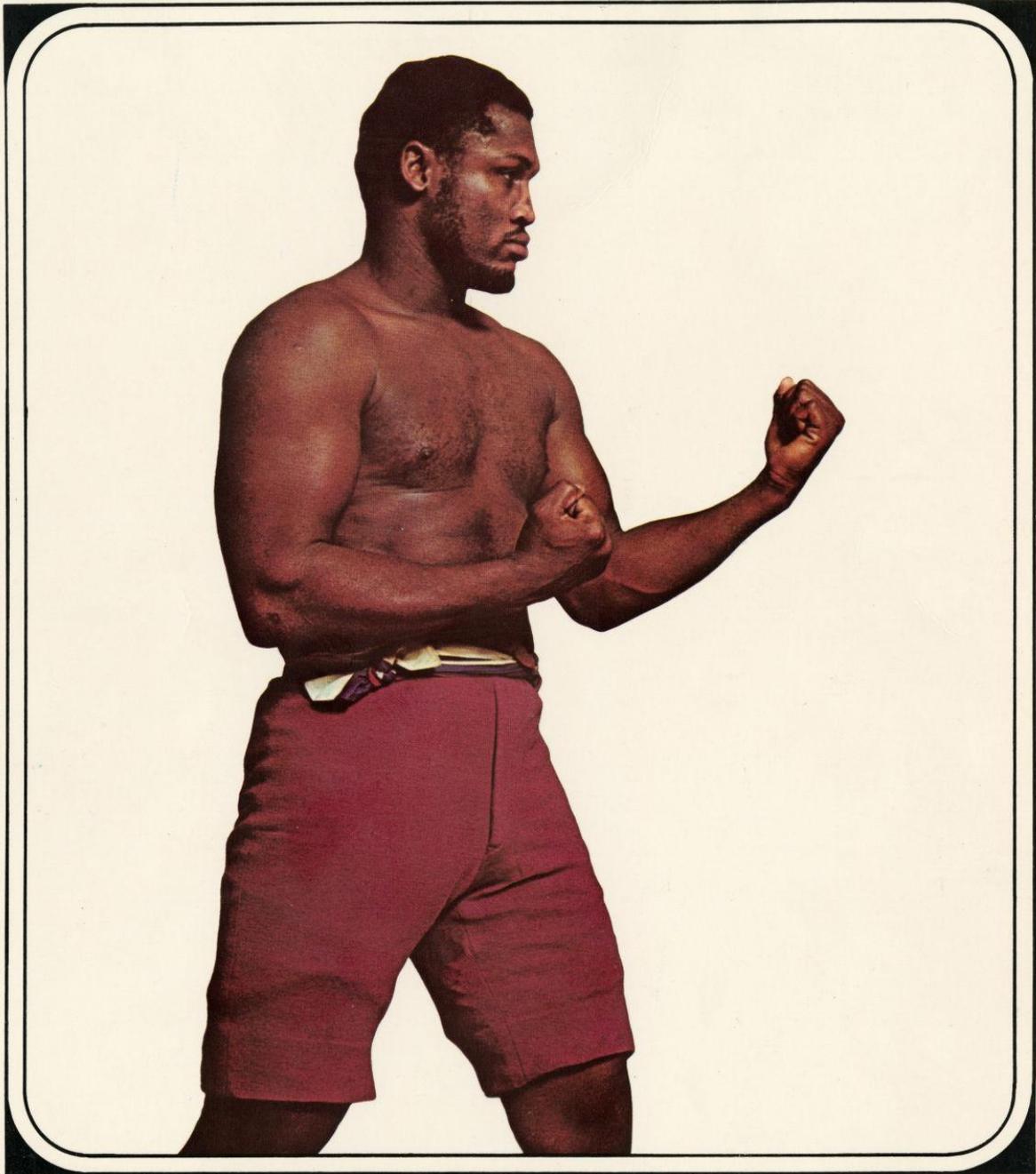


Shatel: Behind the scenes, Bob Mancuso made things happen

- Column by Tom Shatel / World-Herald Sports Columnist / Mar 14, 2015



JOE FRAZIER
WORLD HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION

Bob Mancuso, with brother Charlie, helped bring the NBA's Kansas City-Omaha Kings and heavyweight champion Joe Frazier to Civic Auditorium. The Kings played games there in the 1970s; Frazier fought Ron Stander in 1972.

As soon as I walked in the door, I could feel his presence.



Bob Mancuso
MATT MILLER/
THE WORLD-HERALD

It was Friday for lunch at Cascio's, the iconic steakhouse on 10th Street. The place is busy, the customers walking in.

And you think, maybe this is 1964, and you're here to meet Bob Mancuso about the Cubs and Red Sox coming to play at Rosenblatt Stadium.

You'll both have the luncheon steak, with a side of pasta, and he'll tell you how he plans to sell the exhibition game. He's got some labor folks who are going to contribute, and some Rotary folks are going to buy some ads, sell some tickets.

Maybe it's 1971, and you're here to meet Bob and his brother Charlie, the boss of the Civic Auditorium. And Charlie has some connections in Kansas City, and he's got this idea: We're going to split an NBA franchise with K.C.

No, seriously, this is going to work. Omaha can do this. Could you please pass the bread?

You walk around the place, and see all the tables, people munching on salads with house dressing and conversations bouncing off the walls. On those walls is history: all the posters and T-shirts in frames signed by the College World Series teams and volleyball teams and all the others who visited Omaha and stopped here.

Probably because Mancuso did everything for them, including dinner reservations.

His imprint is here, and everywhere, in Omaha. But Bob Mancuso isn't here anymore. He passed away last Monday. The great city he touched is now minus one great man.

I never saw Mancuso here, doing his thing, his labor of love. But I got the next best thing: lunch with his three proud sons, Bob Jr., Mike and Joe.

It was a beautiful thing. None of the three Mancuso brothers needed a menu. They knew what they wanted by heart. Bet the old man was the same way.

Bob and Mike brought some good stuff, a stack of old articles and photos about their dad and his life. Mike showed classic memorabilia. A program from the Ron Stander-Joe Frazier fight. A program from that Cubs-Red Sox game in 1965. The Kings. The Racers. Hey, remember Baron von Raschke and "The Claw?"

This week we welcome the third NCAA men's basketball event to the CenturyLink Center. You know the other cool stuff we've had. We're a big event town. It's in our blood.

If you want to know when that started, 1964 is a good place to start. That was when Bob Mancuso came home to Omaha.

Mancuso grew up in bustling south Omaha in the 1940s. He graduated from Central High School in 1951 and went to Kansas State. He was friends with Omaha native Bob Boozer. Mike Mancuso said one time his father and Boozer hitchhiked back to Omaha. That's an image, huh?

Bob was a heck of a wrestler. Good enough to qualify for the 1956 Olympic Trials.

He never made those Trials. His father, Joe, a foreman for the Omaha Parks and Recreation Department, fell sick and died that year. Bob came home to be with him. He took a job as wrestling coach at Bellevue High.

He won a state championship there, and then in 1961 he was off to Lincoln, to coach the University of Nebraska team. He was there for four years, and he

became pals with all the budding legends: Frank Sevigne, Bob Devaney, Don Bryant.

It was in 1964 when Charlie Mancuso, the public events manager for Omaha, told Bob he could use some help. Bob came to Omaha, started Mid-America Expositions, and became Charlie's right-hand man.

In many ways, Omaha's right-hand man.

"He was the one behind the scenes making the event successful," Bob Jr. said. "Get the ticket sellers. Get the volunteers. Raise the money. Sell sponsorships. Charlie would say, 'How we gonna make money, Bob?'"

Charlie was in charge of the Civic, brother Frank Mancuso ran Rosenblatt and Bob was everywhere else, a force of nature for the Omaha sports fan.

As good as things are now in Omaha, the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s were a great time, maybe the best time. Sports wasn't cluttered by corporate money. There was a sense of duty, of community, of neighborhood, that was the backbone of this town, with the Diesings and Mancusos leading the way.

The old-school approach always worked best over breakfast tables at Northrup-Jones Cafe downtown, and lunch and dinner at Cascio's and the Sons of Italy. It's hard to mold a city on an empty stomach.

"My dad knew what it took to be successful," Mike said. "He always had connections, and if he didn't have one, he would find one. He would walk down the street and things would start happening."

Charlie Mancuso was the motor behind sports promotion. Bob once credited his brother with getting Creighton into the Civic, the Mustangs and high schools into Rosenblatt and working the deal to get the Cincinnati Royals to become the K.C.-Omaha Kings.

Bob was right with him every step of the way, doing the business and providing the elbow grease to Charlie's vision.

When Charlie passed away in 1977, Bob took over the Greater Omaha Sports Committee and kept plugging. The Kings were gone, but here came the Lancers and later the Racers.

And some other cool stuff along the way.

“They had monster trucks on the Civic,” Joe said. “Remember the motorcycle races in there? They had races, on the cement. It was crazy.”

“No,” Mike said, “It was exciting.”

“They brought in roller derby when it was professional,” Bob Jr. said. “And, of course, All-Star Wrestling. Dad actually coached one of the wrestlers (Jim Raschke) at Nebraska. He went by the name ‘Baron von Raschke.’ He spent some time in Germany and came back with that name. He was called ‘The Claw,’ because he would put the claw on your head and you’d fall down.”

“They set up lanes and had a bowling tournament in the Civic one time,” Joe said. “You see that more today, but not back then.”

The Omaha Sports Committee was the vehicle for hospitality, staging luncheons for the Royals and Racers and the others, honoring student-athletes, making the CWS teams feel at home.

It seemed like everything in Omaha went through Bob Mancuso, if it was going to have a chance. That was certainly my thought in 1996, when, as an officer for the Football Writers Association of America, I wanted to bring the Outland Trophy Dinner to Omaha.

I know nothing about staging dinners except the eating part. So I called up Bob, and tried to share a vision of the Outland Trophy dinner. He immediately bought in. Out of nowhere, hundreds of people showed up. Bob and his sons have made it one of the premier awards events in the country.

Then, suddenly, Omaha voted to build a new arena. And Bob’s world changed.

The Qwest Center Omaha went up, along with a convention center. Then MECA was formed to bring events in, and an Omaha Sports Commission to work with MECA. Soon national and international events streamed into downtown Omaha.

And then a new baseball stadium went up.

Meanwhile, Mancuso and the Omaha Sports Committee were left behind, left in the past, a time soon forgotten. It seemed unfair. But life was moving at light speed in our town.

“Our dad spent 25 years on committees that looked into a new arena and convention center,” Mike said. “They had even talked about a dome stadium. I think to spend all that time on it and not be consulted was troublesome to him.”

The cool thing, though, is that Mancuso wasn’t mad about progress. He loved seeing it.

“He was impressed with the city’s growth,” Bob Jr. said. “The renaissance that we see happening, being part of it. To see the convention center and arena that he had dreamed of, he appreciated it. He loved it.”

That’s why Mancuso’s legacy lives on. We may have impressive structures, but the thing that makes Omaha appealing as a sports destination is the Omaha attitude, that willingness to go the extra mile, the infrastructure of volunteers and hospitality.

If fans come in this week for the hoops and rave about how well things are run and how well they are treated, an old wrestler up in heaven will be smiling. If he’s not too busy making new connections.

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