



Photos by William Lauer/Daily Nebraskan

Bob Nelson trains in his bedroom. The Norton Anthologies are on the desk in the bottom picture.

# Signing away life for story; training to be Toughman

By Bob Nelson  
Senior Editor

The Punch came from nowhere late in the second round. I assume it was a right.

From the videotape of the fight, it looks like I walked into it. Then I bounced off the ropes, twirled, staggered, took an autonomic swing at the ref and fell to the canvas.

While all this happened and up until the count of five, I was somewhere in my head enjoying the universe. At the count of six, I woke to a man yelling numbers backed by hundreds of bloodthirsty Neanderthals screaming "Get Up!" My right nostril was bleeding.

My opponent, "Skid Row" Willie Howard, said later that he had expected me to continue fighting. The referee said that he had called the fight after he looked at my eyes, which he said were staring at something in ancient Greece.

But all I remember is staring into the lights of Pershing Auditorium thinking this: I never ever as long as I live want to be punched in the face again.

And more importantly:  
I want my mommy.

## The Beginning

April 2, Paul Domeier, sports editor of the Daily Nebraskan, posted a notice to all staff members. In it, he offered \$50 to anyone who would enter the 1991 Toughman/Toughwoman Contest April 18 in Pershing Auditorium and write a story about the experience.

At the time, I was in my third month of karate. I was also close to the right weight, in passable shape and extremely gullible to get-rich-quick schemes.

So, April 4 at 3 p.m., I met with Neil Johnston, promoter and organizer of the tournament, at his Toughman headquarters in Room 142 of the Airport Econo Lodge.

First, he said that nobody ever has been seriously injured in any of the Toughman/Toughwoman contests. The worst he had seen in 12 years was a broken nose.

He said that my nose might cause a problem because of its size, but that I could win \$1,000 and a black satin Toughman jacket if I outlasted 15

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**Real fighters, including the other light heavy-weights, had only their pride. The 'Killer instinct', 'the desire to win', seemed not like the desire to be the first, but the instinct not to be the last.**

other contestants in the light heavy-weight division. In theory, he said, I had a chance, because none of the other contestants could be too good. Nobody could have more than five victories in amateur boxing or kickboxing matches.

Each contestant, he said, would wear foot pads, a waist pad, a mouthpiece, 16-ounce training gloves and headgear. It was the safest event in fighting, he said.

Then he gave me an entry form. I wrote down my name, address, phone number and weight, which was 156 pounds, but 160 pounds to make the 160-175 light heavyweight division.

Then I wrote my last date of hospitalization, doctor's name, prior illnesses, interesting facts (I like pain), preferred fighting nickname (Canvas-back) and previous fighting experience (none).

Then, after signing my name to what I thought was the bottom line, I was given the second form, which was:

The Release From Responsibility For Participation In Inherently Dangerous Events, in which I promised not to sue in case of "any damage . . . resulting in the death of releasor, whether caused by the negligence of releasor or otherwise while the releasor is competing or for any purposes participating in the said "Toughman Contest."

Then Johnston offered me a Miller Lite, which I accepted on the grounds that he had to give me advice.

He told me that fighters in Toughman contests often wear out quickly. He told me to jog a lot.

He told me 16-ounce boxing gloves can get very heavy very quickly. He told me to shadowbox while holding some sort of weights. He suggested books.

He also said it would help if I learned how to fight.

Then he gave me the Fighter Fact Sheet. It said I needed a mouthpiece, handwrap, gauze, towels and to be at Pershing Auditorium no later than 5 p.m. Thursday, April 18. Johnston wished me good luck. I had 14 days and two hours to train, he said.

## The Training

Overall Plan: Absolutely no more smoking. Heavy eating to gain four pounds. Beer drinking limited to one 12-oz bottle on weekdays, limit of two on weekends. Training: Long-distance running, pushups, situps,

shadowboxing and kicking with weights. Note: More than two 12-oz bottles possible on weekends if weight gain necessary. April 5: Rose at 6:12 a.m. to jog. Destination: Cooper Park, 0.4 miles. Goal: To start easy. Notes: Strong pace to park, some shadowboxing. One shadow kick.

April 6 to 13: Karate class Monday, Wednesday, Friday. Jog of 2.2 miles. Ate Godfather's all-you-can-eat buffet four times. Notes: Jogging is hard on the knees. Four 12-oz bottles of beer necessary Saturday night for weight gaining.

April 14: Began serious training. Jogged two miles, did three sets of 40 pushups, four sets of 50 situps.

Shadowboxed and kicked in room for one hour. Shadowboxed for entirety of Faith No More's version of "War Pigs" while holding The Norton Anthology of American Literature Volume 1 in left hand and The Norton Anthology of American Literature Volume 2 in right hand. Notes: There is a lot of American literature.

April 15: Went to karate. Jogged one mile. Did three sets of 30 pushups and three sets of 40 situps. Shadowboxed and kicked in room. Shadowboxed for entirety of Jane's Addic-

tion's "Stop" while holding "Khrushchev Remembers" in left hand and "Khrushchev Remembers: The Last Testament" in right hand. Notes: Told karate instructor about fight. He said that was ironic, since he was doing a research paper on amateur fighters killed in the ring.

## The Last 48 Hours

My friends were planning to videotape the fight and show it at what they were labeling "The Post-fight Wake."

Then they were going to plant me in the backyard. They promised to water me.

But by Tuesday, the concept of fighting another human being had lost much of its humor. Kickboxing is a violent sport. Violence and humor only work together in cartoons.

But there would only be three rounds of 60 seconds each. There was no kicking to the head or below the waist. Nobody had ever been seriously injured in a Toughman Contest.

More than the fear of pain or injury, though, was the fear of humili-

See TOUGHMAN on 10

