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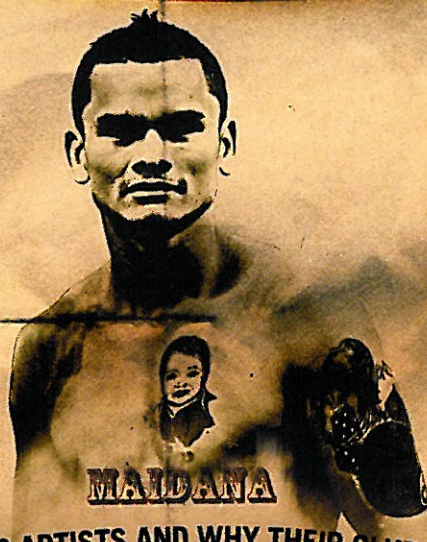
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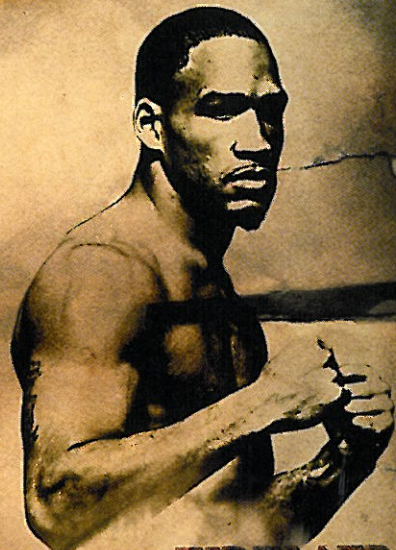
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DOPING GURU VICTOR CONTE FINDS SALVATION IN BOXING

By: Mark Zeigler

The poster was on the back of his bedroom door, and every time he closed the door he saw a life-sized Muhammad Ali, body slightly turned, white trunks with a black stripe, white shoes, teeth gritted, bare fists ready to strike. And this quotation underneath:

"I'm so fast, that last night I turned off the light switch in my bedroom and was in bed before the room was dark."

Victor Conte was 13 when Ali fought Sonny Liston the first time. Those were the days of closed-circuit telecasts, and Conte remembers his dad taking him to the Warnors Theater on Fulton Street in downtown Fresno to see it.

"My uncle boxed in the military," says Conte, now 60. "My dad, he was a huge boxing fan. And he just used to love to fight. He would fight all the time when I was

a kid – neighbors, anybody. I just thought it was normal. He'd drink a little bit too much, and next thing you knew he and the neighbor would have their jackets off in the front yard.

"Ali, he was my idol the whole time I was growing up. I used to think I was a mini Muhammad Ali."

Not because Conte boxed. He didn't. Still never has put on gloves and thrown a punch.

But because of what Ali stood for, the way he fought, the way he talked, the way he acted, the way he hurled his Olympic medal into the Ohio River. The confidence. The drive. The righteousness. The indignation. The articulation. The swagger.

Conte's elementary school had an annual field day with various events – a 50-yard dash, a 600-yard run, pull-ups – and Conte won the title for fifth grade boys. He came home with the trophy and, just as the man on his bedroom poster would, he brashly told his parents he'd win it again as a sixth grader. His mother was horrified.

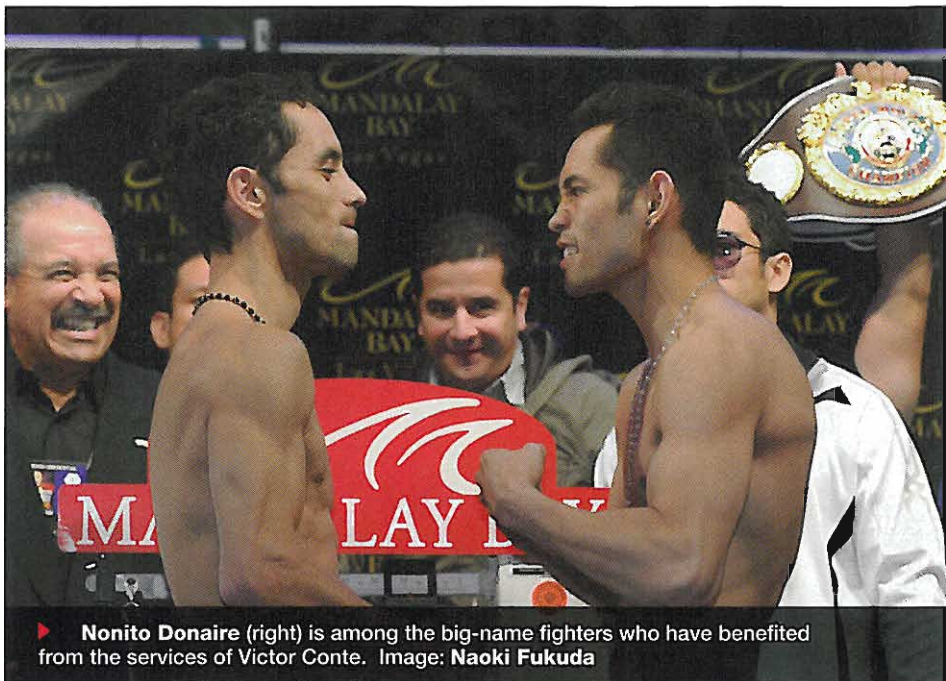
"My mother was a very conservative lady," Conte says. "She told me, 'Oh, don't count your chickens before they're hatched. Don't make these predictions.' I kind of had this Cassius Clay/Muhammad Ali thing going on. The fact that he would predict the round and all those things, there was something about that confidence. There was something where I identified with the fact that he could walk the talk, that he could back it up.

"And that shaped me. I became this kid who believed I could do anything, I could overcome anything, I could become anything. That belief system came from Ali. I'd lie in my room with the door closed and stare at that life-sized poster, and dream."

Conte was walking into his bank in Hillsdale, Calif., in May 2010. He remembers seeing a van parked outside, with "Filipino Flash" painted on it.

"I was like, 'Who the hell is that?'" Conte says.

Conte was filling out a deposit slip when the bank manager, a friend of his, said he wanted to introduce him to somebody. Victor, meet boxer Nonito Donaire. The Filipino Flash.



▶ Nonito Donaire (right) is among the big-name fighters who have benefited from the services of Victor Conte. Image: Naoki Fukuda

They got to talking and realized Donaire and Conte's daughter trained at the same Bay Area gym with the same strength coach.

They agreed to meet and talk more, and soon Conte was working with Donaire – screening his blood for mineral deficiencies, providing him with nutritional supplements, giving him advice on cutting weight, extolling the virtues of intermittent hypoxic therapy, talking about Ubiquinol and sublingual ATP and tyrosine, explaining why hard sprints are more beneficial than boxing's iconic predawn jogs, cautioning against overtraining, imploring the importance of not just sleep but sleep efficiency.

"The controversial Victor Conte," Donaire wryly calls him.

Says Cameron Dunkin, Donaire's manager: "When Nonito first started working with him, I got some phone calls: 'Watch out. He's a scum bag. He's a bad guy. Be careful he doesn't give you something bad.' I called Nonito. I talked to him about it. But Victor's

done a great job with Nonito. He knows what he's doing. It's not hit or miss.

"I've been around a thousand of these bozos. I've seen them nearly kill kids. Victor, he's different. He's not like that. He's legit. ... Everything is scientific."

The sweet scientist.

This is not Conte's first ground in boxing. He worked with Shane Mosley in 2003, providing him with endurance-boosting erythropoietin (EPO) and several other banned substances before his fight against Oscar De La Hoya. Mosley's trainer at the time, Darryl Hudson, was originally a track guy and learned about Conte's underground doping empire through his track contacts.

Mosley ultimately was outed in the BALCO investigation, and Conte served four months in federal prison and four more under home confinement in 2006. But that was another life for Conte, another time, another persona. First he was a musician, a bassist in R&B band "Tower of Power"



► Andre Berto calls Victor Conte's fitness regimen "Conte University." Image: Fightwireimages

in the 1970s. Then he was a doping guru, supplying some of the world's greatest athletes with an undetectable cocktail of drugs. Now he's a reformed doping guru who, in his words, is "trying to do the right things for the right reasons." Or so he insists.

"I had a talk with Victor, and he's assured me that he's doing everything on the up and up," promoter Bob Arum said recently. "Given his past history, you have to believe that. He'd have to be really insane to f--- around with all these eyes on him."

Conte also worked with Andre Ward before bumping into the Filipino Flash at the bank, but that, too, was from past connections. Ward's high school track coach was Remi Korchemny, who eventually became part of Conte's BALCO program.

The serendipity of the Donaire encounter, then, represented a new

beginning. A second chance.

"My comeback," Conte calls it.

His circle of influence has extended to pro boxers Zab Judah, Andre Berto, Karim Mayfield, Brandon Gonzalez and a few others in trainer Virgil Hunter's stable; female boxer Carina Moreno; U.S. amateur women's champion and U.S. Olympic hopeful Marlen Esparza; and MMA's Kyle Kingsbury. The list could be longer, but that's his choice.

Conte is admittedly highly selective, turning down some of the sport's biggest names because he suspects they use banned substances. He doesn't want to take any chances soiling an image he so painstakingly has laundered. He consults his extensive contacts. He also requires everyone to undergo a comprehensive metabolic blood profile, and from that he can identify certain markers – reduced

HDL cholesterol, or maybe elevated liver enzymes – that suggest certain types of doping.

"I'm so grateful to have a second chance," Conte says. "Why would I do anything to screw it up? I don't think there would be a third chance."

The cynicism, the skepticism, the whispers still swirl around him, though. Maybe not with the same fervor as they used to, but they're still there under the surface.

The controversial Victor Conte.

"It's the American way," says Tony Morgan, Berto's trainer. "Everyone talks about what they don't know. Don't get me wrong. When I first met him, it was on my mind. Believe me, I really did my homework before we went with him. But once you get to know him, you just know. He doesn't hide anything. He gives it to you straight. He doesn't claim to be something else. What he knows, he

knows very well – very, very well.

“I think Victor is going to be around for a while in boxing. He paid his dues. He did his time. People can say whatever they want. It’s their prerogative. Whatever they want to believe, they can believe. But I chose to go with Vic. I trust Vic.”

Brandon Rios failed to make weight for his 135-pound fight against John Murray last December in New York.

“I didn’t know what to do,” says Dunkin, who also advises Rios. “He looked like death. He was sick. He was still overweight. He could barely walk. It was bad.”

His first call: the man on the opposite coast with the thin mustache.

“He told me exactly what to do,” Dunkin says. “Brandon did it and he recovered like Victor said he would. When we were on the bus coming back from the weigh-in, Brandon said to me, ‘I don’t know what you gave me, but I feel great.’ That’s Conte.”

Morgan raves about Conte’s weight-trimming methods as well, whatever they are.

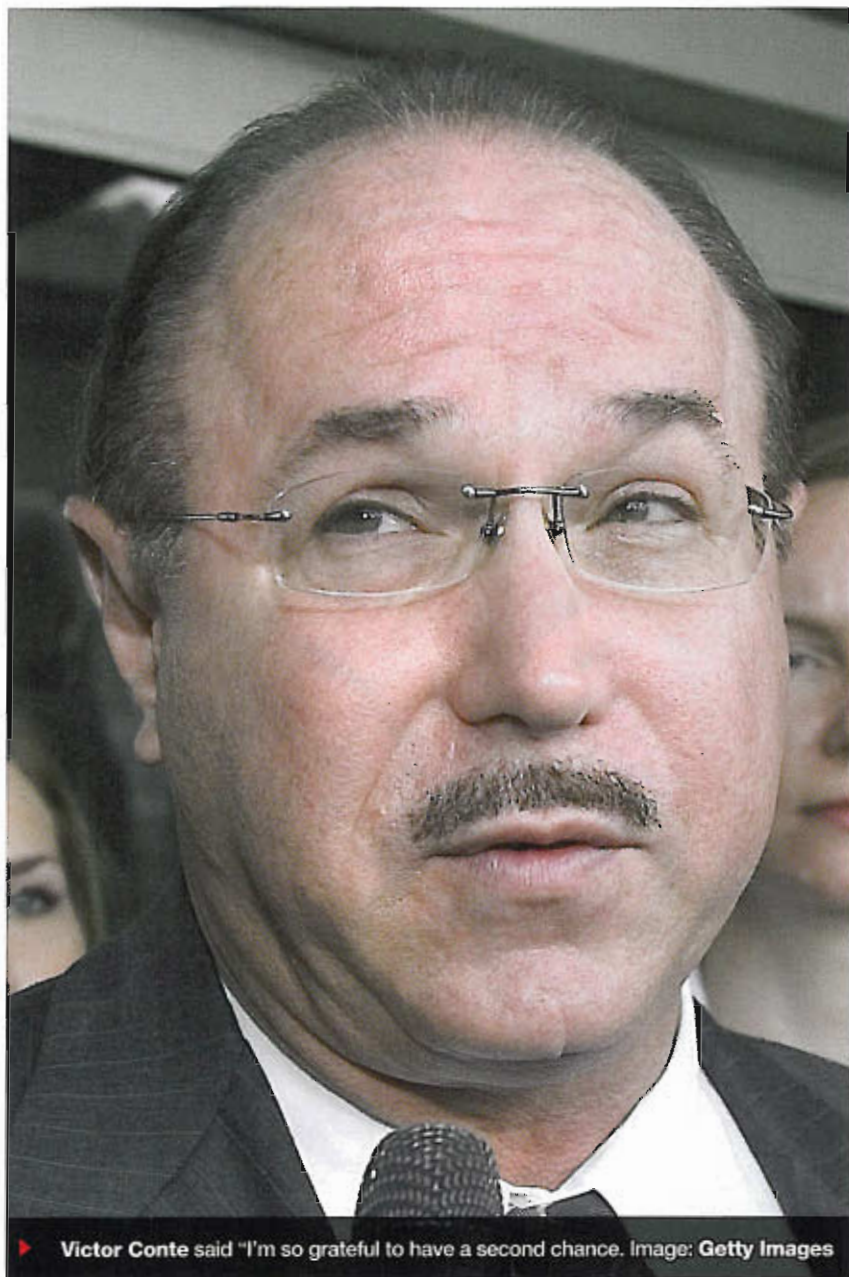
“I thought I knew every secret there was in cutting weight, from the saunas, from drink prune juice,” Morgan says. “I’ve even heard that you should stick an ice cube in your butt. How we cut the weight, I’m not going to say, because it’s our trade secret now. But it’s great. We don’t train or anything. We lose weight by relaxing. Take it right off, put it back on. ... Victor is just way ahead of the game.”

Conte’s regimen – Berto calls it “Conte University” – is multifaceted and individualized. He analyzes blood to identify mineral deficiencies. He counsels his athletes on what to eat, and when. He sends them to Korchemny, the 81-year-old track coach from Russia, for interval sprint workouts. He advises them



► The great irony is that Conte professes to be clean in a profession he has branded among the dirtiest in sports.

Image: Getty Images



on when enough is enough in the gym, and how to get better sleep.

He has them wear “memory belts” when they train that collect seven physiological parameters, including maximum heart rate, breath frequency, caloric expenditure. He projects the results on a screen in his conference room and discusses them, analyzes them, calculates the amount of recovery necessary to repair the metabolic damage from each workout.

There’s also intermittent

hypoxic training, where an athlete breathes rarified air through a mask for an hour each day to increase the body’s concentration of endurance-boosting red blood cells. The traditional method was to train in the mountains, where the air is thinner, or to sleep in altitude simulation tents. But Conte reasons that sleeping in higher elevations or its equivalent can do more harm than good because the body doesn’t get deep enough sleep breathing the oxygen-depleted air.

“New school training,” Conte says. “All you have to do is study up on it and read up on it, and the science tells you what to do. I’m not just making this stuff up.”

The great irony, of course, is that Conte professes to be clean in a profession he has branded among the dirtiest in sports, right up there with cycling and weightlifting. The Ali in him has never allowed him to swallow his words, to tell it like it isn’t, and he has been unrepentant in his criticism.

The use of illicit performance-enhancing drugs in boxing? “Rampant.”

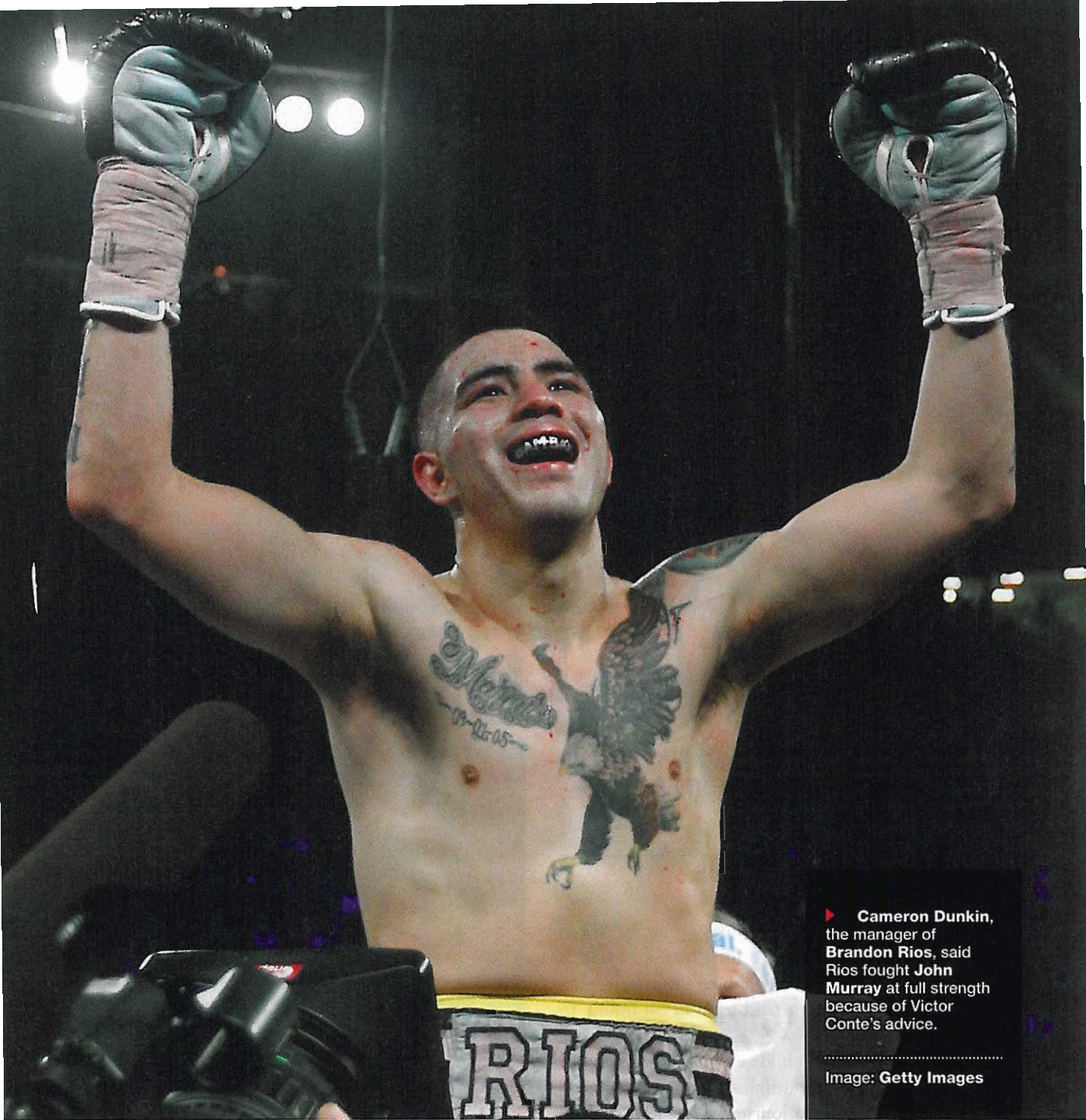
Its testing programs? “An IQ test, because you’re an idiot if you fail one.”

It is such candor that might be Conte’s ultimate legacy in the sport, greater than hypoxic breathing masks or innovative weight-cutting techniques or new-age mineral supplementation. In an underworld of shadows and whispers and nods, Conte is standing on the mountaintop, shouting.

“Nobody would talk to me about doping,” says Dr. Margaret Goodman, the longtime ringside physician in Nevada. “I was writing an article about PEDs, and someone told me that you don’t know anything until you talk to Victor Conte. And Victor talked to me. I wouldn’t know half the things I do about performance-enhancing drugs if I hadn’t talked to him.

“Yes, he has learned a lesson. But he is somebody who understands the problem. If you can’t listen to someone like that, you’re really doing the athletes a disservice. People just get so afraid of listening to people. I don’t know why. He is not the enemy.”

Goodman recently launched the Voluntary Anti-Doping Agency, or VADA, a comprehensive testing program that debuts with Berto’s Feb. 11 fight in Las Vegas against



► Cameron Dunkin, the manager of Brandon Rios, said Rios fought John Murray at full strength because of Victor Conte's advice.

Image: Getty Images

Victor Ortiz. It is her baby, but she credits Conte with suggesting it and “talking me through how to do it.”

Conte has since distanced himself from VADA, choosing instead to work with fighters who will be subject to its rigid urine and blood tests – and the penalties for failing them. The field is being leveled. Now he wants to play ball.

Conte doesn't charge his athletes. Never has. That shocked Morgan, who has tried repeatedly to compensate him.

Says Morgan: “He told me, ‘Listen, Tony, I do it because I love it. I've made my money.’”

Goodman sees something else at work, a special connection, a sense of responsibility, a salvation.

“I think he really cares,” she says.

“He cares about these kids and about the sport. There's something about boxers. I think it's because so many of them want a father figure. They were the best patients I ever had. I see that transformation in Victor as he falls in love with these fighters.

“I've seen him transform.” ■