

# BOXING

**BASILIO**  
The Great Eastern Mainweight and World Heavyweight Champion vs. Backus  
10 Rounds

**Billy BACKUS**  
Green Bay's Fighting Hope vs. Fernand "The Bull" CHRETIEN  
10 Rounds

**FATE DAVIS**  
Special! 6 Rounds

**DeCavitch vs. Smith**  
BILLY WEIR  
BOBBY PARNELL  
New Castle  
Friday, Aug. 2

## Owned 1981 Prince of Wales winner **Fernand Chretien's stretch drive** By Peter Gross



Fern Chretien (flowered shirt) in the winners circle



Bunny and Fern watching the horse races

was third in that race. Fern remembers another pleasant aspect of that victory.

"We got \$42,000," he says. "That would be half a million today."

For 30 years, Chretien has been involved with the Toronto Thoroughbred Racing Club. Because of his long tenure in the business, he's the guy President Sam Lima relies on to bring the colourful characters of the game to the monthly meetings.

"He's been a very good director," says Lima. "He's in the backstretch all the time. He's able to get us the guests. The jockeys are hard to get, but he somehow gets the jockeys to that room and it makes the meetings great. And he's always with us when we go out of town. We've gone to Chicago, Delaware, Saratoga, Suffolk Downs."

Chretien's last visit to the winners circle was about four years ago when Sly Illusion, trained by Alex Bankuti, won a \$27,000 race in August at Woodbine. In the picture, Chretien is robust and beaming. His present state of health pretty well dictates that he can't own any more horses. But it doesn't mean he can't still enjoy the sport.

"I'm looking forward to the races this summer," he says. "Yes I am."

He sits on the edge of his bed and a smile creases his still handsome face. He tilts his head forward and starts to mime punches. The rhythm is still there. Short, choppy jabs from the left. An overhand right. Another. Three jabs in a row from the left.

"I could still go half a round," he says with a self-deprecating laugh. Cancer may be devastating his body, but it's done nothing to his sense of humour.

Bunny is steeling herself for the inevitable. But how do you prepare to lose the man you've loved for so long? She was 18 when they were married.

"I know I'll be ok," she says, not thoroughly convincing. "Of course, he's going to be missed. But it's life. You have to go on. You can't just give up."

Chretien has been subjected to a continuing series of treatments to slow down the relentless invader.

"The radiation was the toughest of them all," he says. "That was November, 2010. They put a machine in the back of me. I couldn't eat anything for a few weeks. I'm better now, but it was a shame the way I felt at that time."

Bunny's with him all the time. She's fulfilling the hard part of the marital vow. For better or for worse.

"She's dynamite," Fern says. "I couldn't live without her."

Now he's swept up with emotion. "I couldn't do it," he whispers.

Those who have been visiting Fern know what a pleasure, what an inspiration it is to see his uplifting attitude in the face of oppressive odds. There's no self pity, just a long time racetracker dealing with a photo that didn't go his way. The racetrack metaphor is easy for Fern Chretien to articulate.

"The finish line is getting close," he says with acceptance, "and there's nothing I can do about it. So I'll go on right to the end."

Chretien casts a loving smile at Bunny. "That's all you can do."

As a young man, Fern "The Bull" Chretien fought 32 times as a lightweight. His toughest opponent?

"Billy Backus," says Chretien after a moment to consider. "He turned out to be a world champion."

Chretien is now 74 and battling a much fiercer antagonist.

"My back is full of cancer," he says, trying to be casual. "And it's in part of my legs. And I got some in my cheek bone at the moment, but it's not too bad. I'm going through it pretty well."

Kind of what you might expect from a guy who never backed down in the ring, who was once Canadian champion and ranked 7<sup>th</sup> in the world. But Chretien acknowledges that this opponent is relentless.

"He doesn't play by the rules," says Chretien. "He doesn't take a breather between rounds. He hits below the belt and doesn't get penalized."

Fern and Loretta – he always calls her 'Bunny' – have been married for almost 53 years. She's been with him through his boxing career, through several years as he built up a successful flower business, and she joined him in all the ecstasy and the agony of owning horses. Bunny's a tough vibrant woman, watching the man she loves being overwhelmed by cancer.

"It's hard to see him going through the pain," she says, as tears well in her eyes. "He's a fighter, but it's very hard. I think of his grandchildren. They're used to seeing a strong grandpa. They can't believe he's the way he is."

Bunny takes a breath to compose herself.

"Yes I'm angry," she admits, "because we always said we were going to grow old together and be together. But if God wants it this way, this is how it has to be."

Chretien underwent prostate surgery in 2001 and the doctors gave him a clean prognosis.

"At the time, they claimed it was a success," says Chretien. "Then I heard they didn't get it all. I was very disappointed."

As for the possibility of any more surgery to

remove the tumours...

"Nothing they can do," he says frankly. "I got to fight it. Got to keep fighting it."

Chretien's ordeal is made much more bearable thanks to the kindness of his daughter Andrea and her husband Dave who designed and built a special addition to their Mississauga home so that Fern and Bunny could move in and all his nursing needs could be satisfied. It's a comfy, cozy little nest, and in the centre of the living room is a new widescreen t.v.

"We have the racing channel and we watch it pretty nearly every day," says Bunny, happy to consider a much more uplifting topic. "And we have an account set up on the computer."

Chretien grew up in the hard and tumble Sherbourne and Dundas area of downtown Toronto. As a small kid, developing his boxing skills was the way he avoided getting beat up in the streets. In the ring he won 28 of 32 matches. In 1961, when he was still in his 20s, he and his brother Lionel started a flower delivery service called Brother's Express.

"I had 32 trucks," he recalls. "We'd pick up flowers from the flower shops, take them to the warehouse, sort them and then we'd deliver them."

That business put cash in the bank account and soon Chretien, with another brother, Richard, was buying race horses. There was one called Below Deck, then Corvette Carol, then Sweet Mood. Then there was a horse called Cadet Corps that brought the Chretiens their biggest score.

"We won the 1981 Prince of Wales," says Bunny, relishing the memory. "We paid \$14.50 to win and we were the Cinderella story because we beat the big people."

Indeed. Queen's Plate winner Fiddle Dancer Boy