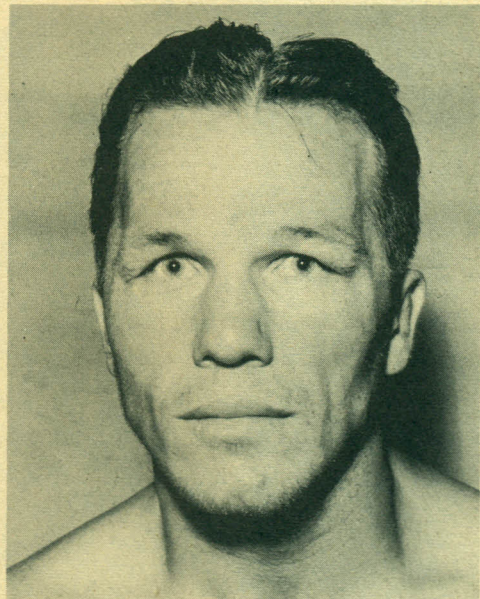


The GREATEST MAN I Ever Fought

by TONY ZALE

(former world's middleweight champion)
with Paul Neimark

"Hostak hit me on the chin and I didn't know where I was or what I was doing. I found out the hard way that Al Hostak had more guts than was good for him."



THERE ARE THREE things that make a great fighter, as far as I'm concerned. Speed and power are two of them. Few men have both. If you're fast and rangy, chances are you might not be the most muscled guy in the world. On the other hand, if you've got a payoff punch that puts your opponents to sleep before they ever get a chance to count any sheep, then you probably aren't very fast.

Al Hostak was both. He had that rare combination of speed and power that nature only gives one fighter in ten thousand. But he had something more. He had that third thing you've got to own to be a really top notch fighter—he had *heart*. And it was his heart, or guts, or whatever you want to call it, that made him far and away the greatest man I ever fought.

Even though I'd just turned 25, I was a seasoned veteran of ten years experience when I first met up with Al. All I needed was a little top of the ladder savvy to reach my peak. Al had that A-1 experience that you can only get by fighting the best, because at that time he *was* the best. He was the Middleweight Champ.

Hostak's manager had agreed to give me a nontitle 10 rounder in Chicago on January 19, 1940. I knew this was my big change. The 160 pound division had been in a state of flux for the last few years, and I saw the opportunity I'd been sweating to get since I was a green kid of fifteen catching hot rivets in the Gary steel mills. If I could cop a clean win over Hostak and earn my title fight, I'd have a chance to get on top and stay on top. On the other hand, if I made a bad showing in the nontitle bout with Al, I might never get a shot at the title.

I was training hard for the fight—maybe too hard—because I came down with a bad case of flu a week before the bout. My managers wanted the fight to be postponed for a month, to give me time to get my strength back and get in shape, but Hostak didn't take to the freezing Windy City weather that well, so ten days was all they'd give me. I knew I couldn't

be up to par by the 29th, but I also couldn't throw away my chance at the big time, so I agreed.

I didn't get out of bed 'til the 20th. I had nine days to get into shape again. When it came time for the fight, none of the odds boys would even take bets on me. The only question in their minds was: would it go two, three or four rounds before Hostak laid me out? Even those closest to me were doubtful about my chances because of the flu. I was really the only one who felt I could win. I had to win. I didn't feel too strong, though.

The beginning of the fight made the odds makers look good. Like I said, Hostak was fast *and* strong. He came out throwing punches at me faster than a submachine gun throws shells. And every one hurt. This guy was no patsy. After not too long, I was down on my knees and the ref was counting. I got up at nine, more from instinct than anything else, and I somehow finished the round.

I wasn't too disappointed, though, as my handlers worked me over between rounds. I figured I had taken his best punches and was still around, so things had to get better instead of worse. I was wrong.

The next two rounds were about even, as Hostak sized me up for the kill and regained the strength he'd lost beating me bloody. But then at the start of the fifth, everything went black again. He hit me with a couple of rights on the chin, and I was out of it. I didn't think, I didn't feel, I didn't have the faintest idea where I was or what I was doing.

The next thing I knew I was sitting in my corner having cold water poured over my face. My head was clearing a little but the rest of me was really hurting. "What happened?" I asked my handler. "You stuck it out, Tony. He didn't get you. Nice going. Now go out and get *him*—you've still got half the fight left." I looked around. "What are you talking about—half the fight left! That was the fourth round." He wrinkled his brow. "That was the end of the *fifth*, Tony. Don't you remember?"

The bell rang and the talk stopped. I went out there, marvelling at the fact that I'd gone through a whole round of the fight without knowing a thing. Screwy as it might seem, I'd kind of expected the fight to be over when my head finally cleared, and I was suddenly happy to know that I was still in there. This guy can hit me, I figured, but he *can't* put me away. I'll stand up no matter what he does to me. Knowing that, I got some of my own strength back that I'd lost in the opening minutes, and I really started swinging at him in that sixth round.

You know how it is when you go all out and things are going your way, but you can't quite win it and then the other guy suddenly seems to get his second wind? That's what happened to Al and me in that sixth round. I threw the leather with him a lot after that (four more rounds of that fight and two rematches), but that sixth round was the turning point of everything between me and Al Hostak. He was tired from the last two rounds, and a little disappointed that he hadn't put me away. He was still way ahead on points, but I saw the surprise in his eyes when, after all the punishment I'd taken, I still came out there in the sixth like it was the beginning of the fight again.

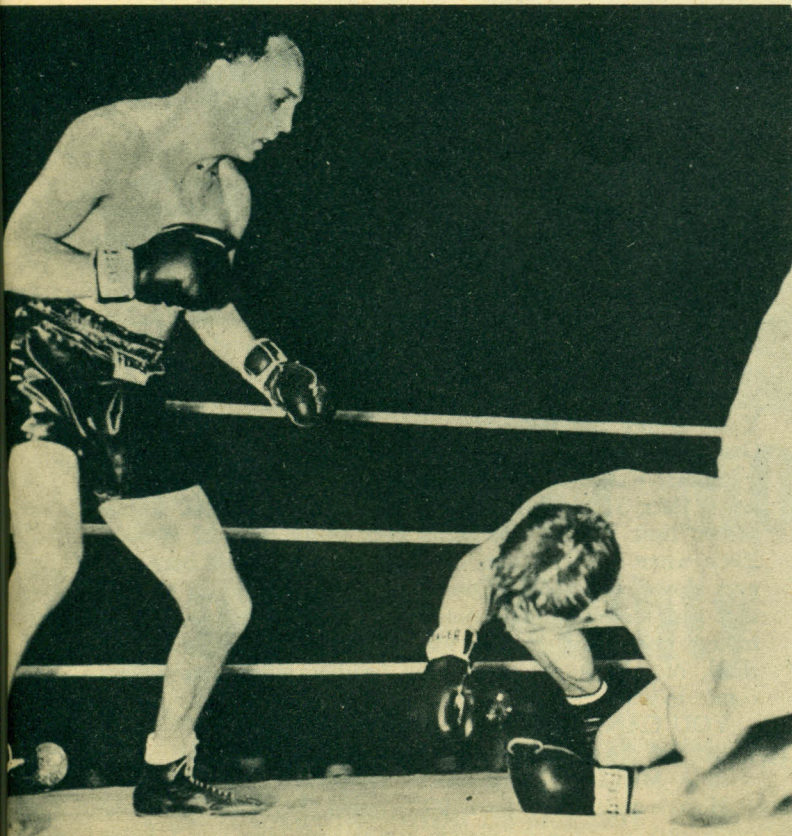
That was my ace in the hole in the fight game, and always had been. I never knew when to quit. I remember when I was a kid on the tough streets of Gary how bigger, older guys would pick a fight with me, and get the best of me—but when I was broken and bloody on the ground and they thought the fight was over, I was just getting started. Time and time again I remember seeing the shock in their faces—sometimes even the laughter at first—when I'd get up after twenty minutes of taking a one-sided beating and go at them again. And every time I'd finally end up taking them. I just kept on getting up one more time, that's all.

The same went for Al Hostak. He'd shot his wad and it gnawed him when I kept on coming. I took the next round after the sixth and won on a close decision. Afterwards I

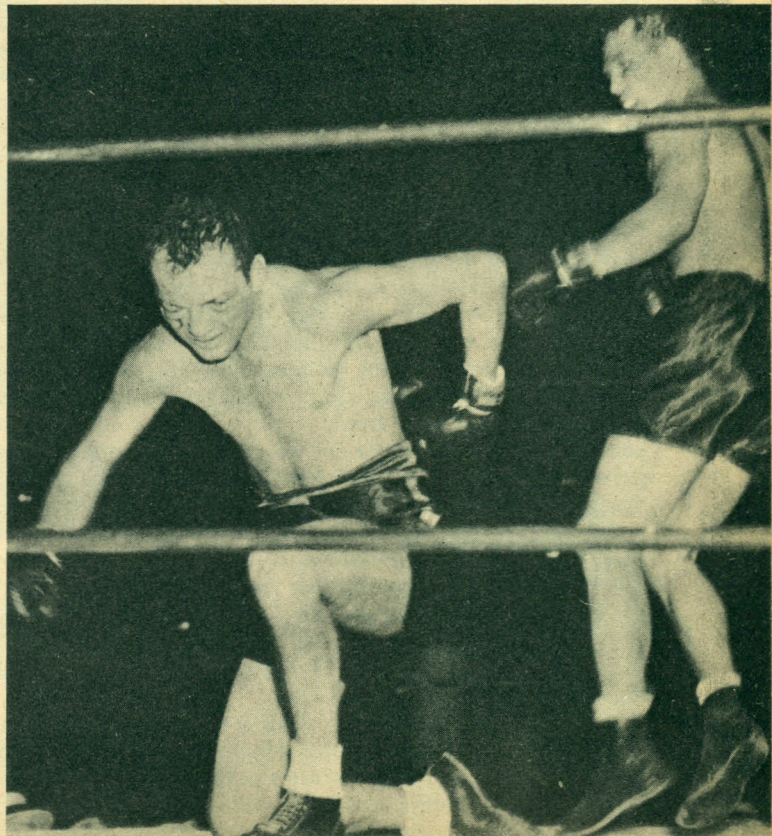
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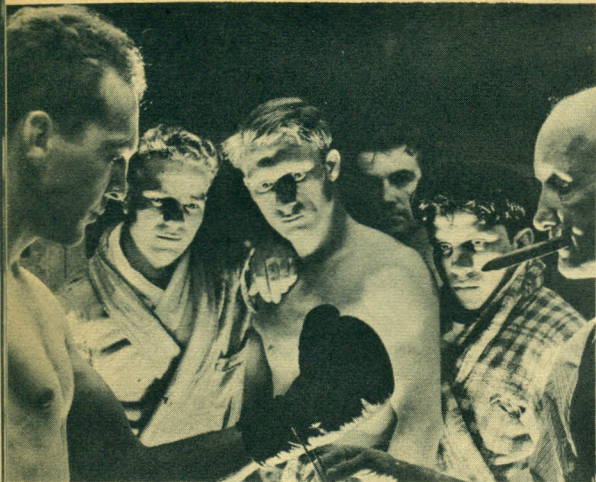
"Hostak was tall and thin, looked more like a lightweight than a middleweight. But he hit like a Louis or Dempsey."



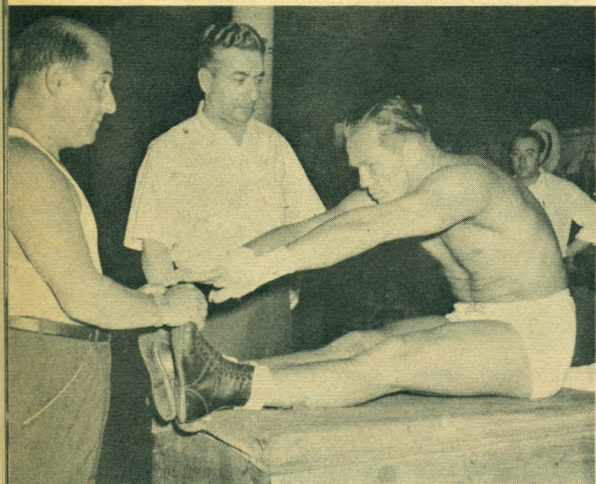
"This happened in our fight in Chicago in 1940. It was in the first round. He hit me on the chin and down I went!"



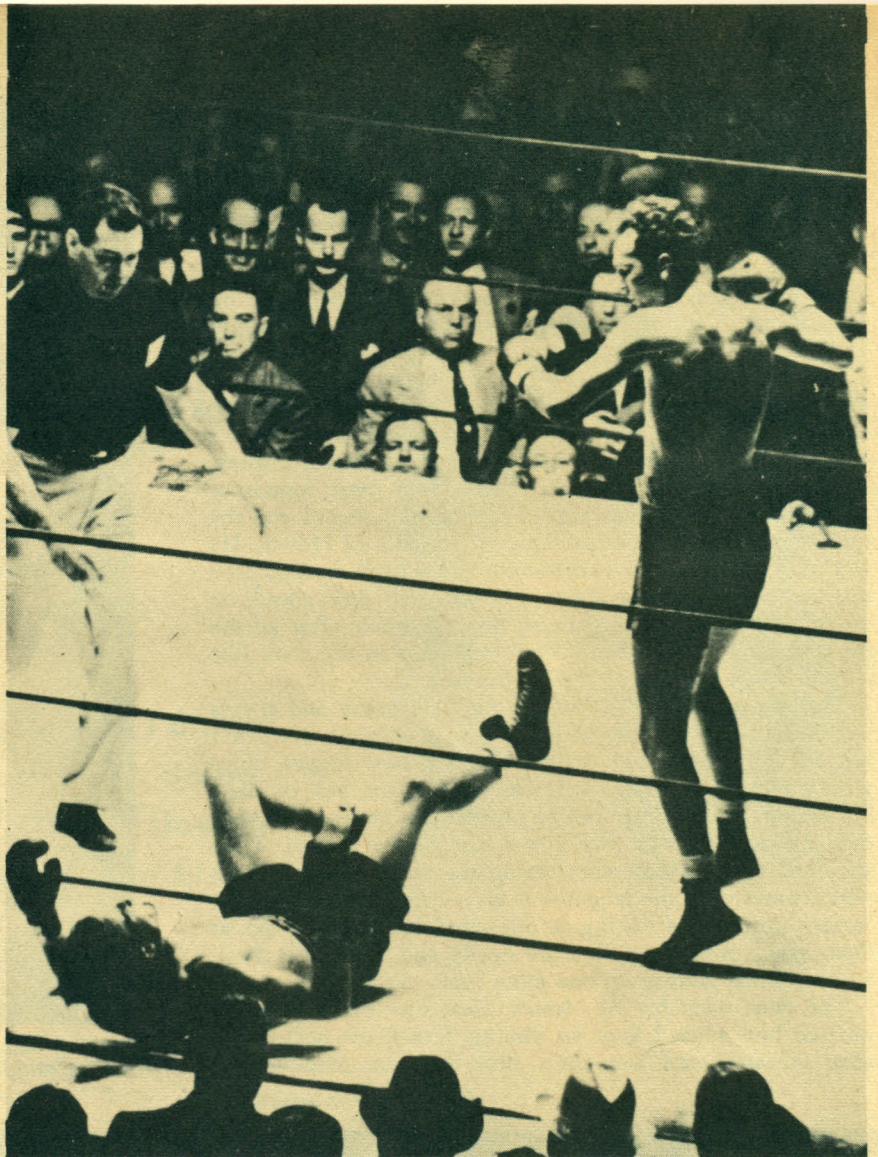
"I caught him under the heart in the 13th and dropped him. This was in Seattle, July 1940, the night I won the title."



"Admiring kids watch gloves being tied on Hostak before workout in gymnasium."



"My managers, Art Winch, left, and Som Pian warned me Hostak was a killer."



"Hostak won the middleweight title by knocking out Freddie Steele in one round at Seattle in '38. Referee Jack Dempsey is about to stop the bout."

learned that he busted his hand in the fight. But now I had my title chance with him.

The championship fight, in July of '40 in Seattle, wasn't as hard for me as the first one. I was at full strength and he knew that he couldn't knock me out unless he brought a blackjack into the ring. In that second fight, though, I began to know what a truly great fighter Al Hostak really was. Because, no matter what I hit him with, *he* couldn't be put away. After a few rounds, the fight was mine, but he stayed in there and put up a battle anyway. It's not just that he kept on his feet, either—a lot of guys can do that—it was something that only another fighter can know about, something hard to put in words. What it boils down to is this: he kept trying not just for the sake of trying, but because he really thought he still could win, because he didn't know how to quit. It's a quality you either have or you don't, but some guys can never say "die," no matter how bad things are going against them, and Al Hostak was more like that than anyone I'd ever met. He just wasn't constitutionally capable of believing he could lose.

He proved it beyond any shadow of a doubt after our second fight. The referee stopped it in the thirteenth round because Hostak was helpless after several knockdowns. But still Al wanted another rematch! I didn't think he'd have the guts, the pride, to take a chance on another beating like that, but, like I said, he was a "never-say-die" guy.

I gave him his third fight and, even though I had him

figured out good by that time, he still had a moment there when his fantastic courage almost made him champion again. In the very first round he started taking two punches to give one—something that had always been my trademark—and he got in a good uppercut that put me down for a second or two. After that, though, the fight was one-sided. I had him down five-six times in the second round, and that was the end of it. I was champ for sure. I had achieved my ambition—except for one flaw. I wasn't recognized in New York as the middleweight king. For that, I had to beat George Abrams in November of that same year.

Al didn't ask for any more rematches after that. As a matter of fact, I think he retired. My stubbornness had finally beaten him. But no one could ever *really* beat Al Hostak. Even when you had him down there flat on his back, his eyes closed, and the ref counting "Ten!," you knew that he still had something left, something you couldn't touch no matter how hard or how long you hit him. Whenever I think of Al, an old saying my brother taught me always comes to mind.

YOU CAN CHANGE A FOOL
BUT A DOGGONE MULE
IS A MULE 'TIL HE DIES.

Hostak must have been 99% mule, I guess. There's no other way to figure it—except maybe one. The way I figure it—Hostak was 100% *fighter* and *man*.

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