Kid Gloves

And in this corner, weighing in with hemophilia and HIV...

September 1, 1998 By Shawn Decker

Growing up with hemophilia, I became adept in the art of hand-to-hand combat as a means of self-defense.

In elementary school, I was undefeated as an amateur pugilist. I slugged it out on the kickball field during recess (I was safe, but he insisted I was out), in the boys bathroom (he "accidentally" peed on my leg), even once at Sunday School (all that talk about David beating Goliath got me worked up).

While I was usually the first one to take a swing, I was never a bully. I just knew how to scrap with my peers effectively. Being a notorious bleeder, I had to ensure that my opponent would be in no position to get the upper hand. If an argument broke out and I felt threatened, I had to react with full force: A tackle, a face rake, sometimes a headlock. But never a punch to the nose. I was very empathic in that respect—nose-gushing was my hallmark as a Thinblood.

My battle-savvy was reduced dramatically when I was diagnosed with HIV just before entering junior high school. You might think that a death sentence would bring out the best in a young, bare-knuckle fighter or that my new serostatus would make me the perfect fighting machine. Just imagine how socially acceptable it would be for the poor sickboy to vent some anger and frustration on some hapless Thickblood foe. "That brave, brave little man," they'd say with quivering lip.

But that wasn't the case. My diagnosis made me softer, more cuddly than before. This change in philosophy wasn't really noticeable until I got into my first-ever post-diagnosis schoolyard slugfest. I got thrashed.

It was the eighth grade, the year I found out that HIV couldn't be transmitted through kissing (real kissing, not pecking). The year I entered an arena unlike any other… dating.

I was on cloud nine. Snagging my first negatoid girlfriend—a cheerleader, mind you—had me strutting around like Sly Stallone in a tank-top at a Planet Hollywood premiere.

And that's when it happened. I was summoned back into the world of Mortal Kombat by an

antagonistic, thick-blooded thickhead who deemed my girlfriend's breast the perfect place to measure the size of his palm. Imagine, my girlfriend, groped and violated. With this heinous act my machismo was rekindled.

So, after school I confronted this admittedly smaller nemesis. I started off well—a little bit of verbal intimidation and a shove. It felt just like the glory days.

But soon it was more Stop! Or My Mom Will Shoot! than Rocky. Suddenly I found myself in a headlock (not something I would recommend), and all I could hear was screaming. Clearly, this psycho negatoid had issues, and he was venting all of his teen angst on me.

Or, more accurately, on my nose.

The first punch to the snout sent a shock wave through me. Not because of any pain that I felt—just the realization that "Aw man, that's going to bleed." The second, third and fourth punches didn't help matters, either.

I was disappointed by my lack of offense. Why didn't I put up more of a fight? How could I let a seventh-grader kick my butt in front of a good portion of the school? In any case, the grudge match left me down for the count.

Later, when I finally stopped gushing, my only postfight comfort was the realization that I had managed to bleed all over my opponent. I knew I didn't infect him—he was unscathed in the 20-second match. But I figured he felt some tremors of his own when someone yelled, "That blood has AIDS in it!" as they pointed to his crimson-stained shirt and fists.

Or maybe he felt bad for wailing on the poor little sickboy who was just defending his girlfriend's honor. He did make a pretty heartfelt apology later. He said simply, "I didn't know." By the tone of his voice it was obvious that he was referring to my positoidity and not to the fact that his groupee was my girlfriend.

It was also obvious that he cared. He wasn't devoid of the emotion I had hoped to beat into him. His inner-flower could only blossom after he knocked me half senseless.

Please don't view this as an open invitation to a pity party. It's actually just the opposite. I learned more with that defeat than I have with any victory.

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