

ALEX HILTON

ATHLETE, 61

FORMER BOXER WAS PART OF A TROUBLED QUEBEC FIGHTING CLAN

He was a Canadian middleweight champion at age 18, but his battles in and out of the boxing ring eventually left him scarred and broken

LISA FITTERMAN

When he was six years old, Alex Hilton wanted to be just like his father, the boxer, brawler and drinker, Dave Hilton Sr.

Twenty years later, after a stint in prison for alcohol-related crimes and sexual assault, the outlook of the younger Mr. Hilton had been tempered by hard experience when he said he did not want his own sons to be like him. "I hope they can look at me and see what happens when you don't have a good education when all you know is boxing and all you've ever known is boxing," he told the *Montreal Gazette*. "I hope they are going to be lawyers or doctors or at least learn how to be lawyers or doctors before they become boxers, because you know, boxing is in our genes."

Mr. Hilton described his world as coming to a pinpoint focus on his opponent whenever he entered the ring. A journeyman compared to his brothers Davey Jr. and Matthew, both of whom won world titles in their respective weight classes, Alex had a style that was more a furious flurry of fists than a tactical, choreographed dance. He was the one who would not give up, punching right and left, jabs, hooks and uppercuts, no matter how many hits the other guy landed. Back then, it was the only way he knew how to survive.

"He was like a soldier," said Robert Frosi, a Radio-Canada sports journalist who wrote a book about the family. "He may have been the least talented in the family as a boxer, but he was most courageous of them all."

Alex Hilton's boxing career was marked 37 wins and 11 losses, with the highlight being named Canadian middleweight champion at the age of 18. But the years outside the arena were marked by addiction and numerous arrests and incarcerations for crimes that ranged from disorderly conduct to armed robbery and orchestrating the sexual assault of a fellow inmate in Montreal's Bordeaux jail. The latter led to a five-year prison term, the longest of all his sentences.

Life hit Mr. Hilton hard, leaving him with a bum shoulder, an injured hip and a face that was a scarred, smashed-in landscape of past fights. Sober, he could be sweet and self-reflective, aware of his shortcomings and determined to kyo his past and do better. But get a drink or six into him and all those good intentions would be forgotten in the drama of the moment. In effect, he was caught up in an almost preordained cycle of addiction, destruction and contrition, marked by poor decisions and a talent with his fists.

In 2007, for example, Mr. Hilton was sentenced to six months in jail for assaulting a police officer, and for a breach of probation for an incident that happened only the day after he had been released from jail on a previous conviction. Clemente Monterosso, his lawyer at the time, told reporters that his client did not mean to threaten patrons in a west-end Montreal bar, but after consuming five or six quarts of beer, had not been able to control himself.

His youngest brother, Jimmy Hilton, said that people tend to remember just the bad stories, the violent incidents, the tales of a family that went from rags to riches and back to rags again, complete with drunken jags and lured, breathless tabloid headlines. "But there was so much good to Alex," he continued. "Once, when he was in [Bordeaux] jail, he saved a young man who had tied his bed sheets together from hanging himself. He reached through the bars, grabbed the guy and hollered for help. No one knows about that."

More recently, Mr. Hilton, who had finally managed to get sober, was the primary caregiver for his ailing mother at her home in Châteauguay, an off-island suburb of Montreal; on April 7, he died there in an armchair facing the television in the living room after



Montreal boxer Alex Hilton amassed a record of 37 wins and 11 losses over his career, and was known for a style that was more a furious flurry of fists than a tactical, choreographed dance. COURTESY OF THE HILTON FAMILY



Hilton brothers Matthew, left, Alex, centre left, and Davey Jr., centre right, attend a news conference in Buffalo with boxing promoter Don King, right, in March, 1985. Matthew and Davey Jr. both won world titles in their respective weight classes. BILL GRIMSHAW/THE CANADIAN PRESS



Alain Bonnamie, right, lands a right to the jaw of Mr. Hilton during their eight round non-title super middleweight fight in Montreal in September, 2002. RYAN REMIOWZ/THE CANADIAN PRESS

suffering an apparent heart attack. He was 61 years old. "He was always there for us," said his sister, Jo-Anne Hilton Williamson. "We always took him for granted but Alex was always there."

Alex Stewart Hilton was born in LaSalle, Que., on Dec. 20, 1964, the third of Dave Sr. and Jeannie Hilton's six children. The oldest, Jo-Anne, was a surprise, for the father had been expecting a boy and bought a lot of baby boxer accoutrements to get his first child

started early in life. All five boys — Davey Jr., Alex, Matthew, Stewart and Jimmy — had the same middle name, as if to brand them as a clan. From the start, expectations of them were at once large and limited. Be proficient with their fists, and tactical, to be sure, and because they were supposed to make their way in the boxing ring, everything else went by the wayside.

In the early days, the family lived in a trailer and the boys slept in dresser drawers until they

were too big to fit inside. They all quit school when they turned 12, ostensibly to pursue boxing careers, and they all began to drink when they were 16 because they figured it was an adult thing to do.

"It was probably younger than that, but put 16 because it looks better," Alex Hilton once said in this reporter.

His father was an erstwhile boxer who won Golden Gloves amateur matches in Tennessee, Texas and Kentucky in the mid-1950s and went on to win several Canadian championships. He was determined to initiate his sons into the sport.

"I treated them tough, really strict," he said. "My motto was 'do as I say, not as I do.'"

Mr. Hilton Sr. was wont to go on benders on weekends, blacking out in bars, getting into fights, then waking up his boys at 4 in the morning with his fists and boxes of Dunkin Donuts and Chinese food takeout.

"Everybody was going to do good and make money and get their education later. But it didn't work out that way," he said in 1991. "We looked for that pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, but we didn't quite make it because whatever pot of gold we had was spent before we had it."

In public, he was the boys' trainer, striking them when he

felt they needed it and using profane language, no matter who was around to hear.

In the 12th round of a match against Deano Clavet in March, 1984, which Mr. Clavet was winning happily, the father slapped his son and asked why he was letting a "girl" beat him. Fired up and desperate, Mr. Hilton spat out his mouthpiece, which landed between his opponent's feet.

Mr. Clavet was distracted for just a second or two as he tried to kick the mouthpiece out of the way, but it was enough time for Mr. Hilton to land a vicious punch. "I thought, 'Thank you. Then, split, he was down.'" he recalled in a 2003 documentary interview.

Controversy and tragedy followed the Hiltons wherever they went. Stewart Hilton (his middle name was also Stewart) was 17 and had just turned pro when he was killed in a high-speed car accident in 1986. The family's personal lawyer, Frank Shoofey, was shot to death in October, 1985, while working late in his office — a murder that has never been solved. And in 1986, a royal commission that had been struck to look into the connections between the boxing world and organized crime found systemic corruption; crime boss Frank Costello, it concluded, was the "guiding spirit" of boxing in Quebec and had an "outsized influence" on any business decisions the Hiltons made.

(Dave Hilton Sr. always maintained that his friendship with Mr. Costello meant nothing other than accepting help to pay for groceries and other household expenses after the family moved to a sprawling house filled with plants in Rigaud, about 70 kilometres west of Montreal.)

In the end, Alex Hilton's world shrank to that of his immediate family. A man broken by falls inside and outside the ring, he preferred to live in the shadows, estranged from four of his five children and determined to care for those he had left.

"His past changed him for the best," said his sister, Ms. Hilton Williamson. "He was a genuine, quiet soul who didn't like drama. There was too much drama in his young years."

Jimmy Hilton added that stories about sibling infighting did not mean a thing. "We Hiltons may fight amongst ourselves, but when it comes down to it, we stick together against the world."

Along with his mother and surviving siblings, Mr. Hilton leaves his five children, Davey, Alex, Phoebe, Holly and Francis, and one grandchild.

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