

## **THE HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMP OF NAPLES**

**By**

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In the late 1950's, Scruff McGullis was the undisputed heavyweight champion. Of Naples. On Saturday nights. At The Barn, and other local watering holes where fisticuffs were as pervasive as the smoke laden air, honky-tonk music, and belly-rub dancing, he reigned supreme. He'd beaten every other beer sodden thug at least once.

Scruff wasn't particular. Every customer was subject to his abusive challenges and, if he wasn't too drunk, he was a formidable adversary. A fisherman by trade, years of pulling the nets had forged arms with muscles that bulged like the hawsers mooring the Everglades City shrimp boats. This was coupled with a briny and coarse salt-water temperament.

On this one particular evening, Scruff was down in the dumps. Try as he might, he hadn't been able to provoke even a spirited shoving match. He'd used his best insults, wasted half a mug of beer pouring it over one joker's head, and even pinched a patron's wife on her ample ass. This last assault usually guaranteed a rough-and-tumble. Not tonight. The bitch seemed to like it, and her husband was too wasted to give a damn. Nothing worked. He'd decided to go home; even drained his mug of beer, slid off the barstool, and was heading for the door when salvation came lumbering in.

He would've been much taller, the fella that walked up to the bar, maybe six-feet-three, if he wasn't so stoop-shouldered. His walk was splayfooted and his arms hung loose like broken lanyards. Right comical he was, too, with a shock of dark hair drooping over his forehead, a big nose, squinty eyes, and a mouth like an Okeechobee bass. Yep, Scruff thought, a real goofy looking son of a bitch who could use a good ass whuppin'. Fella that looked like that was probably used to it.

Scuff leaned over the bar and asked the tender if he knew the stranger. "One of them actor fellas," the bartender replied. "Been in here a couple a times. Down here working on some TV show about cops in Tallahassee."

Now Scruff was salivating. This couldn't be better. Why, he'd just whipped one of those actor fellas a few months back. And that one was a helluva lot more man than this sissy. What was his name? Cochran. Yeah, Steve Cochran, that was it.

Steve Cochran *was* a big, burley man, with dark good looks. In the real world, he'd once been a cowboy. In films, he was usually a villain, parts that seemed to suit his temperament. He'd had a small part in the Academy Award winning *Best Years of Our Lives*, then became a *film noire* staple. Now, he'd broken with the studio system, intent on producing his own films. When he'd stumbled on The Barn, he'd been in Naples to scout locations for a project he was developing. When he met Scruff, the results were predictable, He too, loved to drink, and, like Scruff, the next best thing to drinking was a good barroom brawl.

This Cochran fella hadn't been short on guts, Scruff remembered. He'd even gotten in a few licks that caused Scruff to see double for a couple of days. But, in the end, Scruff had given him all he wanted. The fella had waived him off, staggered on back to his motel. Scruff had been right famous around town for a week or so after that event, recognition he savored, the short time it lasted. Now the opportunity for greatness had come again.

Scruff ordered another beer and stomped down to the stool next to his proposed adversary. The Barn's Saturday night crowd hushed knowing Scruff, and what was surely going to follow. Only the jukebox, playing a Hank Williams lament, could be heard.

The actor wasn't sitting on a stool, just resting his elbows of the bar casual like. Scruff preferred to attack someone while they were sitting. Sitting in a booth was the best of all. If you got a fella trapped in a booth he could never get up and out, you owned him. But, you couldn't always have ideal conditions, and Scruff was sure with this fella it didn't make any difference. Scruff figured he could whip him on roller skates in a phone booth. So, he made his overture: "Say, I hear tell you're one of them actors."

No response.

"I said," this time a little louder, "I heard you were one of them Hollywood actors."

The actor turned to Scruff, gave him a squint eyed once over and said, "Actually, I'm from New York, and there are those in the business who would debate you on my acting prowess."

Big words. Big, fancy words with a Yankee accent. There was nothing that pissed Scruff off worse than fancy talk, unless it was a Yankee accent. He was really gonna enjoy this.

"I heard all you actors were queer," he said. "Queers or pre-verts, like to help sheep over the fence, play drop the soap, shit like that."

The actor sighed, put down his beer. "Okay," he said, "we've all enjoyed

your witty repartee. Now, why don't you let me finish my drink in peace, and I'll be on my way."

Scruff laughed. "Bet you would, 'bout now, like to be on your way. But that ain't gonna happen 'less you go through me."

The actor smiled, "That being the case, maybe we can engage in some genial conversation. Maybe you can answer a question for me. Something I always wonder about when I meet gentleman such as yourself."

Scruff frowned. "What kinda question?"

"I was just wondering, do little Southern town's *hire* buffoons like you to be the village idiot, or do you volunteer as a public service?"

Scruff didn't know what a "buffoon" was, but he was damn sure familiar with "idiot," and rage rolled over him like a hurricane tide. He snorted, cocked his big right arm, started to fire it and . . . his lights went out.

Eyewitness accounts vary as to just what punch the actor hit Scruff with. Some say a left hook, others a straight right, still others a left *and* a right. All agreed on one matter: the punch had been fast and devastating. One second Scruff was in front of the actor, bowed up, ready to unleash lightening, the next second he was on his back, eyes wide open but seeing nothing. They also remember the actor's departure, gesturing as though tipping a hat, saying "Ladies, gentlemen, a fond adieu, and goodnight."

Scruff would later claim that it was a sucker punch—and a damn lucky one—that had put out his lights. In truth, he knew he'd been pole axed with a killer blow delivered by someone who knew exactly how to do it. Fact of the matter was Scruff was right.

It hadn't, from the start, been a fair fight. Although he didn't look it, the actor had been forged from premium ore, polished by tenacity, sweat, and grit. A Jewish Russian immigrant at age three, with an unpronounceable, fifteen consonants, and vowels name, he grew up poor, hard, and tough on the mean streets of the New York's Lower East Side. He'd lettered in six varsity sports in high school, was a decorated veteran of WW II, and had once managed a gym, being expert enough a boxer to teach the sweet science to policemen as part of their self defense training.

Few are left who remember the momentous night. The Barn has long since succumbed to the developer's blade, the site, near the intersection of Davis Boulevard and US 41, now an auto repair shop. Scruff is a ghost in the fog of local folklore.

Except for *film noire* fans, Steve Cochran has also been enveloped by time. On a trip on his yacht to Guatemala to search for even more shooting locations, he came to a mysterious end. Although setting sail with a party of friends, his body was found days later, alone, at sea, in his abandoned boat. The circumstances around his death have never been fully explained.

And the New York actor fella who whipped Scruff McGullis? His role on the TV series *Stakeout* was the break he needed to make it to the big time. And hit the big time he did. After a career that lasted over fifty years, he remains one of our most beloved actors. A winner of the Academy Award, Golden Globe, and every other accolade Hollywood has to offer, his biographies always overlook one other achievement. The obscure yet absolute fact that at one time, long ago, in a small Florida town, he was the heavyweight champion. One Saturday night. At The Barn. This, rumped, stooped shoulder gentle giant with the wry smile, twinkle in his eye, and thunderous fists we remember as Walter Matthau.

**Note:** *Scruff McGullis is a fictitious name. I personally knew the real Scruff and know this story is true. There is some dispute over the location but most of those still alive who know of the incident claim it was at the Barn.*

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