

# Million Dollar Senior

Gotta give Stephen Acunto lots of credit for teaching the only credited boxing course in the nation at the age of four-score and eight.

**I**t should come as no surprise that Stephen B. Acunto, the boxing director for Westchester Community College (WCC), works out twice a week for two hours at a time. What may surprise? His age—88.

"I wake up on my workout days and go down to the gym in my cellar," says Acunto, who has lived in Mount Vernon since 1932 and has taught at the college since 1978. "WCC President Joseph N. Hankin told me back in my first year on the job that students would be getting hurt. But we've never had an injury—a bloody nose on occasion is all."

He was introduced to the sport by the man who delivered ice blocks to his family's home. "He was an amateur fighter and always had lacerations on his face," Acunto recalls. "I loved the way he chopped the ice so deftly. He took me to watch my first fight on the Staten Island Pier. He told my parents he was taking me to a baseball game."

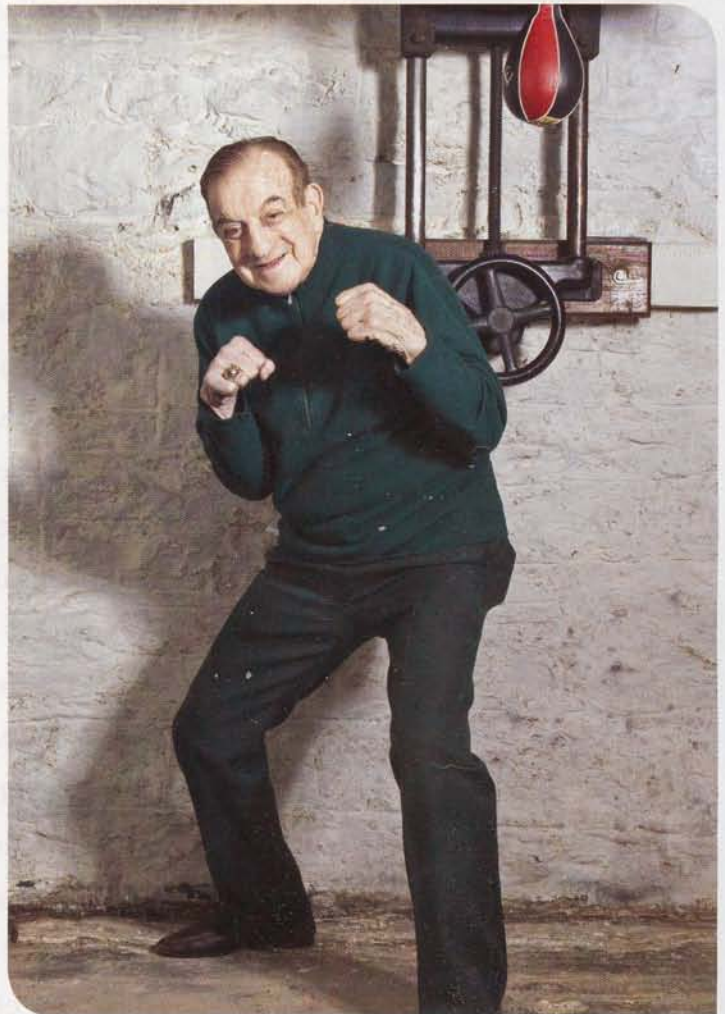
Acunto fell in love with the sport. "Boxing is not just two lugs pounding each other," he says. "Boxing is an art and a science." Acunto's parents didn't see it quite the same way. "My folks were artists: Dad a composer, Mom a singer. They despised my interest in boxing and thought it was for hoodlums. My sister called me 'pug.'"

Nevertheless, Acunto pursued his passion, going to many gyms, including the now-defunct Schulman's on 54th Street and 8th Avenue in Manhattan. "All the thugs and mugs were there. It's where I learned my left jab."

In 1935, he worked with booker Al Weil and earned \$500 in a 10 day period as sparring partner for lightweight champ Lou Ambers. Acunto eventually sparred with lightweight champs Tony Canzoneri, Barney Ross, and Henry Armstrong. To please his mother, after five years of fighting, Acunto switched to teaching the sport at A B Davis High School in Mount Vernon and, eventually, at WCC. The college's boxing program today offers both a non-credit (\$260) and a one-credit boxing course—the only credit course of its kind in the nation. Students from age 15 to 80 have taken the non-credit course. And, though Acunto, once an instructor, never actually fought again, he coached for Sarah Lawrence, Concordia, and Fairfield University, and wrote a column twice a month for *Boxing Digest*. He also founded the American Association for the Improvement of Boxing (AAIB) with heavy-weight champion Rocky Marciano in 1969, judged fights at the County Center in White Plains (1945 to 1960), and built a boxing memorabilia museum in his home.

Heavyweights Gene Tunney and Marciano are among his heroes, but, he says, "my first hero was my wife, Mercedes." She died in 2003. "I was with her for fifty-seven years. She was a gentle soul who helped me however she could. Like my parents, though, she hated boxing."

To learn more about boxing classes at WCC, call Ron Stern in Community Services at WCC (914) 606-6959.



## Acunto's Top Knockout Movies

**(1) *All* (2001)** "Nobody can clone an original person like Muhammad Ali. But Will Smith gave it a nice try." **(2) *Raging Bull* (1980)** "I love the movie because of Robert DeNiro's great portrayal of Jake LaMotta. The real LaMotta degraded the sport taking a dive to Billy Fox in 1947. He was an abuser of women and a real lowlife." **(3) *Somebody Up There Likes Me* (1956)** "Paul Newman does an admirable job as Rocky Graziano." **(4) *Rocky* (1976)** "Ridiculous boxing scenes. Every punch lands?"