



William Lauer/Daily Nebraskan

From left, Gary Allen, 35, Dallas Hoffman, 22, Jerry Schlondorf, 27, and Bob Nelson await the fight. Schlondorf was not allowed to fight because of a recent head injury.



William Lauer/Daily Nebraskan

Marky Schenkelberg examines Bob Nelson before the fight.

# Prelude & The Punch

*'Little bit of badass' Bob battles big 'wimp' boxer, but gets bashed*

By Bob Nelson  
Senior Editor

## The Orientation

The manly voices of boxers and promoters carried and bounced back from the shadowed nosebleed sections of Pershing Auditorium. Everything, even the arena floor, was dimly lit.

Except for the ring. It towered majestically over the floor, basking in transcendent radiance like Mount Olympus.

Much too sublime considering the event. This was a plateau on which neophyte thugs would bleed and spit and sweat and drool in savage animal combat for profit. My profit would come afterward, when I wrote a \$50 story about my experience.

No, Toughman kickboxing contests shouldn't be held in spotlights. They should be held at 1 a.m. in a dank, dark alley behind the Royal Grove.

Near a dumpster.  
And most important of all, without me.

From 5:30 p.m. to 6 p.m. Thursday, April 18, I sat ringside with the other 13 light heavyweights waiting for two more contestants and a short talk by promoters on rules, physicals and other details.

The fighters waited in different degrees of machismo. Some sat angry, some stood cocky. Some smirked, others stared. Others talked about the gym or past brawls.

This was the time to intimidate prospective opponents.

Giving up on the last two fighters, one of the promoters began explaining how the night would work. He said fighters would be paired off randomly and that we would not know our opponent until the ring announcer called our names for the fight. He said that light heavyweight and two women's fights would alternate with heavyweight bouts.

The guy droned on. Behind him a giant blond man wearing a black satin Toughman jacket was digging through a case of tapes, trying to organize the music for the evening.

That meant our briefing was intermittently delayed by thunderous soundbites from songs on the public address system:

"Weeeeee are the champioooooons, my friend. And weeeeee'll keep on fighting, to the end. We are the champions, we are the champions . . ."

and,  
"We will,  
We will,  
Rock You!"  
tchsch. . .

BOOM! BOOM! tchsch.  
It was a high school wrestling tournament from the early 1980s.

After the orientation, we were examined by a doctor.

He weighed us, checked our blood pressure, checked our fronts, backs, eyes and ears. Three people didn't pass the physical; one guy had high blood pressure, one had a cut over his eye and one weighed only 145 pounds — 15 under the minimum. Neil Johnston, the Toughman promoter, told the guy with high blood pressure to go into the stands and think about women. Ten minutes later his blood pressure was low enough, for some reason.

## The Wait

People began trickling into the arena about 7:30 p.m. At 8, one of the promoters grouped all the fighters together and gave us a pep talk.

"You're all gonna be friends after this," he said.

He ended with:  
"You guys and gals are all champions for having the guts to do what you're going to do tonight."

I felt then we needed a group hug, because we were all so great.

And this "guts" thing. There's a fine line between bravery, stupidity and boundless profiteering.

At 8:10 p.m., the 12 light heavyweights, 20 heavyweights and four women fighters were paraded around the arena to "Gonna Fly Now" from "Rocky." I waved to the crowd and shadowboxed with a few children. For a few seconds, I was feeling pretty big.

The crowd was much smaller than expected, only a few hundred. The promoters said they expected more people on Saturday, the night all the winners from Thursday would fight for \$1,000.

The fighters returned to the darkened end of the arena next to the stage. After a heavyweight fight, the ring announcer called out the first two light heavyweights. I didn't have to fight first, which, at the time, seemed like a blessing.

But worse than getting punched, I think, is the fear of getting punched. Like the French awaiting the guillotine, no fighter knew whose name would be called next.

Each time the announcer called for the next contestants, the adrenaline would surge. The later a person fought in the night, the more moments of extreme terror a person faced, and the less adrenaline he had remaining for the actual fight.

And this weakened us all. A strange air of humility and humanity began to sit in over the remaining contestants.

Fighters who before had been sitting stone-faced and menacing were now asking me how I had gotten into this mess. They would laugh and shrug their shoulders and tell stories about how their boss or friends or whom-ever had dared them to do it.

Many of them, like myself, thought sometime in the past that it would be funny to enter. Even the street fighters who wanted the \$1,000 were talking quietly about metaphysics and their mothers.

And all this time we were stretching and jumping and kicking and punching, wearing ourselves out.

After a few bouts, I was praying to go next.

I went last.  
Willie Howard, a 22-year-old, 163 pounder from Lincoln with two years

of karate, also wanted to fight earlier. He and I waited for two hours as other light heavyweights were called to the ring.

When the last two fighters beside Willie and I went, we began talking to each other more. I told him not to break any of my bones. He told me not to break any of his. I told him I was a wimp. He told me he was a bigger wimp. He said he had never been in a ring. I said I'd never hit anybody in the face.

I told him to say something that would make me want to hit him in the face. He didn't.

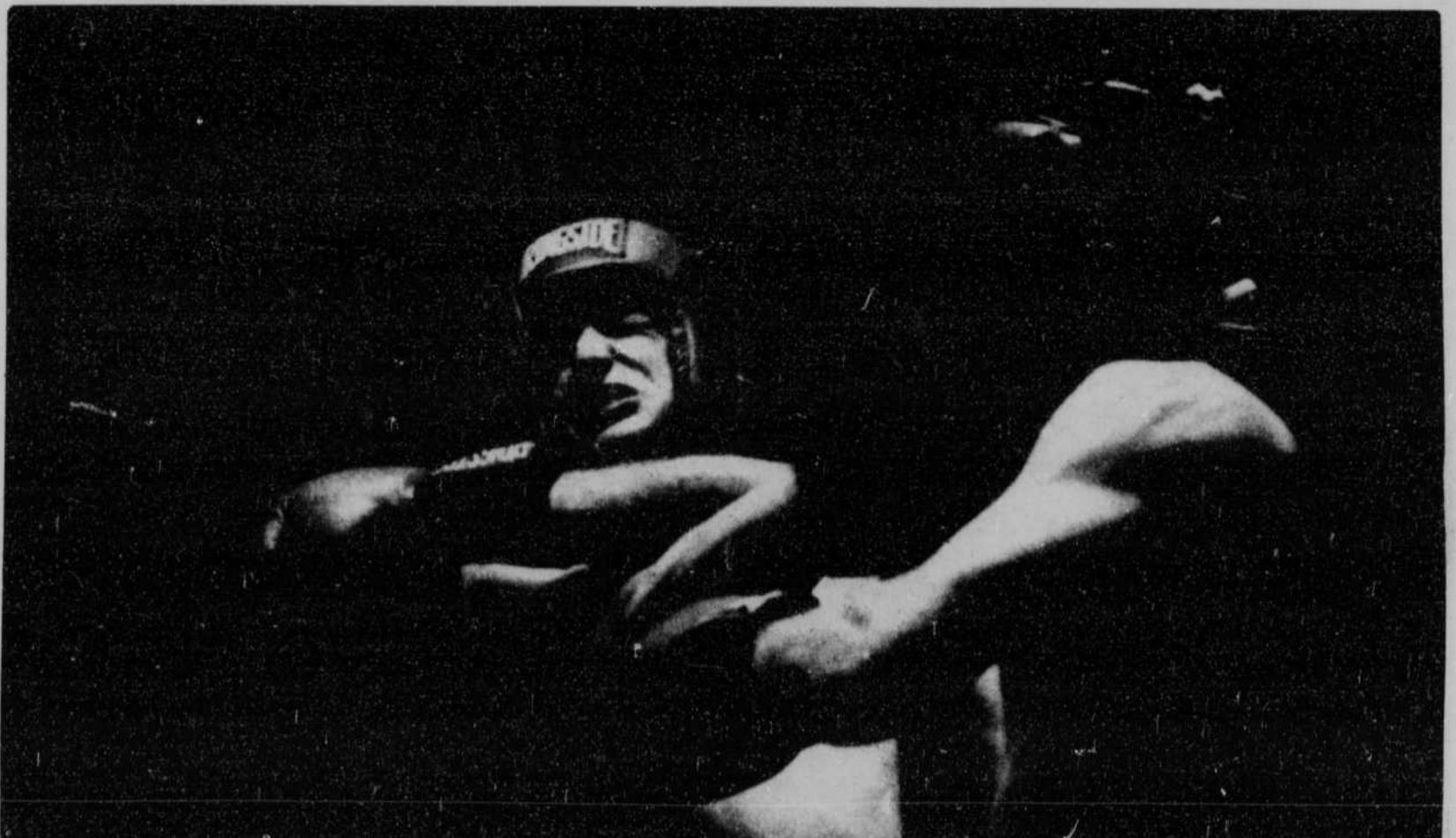
## The Fight

The announcer interrupted our conversation:

"In the red corner, 'Canvasback' Bawwwwwwwwwb Nelson. And, in the blue corner, 'Skid Row' Williceecece Howard."

Getting into the ring without incident, like dressing well, is terribly important. One heavyweight, George, ran to the wrong side of the ring and got trapped behind the press table.

See KICKBOX on 10



William Lauer/Daily Nebraskan

A bunch of punches from "Skid Row" Willie Howard like this one led up to The Punch.