

The Knockout by Gail Lustig

If anyone should be telling this story it should be my father, the late Donny Loon, who passed away on 16th January 2011. It is the kind of story he liked hearing, reading, telling, and retelling!

I have my brother, Stanley Loon, who has been blessed with an amazing memory, to thank for some of the details, and also my cousin Hilton Loon who recalled these events from decades ago.

The story actually really begins in Ponevezh, Lithuania where my grandfather, David Loon and most of his five brothers, Arthur, George, Lazar, Issy and Maurice and one sister, Hetty,

were born. The Loon brothers enjoyed a close family and social life. They supported one another in many ways. The family connection was always particularly important to them, and their children also developed close ties, even when the family had moved together to Johannesburg.



David Loon had been born with clubfeet. His feet turned inwards, and toes pointed downwards, which posed a serious handicap to his motor development. The congenital problem for which he was teased endlessly might have been what spurred him on to take up boxing which was very popular amongst the Jewish youth of Lithuania. He excelled at the sport and before long he was given the nickname of Siki, after a French-Sengalese light heavyweight boxing champion in the beginning of the last century. David took time to teach his son Donny the punches and rules of boxing and although Donny never formally took up the sport, he certainly had a good knowledge of it.

In 1950, Donny Loon, now a young doctor, left the family enclave in Johannesburg and settled in the Cape Town's northern suburb of Bellville with Rita née Cohen his young wife, who had grown up in the southern most city in Africa. He set up a general practice and soon became one of the popular family doctors in Bellville where he treated people from every background and walk of life.

Donny hankered after his childhood environment with its warm family atmosphere and exciting prospects, and a spirit that filled him with hope. He had not taken to Cape Town, the city of his wife's family. He was irritated by the soft, white sea sand that got in between his toes and biting on chicken pieces coated with sand on Muizenberg beach where he sat on a beach-chair with a towel over his legs while his family dived into the warm waves of False Bay.

It was perfectly natural, then, that as soon as circumstances permitted, he would pack his Chevrolet and head northwards on the National Road with his wife and baby to visit his parents and cousins in Johannesburg. And so, in August 1952, after a brief stopover in Beaufort West, Donny travelled forth, hour after hour along the lonely road until they reached Magaliesburg, near Johannesburg. The family had booked in at the Moon Hotel, a modest holiday venue.



How thrilling it must have been to discover that the Moon Hotel had been chosen as the boxing training base for the world championship fight where the young Australian bantamweight champion Jimmy Carruthers, was to fight South African, champion Vic Toweel, of Lebanese roots, in November 1952. This would be the first time since 1908 that an Australian would be fighting for a world title.

It didn't take long before Donny met Jimmy and an instant rapport developed between the two. Donny learnt that Jimmy was one of eight children born to an English wharf worker in Sydney who had revealed boxing skills at an early age. Jimmy was friendly, a little lonely, with an open personality and although devoted to a tight and demanding schedule for training, enjoyed Donny's light-hearted and warm interest in him, his stories and jokes and his knowledge of boxing.

Jimmy and his trainer shared some pleasant hours talking to Donny and Rita who loved a laugh and the fact that her baby (me) had taken to the boxer who clearly had a way with children. (in the picture below Jimmy is posing with children at the hotel and holding me in his arms)

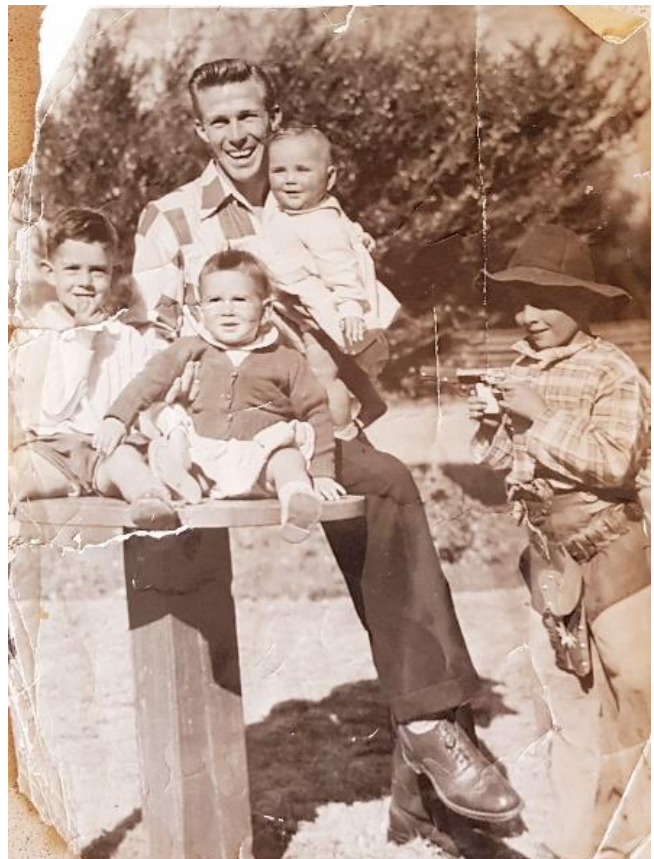
Before long, Donny found himself drawn into the pending fight

between Toweel and Jimmy. It was clear to him that Jimmy had a great chance of beating the favourite but he didn't seem to have a clear plan of how to go about it.

Toweel was defending the title for the fourth time. He had won 200 bouts before turning professional, and now, on home territory, it seemed that everything was in his favour. What was apparent was that Vic was slow to get started in the ring whereas Jimmy was quick and agile with a machinegun like hand speed.

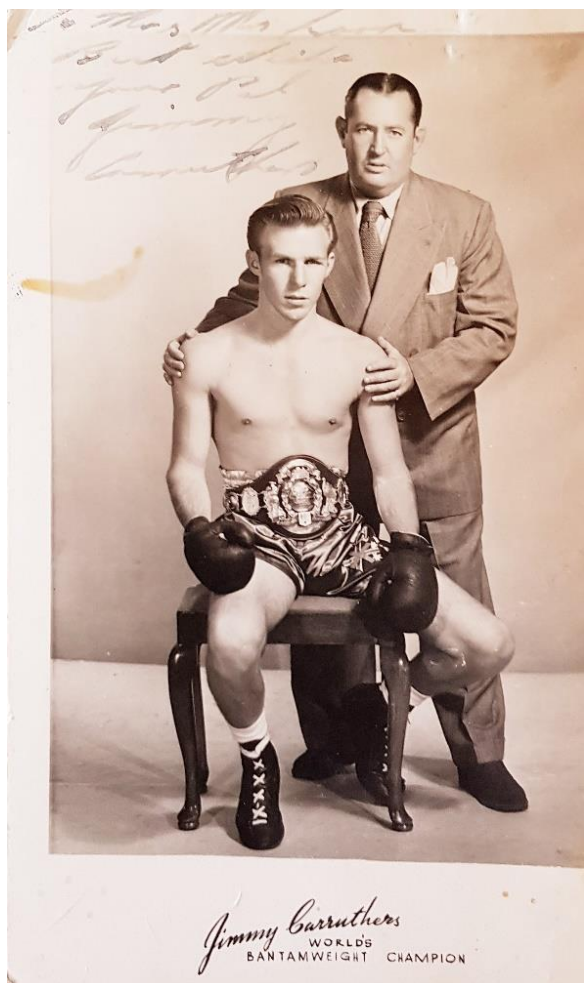
Before long, Donny realized that the way to go about beating Toweel, was to move like lightning straight after the bell, pull as many punches as possible, thus surprising his opponent and hoping for a knockout.

He proposed his plan to Carruthers' trainer, teaching him how to use the stopwatch he had with him (a useful instrument in a doctor's medical bag), in the training program, timing Jimmy's responses and reaction time. And so it happened that every morning for the next week, just as the sun rose, Donny would get up early, secretly meet Jimmy in the training ring, before Toweel's team appeared. Over and over, he would demonstrate to Jimmy how to improve his performance straight after the bell until he literally reacted within a split second.



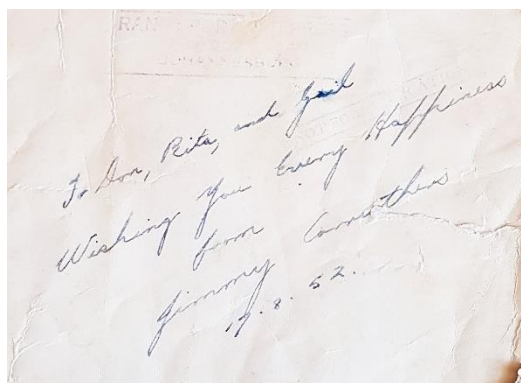
Of course, the Loon uncles and cousins were in on the story and immediately understood that if luck were on their side, it might be the perfect opportunity to back the underdog and score a personal small betting victory.

Before the match, we returned to Cape Town, Donny continued with his professional and family routine, and, but for the signed photos included here, Jimmy Carruthers faded from his mind.



The fifteenth of November came round very quickly. Everyone in South Africa who enjoyed competitive sport, crowded around their radios to listen to the boxing match. The Loon brothers and Donny, by now, loyal supporters of Jimmy, were in on the excitement on opposite sides of South Africa.

And of course, you've guessed it! The bell was sounded; Carruthers pounced on Toweel, and in just on 2 minutes and 19 seconds and with 110 accurate punches, knocked Vic Toweel out, to become the new light bantam weight champion of the world!!



The tactic of moving like lightning after the bell sounded, had worked like a charm.

While tidying my photographs, I came across these two, which in their naiveté, tell so much! One is of Jimmy Carruthers World Champion his trainer. It is inscribed 'To Mr and Mrs Loon, Best wishes, Your pal, Jimmy Carruthers'. The inscription on the back of the snap with me in Jimmy's arms, reads, 'To Don, Rita and Gail. Wishing you every happiness, Jimmy Carruthers 17.8.52.'

Jimmy Carruthers gave up competitive boxing in 1954 at a very young age, having made enough money to settle down, marry and run his pub in Sydney, Australia. In one article I read on him, he was described as a unionist and a proponent of world peace!

And that's when I really understood what had bought the two men, Donny and Jimmy together; hardly the ability to knock out, but rather to change the world in a very different way. Each dreamt of world peace; it would unite them forever and more important be passed down in the image of a chubby baby secure and fearless on the knees of a champion boxer.

You can watch the actual fight on YouTube here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yIgbNSpp41U&t=160s>

Gail Loon Lustig Israel, 2020