Home-sweet-home: Ali had one in Dundee’s corner on history

He was a trainer by trade. He was called an ambassador by everybody who knows that boxing desperately needs one. Angelo Dundee was all of that and yet so much more.

“That one minute with Angelo between rounds was like coming home to your mother and father,” said Bill Caplan, who worked in 1974 for George Foreman when he lost in Zaire with Dundee in Muhammad Ali’s corner and again when Dundee was there two decades later for a 45-year-old Foreman in his 1994 knockout of Michael Moorer for his second heavyweight title.

Mom-and-dad’s wisdom passed Wednesday night with Dundee’s death at his home near Tampa, Fla. Foreman mourns. Caplan mourns. Boxing mourns. Ali got the news while at home in Phoenix, less than a month since a reunion with Dundee at Ali’s birthday party in Louisville, said Jimmy Walker, the founder of Celebrity Fight Night, Ali’s annual fund raiser in the battle against Parkinson’s Disease.

The 90-year-old Dundee was there, confined to a wheelchair after undergoing hip-replacement surgery. Ali, confined by Parkinson’s terrible symptoms, sat next to him. Time marches on and often over. But Ali and Dundee remain inseparable. They have a corner on history.

“You could see, really feel, this chemistry between them,” said Walker, a Phoenix businessman who joined Ali in Louisville, his hometown, for his 70th birthday.

Other than Manny Pacquiao and Freddie Roach, it’s the kind of
chemistry you don’t see much of anymore, perhaps because Dundee was always more loyal to people than money. Sounds quaint today. Then again, boxing was at its best when Dundee was in a corner. He was with Sugar Ray Leonard after Ali and Carmen Basilio before him. But it was his time, a lifetime, with Ali that defined his generosity and gentleness in a sport not known for either.

Ernest Hemingway once said that courage is grace under pressure. Few have been able to put that one into action like Dundee. Hemingway’s definition defines Dundee. He was there to guide a fighter through the rigors of training and the subsequent adversity of a fight, yet he never interfered with their lives outside of the ropes.

He knew all the tricks. One of them saved Ali from a loss to Henry Cooper in 196 at London’s Wembley Stadium. Ali was on the mat and in trouble in the fourth round. Dundee bought some time by alerting the referee to a tear in Ali’s gloves. Officials searched for a new pair and never found them, allowing Ali to regain composure and confidence. Years later, Dundee acknowledged he saw the tear before opening bell. It was there to use, just in case. That’s part of the game. Interference in Ali’s decision to become a Black Muslim and change his name from Cassius Clay, his opposition to the Vietnam War and his public bravado during the polarized ‘60s was not.

In a sport and time loaded with controversy, Dundee was never a controversial man. In boxing, only the back-stabbers outnumber the low blows. If anybody has ever had a bad word to say about Dundee, I’ve never met him. Caplan remembers a man who just liked people.

“He genuinely cared about everybody he met,’” Caplan said. “In the days before e-mail and cell phones, Angelo would send post cards to the boxing writers of the day from where ever he was in the world at the time. He was just that kind of guy.’’
He’s gone. But his example lives on. Like Ali, I live in Arizona where we talked about civility after the shooting of Tucson Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords, but practice it rarely in our politics, or on our streets. I cover boxing, a business in which trash-talk passes for civil discourse. Listen to the never-ending talks for a Pacquiao-Floyd Mayweather fight. Then, listen to Mitt Romney and Newt Gingrich debate in the Republican race for the presidential nomination. Different games, same insults.

Wouldn’t it be nice if Pacquiao, Mayweather, Romney, Gingrich and the rest of us could spend that minute in Dundee’s corner? Mom and pop always knew what to do, how to do it.

AZ NOTES
The 2012 Celebrity Fight Night is scheduled for March 24 at the Marriott Desert Ridge and Spa in Scottsdale, Ariz. Last year’s event raised $6.6 million in Ali’s annual fight against Parkinson’s.

Las Vegas super-featherweight Diego Magdaleno replaces Dallas super-bantamweight Roberto Marroquin on the Mach 23 ShoBox-televised card at Tucson’s Casino del Sol. Magdaleno (21-0, 7 KOs) is scheduled for the main event against Miguel Beltran Jr. (26-1, 17 KOs) in the main event for a North American Boxing Federation title. The fighters are scheduled to be at a news conference Wednesday (2 p.m. MST) at Casino del Sol.