much earlier, so that I might have trained at his gym from the beginning.

Mr. Senrima is quite a character: charismatic, with a flair for performance, as well as a practical, down-to-Earth side. He speaks snippets of several languages (English, Portuguese, Chinese), dabbles in the history of ancient civilizations, and recently learned to play a piano he salvaged from the Hanshin-Awaji earthquake. He also does a great impression of Antonio Inoki.[4]

After a brief comeback attempt following the Hanshin-Awaji earthquake in 1995, Mr. Senrima continued to run his gym with his wife, who serves as manager and second, from the basement of their quaint two-story home in Kasuganomichi. These interviews took place mostly on the premises of Senrima Boxing Gym between November 2001, and May 2004.[5]

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From the beginning, with his joke about Kobe Gym "taking a little break, after the big earthquake,"[6] he turns our interview into his own little *manzai* (Japanese vaudeville) routine. His deadpan humor and sense of having fun with it is apparent in his quick shifts in discourse. In giving a boxing answer to a basketball question, he sets himself up as the *boke* (funny man) and puts me in the role of *tsukkomi* (straight man):

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[3] The main boxing arena in Western Japan, located in Namba, Osaka. Cite of the annual March Osaka Sumo basho.

[4] Brazilian-Japanese Pro Wrestler and TV personality who fought Muhammad Ali in an ill-fated mixed martial arts match in Tokyo in 1976. Later elected to the House of Councilors in the Japanese National Diet. One of his signature "moves" is to stand in front of you like a stern teacher/drill instructor and slap you in the face while you stand at attention, hands at your sides. I've seen Mr. Senrima imitate this more than once.

[5] Mr. Senrima spoke occasionally in English and pidgin English ("Japanglish") from time to time throughout these interviews. This comes through now and then in the non-native phrasing, non-idiomatic, and sometimes stilted English.

[6] Kobe Gym was destroyed in the Hanshin-Awaji earthquake, January 17, 1995.

> I was a player of basketball. For basketball, I went to boxing training sometimes. Boxing was very exciting. So, I love boxing.
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> I took up basketball at age fourteen at Kobe Korean High School. But the basketball club only had practice three times a week.
>
> Q: What was your best move?
>
> A: Straight.
>
> Q: No—in basketball.
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> A: Oh! I was the center. Rebounds.

He makes things interesting—more interesting than they would be if he told them straight—inflates and exaggerates. I once saw a videotape of a nationally broadcast news story on Senrima and his comeback after the 1995 Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake. The broadcast was casting him as a symbol of the comeback of the city of Kobe and its people. In the feature, it showed him visiting a North Korean junior high school, presenting himself, in a business suit, in front of the students in a classroom. Speaking in both Korean and Japanese, he introduced himself as a boxing champion. During the Q & A, one student asked how many fights he had. Without batting an eye, he replied: "100 fights, and I won them all by knockout." It was much more effective—and somehow more appropriate—than stating his real ring record—12 wins (7 KOs) 8 losses—for the heroic role he had assumed (and taking into account the boxing naiveté of his young audience).

He's a real character. He created himself as such by taking on the ring name "Senrima." Senrima refers to a Pegasus-like horse in Korean (and Chinese) mythology that is said to be able to run for 1,000 "ri," (*Sen ri*) a very long distance, without stopping. This figure of Senrima was taken up by the post-war North Korean government as a symbol for its communist programs of development and advancement, and thus is easily recognized by Korean-Japanese. This was a bold move in the Japan of the early 1980s, where there seemed to be little benefit—and big detriment—in divulging one's Korean ethnicity.

Another aspect of his mythology is Senrima's invulnerability. Though he'd lost many fights, he made a point of telling me he'd never been knocked down. When I stumbled upon a fight video in which he had been knocked down and brought this to his attention, he explained it away—"I was off balance, he hit me on the shoulder, and I went down—but it wasn't a knockdown." I later learned from reading the monograph on him (and Owada Masaharu) *The Man Who Knocked Out Rocky* that he'd also been knocked down in sparring by Milton McCrory at the Kronk Gym in Detroit.

Throughout our interview, Mr. Senrima also makes himself the crucial element in everyone else's life. Coming from the periphery—a "nobody" from the marginal world of Japanese big men in the marginal world of Japanese boxing—to Kronk Gym, a gym full of world champions and contenders in the Mecca of boxing, the United States, Senrima has fun locating himself at the center of things:

> Q: But Hearns had more success than McCrory, didn't he?

> A: That's because he sparred with me. He really learned a lot from me, don't you agree? At that time he was still a welter and junior middle world champion. After sparring with me, he became middle and light heavy and cruiserweight champ. After sparring with *me*. Right?
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> Q: Were you grateful to him?
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> A: He should come and express his gratitude to me, he's got to come say "Thank you, Senrima."[7]

There's a positive energy and optimism in the way Senrima recasts things. When he talks about his fight against journeyman Clinton Longmire, he says Hearns "fought on my undercard." When you look at the NHK documentary video of that night's fights, it is clear that Senrima fought in the "walk-out" bout. Technically, yes—Mr. Senrima's fight was the last of the evening—but it was not the main event. Hearns defended his world title that night in the main event. At world title fights, promoters often schedule "reserve" fights for television scheduling purposes. World title fight television broadcasts are scheduled to begin at a certain time; however, no one knows how long the fights leading up to the main event will last—whether they will end by knockout in the first round, or go the distance. Thus, promoters hold one or two four- or six-round fights "in reserve." Because Hearns' fight that night went off on time and ended early (by TKO in the third round), Mr. Senrima's "reserve" fight was last. It's called a "walk-out" fight because many fans leave the arena after the main event.

According to Senrima, he was responsible for Hearns' greatness as well as Sugar Ray Leonard's comeback:

> He [Hearns] really must have learned a lot from me. And Leonard, too, he saw my fight, got excited, and decided, "Hey, I think I'll make a comeback." He came back, conquered five weight divisions, what a guy—Senrima Keitoku. What a guy I am!

Senrima's pronouncements have a way of morphing more and more impressively as soon as they leave his mouth. First he says he sparred Roberto Duran, then quickly amends—he was supposed to spar Roberto Duran, but Duran "chickened out" because he was scared of Senrima. When I ask him what he learned from trainer Emmanuel Steward, he says "I forgot," then immediately changes that to "It's a secret!" When I ask Senrima what Steward's opinion of him as a boxer was, it produces the following crescendo:

> He thought I was a good boxer. "Better than any boxer I've seen before—incredible.... [H]e will be world champ in the near future...."

Perhaps the most evocative story in Senrima's interview is the anecdote of going out for Chinese food with Milton McCrory in Detroit. It is a story of the absurdity of prejudice, of being identified (in this case, mistakenly) and marginalized along the lines of one's ethnic background—an absurdity Mr. Senrima becomes literally "fed-up" with. Finally out from under the pressure of Japan, where he'll always be a second-class citizen, in the melting pot of the United States, Mr. Senrima finds himself taken out to a Chinese dinner by his African-American gym mate. The hospitality of the gesture soon erodes when he notices his host won't eat any of the food. Senrima counters with a rhetorical twist, reducing himself and his wife, through synecdoche, from members of a minority group to the foods they eat:

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[7] Mr. Senrima's reference to Haku Shigeo (in the full text of the interview) is similar to Yokozaki's self-mythologizing: "After he lost to me, he won three fights in a row by knockout."

> So I asked McCrory—"Why do you bring us here and not eat?" McCrory said, Y'all are Chinese, right? "Huh-uh—nope—we're Cabbage People, I said…. No—really we're Korean Ginseng roots."

Senrima Keitoku with pupil Zaiki Takemoto

Teraji & Mr. Nakamura

Teraji Hisashi, the former Japan middleweight and OPBF light heavyweight champion, retired right around the time I started attending boxing matches on a regular basis. I first met him in September 2003, when we requested his services as a sparring partner for Nakamura Eiji, the fighter we were training for a shot at the Japan middleweight title in November of the same year. Nakamura had been his sparring partner some seven or eight years before, at which time Teraji had handled him very easily—"with the left jab only," as he said. I thought it would be good for Nakamura's confidence to spar with him again and see how far he'd come. Plus, at 6'4", Teraji had the height and stand-up boxing style that Nakamura would be facing against Araki.

Though retired and busily engaged in two professions—the first, his elected post of Uji (Kyoto) City Councilman; the second, as owner and manager of an office building maintenance company—Mr. Teraji still spars regularly with up-and-coming middleweight boxers at SF Maki Gym in Kyoto. He has remained near his fighting weight of 79 kilos, and at age 40, his performance in sparring suggests no significant slippage in physical or boxing ability due to age or inactivity. Indeed, he states that he doesn't really enjoy his current work; boxing is the only thing he's ever really loved to do, and he would rather be boxing as a professional than run a company or be a politician. Though he also said he feels a comeback will be "impossible," he seems to be dreaming of returning to the ring—possibly in America. At six foot-four inches, I suspect he is the tallest Japanese professional boxer in the history of the sport. I found him to be affable, interested in speaking English, and curious about America. In October 2003, he told me of his plans to open his own boxing gym in Kyoto later that year or early in 2004.[8]

Prizefighters often resemble imprisoned criminals in the sense that, if you ask them, none of them are ever guilty of having committed any crimes. Replace "committed any crimes" with "lost any fights" and you'll see the resemblance. Fighters always have an explanation or excuse that absolves them of any responsibility for claiming the "loss" on their records as legitimate and therefore part of their "true" selves. I found Mr. Teraji's candor about his career refreshing; he tended to admit when he lost a fight, even when that fight showed up on his record as a win or draw. It is possible that retirement provides the narrative distance required for some fighters to reflect more objectively on their pasts. Yet in his case, I admire what I take to be a character trait of plain honesty.

This interview took place on August 17, 2004, on which day Mr. Teraji's car (a 1995 Mustang[9]) broke down on the highway en-route to the interview. After getting his car towed to the shop, we were joined by his former manager, Mr. Nakamura, for a three-person interview. After talking casually over dinner in a Chinese restaurant, we removed to a family restaurant for beverages and the talks referenced below.

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[8] He did open and currently manages BMB Boxing Gym in Uji.

[9] Extremely rare in Japan.

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This interview unfolds a bit differently than the others, not only because it's between three people, but because Teraji's former manager, Mr. Nakamura—whom I had never met before and had no idea would show up—takes on a guiding, pro-active, "managerial" role. Apart from a running dialogue with Mr. Teraji about his professional record, which I had printed out and set on the table between us and to which I keep redirecting him, Mr. Nakamura shapes most of the discussion. He fields many of the questions, speaking much more than Teraji—as perhaps a good manager should. Thus, I have to go through Mr. Nakamura to find out about Mr. Teraji.

Though unexpected, Mr. Nakamura's contribution to the interview is a valuable one; throughout our talks, he touches on several recurring themes. Early in the interview, when Teraji broaches the subject of hungry spirit, he sets off on the familiar track of suggesting that the fighters of the past were more "hungry" than those of the present. Mr. Nakamura immediately dissents, citing Teraji's own hungry spirit, and explaining that Teraji was just as hungry as fighters from earlier generations. As Mr. Nakamura is a member of an earlier generation, his opinion holds weight. He explains that though the motive or "kind" of hunger is different—actual *physical* hunger (past) vs. *existential* hunger (present)—the hungry spirit is "the same":

> Because you didn't want to lose anymore than Shirai Yoshio[10] did, that's why you went all the way to America in order to train. I mean, he spent more than his fight money just to go practice. For example, if he made $10,000 in the ring, then he spent $10,000 to train for his next fight, well, how could he make a living? Well, even if it meant having no money, that's the path he chose. 'Cause he didn't want to lose—that's the point. So that's hungriness, too. It's not just about money. In the past, it was. You made a living by taking fights.
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> He chose boxing because he was searching for something to devote his life to. I think you could call that "hungry," too. Since there was nothing he could buy that would satisfy him.

The fighters of the past fought to get the money they didn't have in order to buy things. The fighters of the present fight to get the things they can't buy with money. Who is hungrier? The person without enough money to buy something to eat or the person who isn't satisfied with anything his money can buy? In this sense, the Japanese boxers of today remind me of Kafka's hunger artist:

> "I always wanted you to admire my fasting," said the hunger artist. "We do admire it," said the overseer, affably. "But you shouldn't admire it," said the hunger artist. "Well then we don't admire it," said the overseer, "but why shouldn't we admire it?" "Because I have to fast, I can't help it,"

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[10] First Japanese world champion (1952).

> said the hunger artist. "What a fellow you are," said the overseer, "and why can't you help it?" "Because," said the hunger artist, lifting his head a little and speaking, with his lips pursed, as if for a kiss, right into the overseer's ear, so that no syllable might be lost, "because I couldn't find the food I liked. If I had found it, believe me, I should have made no fuss and stuffed myself like you or anyone else." These were his last words, but in his dimming eyes remained the firm though no longer proud persuasion that he was still continuing to fast. (Kafka, *A Hunger Artist*)

Does physical hunger trump existential hunger or vice-versa? Teraji's description of what he enjoys most about boxing—and his addiction to the cycle of performance—resonates with the repertoire of the hunger artist:

> The happiest times in my boxing career were all my fights, but—before the fight I'd cut weight, tough it out, focus on my goals and cut weight, and it was the feeling of relief I had upon winning—after all that—the relaxation I felt—because leading up to it, it had been total and continual pressure building up—so feeling that rising pressure, and rising to victory and all that pressure dropping away—it is a feeling of liberation I couldn't get enough of. If I have another chance, I'd like to fight again.

Teraji points out how the Japanese media helps perpetuate the notion that boxing is a sport for smaller men:

> The world title fights they show on TV are all light weights. So I think the image of boxing here is that it's a sport for little guys.
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> In my case, I used to watch fights from abroad, so I knew differently. I really never had any "favorite" Japanese boxers. My idols were always Leonard, Hearns, Holyfield, Foreman, and many more.

As Mr. Teraji is now a politician (City Councilman), it's not surprising that a great deal of our discussion revolves around the politics of boxing in Japan. Both he and Mr. Nakamura are highly critical of the Japanese system. Yet as we look closely at how Mr. Teraji locates and aligns himself within these frameworks, it becomes clear that he forged and defined his boxing career within a strange and intimate distance. His mentors—those he most identifies with, is inspired by and aspires to—are foreign boxers he watches on videotape:

> I'd watch the boxers I liked with the idea of copying them. How they moved, and stuff. I never learned from any trainer—just by myself, myself. With my eyes only, I watched the videos over and over again.

With the exception of Nishijima,[11] who has "disappeared," his boxing community in Japan is a community of one:

> I didn't have any sparring partners.

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[11] Former OPBF cruiserweight champion.

Even though he travels all over Japan searching for adequate sparring partners, they all amount to "nothing," or "not worth mentioning." Over and over, Teraji defines himself as a loner, a Lancelot (searching warrior unable to find a worthy opponent), the ultimate outsider. Even when he finally travels to America, "the Mecca of boxing," he finds no adequate company:

> There was this junior middle…this junior middle interim champion there…. So I sparred him…. He was nothing. "Huh?!" I thought. I'd gone overseas hoping to get stronger, and—well…he was no problem…. Then, there wasn't anyone else around middleweight, there were only heavyweights, and I couldn't get anything out of sparring them. I sparred them, but it wasn't really sparring.

Teraji keeps his distance even from those he fought in the pro ring:

> I never had any fights where I really learned anything. 'Cause I got my style from watching foreign fighters, and the level of the fighters I took as my models and those I actually fought was completely different.

Learning to box without much coaching is not uncommon in Japan. Ensuing discussion of Japan-based Ugandan heavyweight Peter Okhello, who Teraji once sparred with, seems to argue the virtues of self-instruction. Nakamura explains how Peter was better before his manager brought in trainer Mack Kurihara[12]:

> I went to see him train when he first came over, and he was incredible, wild. Now they've taken that and boxed it in and trimmed it down and made him small in the process. You understand? No—that kind of fighter you just leave alone—let him do his thing… I think Mack himself knows what he's done to Peter…. Now Mack is a very capable teacher, and people thought he could lead Peter to the title, but…
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> There's a lot of people like that—who try to turn everyone into themselves—he's not really bringing out the other guy's good points…. And with Mack, even if it's a fighter, he'll turn him into a boxer. 'Cause everybody's different.

Teraji relates how he learned to learn from watching foreign boxers:

> I never learned from any trainer—just by myself, myself. With my eyes only, I watched the videos over and over again…. As an amateur, when I went to college, I was told to keep my hands up high to guard my head. All the way up here, very high. But for me, this made it hard to throw a jab. It made my shoulder really tight. But then when I watched these fighters from abroad, they were really very loose, these pro fighters, without even lifting up their left arm…. So I thought, hey, there's one way to do it,

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[12] Hawaiian-American trainer who often works with Japanese boxers.

> and here's another! And I felt I was more suited to fighting this way. So I copied them. It was easier for me.

We might read his complaint about Japanese being "too caught up in style…the same, fixed style," (later in this paper, see Ishida's observation of Japanese tourists lining up to buy Prada and Ferragamo products in Italy) as a criticism of Japanese uniformity and conformity. Teraji then criticizes Japanese boxing trainers for being closed-minded. Nakamura elaborates upon this:

> And that's why world champions tend to come from the same gyms…. If a trainer doesn't understand the power of a world champion's punch, he won't be able to make a world champion of his own. 'Cause his eyes aren't world-class. No matter how hard he watches a world title fight on TV...they don't know what it means to be world-class.

The Japanese have been obsessed with the idea of being "world class" since opening their doors to the world in the Meiji Restoration. Mr. Nakamura's comments remind us of Japan's isolation, its distance and remoteness from "the world." Japan produced its first world champion in 1952. Between then and now, there have been periods when they had no world champions, and there never have been more than a handful of world champion boxers in Japan at any given time. Mr. Nakamura is on the mark: though there are over one hundred boxing gyms in Japan, most of Japan's world champions have come from three gyms: Kyoei, Yonekura, and Teiken.

Though the interview technically comes to an end on Teraji's return to the cliché of ("meat vs. rice") Japanese and foreign bodies, the substantive conclusion comes a bit earlier, with Mr. Nakamura's invocation of World War II:

> We tried as hard as we could, in the past. 'Cause we lost the war. For the losers, well, we got beat up by you, so it makes us pretty tough, in boxing, or any sports, whatever. And all of us have the dream of someday beating America. This goes for business and everything else. But from an American perspective, Japan is small beans, a country America made decisions for, and, after all, a bunch of "yellow monkeys"—no comparison at all…

In Japan, as with ethnicity, the subject of World War II is taboo, and rarely presents itself for discussion. When it does, it seems to come out of nowhere—which is why I think it is always there, just below the surface. It came up once, early in my tenure at Osaka Teiken gym, when I went out for dinner with the trainers after a day of fights. Mr. Matsuda, the most senior trainer, was shaking his head, talking about how much bigger a country America is than Japan, and what a mistake Japan had made taking on such a bigger country. I said yes, we probably won because we had so much more resources. At that point, sitting across from me, the head trainer at the time, Haruki leaned over and said:

> Goodman, you know why we lost World War II? 'Cause we fought with our hearts. You fought with science.

That the answers to questions about hungry spirit, past vs. present, Japanese-American relations, what makes a fighter world-class, and so on, are embedded at this stratus of the Japanese consciousness is telling. In considering the importance of fighting sports in post-war Japan, we should not forget that it went, in a very short time, from one of the most war-like, imperialist nations on Earth to a "peace-loving" country whose very constitution (Article 9, written by the United States) prevents it from waging war. In this light, Teraji's use of the above cliché seems like an attempt to retreat to more comfortable ground.

Teraji Hisashi

Nishizawa

Though I had heard of Mr. Nishizawa many times before—given his long pro career at middleweight and above, which began in October 1986, he's fought almost every top-level "big" fighter outside his gym during the past twenty years—I first met him at the WBC Convention in Tokyo in the winter of 2002. He was there with his wife and daughter. They were all very friendly. Mr. Nishizawa seemed interested in learning and speaking English, and related his struggles with the language on his various training excursions to boxing gyms in Australia. He made the impression of a person of great focus, energy, and control. As chance, or the current of events would have it, the JBC had made a standard-defying rule amendment in May 2003, regarding their strict mandatory retirement age of 37. According to the amendment, any boxer who had won a national, regional, or world title, or challenged for a world title and ranked among the top fifteen in the world upon turning 37 would be eligible to continue boxing professionally upon obtaining satisfactory results on a brain scan and thorough neurological examination.

I conducted these interviews from January 27-29 at Yonekura Gym in the Meguro district of Tokyo immediately after Mr. Nishizawa finished his training for the day. They were timely in the sense that he had just returned from losing his first challenge for the world title against the controversial Australian Anthony Mundine.[13] Although he lost, the fight was a success for Nishizawa. With his rather poor professional record and unimpressive outings over the previous year, the challenge was viewed as a token "last chance" fight for the old veteran who really had no chance. Mr. Nishizawa turned that all around and inspired every big (and old) boxer in Japan when he knocked Mundine down in the second round and nearly pulled off a major upset abroad.[14] I could see the change in his eyes—his whole demeanor—since the time we'd met in Tokyo at the convention.

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The boxer who fights in honor of his father or mother is a classic trope in boxing. Many young boys begin boxing because they are encouraged or forced to do so by their fathers.[15] Several of the boxers I interviewed said they became interested in boxing because their fathers boxed or were boxing fans. Many others explain that their interest in boxing stems from never having known their fathers. Sometimes fathers become their sons' trainers, though, according to boxing "folk" wisdom, such pairings are doomed to failure. In any case, filial relations appear to play an important role in the nomenclature of boxing. An investigation of the relationships between boxers and their parents might lead us to ask to what extent boxing is a family sport.

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[13] The former rugby star decided to follow in his father's footsteps when he quit rugby and turned to pro boxing in July 2000. An aborigine and Muslim, Mundine sparked a controversy after September 11th when he commented to the press, "the USA got what it deserved."

[14] January 19, 2004.

[15] Such as Roy Jones Jr., Joichiro Tatsuyoshi, and Hozumi Hasegawa.

Such "loyal son" stories—quickly taken up by the media—are well-known among boxing aficionados. When Ray "Boom Boom" Mancini fought for the world lightweight title in 1981, he was fighting for his father, whose own promising boxing career was interrupted by mandatory military service in World War II. Oscar de la Hoya's Olympic story became the story of a son fighting for the Gold Medal in Barcelona in honor of his mother, who had recently died of cancer. James "Buster" Douglas, a 40-1 underdog against Mike Tyson in 1990, attributed the determination that helped him win to his mother's recent death.

Nishizawa, however, calls attention not to his parents, but to the relationship between the boxer-father and his children:

> The thing that moved me most in Australia was when I lost, the fans, the crowd there, they wanted my little daughter to come into the ring with me. And someone handed her up to me, and when I brought her into the ring, the crowd went wild. The worst thing about losing was having my daughter see me like that, as a loser. So in the future, I'm determined to show my daughter that her father is strong.

In Japan, the boxer (father)-child relationship seems to take precedence over (or is at least equally important as) the relationship between the boxer and his parents. In the West, though this father-child relationship also occurs in story from time to time, it is generally less interesting and less complex. As in Jack London's 1909 short story "A Piece of Steak," the relationship between the boxer-father and child is subordinate, evoking little more than emotions of guilt and responsibility, centering, as it does, on Tom King's inability to provide adequate nourishment for his children, who play very minor roles in the story:

> Yet he alone had eaten. The two children in the other room had been sent early to bed in order that in sleep they might forget they had gone supperless. His wife had touched nothing, and had sat silently and watched him with solicitous eyes. She was a thin, worn woman of the working-class, though signs of an earlier prettiness were not wanting in her face. The flour for the gravy she had borrowed from the neighbour across the hall. The last two ha'pennies had gone to buy the bread. (London)

Cinderella Man, the 2005 depression-era film loosely based on the life of the boxer James J. Braddock (Russell Crowe), takes up a similar theme. Though there is also a "moral lesson" scene in which Braddock plays the role-model, reprimanding his son for stealing, the core of the emotion and motivation derived from father-child relationship revolves around the father's guilt-ridden failure as a provider of food, shelter and clothing. Even in the 1979 movie *The Champ*, though the boxer-father (played by Jon Voight) is motivated to return to the ring to give his son (Ricky Schroder) "a better life," the real complexity of that motivation lies in the Champ's relationship with his ex-wife (Faye Dunaway).

For Nishizawa and many Japanese boxers, the father-child relationship is a much bigger theme. I don't know the origin (or significance) of the practice of bringing one's young children into the ring after a fight, but it has been embraced with great enthusiasm in Japan. Having the names of one's children stitched onto one's boxing trunks is even more popular. Might this be a form of heraldry? Although much of this behavior is imitative—Tatsuyoshi did a lot to popularize both—it raises the notion not only of fighting for, but also being accepted and approved of by one's children:

> When we got back to Japan, my daughter said it's ok if I want to quit. It was that much of a shock to her. To see her father in defeat. If I lose again, she'll have a weak image of me. I can't accept that. In the future, no matter what kind of world my daughter enters—school, sports, or work—I want her to think, "Daddy tried his best, and won, he's strong—and I'm strong too." It's my duty as a parent, as far as educating my daughter, to keep on winning.

Boxers fight for different reasons. Sometimes, not really knowing why they fight, they search for and make up reasons. Other times, the fighting itself is the search for those reasons. I can't imagine an American boxer asking his kid's permission to keep on fighting. In the West that's a spousal discussion. In another interview, when I asked a Japanese boxer "Why do you box?" he replied, "To be a cool father." Perhaps the difference here is that people in the West largely form and define their self-image in relation to their parents, whereas in Japan, people do so in relation to *both* their parents and their children. In contrast with post-war Japan, boxing has become an existential quest, at the end of which lies the chalice of approval. Contemporary Japanese boxers often seem to feel they have something to prove. It may be that in Japan, approval is just as important from one's children as from one's parents. It certainly seemed to be for Nakamura Satoru, a young boxer I observed after he lost by come-from-behind knockout in Osaka in 2003. Back in the locker room, Nakamura was clearly distraught, crying, wailing, and apologizing to his son, who couldn't have been more than four or five years old.

Though it has become a common part of boxing theater, watching someone bring his infant child[16] (often crying) into the ring after a fight has never done much for me. Maybe this is because it has become a cliché, but something seems falsely self-promotional about the whole thing. The children often appear uncomfortable and disoriented. I'm not sure what it is meant to convey—that the father is a respectable family man, or to restore an element of normality, innocence or "cuteness" after the brutality of the fight.[17]

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[16] I don't know how old Nishizawa's daughter is, but I would guess between seven and ten years old.

[17] Yet this act also appears brutal when one considers the infant or child—up past his or her bedtime and ignorant of the event—hauled bawling and disoriented into the ring, uncomfortably hot under the TV lights.

Another aspect of Nishizawa's interview worth noting is the way in which he describes himself as a veteran and pioneer. His comments are pertinent to the changes in society and sport related to aging, health and increased longevity:

> Actually, in boxing in Japan right now, the number of champions in their 30s is increasing, isn't it? In the past, that was something people couldn't imagine—"still the champion after thirty??" But things have really changed in that sense. Until now, I had no road to follow for the future.
>
> Now, I'm cultivating this area, for other boxers as well. Not only boxers—people in other sports as well.
>
> If I were to fight myself when I was in my 20s, it would probably be one-sided. I've raised my level now.

From February 1990 until April 1993 Nishizawa went winless, with a record of six losses, two draws. He describes this period in his twenties as follows:

> No matter what I did, it didn't work. I was getting a lot of injuries—broke my ribs, my hands…. And I couldn't conjure up any images…. I just ran into the wall of life, of my boxing life, and couldn't see anything ahead.

Above all, the quality that has enabled Nishizawa, in his own terms, to become a "veteran," a "pioneer," to "improve" and "raise his level"—even more than hard work, perseverance, grueling training, physical strength or technique—is vision; the ability to see, to "conjure up images." The imagination:

> In this past fight,[18] more than ever before, I was able to see my weak points. And as far as the good points…I really came to see this by myself. Not objectively, but in the heat of battle.
>
> As long as I focus on my image training,[19] with whatever kind of opponent in mind that I have to face, there's no problem.

When I think back to my visit to Yonekura Gym, it all makes sense. High on the wall above the sparring ring, there's a signboard listing the qualities, in order of importance, fighters must develop. At number one, above speed, endurance, power, and so on, is the single Chinese character for "eyes." When I asked the gym's owner, Mr. Yonekura why "eyes" was the most important thing about boxing, he smiled and tapped his finger near his eye—"It's all about the eyes," he said. "Now matter how scary it is to keep your eyes open—and it is scary—you have to look. You can't close your eyes when you throw a punch, or when you get hit. You have to move like this, always watching, with your eyes open. You have to look and learn how to see."

I think the most remarkable thing that comes out of our interview is Nishizawa's emphasis on the importance of imagination, vision and dreams, and the sense of how important they are for him. He smiled a lot during the interview; glowing with discovery, the energy of a person who has found a way to keep going, and to improve. Though he didn't win the world title, by knocking down two world champions he proved something.

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[18] Against Anthony Mundine, January 19, 2004.

[19] Cybernetics.

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Nishizawa had another crack at the world title against Markus Beyer in Germany in December 2004. Again he knocked down the champion in the second round, losing by decision. He went on to fight for the OPBF light heavyweight title, a fight I saw, against Australian Dale Westerman, in which he was sorely outclassed. He challenged for the super middleweight OPBF title against another Australian, Peter Mitrevski, Jr., losing again on points. He then captured and lost the OPBF light heavyweight title, was denied permission to fight professionally in Japan, relocated to Australia and fought twice there during 2007. In 2008, he fought and won in Seoul, Korea.

Nishizawa Yoshinori knocks down Anthony Mundine

Yokozaki

My former advisor in the department of cross-cultural studies at Kobe University first told me about his friend, the former professional boxer and Japan middleweight contender, Yokozaki Satoshi, shortly after I arrived in Kobe in 1999. I remember him telling another professor a story about how, on the subway in Tokyo, Yokozaki got annoyed with a passenger playing his jam box too loud. Not one to mince words, he expressed his feelings to his fellow passenger; an argument ensued, and Mr. Yokozaki punched him out: "that's when I realized I enjoyed hitting people," and he was on his way to becoming a professional boxer.

It wasn't until I became acquainted with Mr. Ozeki, former gym-mate of Yokozaki, former Japan bantamweight champion and current reporter for *World Boxing* magazine, that my eventual encounter with Mr. Yokozaki began to take shape. While talking with Mr. Ozeki at the fights at Korakuen Hall, I expressed my interest in meeting and interviewing Yokozaki. Sempai-Kohai relations being the way they are in Japan, Mr. Ozeki passed the word along.

After retiring from boxing, Mr. Yokozaki took up cooking and became a chef. He has gained weight, and is not tall for a middleweight. Though he might appear intimidating with his shaven head and scar tissue, he was very friendly and talkative, with a kind of spritely, animated voice and gleam in his eye. He approaches his work as a chef with the same tenacity and fullness of endeavor with which he threw himself into boxing and is enjoying his "second life," having returned not long before with his wife from a trip to France, where he studied the native culinary arts he continues to practice back home.

This interview took place on April 14, 2003, at Mr. Yokozaki's workplace, a French restaurant located in the Roppongi district of Tokyo. He invited me to meet and talk with him there in the early afternoon before he began his duties as chef. The interview tapes are full of the background sounds of pots and pans being cleaned and other kitchen preparations.

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There are two things Yokozaki made a point of telling me about himself that don't show up in the interview. The first—that he was "a little punch-drunk"—he repeated over and over at different points, always with a little smile or wry glance. It seemed a kind of inside joke, one that I couldn't quite get. Thinking it over, I come up with the following possibilities. In one sense, he may have been telling me (and himself) that he sacrificed a part of himself in his former life as a boxer—that he made a true and necessary sacrifice. In another sense, the way he said it—with a pursed-lip smile and tilt of the head—leads me to believe he uses this as a kind of rhetorical device. What kind? One that allows him to (1) shape his memory to fit the meaning of his story, to make "mistakes," in history; (2) to put distance between his second life as a chef and his first as a boxer; and (3) to justify his peculiarity—because he's a little "punch-drunk," he doesn't have to conform. Many boxers take up boxing to avoid conforming to the norms of their environment, whether those norms entail gang membership or office work. Living a boxer's life gave Yokozaki the perfect excuse to be himself. Though he's no longer a boxer, being "a little punch drunk" perpetuates the validity of that license. The more I think about it, the more (3) seems on the mark, and that he probably isn't punch-drunk at all.

And what a non-conformist, what a person, what an individualist he is! There is something so refreshing, honest and charming—a rare kind of integrity—about letting himself cheer for both boxers (both friends, sparring partners and opponents of his) at a fight:

> You know Kevin Palmer? We also became friends…. He used to call me over a lot for sparring…. Kevin Palmer and Nishizawa fought for the title…. So I went to see the fight…. So I was, with both—well, not so close with Nishizawa…but I'm friends with both, right? So I thought, well, I guess it's ok if I cheer for both. So when Kevin was coming on, I'd yell "Kevin!" And then when Nishizawa was, "Nishizawa!"

Though he makes no bones about his disapproval and dislike of Mr. Osamu, the owner of his gym, his peculiarity is right in line with the Osamu Gym aesthetic. Mr. Osamu wears a cowboy hat/sweat suit ensemble at all times in public. He lets his boxers learn for themselves. As if the offer of a "California training camp" (dubious) were not enough, the Osamu Gym ad in *Boxing Magazine* also promises instruction on how to throw a "Special Outer-Space Punch"—all superimposed over the silhouette of Mr. Osamu in his cowboy hat. Nishijima Yosukezan was a baseball catcher when he met Mr. Osamu in the Tokyo subway. He fought wearing divided-toe socks (no shoes), and became the first Japanese OPBF Cruiserweight champion. "Powerful Honmo," former Japanese super feather-weight champion and world-title challenger, developed (on his own) a unique way of pushing his opponents' arms away while parrying. A defensive whiz, he's anything but "Powerful." Okadayama Kintaro, a middle-weight journeyman who has also fought at heavyweight, enters the ring as the mythical Gold-Boy Kintaro, wearing a large red bib and wielding an axe. He fights like an apathetic caveman, arms at his sides, switching constantly from orthodox to southpaw. What do these fighters have in common? All are from Osamu Gym.

If you aren't yet convinced of Yokozaki's peculiarity, consider his frame of mind at the time of his rematch with Takehara:

> Then some years later, during the Champion's Carnival,[20] I fought Takehara. That time, my condition was perfect. Now I thought Takehara was strong, but when I watched the videos of his fights, I realized how slow he was. I could see all his punches, and slip them. And I could get in some counterpunches. But during the infighting, his thumb got in my eye. I was ready to die going into this fight—to put everything on the line. And if I'd won, I was going to retire, go to Thailand—I wanted to do Muay

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[20] Annual tournament in which all Japanese national champions defend their titles against the number-one contenders.

> Thai…. Anyway, if I'd beaten Takehara, I was gonna give the belt back right then, and go to Thailand. So I thought, "I don't care if I die in this fight."

Still not convinced? Listen to this:

> When I did roadwork, more than long distances, I'd run short distances, dashes. In the morning, jog five kilos. Then before practice, I'd run 300 meter sprints, with one minute rest, for a total of ten rounds, then go and train.

He's the only guy I've ever heard of who ran 300 meter sprints before gym work. But it doesn't sound that strange coming from someone who admits:

> I didn't wear headgear very much when I sparred.

We see, as the interview with Yokozaki unfolds, the different ways in which he misremembers events of his boxing past. He shows how history is a tool or machine for making meaning, his method impressionistic. The most minute "random"-sounding details apply in pointillist precision:

> My pro debut was in 1983. My opponent in that fight, Nagata, is now running a ramen shop.

The statement inscribes a perfect circularity, a parallel which brings closure: both Yokozaki and his boxing debut "other" have retired and become chefs.

Of the seven boxers Yokozaki defeated, five quit immediately or shortly after they fought. One had been the Japan champion, and another went on to become Japan and OPBF Champion. Of the ten boxers who beat Yokozaki, seven went on to become Japan, OPBF, and world champions. Two others challenged for, but never became champions. Yokozaki slightly blurs these "facts" into a beautiful self-mythology:

> When people fought me, they wound up quitting. Everyone who lost to me quit. And everyone who beat me became a champion.

Though he never became a champion, he constructs connections that make sense of and give meaning to his life as a boxer. He makes himself the gatekeeper ("trial horse"), the crucial test in the life of every fighter, every "man who would be champion" to face him.

While Yokozaki may appear to take liberties with the past, blurring histories and certain facts, he does so with precision. The consummate autodidact, he distinguishes himself throughout the entire interview as a formidable student of boxing history, and a man who makes interesting and precise distinctions:

> Hagler and Chavez weren't my only influences. There was also Barry McGuigan. I watched his videos too, a lot. Then Duran. And Bun Son Gyu[21]—a bantamweight champ from Korea. And Khaosai Galaxy. From Thailand.
>
> Let's see, who do I like among Japanese boxers…. There's no one I really look up to as a model, though there have been many who I can recognize as being good.
>
> Onizuka. I don't like him on a personal level…. What a jerk…but as a boxer, what heart…. He's world class. And then Mr. Gushiken. And in the past, of course, Mr. Oba, Fighting Harada, and Mr. Ebihara.... I don't rate Tatsuyoshi high at all. 'Cause if you look at Barry McGuigan, if he'd been in the same class, there's no way Tatsuyoshi could have beat him.

Yokozaki's take on Kevin Palmer demonstrates an apprehension of body difference, but breaks free, in its honesty and precision, of the Japanese clichés about "black" athletes. According to Yokozaki, Palmer is powerful, but not fast. His punches are "different" and awkward. And it is the Japanese, Takehara—not Palmer—who is more frightening:

> I knew Palmer from sparring before we fought. My first impression of him was that his face was small.[22] His punch itself was different from Takehara's—looked uncomfortable to throw. He was very powerful here. Like in his arms. His punches were like, "Bam, bam, bam!" They'd come in at you from long distance. 'Cause his arms were extremely long. "Zoooom!" it'd come at you from far away. Punches that seemed too far away to land would hit you. He wasn't fast. But he would reach you. And then, he had power. His power was just at another level. It was just his body strength. His upper body—he has an incredible body, doesn't he? I really felt his upper body strength. I wasn't afraid of him, though.
>
> The scariest guy I fought was Takehara.

Pay attention to the way Yokozaki compares himself and his opponents to his foreign boxing idols, and it becomes apparent that he was a connoisseur long before he became a chef:

> Marvin Hagler and Sugar Ray Leonard…Thomas Hearns…Carlos Monzon…Julian Jackson…when you compare Takehara with these guys, you know, there's just no comparison. But his heart was incredible. I really don't have the right to say much about the people who beat me, but none of them were really world-class middleweights—unfortunately.
>
> I love Hagler. But looking at Hagler, I understood that I was not at the world-class level. When I watched him on video and when he was on TV, I said, ah—well, I'm not world class at middleweight.

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[21] Probably Moon Sung-kil, super flyweight world champion.

[22] Japanese often express this impression of foreigners.

> Takehara doesn't belong up there with the world champs. I mean with Hagler, and those guys. This isn't really something that should be said—let's just say I don't think he was that good.

The second thing Yokozaki made a point of telling me which didn't show up in the interview he mentioned only once, but with force and clarity: "The whole time I was boxing, I lived by myself—but I never kept any porno in my apartment or masturbated."

Like many things he says, it may seem a little strange on the surface, but I think it's deeply connected with his sense of integrity, the religious strictness of his regimen, sense of hierarchy, and discernment. The theme is one of discipline and denial, of living up to high standards. Through rigorous study of the game and its history, Yokozaki cultivated an idea of what is "world class." Even though he criticizes Takehara—and in doing so, himself—we must remember—as should he—that he did fight a world champion twice.

Yokozaki Satoshi

Kevin Palmer (below) defeats challenger Song Jin-yul

Kevin Palmer

Kevin Palmer had been an intriguing, mysterious figure for me even before I made it to Japan. For in all the boxing magazines I picked up in the late 1990s, his name appeared in the top ten middleweight rankings, alongside the parenthetical locater "(U.S./Japan)." So I was very happy when I finally got to meet the transplanted New Yorker at his local Tokyo boxing gym. I almost missed the opportunity.

A military policeman and resident on the US Naval Base in Yokosuka, "KP,"—"as my friends call me—and you're a friend"—boxed professionally in Japan from February 1993 until August 2001, winning the Japan and OPBF middleweight titles along the way, and compiling a sterling record, blemished only in his final fight, some two weeks before he left the country "forever," the circumstances and scene of which remain a mystery.

I saw him fight three times, all at Korakuen Hall: his comeback from back surgery against OPBF junior middle king Takechi in the Spring of 2001; his "revenge" match against the Korean Olympian Song, in which he entered the ring to the doom-like beat of James Brown's "Payback"; and his last fight, another rematch, against Hozumi.[23] I thought it was unusual for him to take this fight, which he lost by knockout in the ninth round, only six weeks after the Song fight. It seemed like very poor management. KP had made plans to leave one week after the Hozumi fight for his new assignment in Saganella, Sicily. His entire family had already packed up and left, leaving him to fight alone, I believe, for the first time. Finally, there was the strange, portentous manner in which, before the doors opened, KP's venerable manager (a former OPBF champion himself)[24] Shigeki Kaneko walked up to me and said, "I wonder what kind of fight it'll turn into tonight."

This interview took place January 16, 2001, a cold, dark winter night, at Kaneko Boxing Gym in the fashionable Shimokitazawa district of Tokyo. I wish I'd had a little more time to talk with KP, and that I'd been able to see him some time later, after learning a little more about boxing in Japan. Anyway, I'm happy he did take the time to talk with me, and I hope he's doing well.

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Kevin Palmer's narrative flows in a patchwork quilt of lingo: technical, scientific, military, and street; a composite of who he is—technician, Navy man, MP, boxer, New Yorker, American. In Palmer, the languages and ethos of boxing and the military achieve a fusion; both are forms of science. For Kevin, boxing truly is "the sweet science." When he talks about the difference between the "old" Kaneko Gym and the new one, he describes the difference in terms of "evolution":

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[23] Hozumi Naotaka, former Japan and OPBF champion and world-title challenger.

[24] Mr. Kaneko won the OPBF featherweight title in December 1953, and defended it several times. He also fought Sandy Saddler.

> [T]his building wasn't the same at all. As a matter of fact, this is a new building. The building that I came to was very old, and—wooden floors. And it was very old, and in fact, it was only one level. Now this, this building is two levels. And when I first came here, everything was on the ground floor. And like I said, it had wooden floors, and you can look in the gym and tell that it was old. That's how long I've been here. And since then, evolution. Evolution took place, and things changed…

The above passage is also notable for its repetition. Though his attention to "wooden floors," and "two levels" instead of "one level" may seem like dunderheaded observations, they aren't. Kevin Palmer and the physical structure share an intimate connection—it is likely that the new building owes its construction to the monetary benefits of Kevin's success in the ring. Palmer saw the gym grow and evolve as he grew and evolved as a boxer.

In explaining what he did "to push [him]self a little bit more," he employs the terminology of exercise science:

> Well, you know they got the um, polymetric[25] [sic] exercises. Polymetrics [sic] is dealing with endurance, sustained endurance and sustained stamina.

He moves from a tautological definition of sparring to sparring (training) as "chemistry." He applies the laws of physics, paraphrasing Newton's Third Law. When he insists on the necessity of reflection, employing the terms "understanding" and "analysis," he embraces scientific method:

> It's always different when you're sparrin' someone, because you never know what to expect. Sparrin' is sparrin', and it's all about training, it's not about goin' in there and trying to hurt your sparrin' partner and trying to knock him out or nothin' like that. Sparrin' is just what it is, it's about trainin'. And the more you can get in there and learn—what you doin—and what you did, and as a result of what you did what happened—you know, you have to understand everything—you have to understand, it's a chemistry. It's a chemistry, and for every action there's a reaction. And you have to understand that, and see what you did wrong and see what you did to make that happen. So you have to analyze it.

For Kevin sparring (and boxing) is "a learning experience." He emphasizes this throughout the interview, differentiating his attitude from that of the Japanese "all-out war" approach to sparring, and when talking about sparring with an "old hand" trainer at Gleason's Gym in Brooklyn.

When I ask if he's been in the gym longer than any other boxer, he replies with a stimulating mix of diction:

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[25] Plyometrics: "exercises that use explosive movements to develop muscular power" (Wikipedia).

> I think so.[26] Honestly speaking, I think so. I think the manager can verify that to the max.

In Kevin's imagination of his training schedule for the world title fight he was offered but didn't take, more of his street talk, clichés, military slogans and technical jargon emerge:

> I got the offer, and I was gonna do it, I was gonna take the fight…. And *I was in about 70% condition*. And with that two weeks notice…we would have had one week to get some good trainin in, and then we would have had another week to fly to the States, and uh…*stabilize*. But *I would a got up to about at least 80% condition, 85% condition*, which would have been good enough for me *to be in there*, 'cause, you know, *if all else would have failed, therefore* if things didn't work out right *when the fight was goin down*, you know, um, I just would have had ***to*** *proceed with precaution* [emphases mine].

Another point during the interview where KP repeats himself occurs in his narrative about how he went from fighting "smokers" to joining a Japanese gym. Receiving no response from the All-Navy Boxing Team in America, KP enters an amateur boxing tournament at Camp Zama. There he meets the manager of Kaneko Gym, who gives him his address:

> He saw my abilities, he saw what I had to offer, when he saw the exhibition bouts, and he knew that what I was sayin wasn't no joke. He gave me his address, and he said if I'd make it to the gym, we'd go from there. And I'd never traveled on the trains at that time by myself at all.
>
> Q: How long had you been in Japan at that time?
>
> Uh…three to four years. At that time I was at Atsugi base. Now I'm in Yokosuka base. I'd never traveled on trains alone by myself, and he gave me the address, and I told him that I'd never been there before, and he didn't think that I was gonna make it. But I showed up the next day, and I was ready. I found it by myself, and I was—well, I had some problems, I asked—but I was determined. I wanted to do this, and I found the place, and I asked some questions, and I found it—

From my own experiences on and just outside American military bases in Japan, and my encounters with American military personnel stationed there, I have a feeling that most US servicemen stationed in Japan never venture outside certain prescribed zones, e.g., those bar-filled streets just outside the bases that serve as barriers between the nearby towns; a few Roppongi night spots that cater to American military, and the bars and clubs in Tokyo's "America-Town." Even when they venture out to these spots, they do so in packs, and rarely go off on their own. Thus, for a U.S. military man stationed in Japan, moving from the base to civilian Japan is a big move. Shut out from boxing in the United States, KP undertakes that move—on his own—effectively "goes native," and navigates the foreign terrain.

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[26] Kevin in fact was the oldest, most senior, most accomplished boxer at his gym—a very rare feat for a foreigner in Japan. The ad for Kaneko Gym in *Boxing Magazine* was adorned with his likeness. Kevin also was not the first "black" middleweight boxer handled by the Kanekos. In the 1970s they managed Japan and OPBF champion Cassius Naito. Naito's father was an American military serviceman, his mother Japanese.

The fact that he did so relates to his own sense of being an outsider, an unknown and mysterious figure:

> When you shoot my name around back in the States, some people know it, some people don't. And it's just because I'm not fightin in the States. They see my name on paper, and they, and the first thing they see is "Kevin Palmer—number five—number three—who is this guy?" You know, he's fightin in Japan. "Who is this guy here?" Everybody's curious…. So everybody curious, and then they—"…w-what's his record? His record is twenty three—oh—and one, you know, he's undefeated. Wow, what is he doin? Who is he? Do anybody know him?" So—don't nobody know him—yeah, yeah, exactly.

Our interview ended rather abruptly, as it was getting late, and KP had to drive back to the base. So just before he left, we talked briefly of his fellow American military boxer Rick (Roberts) Yoshimura's[27] upcoming world title fight:

> You know, for some reason or other, I always like to go for the underdog. I mean, if there's a person that doesn't have a chance, I always some kind of way that he'll pull it off. And I really hope that for Rick. Because right now he is the underdog, but I really wish him the best and hope he can pull it off.

When KP talks about Rick as an "underdog," he's talking about himself:

> So, I mean…it doesn't matter what the situation is, whatever the fight is. I know that I have a lot of confidence in my skills. And I know that I'm capable—what I'm capable of doin. And I also know that whatever the competitive level is, I can rise to the occasion.

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[27] Former Japanese lightweight champion. US Air Force, formerly stationed in Japan. KP is referring to his world title challenge against Hatakeyama, which he lost by controversial decision.

Amada

I became aware of the existence of Amada Hiromi several years ago while watching K-1[28] on TV. This mixed-martial arts spectacle was booming, and I remember being impressed by this rugged-looking Japanese fighter who simply refused to kick. A lone boxer among karate men, in plain boxing trunks with none of the flashy Eastern frills, he really stood out. I saw what potential he had.

The next time I saw him, it was in person, outside Yoyogi Arena,[29] where, dressed in his Sunday best, he accompanied a curious-looking young entrepreneur who I soon came to find out was the newest boxing gym owner in Western Japan.[30]

While working as a boxing trainer at Mutoh Gym, located in the Nagai Park area in southern Osaka, Amada persevered in his career as a K-1 fighter. He also sparred regularly with two other boxing "big guys"—former Japan and OPBF middleweight champion Araki Yoshihiro, and Ishida Nobuhiro. This interview took place in the office of Mutoh Gym on October 12, 2004.

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Amada distinguishes himself as an outlaw, an outsider, from the very beginning. He's arrested for street-fighting simply because he has "all this energy." Though boxing is something "fun," like baseball and golf, the boxing coach won't let him on the school team because he thought "I'd use it for fighting." Even so, he takes on the role of outlaw with a kind of whimsical practicality. He does boxing because it is fun and less dangerous than street fighting. He studies law because he's an outlaw:

> My major was law. Just wanted to study it. It was interesting. Why? Well, if you know the law, it can help you, can't it? Like for whatever bad things you do, if you learn what kind of way you'll be punished—that's why I got into it.

All middleweights in Japan are in some sense outsiders. Once an outsider, always an outsider. Amada leaves the world of boxing for that of K-1, where—a boxer among kickers—he's even more of an outsider:

> I've lost to Musashi every time, but he's not that good. I never really understand why I lost to him. It's like—"what the?" Like they give him the decision. They don't like boxers, so I'll have to knock him out to beat him. If we fight to a draw, he'll get the win. If I win, it'll be a draw. 'Cause

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[28] Similar to kick boxing.

[29] Famous arena in Tokyo.

[30] Takashi Edagawa, owner of Mutoh Gym. He later became my English student and confidant. Also manages Nashiro Nobuo, current WBA super flyweight champion.

> it's geared toward Karate. And because Musashi's sensei is the referee. Musashi[31] hasn't lost to any other Japanese.
>
> In K-1, you run in the morning, right? Then around 2 pm, spar. And at night, practice kicking. But I don't need kicks, so I don't practice them anymore.… I'm much better with my hands. I can use them more freely…. When I first started, nobody could get out of the way of my punches. "Hey, this is easy!" I thought.

As before, his outsider status is founded on a practicality and ease—unlike many boxers who become K-1 fighters, Amada went through a long apprenticeship, learning the intricacies of kicking and defending against kicks:

> Legs are longer than arms, right? So I felt there was a little more distance than in a boxing match. And punches come at you with no motion, but you can see the motion of kicks, so I had to punch while shifting to lessen the shock of the kicks.
>
> So you shift the angle and it doesn't hurt.… Absorb the kick and punch back, or slip it and come back with a return blow. It took me about two years to figure this out. At first…the kicks hurt for a whole year. When I got to the point where if I rolled with it a little, it didn't hurt, I got that down in about two years, and it was ok.… Look, my bone is messed up, right? When you kick, your bones get thicker. But I don't kick.

Amada is a studious fighter; for him learning involves both brain-work and a physicality such that it actually changes the structure of his bones. He learns and lives primarily on his wits—more precisely, via proprioception. We can see why he admires his Dutch Masters, Peter Aerts and Ernesto Hoost, in his poignant description of their divergent pedagogies:

> Ernesto Hoost, Peter Aerts. Holland—a year after my debut, I spent a whole year in Holland…. We practiced together all the time. I'm very close with Peter Aerts. He's always smiling and laughing. Still going, he's been in K-1 over ten years. Hoost too. They're both good guys. Ernest Hoost is like a school teacher. That's how he teaches in the gym, it's like he's writing on a blackboard. Peter, he hits you "Whack! Whack!" full-on, and says "see, it hurts like this, doesn't it?" He teaches with his body. "If it hurts, get out of the way." He hits you on purpose, and asks, "why did you get hit?" And if you get hit again by the same blow, he gets very angry! But since he teaches you with his body, you learn very quickly. They're both very different in the way they teach, yet both very intelligent, very good teachers.

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[31] Japanese K-1 champion.

Amada's mode of expression stems directly from his kinesthetic intelligence, and finds form throughout the interview in his prodigious use of onomatopoeia:

> When I was cutting weight, I'd only eat one plate of pasta every three days. And even when I ate, I'd get cramps in my hands—"Arghhh!"
>
> [W]hen the kick and your body meet, it's one instant. "Whack!" hurts, but "whaa-aap" doesn't hurt, right?
>
> At first, "uggh!" the kicks hurt for a whole year.
>
> When you're winning—boom, boom, boom, three times in a row, all the sudden you find yourself up against a monster.
>
> Bernardo[32] was good at boxing. I think…if we fought now, I could beat him. I'd just started out, and…I didn't have enough muscles. So when I ran into him, he just shoved me, blew me over. Bumped into me, "Bam!" then came on with punches, "Boom, Boom, Boom!" And I got knocked down.
>
> [F]oreigners, even when you hit 'em on the chin, they just go "Grrr!" and laugh, and so on. Butterbean was like that…so even when I hit him, "Ho, Ho, Ho," he'd laugh! [Laughs]
>
> Michael McDonald[33]…that guy is good at boxing. I lost—but it was a high kick. I was blocking, but the kick "zip!" slipped right in there, "bonk!" on my chin.
>
> When I fought Mark Hunt,[34] I…broke my pelvis. It was terrible. When I went down, I went down—"snappp!" The rings in Australia are really hard. "Man, this ring is hard!" I go down, "booom!" I hear this "snappp! Ah…! Oh no," I thought.
>
> Butterbean[35] had tremendous power…sometimes I was able to avoid his punches—"swish, swish"—they'd go by…. But when the fight was over, my neck was tipped to the side like this, and I couldn't move it. My neck wouldn't straighten out. I was like "Ah gha-gha-gah!" Went to the hospital—"You've got whiplash."
>
> Butterbean wasn't that fast—but he was a little fast…. When he swung and missed…how should I say this…the sound it made was incredible: "VOOOOOM." I'm serious. It made this horrible sound. That guy is dangerous.

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[32] South African K-1 champion.

[33] Canadian K-1 champion.

[34] K-1 champion from New Zealand

[35] 400+ lb. boxer/K-1 fighter.

> Heavyweights are like "Grahhh-ahhh!" But middleweights have skill, punch and slip, then punch again.

In these excerpts and throughout the interview, Amada touches on many recurrent themes in Japanese boxing. These include: ethnic body differences (the size and "chin" of Samoans and other foreigners); technical "scientific" approaches to boxing and training methods (weight training, methodical way he trains to avoid punches in his fight with Butterbean); fighting spirit, or "heart," and boxers of the past versus those of today; and the difference between middleweights and heavyweights, which unlike most Japanese, he sees from a heavyweight's vantage point.

All of these themes are important to Amada. I want to draw attention to how they intertwine, emerge and coalesce to form perhaps the most instructive stories of his life as a fighter—stories of injury and recovery:

> I'd just started K-1, when I joined Team Andy—for about six months. We trained for so long. Then I broke my ribs in training one time, and quit team Andy. I also fought Andy. I was down three times, but the first was a slip. The second really did hurt, and I went down. But the third was a slip, but the referee said it was over, stopped it…. Low kicks hurt a lot. But now they don't. Now I got used to them.

His story about training with the legendary Andy Hug[36] becomes his story of fighting Andy; the broken ribs are just background, never mentioned again. He appears to be honest about what hurts him and what doesn't. Though going from lowest man on the totem pole in Team Andy to actually fighting Andy illustrates significant growth, the story also reconfirms his overcoming the pain of kicks, and thus, his growth as a fighter.

> When I fought Mark Hunt, I had a hernia, my back. Even though I got a hernia before the fight—I said, "Hey look, I gotta hernia, there's no way I can fight." They said: "You gotta fight. So I got on the plane and flew to Melbourne, in Australia. Then I got knocked down in the first round, and broke my pelvis. It was terrible. When I went down, I went down—"snappp!" The rings in Australia are really hard. "Man, this ring is hard!" I go down, "booom!" hear this "snappp! Ah…! Oh no," I thought. I couldn't even walk. It was broke. I went to the hospital after returning to Japan. The reason was that fight finished at twelve o'clock at night. Our flight left the next morning at 5 a.m. So if I'd gone to the hospital, I'd have missed my flight. So I got on the plane without going to the hospital. Then they took an X-ray, and it was broken. And on the plane—it was economy—I was like this, scrunched up, for six or seven hours. It hurt so much I couldn't sleep.
>
> Now it's healed. That was already three years ago. It takes time. Went for acupuncture, Eastern medicine. Healing with heat energy from the hands.

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[36] Swiss K-1 fighter. First ever K-1 champion.

> I broke this leg right? It happened when my leg was extended, so I can't bend it any further than this. I broke it, and the nerves got pinched, so I can't move this leg anymore than this. There's all these nerves running through the middle bone, and they got pinched, in the backbone—the bones got knocked out of whack, which pinched the nerves, plus, I broke my pelvis, and I broke this leg—pinched two of these, and couldn't move my leg. It was terrible. Took me six months to get better. Couldn't walk for three months. I played Pachinko. Used to like it. I didn't use a wheelchair or crutches, just walked like this, dragging my leg along. My hernia got better too. My pelvis healed pretty quick, after six months, but the hernia didn't get bet-ter for two years. Without surgery. So then I started lifting weights. Up until then, when I'd lift weights, the next morning I couldn't get up, it hurt so much. Now, it's no problem.

Amada's story of his fight with Mark Hunt becomes a litany of injury, and then of recovery. It too, is a reaffirmation of his belonging in the society of fighters. Injuries for fighters aren't the same as they are for non-fighters. Explaining he cannot fight because of a hernia, he is told to fight with the hernia—and he does so.[37] Because his flight leaves at 5 a.m., he doesn't go to the hospital until back in Japan. Midway through his narrative, it turns out he didn't just break his pelvis, he also broke his leg and pinched several nerves. Still, he doesn't use a wheelchair or crutches, he just "drags" his leg around for three months. At first, he says his pelvis took a long time to heal; later, when compared to the hernia, he says his pelvis "healed pretty quick, after six months." And when his hernia finally does heal, he is able to lift weights—which he was never comfortable with in the past—and bulk up to better challenge his oversized foreign rivals.

Before his fight with Butterbean, another enormous foreign specimen, Amada applies what he learned in his fight with Mark Hunt, devising a special training regimen to prepare for and protect himself against his physically imposing opponent:

> Before we fought…I knew if I'd gotten hit by one punch, I'd lose. Knew that before we fought…I have a lot of gym-mates, you know? So from fly to middleweight, I boxed twenty people, for twenty rounds, three or four times—once a week, and worked on my eyes. Flyweight punches are very fast, you know? So that was great training. I couldn't get out of the way of every punch—flyweights are so fast. But we did that training, with everyone. It really helped.

It certainly did help, as Amada won a decision over Butterbean, whose power was as dangerous as he suspected:

> Butterbean had tremendous power.... If I'd gotten hit clean, he would've knocked me out…just by getting chipped by his punches, I had whiplash for three days. Couldn't get out of bed. Just layed there, icing it like this.

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[37] See Teraji regarding his fight with Tyrone Jackson in the full interview.

Once again, Amada fights, is injured, recovers, and in doing so, grows. As Amada's stories show, boxers conceive of pain and injuries differently than those who do not box. To some degree, going through constant cycles of pain and injury (and recovery) is, in fact, a requirement for a boxer. As Bryan Turner and Steven Wainwright discuss in their article, *Corps de Ballet: The Case of the Injured Ballet Dancer* (2003), boxers, like ballet dancers, may see their careers and identities disrupted by injury. Yet injury is also mediated through a group consciousness, and "accepted as a sign of vocational commitment." Many boxers, in fact do not consider black eyes, bloody or broken noses, facial swelling and lacerations, broken ribs, etc., as injuries. As we have seen earlier, they also train to tolerate, desensitize themselves to, and hide pain.

When Amada talks about two of the biggest mixed-martial arts sensations in the world, Akebono and Bob Sapp, he makes a crucial distinction between the two, which is ultimately self-defining. Though both are huge and incredibly powerful, and Sapp's record is more impressive than Akebono's, Amada disqualifies Sapp, excluding him from the company of "fighters" because he can't ignore pain and accept injury:

> Akebono, I've sparred with him a couple times. He has incredible power. No stamina though. But wow, what power. One time, in a clinch, he gave me a swat and I did two somersaults when I hit the ground. Just with this little swat, sent me head over heels twice. What power. I boxed him mostly from the outside. I could only hit him in the face a few times, he's so tall. Mostly body. And his body is pretty strong. He hit me about once, and he hits very hard. Sort of bounced off my shoulder into my face. Still, it was very hard. Bob Sapp doesn't spar that much, so that's no good. Sparring is important. I think it's very important. I never sparred him. He's so strong, but he's probably finished, don't you think? He might fight again, but—how should I say this—his heart has been broken. When he gets hit, it hurts, so he'll go down. That's not a fighter. Akebono's a fighter. If he gets a little more technique, he'll get better. And he has to go on a diet. Get down to about 180 kilos.

Amada Hiromi blocks kick from Gohkan Saki

Ishida

My first contact with Ishida Nobuhiro came on the day of his second professional fight, an unbelievably hot July day in Osaka. The fight was held at the "Tomioka School," a little neighborhood gymnastics school adjacent to Kanazawa Boxing Gym, the gym to which Ishida belongs. Inside, where they'd crammed a ring and several rows of folding chairs, it was even hotter. The programs for the fight were printed on red fans. I had come to cheer on my gym-mate—Ishida's opponent—Nakamura Eiji. Nakamura was coming off a big win over his rival Shimoirisa Taisei, and looked in good spirits. I snapped two photos of Ishida that day as he was sitting outside the entrance of the Tomioka School before his fight. The first photo I snapped with my camera, the second, with my mind. In the first, Ishida looks forward, flanked by his trainer, former world champion German Torres, with a look of fatal focus and determination. In the second, as he catches a glimpse of the muscular, imposing and "scary"-faced Nakamura Eiji walking into the arena, his expression changes to one of complete fear and lack of confidence.

I subsequently saw Ishida fight on many occasions. His fights are always entertaining.

*

Ishida is something of an anomaly—even among middleweights—in the world of Japanese boxing. Not only has he boxed from age 11, amassing an impressive amateur record of ninety-nine wins, forty-eight KOs, fifteen losses, as well as a substantial record as a professional (WBA World Ranking, OPBF and Japan Champion), he has done so all the way from flyweight (112 lbs) to middleweight (160 lbs). I believe he is the only boxer in the country to have done that. Even at flyweight, he was 5'10", so he has had the same body type throughout his career. Not many boxers in Japan have twenty years of experience in the ring to draw from. He's also a bundle of emotion, as unparalleled in technical excellence and experience as in his vulnerability, which seems to arise from a combination of lack of stamina, in turn the result of sensitivity and psychological fragility.

One thing that may account for the longevity and excellence of Ishida's boxing career is his strong sense of boxing as play—also rare in Japan—which he cultivated from an early age:

> I've been boxing a long time. The very first time I started, I was a sixth grader. I went with a friend from the neighborhood.… Back then, we just went boxing to have fun. When we didn't want to go, we'd just goof around at the Daiei in Kyobashi, or just hang out in Kyobashi.

When he talks about boxing, it's clear that he enjoys it. He uses the words "fun" and "happy" in connection with boxing more than any of the Japanese boxers I've interviewed:

> I trained there for about two years—when I was in sixth and seventh grade. Then I thought I should study for the high school entrance exams, so I quit. I enjoyed it. I didn't really do any other sports.… Well, I got sick of studying for the high school exams, and wanted to do boxing again.… I went to Teiken through ninth grade. They were having me spar pretty often with pros. I made a lot of friends, and it was really fun.… And those young pros—I'm an only child, so they were like my big brothers, and it was fun.
>
> I don't remember the first pro I sparred with, but there is one that stands out. He was a six-round fighter. The first time we sparred, when I threw a jab, I got hit with a right hook on top of it, and got knocked down…so they stopped it right away. Then the second time we sparred, I kept throwing punches the whole time, and pretty much won. I was really happy. The first time, I was mad, but the second, I did good, so I was very happy.
>
> Kinki University. Because it was Osaka, and also, the money—I didn't need to pay tuition. The scholarship. It was the best in Kansai. My university days…were fun. I really partied a lot, but. Going drinking—beer, anything.
>
> I went to L.A. At first…but the atmosphere of the gym was really good. L.A. Gym. It was like, "I've come to the Mecca of boxing." It felt really good, and the atmosphere of the gym was good. At first, I went for about a month. America was fun—it was…fun.

When I ask him to recall his happiest moment in boxing, he recalls three; two come from his amateur days. The third is from his pro career, but he doesn't seem quite convinced that it is one of his happiest moments—rather, that it ought to be, or ought to have been:

> It was at the Spring National Invitationals. I don't really have much memory of it, but I do remember how happy I was.… The one I remember the most was from my junior year in high school, when I won at lightweight in the Spring. There was a featherweight named Nagashima Kengo. And I—at featherweight, he was the champion. And I was the lightweight champion.
>
> My happiest moment. Well, my at the end, at the Nationals my senior year, the Nationals were—the Namihaya Nationals—were in my home town, Osaka. And I took second place.
>
> I guess it has to be when I beat Mr. Ohigashi. I was happy. I thought I'd break into the world rankings, and so on.

Not only does he enjoy and derive satisfaction out of boxing, he has a deep appreciation of the game of boxing and strategy involved in it:

> [T]hat is the great thing about boxing—you've got these long rounds, and so you've got the strategy, and ways to get points. It's really fun for guys

> who understand it. For people who know boxing—establishing your distance, feints, technique—when they see this, it's very interesting, but for people who don't know boxing, they don't get it. To them it seems like you're looking at each other, just moving around, not even throwing punches.

Still, things change when the "fun" ends—or before it begins—and the situation turns serious. Ishida's hesitation and uncertainty is sometimes apparent in the way he speaks; he seems to channel his internal dialogues, take on a psychological stutter, to second-guess himself and question his memory during our conversations:

> The first time we sparred, when I threw a jab, I got hit with a right hook right on top of it, and got knocked down. Wait—did I go down? I did.
>
> [I]n ninth grade, the entrance exams…well, I got sick of studying for the high school exams, and wanted to do boxing again. Got sick of it. Not that I got sick of it, but…
>
> I got hit with a straight right, lost my balance, and fell, and they called it a knockdown. Oh, at that point I panicked. Panic? Well, I did panic.

Hesitation is a character trait Ishida maintains in speech as well as in the ring. As Michelle, a Canadian English teacher and friend who often trained at Mutoh Gym once told me, Ishida's unparalleled technical superiority is balanced by his hesitation in the ring. When he hurts his opponent, and has them up against the ropes, he always hesitates before going in for the kill, thereby letting his opponent off the hook. I saw this happen in his fight against Matsumoto.[38]

The diehard boxing fans know his weaknesses too—one at ringside urged Matsumoto, once he'd made Ishida wary with a few good counter punches, to "just keep pressing forward, take the fight to him, and you'll be alright!" Ishida himself is aware of this weakness—he describes it surfacing in a memorable amateur bout—though he states that he has "figured it out":

> There was a featherweight named Nagashima Kengo. And I—at featherweight, he was the champion. And I was lightweight champion. Then at the Inter-High, he moved up to lightweight, and ran into me. And I lost a close decision. Lost in the Inter-High, then fought him again at the Nationals. At the Nationals, I knocked him down, but lost a decision again.… He was good. His boxing skills, strategy. Even when I knocked him down, even though he was hurt by that punch, he did some clever stuff, faked me out, that's what he did. How can I say this—he really was hurt—I knocked him down, his knee hit the canvas, so I should have just rushed him, but he acted like he was looking to hit me with a counter punch—he feinted at me, so I didn't go after him. That was a learning experience. I figured it out.

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[38] April 23, 2004.

When I think of these aspects of Ishida's character, I can't help but think of him—and all other boxers—as complex equations. So many of his strengths far surpass those of his rivals, yet these are somehow balanced out by weaknesses that almost seem self-imposed, a function of a self-image that's faltering, or missing a piece of its puzzle. In some ways it seems like the result of a kind of immaturity. I would describe Ishida's personality outside the ring as "soft." He speaks in a soft, placating voice. Despite the fact that at 6′3″, he is one of the biggest boxers in Japan, he lowers himself, constantly stooping and bowing his head in conversation. I have seen this before in young elite athletes. It may be that he really is shy and humble, or that the bricks of his character have begun to crumble behind a façade of humility gone long unrepaired. He's an emotional enigma, and I suspect it may be difficult to find out "who he really is." But if we look at his stories, we can clearly see a child-like lack of confidence and overconfidence in fascinating intermixture. He enters into almost all his pro fights either in an intimidated state of high anxiety, or inflated superiority, underestimating his opponent to such a degree that the fight turns into a comedy of errors:

> In my pro debut…I was trying to look good. So I was dropping my guard and taunting my opponent, and stuff, I think that's pretty cool. I didn't do that as an amateur. So I dropped my guard in the fight. And I didn't train for the fight. I was overconfident, and right when my feet got tripped up "Bop!" I got hit with a straight right, lost my balance, and fell…
>
> Nakamura Eiji's face was scary. His face is scary, isn't it? For my second fight, I wasn't nervous at all.[39] My body was also in shape. It was my second fight, and Mr. Nakamura had a lot of fights.… I knocked him down, but they didn't call it a knockdown. It was hot. [Before the weigh-in] I didn't think I'd weigh enough, so I went and ate at a nearby restaurant, then got on the scales.
>
> Haris was strong. Strong, Indonesia champion. And, I think—I think if he had really tried, I would have lost. He was skilled, he could punch, had good stamina. Indonesians come here to fight for the money, don't they?
>
> Haris Pujon—probably, if he'd really tried, I would have lost. I don't know—but when Indonesians come to fight in Japan, they hardly ever win, do they? I thought about that before the fight.… At first I thought he'd probably just take a dive in the second or third round. So I went in throwing punch after punch, but he didn't show any sign of going down at all, so I was like, "hey, this isn't right! This isn't right!"
>
> My preparation for the fight…at that time, I was still working. At the kids' home. When I was working, we had a camp with the kids until three days before the fight. And we played in the river for half the day…. So I thought he'd go down in the early rounds for me, so on the last day of camp I drank too.

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[39] Though he says this, I was at this fight, and happened to be standing right next to Ishida, who was sitting down as Nakamura walked past him into the arena before their fight. Ishida looked absolutely petrified.

> Kevin Kelley was scary looking. Number-one in the world…former number-one in the world, the mandatory challenger.… I didn't really have a strategy, just keep my guard up…it was scary…to fight a world-ranked fighter. An aborigine. His appearance and body were incredible.… His power was incredible.… But then when we got in the ring, I don't think he was really that different from the other guys I'd fought. So when I knocked him down, I thought I was gonna win, so I sort of took it easy in the second half. And my opponent was a foreigner, so I thought I'd definitely get the win, and I slacked off in the later rounds and took a break. …Hit him on the temple. And he went face down. So I thought, "oh, I've got this guy beat." I was thinking that as the fight was going on, and I was figuring on that too much, and things came out differently.

There is something child-like too, in Ishida's naïveté that strikes me as particular to the world of Japanese boxing. He has to go outside that world, to the Mexican resident trainer German Torres, to learn how to feint:

> At first I went to All—All Gym. German. I wanted German to teach me. He was so good, technically, his skills, technique. There were many things in that area I wanted to learn.
>
> Q: What did German teach you?
>
> How to use feints, how to feint...act like you're throwing to the body, and throw to the face.

Still, Ishida appears to have developed a more mature, retrospective sense of his own abilities and limitations:

> [A]t the Nationals in my senior year…I met a fighter named Iyaegashi in the finals. Iyaegashi. He was much better than me, I couldn't hit him at all, and he was much stronger. I couldn't touch him. He was a southpaw, and I think he was very skilled at keeping his distance. Everybody was telling me, "he's a hard puncher, he's a hard puncher," but what surprised me more than his punching power was that I couldn't land any of my punches. I think, if I fought him even now, if he had the same moves as the Iyaegashi back then, I probably couldn't beat him. No way.
>
> Nader Hamdan was good. Probably on a different level. Even in the left hand match-up, I couldn't match him at all. I couldn't respond to his jab. His timing was different. I couldn't make out his timing. It was a learning experience.… Even now, I don't think I could handle it. I guess maybe that's just something the top fighters in the world have. I was doing good through the first or second round, but that's because I was pushing myself harder than the pace I could keep up…. And about the third round, the difference in strength started to open up…so at the end there just wasn't anything I could do. It was all I could do to keep standing.… I felt how much better Hamdan was than me.
>
> When I got the OPBF title, I felt so happy, and had the determination that I could soon be a world champion—at that time. Now, well, I've come to

> grasp over the years what kind of ability it takes to be a world champ, along with a sense of…my own abilities, so honestly, well, I probably don't have what it takes to be world champ. I might be able to challenge for the world title, but without incredible luck, there's no way.

Knowing Ishida, I wonder if he isn't underestimating himself? As painfully aware of his shortcomings as Ishida is, he is trying to address them. Long ridiculed for his lack of stamina, the nasal surgery he had undergone at the time of our interview was in some ways an attempt to overcome this:

> Surgery—yes—on my nose. In all the fights I've had up till now, my nose got bent—and since it got broken and just healed up that way, crooked, no air can get through my nose. So, since I've just been breathing through my mouth. The whole time. How many years it's been, I don't know.

He's also making efforts to change his character by changing the way he behaves in the ring:

> I've got a different theme: letting my hands go and going for it. Throwing a lot of punches. After all, I'm thinking I want to give the fans a fight they can appreciate. Doing it for the fans—that's right, absolutely. You know, I—I've been told many times, your fights aren't exciting. I really have. Many times. So I want to box for the knockout. I haven't stopped many people.

The fact that he feels he has "reached the bottom," especially when he is consistently ranked as the number-one contender in Japan,[40] among the top five in Asia, and top twenty in the world, a constant threat to his Tokyo-based rival, Crazy Kim:

> Why do I box? Now?... [I]n my sixth fight, I got the…OPBF title. Then I failed in my first defense, lost. That was in my first ten months as a pro—getting the title—and my time as a champion was only about two months. So I lost the title, then fought and lost for the Japan title many times, OPBF too. Now—I think I've reached the bottom, so, maybe it's a strange way to put it, but I want, one more time, to show everybody what I can do. Become—I want to be champion. I don't care what champion. I want to be champion.

It's even more interesting to hear him talk about pride. Ishida is not your typical Japanese fighter; his sense of pride is different. It's not the kind of "reckless," self-sacrificing, "samurai" pride common among Japanese boxers.[41] His pride is deeply rooted in his technique, his boxing based on staying away, not getting hit, and winning on points. Suddenly he's talking about pride in connection with pleasing the crowd, and going for the knockout:

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[40] Ishida currently holds the Japan Light Middleweight title, which he won December 2, 2006. He is also ranked #7 in the world by the WBA.

[41] See the full interview for his anecdotes about giving up in Sweden, and not "getting up" versus Takechi.

> Why box? Well…for me, the reason I'm doing it now, is just pride. Just pride. One more time…to be champion…people are saying, "Oh, Ishida—he's finished." It's really frustrating, so I want to show them what I can do one more time.

His new focus on "pride" also originates from feelings of being slighted by the press:

> When I was champion, they wrote about me in a lot of newspapers, and they gave me a lot of good interviews, but now they don't come around at all, they don't. And when I was working as Mr. Araki's sparring partner a little while back, Nikkan—Nikkan Sports was there. And there was me, and Mr. Amada, including me and Mr. Amada, there were four of us. The four of us sparred twelve rounds. Mr. Araki was one. Then Mr. Amada, me, and then a four-round boy. So, Mr. Araki and Mr. Amada made the papers, but they didn't say one word about me—just "there were four sparring partners." That gets to you. It's like, come on, at least put my name—"Ishida, the former OPBF champion"—in there too, as one of the four. If they'd at least done that, it would have been ok.

For a boxer who so enjoys the game and talks so often of how "fun" it is, it seems that Ishida is finally getting "serious." Who can blame him for doing so after the way he lost his June 2004 shot at the title (against Kim):

> I calculate round by round, what rounds I win, and the approximate points. And in my last fight, I thought I'd won every round through the sixth, so—you know that clack-clack noise? When the round is about to end?[42] So there was that "clack! clack!" and I waited a second, looked at the clock…. The clock. The clock in Korakuen Hall. I looked at the clock, and right when I let my attention drift, I got nailed by a right hook.
>
> Q: You watch the clock? While you're fighting?
>
> Well, 'cause I was far enough away. If I'm in close, I don't look, but I stepped back, and thought I was too far away to get hit, and when I looked at the clock, right when I let my attention drift…

Ishida is so good, he can sweep all six rounds of the fight, calculating the points during the fight in his head. He's also so good he can watch the clock, and this is why he emerges as a true tragic figure, his very excellence (*hubris*?) the cause of his undoing.

Q: What's the bitterest thing you've experienced in boxing up until now?

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[42] Before the end of each round, a ringside official knocks two blocks of wood together, signaling that ten seconds remain.

> The bitterest thing? It's just been one bitter thing after another, hasn't it? [Laughs]

If I had to choose one story about Ishida, the story I'd tell is the one he told me about working at the orphanage. In a sense, it is the central story of the interview—how his experiences working with orphans motivated him to make the one of the biggest decisions in his life. Never having wanted to go pro, he graduates college and takes a job at a juvenile welfare institution. There, he finds himself again in a kind of "dorm," surrounded by children:

> I quit boxing for two or three years. Didn't want to be a pro. I never thought I wanted to go pro…. I worked there for two years. I was very… very tough, but very fun. Why was it fun? I guess 'cause they taught me things…. I've always liked kids.

What exactly did they teach him? Living with the kids, seeing the hardships they endure (Ishida himself comes from a well-to-do family) and taking them on field trips to enjoy nature, Ishida's desire to box is stimulated again by one of his charges who takes up boxing:

> There just happened to be one kid who had joined the boxing club. So I'd teach him some stuff. He kept it up till graduation, but in the end, was never able to win a fight. Now he's married, and he's working in an office…. I was working out a little with that kid, teaching him…. There was a Worker's Amateur Tournament…and he said "hey, teacher, why don't you enter too?" I wasn't training at the time. I wasn't really exercising at all.... I only trained twice for it…but—somehow, I wound up winning.

Though Ishida dramatically came "out of nowhere" to win the Worker's Amateur Tournament, his victory is not what makes this story beautiful and poignant. Remember—the boy who inspired him to enter "was never able to win a fight." The beauty and poignancy of the story—what the kids "taught" him—and what I might also learn—is here:

> I thought I'd like to try, to accept the challenge once of doing something I could only do "now."

Ishida Nobuhiro