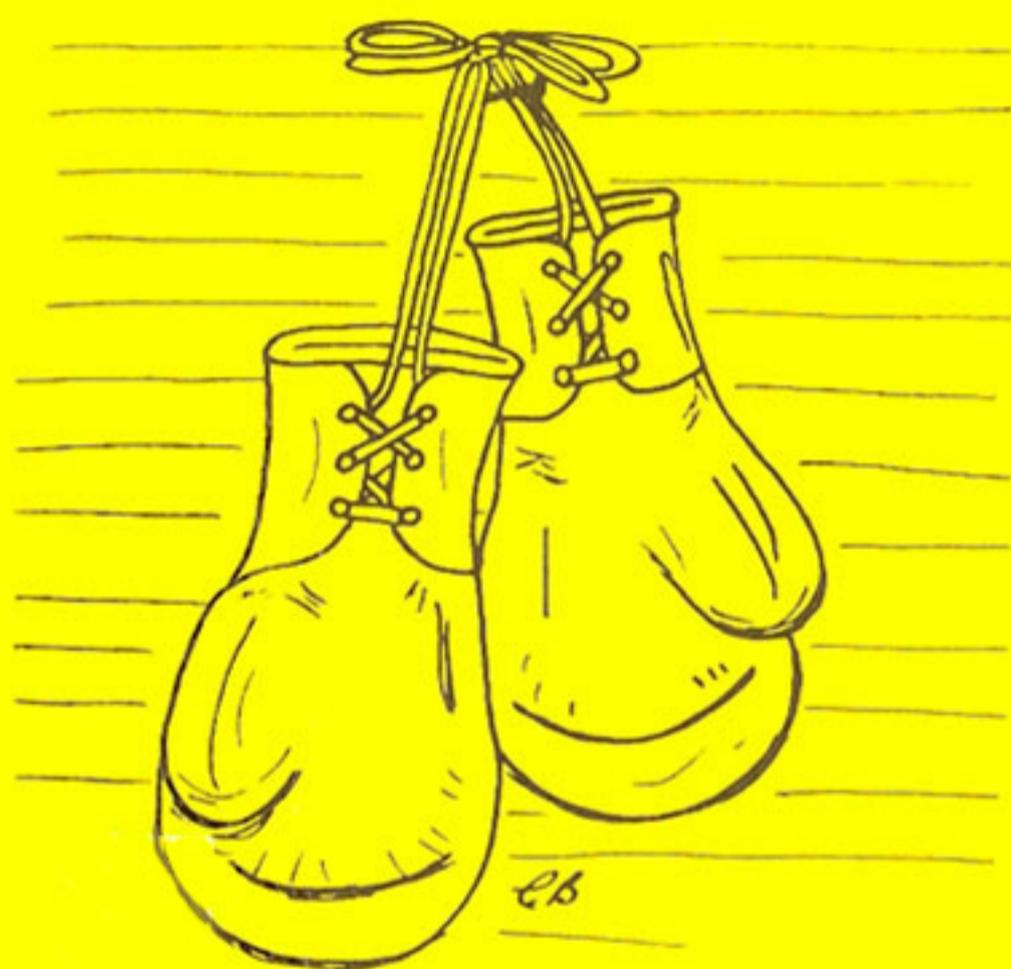


Yvon Durelle

— The Baie Ste. Anne Boxer —



Yvon

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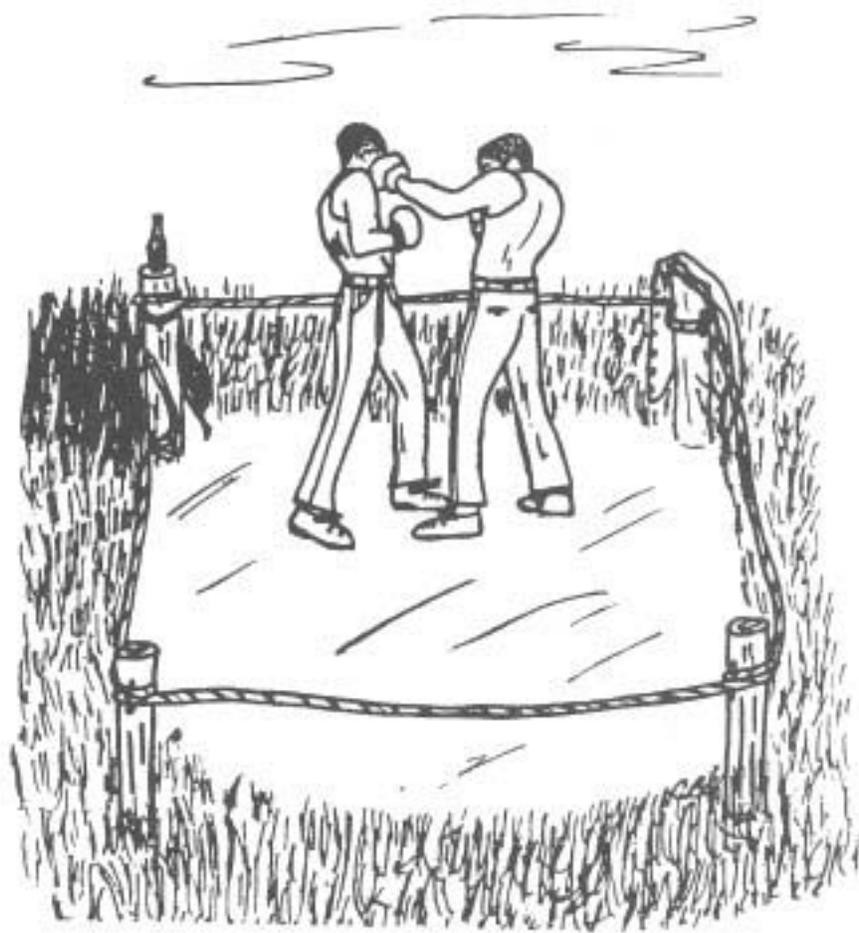
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YVON DURELLE

CHAPTER I

Once in a lifetime a great hero comes along who is “bigger than life.” For the people of New Brunswick, Yvon Durelle was such a hero. As time went by, he was to become greater in the people’s minds than he was in real life.

Yvon Durelle was born on October 14, 1929. He was the seventh child in a family of ten. These were the Depression years. It was very hard to raise a large family then. It was not easy for all the families living in Baie Ste. Anne. Most of the people fished only part of the year. There was no unemployment insurance for the non-fishing season like there is today.

The Durelle children grew up tough and hard. They slept on board beds with only one or two blankets. Often three or four of them would sleep in one bed. It was very cold in winter. As Yvon says:

“We’d cover ourselves with old coats. But we didn’t mind. We didn’t know any different. There were families worse off than us in Baie Ste. Anne. And we always had enough to eat. We had a garden and farm animals—we never went hungry.”

Another reason the Durelle family was better off than most, was that Yvon’s father, Ernest, was a blacksmith. When there was no fishing in the winter, he could make money at his shop. Ernest was a small, gentle man. He was very kind to his neighbours when they were in need. People travelling through Baie Ste. Anne would often stay at the Durelle home overnight.

Ernest never fought, but thought his children should be tough. Some times he would give treats to the child who could fight the best. This led to many fights in the Durelle home between Yvon and his brothers and sisters. Although some of Yvon's brothers were older and stronger, nobody could beat him.

It was left up to Yvon's mother, Olida, to put a stop to these actions. She was a big woman who worked hard all her life. For example, she made all the clothes for her children. Olida didn't believe in this fighting within the family. Nearly every day, Yvon would get a beating from his mother for fighting. Yet Yvon loved his mother very deeply. When she died in the spring of 1957 from a lung sickness, Yvon took her death very hard.

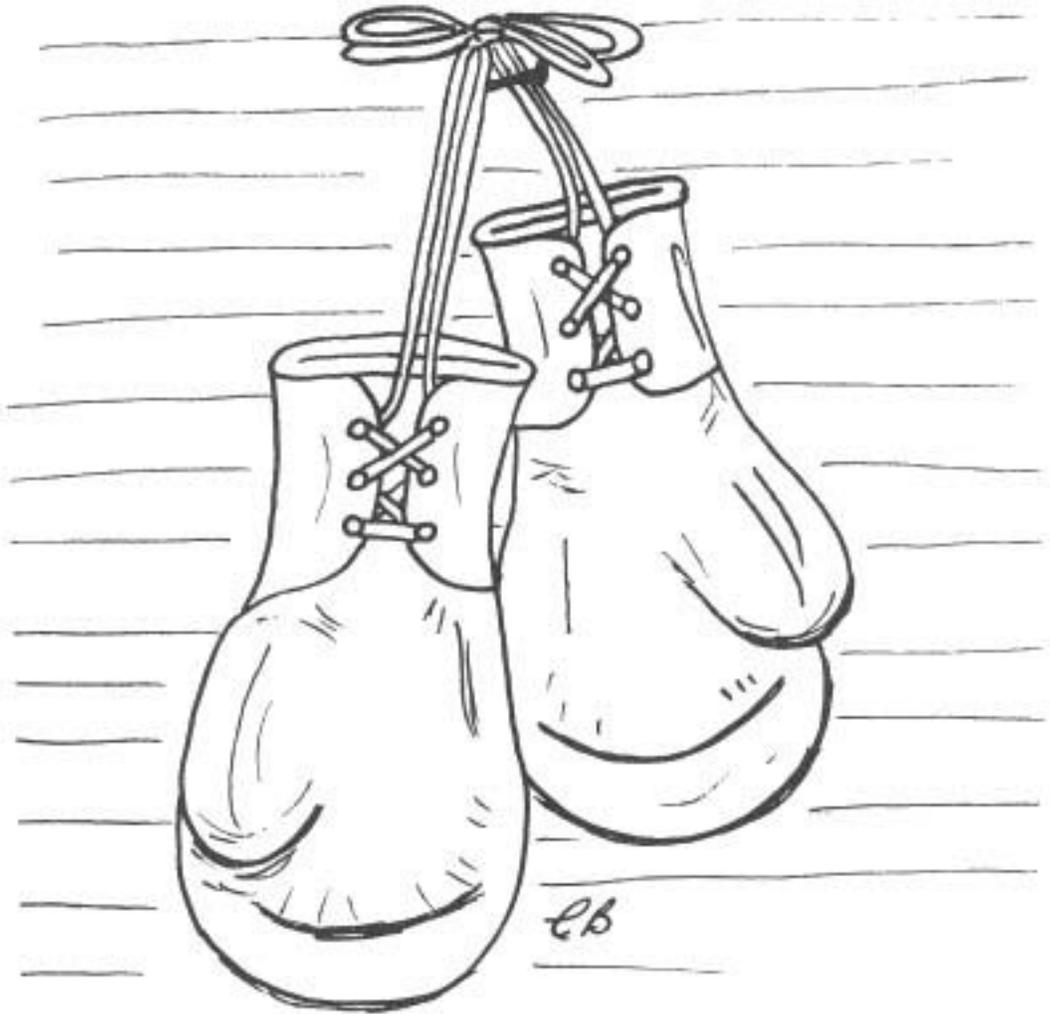
Yvon would have to be called a bad-acting child in his young years. One day, his brother was nearly hanged by Yvon while they were playing a make-believe game. At school, he was always fighting. He would have to be kept five minutes after school so the other children could run home first. He didn't like school and never got along well with his teachers. In fact, when he was in Grade six, he beat up his sixty-five year old teacher. Later, he felt very sorry for what he had done. That did it! Yvon was no longer permitted to return to school.

What was Yvon to do now? He was still only eleven years old. Things got even harder for the family when his father became very sick. Yvon and his older brother, Ernie, began to use the boat to fish in the summer. In the winter, they went to work cutting wood. They got paid very little for this work, but the family needed the money. Yvon also worked part-time in his father's shop. This is where he learned to speak English.

These stories of Yvon as a child might give you the wrong idea of what he was like. He could be a very bad-acting person. But his friends and family called him "Doux." This is a French word meaning kind or gentle. There are many examples that show his kindness. He often helped friends who were having money problems. He never beat any of his own four children, and he loved his dog very much. The dog would often help Yvon with his roadwork by running beside him. When the dog got too old and had to be destroyed, Yvon cried for days. He still thinks of his dog even though many years have passed.

The 1940's saw Yvon's older brothers join the army and go to war in Europe. Yvon was too young, so he stayed home and worked for the family. Unlike today when you will find pretty homes and nice stores in Baie Ste. Anne, most of the buildings then were poorly made. There was little money and even less to do for a young man like Yvon.

CHAPTER II



Picture of 16 oz. boxing gloves

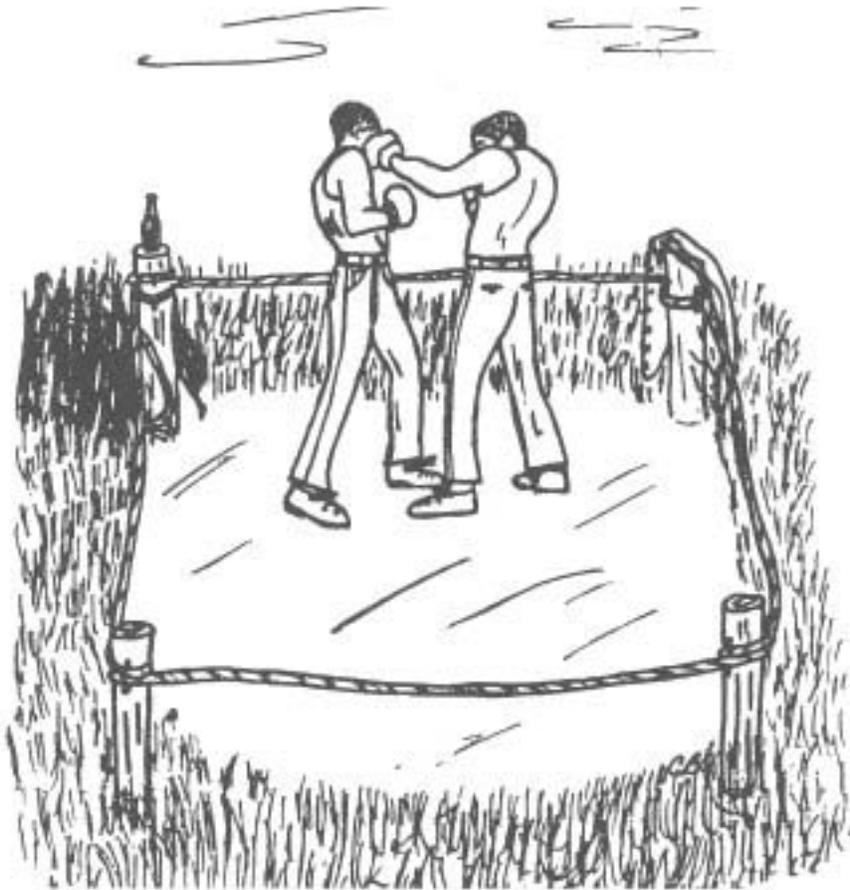
After the war ended in 1945, Yvon's brothers brought back some boxing gloves. These were very large, heavy gloves. Many of the village men would get together at night and use the gloves in boxing matches in the streets. These gloves were too heavy to be used in a real boxing match. But they were the only ones in the village. This street fighting was the only training Yvon would have before he began boxing for a living.

From a very young age, Yvon loved boxing. Joe Louis was the boxer he liked the best. Louis held the heavyweight title for many years. No one could lay a glove on him. Yvon would listen to Louis' matches on battery radio. There were no electric radios at the time in Baie Ste. Anne.

Many men had boxed when they were in the army during the war. When they got back home, there was no boxing club for them. Clyne Cassidy and Vince Moar decided to form the Chatham Athletic Association to get boxing started on the Miramichi. Chatham was a large town near Baie Ste. Anne. It was about thirty miles away. Cassidy and Moar were always looking for new boxers.

One Sunday they drove down to Baie Ste. Anne. They set up a ring in an open space. Many people fought three-round matches. The one who looked the best was Yvon Durelle. He could hit very hard, but he missed often, too. Still he was asked to come to Chatham to box at the old St. Thomas Arena. This was in September, 1947.

Durelle had no boxing trunks for his first match. The day before the fight, he was walking down the main street of Chatham. He saw some swimming trunks in the window of Duplessie's Store. The swim trunks cost three dollars. Where would he get so much money?



Two men boxing in a ring.

Just then, Father Connors of Chatham walked by. He asked Yvon what was wrong. When Father Connors heard the story, he went into the store and bought the trunks for Yvon. The swim trunks were too small and they tore before the fight was over. This didn't stop Yvon, however. He knocked out Sonny Ramsay in the second round. Yvon got eight dollars in pay for this first fight.

After that, he fought almost every weekend for the rest of the summer and fall of 1947. He used the money he won to buy new fishing equipment. Soon no one from N.B. would fight him. Boxers had to be brought in from Nova Scotia and the United States so there could be matches.

Yvon had no trainer or manager in those days. He didn't like to be told how to box by anyone. Yvon was a great crowd pleaser. Even before title matches, he was never afraid. In fact, he sometimes didn't seem to care. People came in great numbers to see his fights. In the winters, he and his brothers continued to work in the woods. This kept Yvon strong and in fairly good fighting form.

Yvon had two main problems as a boxer. From the beginning, he did very little training. He disliked roadwork. The only real training he did was in the ring itself. Yvon was very sure of himself and felt there was no real need to train hard. He could get away with this way of thinking in the beginning. But when the really good matches came along later, it hurt his chances.

His second big problem was his weight. After each boxing match, Yvon would not train and he would gain weight. Then he would have to stop eating and work very hard to make his weight limit. The weight that he lost often made him feel weak in the ring. It was a good thing that Yvon did not smoke or drink very much when he was -getting ready for a match.

Durelle might best be described as a puncher, not a boxer. Very soon, he learned that he didn't need to throw a lot of punches. One good punch would win the match. He usually started very slowly and looked for an opening. As the match went on, he would get stronger. His punches would get harder and harder. But he always had trouble fighting against good, smooth boxers. He would sooner stand and punch it out with a fighter.

By 1950, Durelle was making as much as six hundred dollars a fight. He was now boxing in Moncton and he had a manager, Chris Shaban. Shaban got Yvon to move to Moncton where he could train him and keep an eye on him.

In the early 1950's Durelle fought twice for the Canadian Middleweight Title against Roy Wouters. Middleweight fighters weigh about one hundred and fifty pounds. The two fights were close, but Yvon lost them both. He had been in the hospital only one week before the second and was very weak. Still, Yvon refused to train hard. This led to real problems with his manager. It wasn't long before the two went their own ways.



Yvon Durelle and Chris Shaban

CHAPTER III

It was at this time that Theresa became Yvon's wife. She was only seventeen when she married Yvon. She remembers him as not being very outgoing. He thought he was homely. The first year of their married life was very tough. Yvon and Theresa had to live with her parents. Theresa had a good upbringing while Yvon was used to a rougher way of living. By 1952, he had earned enough money to build his own home. Theresa liked to keep their house very clean and Yvon had to change his ways.

There were other problems that Yvon and Theresa soon had to face. As Yvon became more famous, he began to have more "so-called" friends. He started to stay away from home too often. He was drinking too much with his new friends. Like most people, Yvon loved the feeling of being important. It took a strong person like Theresa to keep them together.



Yvon still was not making much money from boxing. Even when he did well, he never saved very much. He would spend his prize money on boats and new cars. Durelle was a very fast driver and drove his cars very hard. Often, they didn't last long before a new one was needed.

In 1952, he decided to join the Canadian Army. He wanted to be with his brothers and he needed the money. Yvon admits that he was not a very good soldier. He spent more time at home on leaves than he did at camp. His only work was to train army boxers in the gym. Durelle decided to leave this easy life in March, 1954, because he missed being home badly. Yvon never liked the big cities. He was always happier in his small home town. Durelle fought fifteen matches during his two years in the army.

CHAPTER IV

In 1953, he could no longer make the middleweight limit. He had to become a light-heavyweight. Light-heavyweights can weigh up to one hundred seventy-five pounds. It took only until September, 1953, for him to win the Canadian and British Empire Light-heavyweight Title. He defeated Gordon Wallace in the title match in Moncton by knocking him out in the second round. In the rematch, Yvon was an easy winner again. But later in 1953, he lost his title to Doug Harper in a fight in Calgary. Many who saw the fight thought it was a very poor decision.

1954 began as a good year for Durelle. In July, 1954, he won his British Empire title back by knocking out Doug Harper in Newcastle. He had also fought eight rounds with Floyd Patterson in New York City. Patterson had won the heavyweight boxing title at the 1952 Olympic Games. He would soon become the world heavyweight boxing title-holder. Durelle showed no fear of this great boxer and nearly knocked him out in the eighth round.

But, for some reason, things started going wrong for Yvon over the next three years. For one, he had a very poor manager in Harry Shepherd. Yvon had gone to Europe to fight in England and Germany. He lost most of his fights there because his rough way of boxing wasn't permitted. Not only did he lose the matches, but also he got very little money.

Upon returning to Canada in 1955, Durelle once again fought Floyd Patterson in Newcastle. The week before this fight, he broke his hand. Also, the night before the fight he was caught in a storm at sea. He spent the night on board his boat. He was very cold by the time he got to shore in the morning. Yvon went ahead with the fight anyway. He took a very bad beating and couldn't come out for the fifth round. Many of his fans couldn't believe it! They thought he was a quitter.

For the rest of that year, Durelle kept boxing because he needed the money. But each fight he would hurt his hand again. At one point, he had three wins, but had lost eight times. He decided to take the winter off. His hand healed well. The next year was a better year for boxing wins. Just the same, Yvon was still not making much money. It seemed that everyone was being paid first and there was nothing left for him. He was very unhappy and was drinking too much. He made up his mind to retire. He felt he wasn't going anywhere and he no longer cared to box.

Why did Yvon come back to boxing? There were two main reasons. The first was that Chris Shaban decided to return as Yvon's manager if Durelle agreed to train. Shaban was the only manager Yvon trusted. For the first time in his life, Yvon did train quite hard. He moved to Moncton where he and Shaban became great friends. At first, Yvon trained in a small old building. But then the Moncton Air Force base offered him use of their gym. This was a big help. Still, it was hard to find boxers who would train with him.

The other reason for the comeback was that Gordon Wallace had got a British Empire Light-heavyweight title fight and won this title back. Durelle felt he had been treated badly. He hadn't got a chance at the title even though he had already beaten Wallace three times. Yet Wallace had the title once again. Yvon was very angry. He wanted another title shot. But he knew he needed a number of wins before Wallace would have to meet him.

With his interest restored in boxing, Durelle started to do very well. He won six matches in a row in N.B. In March, 1957, he beat an up-and-coming star named Angelo Defendis in New York. For the first time, he was listed in the Top Ten Boxers in the world in the light-heavyweight class. Now, he was becoming well-known in the United States.

Next came a British Empire Title Fight against the champion, Gordon Wallace, in Moncton. Yvon trained very hard for this fight. Before 6,500 fans, Durelle knocked out Wallace in the second round to become the new champion. Wallace took such a beating that he retired soon after that. Even though there was a huge crowd, Yvon said that he couldn't hear them. The noise was just a background sound when he was fighting.



Yvon Durelle

Maybe the second most important fight in Durelle's life happened in Detroit in June of 1957. It was the first Durelle fight on television. There was great excitement in New Brunswick as people got together to watch the fight. That night Yvon fought Tony Anthony to a tie. Anthony was a two-time Olympic champion. He was rated number one behind Archie Moore, the world light-heavyweight champion. Almost everyone who saw the fight felt that Yvon had easily won. After the match, Yvon had become the number three rated light-heavyweight boxer in the world. When Yvon got back to Moncton after the fight, he was given a big parade. That day became known as Yvon Durelle Day.

Yet it would be another year before he would get a shot at the championship. It was Anthony who got the title fight. He was knocked out in the seventh round. This moved Yvon up to the Number One Place in the standings.

The fight with Anthony might have taught both Durelle and Shaban some false lessons. In the first round, Yvon had nearly knocked out Anthony. But he had fought too hard in this round and was soon very tired. In the middle rounds, Durelle took a bad beating. In the last rounds, he came on very strong again. From this time on, Yvon and Shaban decided not to work so hard in the first rounds of a fight. They believed Durelle would win if the fight went into the later rounds. It was this thinking that hurt Yvon when he fought Archie Moore.

1957 had been Yvon's best year for earning prize money. Each television fight earned him four thousand dollars. For the year, Yvon made about forty thousand dollars. Some of this money went to his manager, Chris Shaban. There were many other costs as well. Still, there was enough left over to buy a fourth car which Yvon quickly destroyed.

Also, he bought another boat. He now had two large boats for fishing. But he did not have any time to fish. He was away from home fighting or training nine months out of the year. He had to employ two crews. He could not trust these men. He knew that they were stealing from him, but he didn't care. He was doing so well himself that the money wasn't important.

Yvon had two hard fights at the beginning of 1958. Then, in order to keep his title, he had to fight Mike Holt of South Africa. Like Yvon, Holt was a harder puncher, but not a smooth boxer. The fight ended in the ninth round with Durelle the winner. But it was a very hard fight on both men.

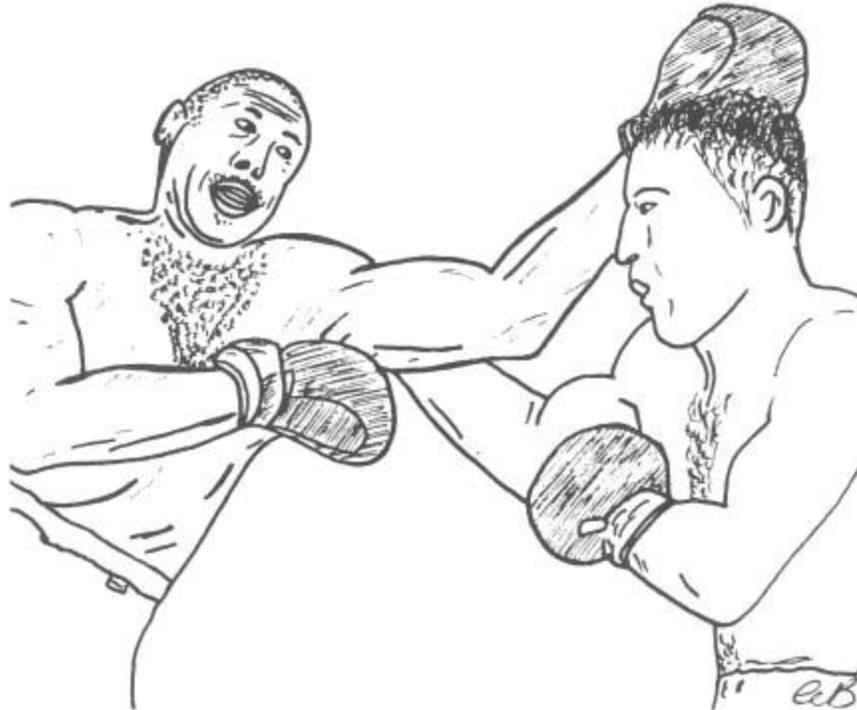
As Durelle was to say about Holt later: "He gave me some working over. He broke my nose and some of my teeth. That fight took the best out of me. I couldn't get my mind into the game after that. I started to be afraid for the first time. That man could fight. He was the worst I ever met!"

A sad thing happened to Yvon shortly after this fight. One night he and his best friend, Stan Martin, had been out drinking. When they were getting ready to go home, Martin stepped behind the car and got run over. He died before getting to the hospital. It was an accident, but Durelle felt very bad for a long time.

CHAPTER VI

At last Durelle got his title chance in December 1958 at the Montreal Forum. He was twenty-nine years old while Archie Moore, the champion, was almost forty-five. Once again Yvon had to stop eating so he could get his weight down to one hundred seventy-five pounds. This made him weak for the fight. But you would never know it. In the first round, he knocked down Moore three times. Two times the count went as far as nine.

Moore managed to make it through the first round. Durelle and Shaban were both afraid that Yvon might be putting too much into these first rounds and would tire out. They felt the longer the match lasted, the more tired the older Moore would get. This was a bad plan. Moore got stronger as the fight went on and in the eleventh round knocked Durelle out. It was a very exciting match. After the fight, Yvon was heartbroken. It was the hardest setback he ever had. He was also angry with the money he got from the fight. He only brought home about six thousand dollars. He made even less for the rematch.



During the next winter, Durelle let his weight reach two hundred pounds. He started training for the 1959 rematch against Moore about three months before the fight. It was very hard, but he was able to get down to the weight limit. But then the fight was put off. Each time it got harder to make the weight limit. He got weaker and weaker. The rematch was no contest. Durelle was knocked down three times and then knocked out in the third round.

A possible reason Durelle did so poorly in the second Moore contest was a boating accident he had before the fight. He hurt his head in the accident. After this, he could not walk very well. Also his speech was hard to understand. For years, people thought he was drinking again. Then he met Dr. Jewett in Fredericton. Dr. Jewett treated Yvon for over a year and Durelle got much better.

After the two Moore fights, Yvon felt so bad about boxing that he no longer cared. In 1959, he decided to fight George Chuvalo for the Canadian heavyweight title. He needed the money and there was more to be made in the heavyweight class than any other. Durelle did not train at all for this fight, and was badly beaten. The day after this contest, Yvon retired and gave up his British Empire light-heavyweight title.

CHAPTER VII

Durelle tried two comebacks in the early 1960's. He had many bills to pay and he missed his fans. He felt very depressed sitting at home doing nothing. But Dr. Jewett and his wife made him give up boxing once and for all. His health would not allow him to continue.

To make a living, Durelle turned to wrestling. For a time, wrestling was his only way to make money. He got only about one hundred dollars from each wrestling match. The pay was very small. Yvon had been used to large paydays when he had been boxing. And there was danger in wrestling, too. Yvon recalls a time wh'en he was wrestling in Ontario. He was thrown from the ring and was badly hurt. It took one month before he could return to the sport.

In the 1963, the New Brunswick Forestry Department gave Yvon a job. The pay was only four thousand dollars a year. Yvon needed to pay back taxes and a large loan at the bank. These were very tough years for Durelle. To add to his problems, his house burned down in 1972. He lost almost everything in the fire. With some fire insurance afd some help from his friends and fans, Yvon's family were soon living in a new home.

In 1973, Durelle opened a night club called "The Fisherman's Club." He quickly made the money needed to payoff his bills. Still, there are often problems for owners of night clubs. Trouble always seemed just a step away for Yvon. One Friday night in 1977 he shot and killed Albin Poirier outside his Club. Poirier had been causing trouble at the Club for many months. Poirier had been in a mental hospital before. On that Friday night, people outside the Club said he tried to run over Yvon with his car. That was when Durelle shot him. That summer Durelle was tried in court in Newcastle and let go. Shortly after, he sold the club.

Since then, Yvon has lived a quiet life. He doesn't have much money, but he also doesn't have any big bills. Durelle has been honored many times for his boxing skills. In 1971, he was named to the New Brunswick Sports Hall of Fame. In 1975 he was given the selme honor by the Canadian Sports Hall of Fame.



Yvon was not the kind of boxer who had a quick climb to the top. Like his life outside the ring, he had his ups and downs in the boxing sport. To this day, he still feels very bad that he came within one second of winning the world championship. These two famous lines seem to fit Yvon Durelle's life very well:

“For of all sad words of tongue or pen, the saddest are these: It might have been.”

WORD LIST

gloves

punch

champion

wrestling

heavyweight

Acknowledgements:

The information for this book was taken from newspaper and magazine articles from the Chatham Public Library. Also much information came from Raymond Fraser's book, "The Fighting Fisherman."