

The night Lou Richards went 'Lip to Lip' with Ali

The great Lou Richards played a significant role in finals, both as a player for Collingwood (14 finals from 1945-53 including a premiership in 1953), and after his playing career as a newspaper columnist and radio personality. He also featured on various television programs and enjoyed a successful stint as the main commentator for Channel Seven's coverage of the game.

In 1989, *Lou: My Wonderful Life* was released, the book detailing his rise to the top of two fields.

Earlier this week, Richards – now 89 – was in attendance when an updated version of *Lou* was launched at the MCG. The latest version has a foreword by Pies president Eddie McGuire, a new section outlining Richards' achievements in later life and a selection of great photos.

Here is an excerpt detailing his meeting in 1979 with champion boxer Muhammad Ali.

It started as just another Friday. It ended as one of the classic sporting confrontations and a day I'll never forget. I was sitting back learning my numbers for a match that evening when the phone woke me. It was Geoff Jones, the deputy chief of staff of The Sun.

"Louie, we want you to drop everything and grab the one o'clock plane for Sydney. We want you to interview Muhammad Ali," Jones said.

"But it's 10 to 12 now." "You'll make it," he reassured me. "We've already sent the cab." So that autumn Friday back in 1979 I found myself at the Woolloomooloo Police Citizens' Boys club in Sydney with photographer Alex Gall and reporter Peter Rees. The place was packed to the rafters. I took one look and knew our chances of getting an exclusive with the great man were about as slim as my chances of lasting 15 seconds in the ring with him.



"Let's get outside," I whispered to my team. We'd been walking to and fro along the footpath outside the club for about 20 minutes when a Rolls Royce glided to a halt alongside us. The door opened and out stepped the 'Louisville Lip'. Sometimes to colour this story I recount how he walked straight over to me and grabbed me by the hand, saying, "Louie, it's great to see you. I've heard all about you." In fact, he looked straight through me. I had one eye on my watch, knowing I had to be on the four o'clock flight back to Melbourne and the minutes had been ticking away at an alarming rate.

"Welcome to the club," I said as I held out my shaking paw. "Nice to be here," Mr Ali replied. In a second it dawned on me: he actually thought I was the welcoming committee, probably the president of the joint. 'The Lip' was in Sydney for an exhibition bout against a former foe, the European heavyweight champ of days past, Joe Bugner, and was on his way to a sparring session with another ex-champ, Jimmy Ellis.

"Don't wash your hand," I told him. "You can tell them all back in the States that this is the hand that shook Lou Richards' hand."

He looked at me with a touch of incredulity.

CHEEKY: Lou Richards' colourful life on and off the field has been updated in the re-release of his book.

“
I get paid
for being
a fool.
What's
your
reason?
”

MUHAMMAD ALI
TO LOU RICHARDS



"I get paid for being a fool. What's your reason?" came back the reply.

"Okay, Ali, you've got the same old lip, but you've lost your zip."

He gave me that same look he'd given Smoking Joe and, in the distant past, Sonny Liston, and to my great relief he walked away and started signing autographs for some young Aboriginal teenagers. We still needed a picture. Alex Gall had been snapping away as I conducted my in-depth interrogation but we needed that special snap. As he turned towards the door, he stopped, looking me up and down. Oh no, I've gone too far this time, I thought as he stepped up to me.

Little Louie the quivering coward was now toe to toe with his idol at last. He bent down and wrapped those massive arms around me and gave me the biggest bear hug in history. Gosh, he had smooth skin for a fighter.

*As my feet hit the footpath he was off and so was I on the plane back to Melbourne with a picture that graces my mantelpiece to this day. It wasn't until we were on the plane that Alex Gall confided in me. "We were very lucky, Louie," he said. "It was the last shot on that roll of film." The next morning that bear hug was all over the front page of The Sun and the story adorned the top of page three. 'Battle of the big mouths' screamed the posters. 'Lip to Lip' was the front-page headline. **B***

LOU: MY WONDERFUL LIFE, WITH STEPHEN PHILLIPS (SLATTERY MEDIA GROUP, \$32.95 RRP)

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