

FAREWELL TO VIC BOFF

Dr. Ken "Leo" Rosa

Ten A.M., January 1, 2003. New Year's morning. Cold, cloudy, gray, raining. I sat bundled up beside my longtime friend, Dr. Serafin Izquierdo, as he drove us from the Bronx towards Manhattan's West Side Highway. Destination: West 22nd Street on the beach at Brooklyn's Coney Island for a final farewell to Vic Boff. A group of Vic's friends were to meet there for a memorial ceremony at noon. On the way, we reminisced about the past twenty years of annual Association of Oldetime Barbell & Strongmen reunions with the exception of the fateful 2001. We also talked about the disappeared Mollo's Health Food Store in the Fordham Road area of the Bronx, which was frequented in the past by both of us, who had been regular, satisfied customers. We found out only a few years ago that the wonderful Mollo's was owned by Vic Boff. Leroy Colbert told me that it was Vic Boff who gave him many valuable, helpful business pointers when Leroy opened his first World Health Center on Manhattan's Broadway and 84th Street.

Coney Island, 11:30 A.M. We drove under the elevated subway tracks until we reached West 22nd Street near the famous amusement area. We parked and walked onto the cold, rainy beach. There was nobody. Perplexed, we turned from the beach and faced the streets. To our consternation, there was a big man in bathing trunks walking towards us. He asked "are you here for Vic?" "Yes," we answered. "Come this way," he beckoned. Just then Arthur Dreschler and his wife Joanne arrived. We all followed the big man in bathing trunks a few yards to the street level metal door of a flat roofed cinder block garage-like building. A short passageway led into a room almost filled with people, many of whom we knew, some of whom we didn't. There was a well used exercise bench with a loaded barbell resting in its rack, some old lockers, a table on which were abundant morsels of chicken, rolls, juices and a fading picture of a young Vic Boff. At this table sat a fit-looking, white-haired man who I later learned was called "Ice Cube." To one side there was percolating hot coffee. The walls were covered with old photographs, and most of them depicted happy looking young athletes from another time. Prominent among those athletes was a smiling, dark haired, vigorous looking Vic Boff. We were in the

famous Coney Island Iceberg Athletic Club-home of the winter bathers and organized in 1918—of which Vic Boff was a long revered member. I felt at home. This was my kind of place.

Suddenly the giant figure of Slim "The Hammerman" Farman towered over me. He began softly sharing memories of his long relationship with The Mighty Atom and with Vic Boff. I listened intently. His face expressed profound grief. Then my breath stopped as I noticed what appeared to be a tear on his left cheek. I felt tears come to my own eyes. Slim and his wife had traveled four hours to say farewell to Vic.

Big Mike D' Angelo's booming voice was easily heard as he conversed with everyone and his two sons videotaped and photographed the goings on. Steve Sadicario greeted us with a gentle handshake from his powerful mitt. The great Joe Rollino, George Boff (son of Vic), Joe Guarino, Joe Lazaro, Randall Basset and Tom Townsend were among the growing group. Many great people were coming together to honor a great man.

We formed a line to sign the attendance book. People continued to file into the room. Then I was totally surprised by the arrival of Mark Henry. Mark lives in Texas, but he's quite busy with his WWE wrestling schedule. Once again a tear came to my eye and my breath momentarily stopped. Mark Henry came in order to pay his final respects, to demonstrate by his appearance this morning the great esteem in which he held Vic Boff. Wrestler, strongman, sensitive human being, Mark Henry has a new fan in yours truly.

One at a time individuals retreated to the locker area or the shower room and reappeared wearing bathing attire. I still had not figured out what this meant although I now realize that it must have been obvious to everyone else.

Amidst the friendly chatting there was a good natured call for us to direct our attention to the white haired man known as "Ice Cube" still sitting erect and regally at the table. The room became quiet so that "Ice Cube" could share with us his thoughts about his departed longtime friend. He said, "there was no one I knew that claimed to have an answer to life except . . . Vic. He believed there was one answer. So he told all the disbe-

lieving Icebergs when I was a rookie swimmer in 1953. ‘be kind to your fellow man and he will reciprocate in kind, usually.’ When I was young the world marveled at the exploits of Dr. Albert Schweitzer, the great physician who selflessly gave his resources materially and philosophically to help the poor people in Africa. As the years passed and some wisdom was attained it dawned on me that there was only one person remotely approaching the towering stature of the so-called ‘great white wizard’ and that was Dr. Victor Boff. When Dr. Boff counseled you, the aura of his presence elevated you spiritually for a long time. Just as Dr. Schweitzer sometimes walked with kings so did Vic. Just as Schweitzer treated every man equally, so did Vic. He had an everlasting spirit that transcended the physical world and gave you hope and reason to carry on. A man such as this will live in **our** hearts forever. CARRY ON!”

Directed by Mike D ‘Angelo, in bathing trunks, people now began filing out of the room through its one door, onto the pavement, into the cold, onto the beach, towards the water. We followed those leading. Most of us were bundled up. Some were carrying umbrellas to shield against the freezing rain.

We gathered at the water’s edge and listened as Mike D’ Angelo, carrying the urn containing the ashes of Vic Boff, reminded us that we were on the spot where Vic regularly had bathed in winter. Mike pointed out the nearby rocks where Vic would place his towel and other gear before entering the water. With that, Mike walked to the rocks and began scattering some of Vic’s ashes on them. He then strode into the frigid water and was joined by the other super-humans in bathing attire including Steve “Mighty Stefan” Sadicario, 97-year old Joe Rollino, Mark Henry, a young woman named Alexis Venezia and several others whose forgiveness I beg for my not having obtained their identities to include herein. When he was waist high in the Atlantic, Mike D’ Angelo emptied the urn onto the waves as Alexis Venezia scat-



Mike D’Angelo speaks to part of the brave group who assembled at Coney Island to share in the scattering of Vic’s ashes in the frigid Atlantic and on the beach he loved so well.

Photo Courtesy Leo Rosa

tered beautiful flowers which intermingled with Vic’s ashes. Alexis Venezia was born 21 years ago with a hole in her heart which was surgically repaired during her first year. At age eight she had a pace maker installed. She is a competitive swimmer and was honored to be asked to participate. She needed little coaxing to go into the ocean with the other swimmers to honor Mr. Boff as she did it as a tribute to her 87-year old grandfather, Jimmy Venice, an old time strongman and a friend of Vic’s.

After the memorable ceremony on the beach we all returned to the Iceberg Clubhouse, reminisced some more, then bade each other so long and went our separate ways. One impression that has remained indelibly with me is the image of Joe Rollino, casting one last sorrowful look at a photograph on the wall of his departed, beloved friend.

Mike D’Angelo has produced a video tribute to Vic Boff that includes the memorial service described in this article, newscasts showing Vic and the Iceberg Club in action, and other rare footage. Despite her protestations, all proceeds from the sale of this video will go to Ann Boff. To order, send \$25.00 to Mike D’Angelo, 18 Colon Street, Staten Island, NY, 10312. Please make checks payable to Ann Boff.