

## When Bell Sounds, Surgeon Answers Ringside Calling



Dr. Victor Khabie checks on junior middleweight boxer Carlos Cisneros, left, who was knocked down during a fight at Cordon Bleu in Woodhaven, Queens, on June 24, 2011.

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By GREG BISHOP

One recent Friday, the orthopedic surgeon Victor Khabie performed seven operations, grabbed a sandwich and fought traffic to a ballroom in Queens to care for athletes who walked willingly into fists. They call themselves boxers. Khabie calls them patients.

This presents a contradiction for Khabie and other doctors who moonlight as ringside physicians. They come from the world of medicine, which is predicated on healing, into the world of boxing, which is predicated on pain. Khabie must reconcile these worlds, for a few hundred dollars a fight, while his patients cut, bruise and disfigure each other for sport.

“It’s tough, but we do the best we can for them,” Khabie said. “If society says we don’t want boxing, then I wouldn’t be taking care of boxers. But I’m not a politician. I do know these boxers need help, these boxers are hurt, and often they have no one to take care of them.”

On Saturday, the heavyweight champion Wladimir Klitschko defeated David Haye in Germany in a fight shown on HBO. Khabie watched both boxers and the physicians who watched over them. In 2006, he examined Klitschko before a bout at Madison Square Garden.

That fight, with the boxer Laila Ali on the undercard and her father, Muhammad Ali, in attendance, served as a career highlight. Just like the time Evander Holyfield raised his left glove between rounds when Khabie instructed him to lift his right, inadvertently smacking Khabie in the face.



Khobie long ago learned the violence inherent in his favorite sport. He tried boxing with a friend and ended up with broken ribs. His wife, Brenda, told Khobie: “You’re a surgeon. You need those hands.” But she also understood that the violence, so different from his daily routines, drew him ringside in the first place. “If he wasn’t a surgeon,” she said, “he’d be a boxer.”

By day, Khobie can be found in Mount Kisco, N.Y., where he is the chief of sports medicine at Northern Westchester Hospital and also helps operate the Somers Orthopedic Surgery and Sports Medicine Group. On fight nights, he makes a mental switch, from repairer of

torn ligaments and busted knees to caretaker of battered faces, from central figure in the operating room to anonymous face at ringside.

Khobie described his job like this: between rounds, he fights through camera crews and trainers into a designated corner, where he attempts to pepper a boxer who is often injured and trying to catch his breath with questions for 10 to 15 seconds. He then makes a decision on whether the bout should continue, one he must live with through the next round.



Dr. Khobie, an orthopedic surgeon, moonlights as a ringside physician.

If all goes well, Khobie operates unseen. This being boxing, “all goes well” means none of the combatants end up in the hospital. Those are the fights that stick with Khobie, that keep him awake at night, like a bout a few years ago at a beer garden on Long Island where a boxer was knocked unconscious. For five minutes that felt like five hours, the boxer did not move.

Khobie never expected to work in boxing, but knew early he would become a doctor, even back in Boy Scouts when his favorite tasks included constructing a bandage in the woods. A longtime sports fan, he entered orthopedics because they combined both passions, because the first time he removed a screw from a leg, his instructors asked not about removal technique, but about a football game the night before.

After college at the University of Pennsylvania and Harvard Medical School, Khobie worked at the Kerlan-Jobe Orthopedic Clinic in California. There, he served as assistant physician for the professional sports teams in Los Angeles. Lakers center Shaquille O’Neal occasionally pulled pranks on him.

Khobie enjoyed caring for athletes (as an assistant doctor, he examined and called in a prescription for the tennis champion Steffi Graf at the United States Open). But boxing, with no place to hide, all the energy and raw aggression, drew him in. His first bout as a ringside physician took place at a cafe in the Bronx, which later became a Red Lobster and had a makeshift ring inside.

On the recent Friday in Queens, Khobie called his work typical: eight fights, three boxers knocked down, two repeatedly, one serious gash opened by a head butt.

In one bout, Bryan Abraham sent Scott Burrell to the canvas four times. Each time, Khobie scurried into the ring. Because Burrell rose quickly from each knockdown, because he remained relatively calm, Khobie let the fight continue. (Khobie finds that fighters who become overly emotional, begging to continue, usually need to be stopped.)

Khobie paid particular attention two fights later. He knew that one boxer, Carlos Cisneros, was 35, with 17 losses in 27 previous fights. (Cisneros lost by knockout.) As Khobie attended to Cisneros, the surgeon from Westchester appeared at home.

“He likes to have that peacefulness and that action,” his brother, Dan Khobie, said. “That’s very much our

personality. At home, we're relaxed and civilized. Put us in a ring, and we'll go nuts."

Yet part of Khabie's role as ringside physician includes making an unsafe sport more safe, or trying to. He echoed Melvina Lathan, the chairwoman of the New York State Athletic Commission, who noted the rules governing fights in New York were more stringent than most states, if not all. Khabie spoke of the wide range of specialists available to boxers (orthopedists, oral surgeons, eye doctors, plastic surgeons) and the seminars they conduct each year.

Khabie said doctors began using more sophisticated magnetic resonance imaging testing in recent years. Research has been conducted on whether larger gloves would reduce the force of blows. Fighters are also required to have brain testing every three years, yearly eye and heart exams, and blood work and mental exams before each fight. But they will never be truly safe. "Boxing is a violent sport," Khabie said. "But like football, it can be made safer. We've had 60-day suspensions for concussions. Imagine that in football. We've taken every precaution we possibly can. But, unfortunately, people will get hurt."

Recently, an 80-year-old amateur traveled to Khabie's office, certain that if any doctor would clear him to fight, it would be a boxing one. Khabie did not clear the man, but he returned a few months later and dropped the belt he won on Khabie's desk.

So goes the life of a ringside physician, where safety is both relative and paramount.