



## The furious boxer who inspired *Raging Bull*

**Jake LaMotta**  
1921–2017

Jake LaMotta could take a beating as well as he could give one. The boxer, whose relentless fighting style won him the middleweight championship belt in 1949, was knocked down only once in 106 fights, earning him a reputation as one of the “toughest chins” in the sport’s history. His ferocity, both inside the ring and out, was immortalized in director Martin Scorsese’s 1980 movie *Raging Bull*. LaMotta personally trained Robert De Niro for the lead role, boxing more than 1,000 rounds with the actor. But the former champ was angered when he saw the final film and its portrayal of him as a brutal, wife-beating paranoiac. “Then I realized it was true,” said LaMotta. “I was a no-good bastard. I realize it now. It’s not the way I am now, but the way I was then.”



Born on New York City’s Lower East Side and raised in the slums of the Bronx, “LaMotta learned to fight at an early age,” said *ESPN.com*. His father, a Sicilian immigrant, would force him into street brawls with other neighborhood children, paying part of the family’s rent with coins thrown into the ring by spectators. LaMotta

“emerged as a leading middleweight in the early 1940s,” said *The New York Times*. He successfully defended his title belt twice before losing it to his longtime rival Sugar Ray Robinson on Feb. 14, 1951, in a fight that became known as the St. Valentine’s Day Massacre. LaMotta endured a relentless battering from Robinson, considered by many to be the best pound-for-pound boxer of all time. When the fight was stopped in the 13th round, “LaMotta was a bloody mess but had never hit the canvas.”

LaMotta retired from the sport for good in 1954 but “had trouble adjusting to life after the ring,” said *The Washington Post*. He went to jail in 1957 for enabling the prostitution of a minor when a 14-year-old girl was arrested in his Miami Beach nightclub. While in solitary confinement, he broke his hands punching a wall. But the release of *Raging Bull* rescued him from obscurity, and he enjoyed a long second career on the speaking circuit, “delivering one-liners, signing autographs, and making appearances before far more people than ever attended his fights.” Without the film, “I’d be in bad shape,” he said in 1997. “It made me champ all over again.”

## The Catholic activist who fought for victims of clergy sex abuse

For decades, Barbara Blaine stayed silent about the sexual abuse she had suffered as a teenager at the hands of a Catholic priest. Then in 1985,

**Barbara Blaine**  
1956–2017

the Chicago social worker read a newspaper story about a pedophile priest in Louisiana and decided to confront church officials in her hometown of Toledo. They dismissed her claims and left her feeling, she said, “raked over the coals.” Uncertain how to help, Blaine sought out other victims and in 1988 formed the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests (SNAP). The group today has more than 21,000 members and is the nation’s most powerful voice for abuse victims. “I don’t think any of us thought when we started,” Blaine said in 2014, “that we would still be doing it now.”

Blaine was 13 when she was first abused by a priest who convinced her that she was an “evil temptress,” said *The Boston Globe*. After attending college in St. Louis, she moved to Chicago, where she headed a Catholic charity that helped to house the homeless. She initially founded SNAP in Chicago as a support group, but its mission soon expanded to advocacy. Members posted fliers outside churches warning that an abusive priest was inside; victims held vigils holding photos of themselves as children when they were first abused.

That activism, together with revelations of massive church cover-ups in Boston and elsewhere, eventually led U.S. bishops to pledge to remove all alleged abusers, said *The New York Times*. But SNAP accused the church of failing to keep those promises, so Blaine kept campaigning. Following her death, her husband, Howard Rubin, said he was inundated with messages from survivors. “I’m hearing from people,” he said, “who are saying, ‘She saved my life.’”

## The wrestling manager who boosted bad guys

**Bobby Heenan**  
1944–2017

Bobby Heenan managed some of the biggest names in professional wrestling in the 1980s and ’90s: Andre the Giant, Ric Flair, Ravishing Rick Rude, Big John Studd. Known as The Brain by his fans—and Weasel by his enemies—Heenan drummed up attention for his clients by trash-talking anyone and everything: his wrestlers’ opponents, their fans, the towns where the matches took place.



“Have you ever been to Glens Falls, N.Y.?” he once said. “The city limits signs are on the same post.” Hulk Hogan’s followers, he declared, were the kind of people who “wear a brown sock and a white sock and got a pair at home just like them.” Heenan’s ringside banter made him one of the most reviled, and popular, figures in the business. “I’m a legend in this sport,” he said. “If you don’t believe me, ask me.”

Born in Chicago to a railroad worker father and a hotel manager mother, Heenan “became enamored of wrestling as a child,” said *The Washington Post*. He dropped out of eighth grade to work at wrestling venues; when a performer didn’t show up one day, he put on a mask and entered the ring. By the mid-’60s he was

wrestling under the name Pretty Boy Bobby Heenan and managing other wrestlers. Because most of his stable were villainous “heels,” Heenan would strut around the ring before and during matches, taunting the crowd. Some fans took the show seriously: Over the years, Heenan “escaped thrown chairs and attempted knifings and at least one shooting.” But he had to step back from the ring in 1983, said *Deadspin.com*, after his neck

was broken by a Japanese wrestler’s “errant knee drop from the top rope.”

Following the injury, Heenan became an on-camera commentator in addition to his managing duties, said *The New York Times*. He formed a memorable TV partnership with former wrestler Gorilla Monsoon, and the pair often debated in-ring tactics. After Monsoon accused one of Heenan’s wrestlers of performing an illegal move, Heenan protested that “it was a legal move, it was a Greco-Roman Hair Pull!” Diagnosed with throat cancer in 2002, Heenan was inducted into the WWE Hall of Fame two years later. It was an honor, he said at the ceremony, to have brought his comedy “into a business that I often thought needed a kick in the pants and a couple of smiles.”

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