

Phil Huss: A champion at producing smiles

By STEVE GOBLE
Staff writer

Grab that stony grasp and stare into his craggy, granite face and you think you're meeting one stern guy.

Then Phil Huss grins. It's an ornery, sideways smile, but full of warmth. Kind of grandfatherly.

But don't forget the tough part. After all, this man was once the Navy's Pacific Fleet boxing champion. "And that's a big fleet," Police Sgt. Dana Dorsey says.

That's credential enough to establish Huss as a hardy fellow, but he's got more. This guy used to catch circus acrobats in mid-air. Add in 30 years as a Fremont police officer and you've got a he-man of sorts.

You say he's 66 years old? So what. His handshakes still hurt.

But he'll put you at ease very quickly. Clowns know how to do that.

Yes, that's right. This big guy with the bruiser's resume has been Smoky the Clown since 1954.

Somehow, all these diverse identities dovetail into one nice guy, born and reared on a Riley Township farm. "I love one job as much as I do the others," he said.

Huss is one of two retired Fremont police officers who work the parking detail downtown. He's easy to find on his work days — just walk downtown and wait for someone to yell "Hey, Phil," or "Hey, Smoky." Then look around for the white and blue Cushman scooter he uses on patrol.

Renewing acquaintances is the best part of his job, Huss says. He can't go a day without running into people he knows, either from his police days or from giving them kiddie rides on Smoky's "clown-cycle."

He serves as a sort of city ambassador, too. "People see the uniform and they come for help. They ask for directions, where they can get their drivers' license renewed, whatever," he said.

He likes being back with the police after an 11-year absence, minus the frequent visits during his retirement. "We get to reminiscing, and it's just great. When you forget the good old days, you forget everything."

The good old days include being a detective and being Fremont's first juvenile officer. Dorsey, who holds the juvenile post now, recalls how Huss used to break in rookies.

"When I first came on you had to spend two weeks in plain-clothes riding with Phil before you could do anything else. Two weeks with him was like being at the Police Academy," Dorsey said.

If Huss instilled some of his own tenacity into the rookies, they must be dedicated cops.



News-Messenger/Scott Lightfoot

Huss never lets go of anything he loves.

For instance, he started boxing at age 14 while attending Fremont Ross High School, and kept it up through four years in the Navy and 150 bouts. He picked up a number of Toledo Golden Gloves Association amateur titles along with the Navy belt. Today, he coaches young boxers in the Fremont Wreckers and serves as a ring announcer for amateur bouts all over northern Ohio, Michigan and Indiana.

As for the clowning, he still does that, too. He started at the Fremont Speedway, after a Navy buddy introduced him to

some Ringling Bros. clowns. The same buddy got him involved with circuses, where he tested his muscles catching spinning aerial artists.

These days, Smoky still will travel up to 200 miles away to dispense his magic tricks, balloons and cycle rides.

"In another four years or so I'll be into my third generation of clowning," he said, explaining that some parents propping their kids on the clown-cycle will tell their children, "I used to ride with Smoky when I was your age."

And, of course, his new parking detail job maintains his po-

lice connections.

Huss hangs on to all these threads of his life because he knows first-hand how fragile the fabric is. "You see, when I was 18, I was in a serious accident. The car I was driving kind of left the road and hit a tree. I was very close to death for many days."

Afterward, he made a decision. "The good Lord had a job for me to do. He spared me, so I'm still trying to do what I can."

That's where the clowning and coaching come in.

Huss said both roles, boxing ring and circus ring, helped

OUR NEIGHBOR

NAME: Phil Huss, a.k.a. Smoky
ADDRESS: 213 N. Columbus Ave.

FAMILY: Wife Martha, children Phil, 42; Marsha, 40; Brenda, 38.

ON KIDS: "One thing that bugs me is the way some people neglect kids. They don't teach respect for elders or respect for law and authority. ... The kids get into trouble and really they're just screaming for attention."

ON CLOWNING: "I did it because so many kids are told to 'be good or I'll call a policeman. I don't want kids to be scared. I wanted them to see that the police love boys and girls, the same way a clown loves boys and girls."

FACE BRIGHTENER: "The quickest way to put a smile on a kid's face? Hand 'em a sucker!"

WEEKEND WORK: Mowing lawns for neighbors, for a few extra dollars.

BEST THING ABOUT BEING PHIL HUSS: "Loving life the way I do. Life is beautiful."

make him a better cop. Through boxing, he gained confidence and a tough-guy reputation that made people think twice before giving him guff. And through clowning he developed a sense of humor and kindness that helped him deal with the bad days on the beat. It also helped bridge the gap between the badge of authority and the rebellion of youth.

"I've had many times I was kicked or slugged. Many of those I ducked. I never came back with a KO punch, but I could have," he said. He's proud to say he never had to use his boxing skills to hurt anyone in all his police work.

With such a varied background, Huss has had some challenging moments. But the greatest, he says, wasn't a baffling investigation or a prize fight. It was the first time someone recognized him in his clown garb.

"It was my first time as a clown at the Speedway. A pair of boys in the stands saw me in my trumpy, patched-up clothes and said 'Phil, what are you doing in that outfit?'"

It made him think to himself, "What am I doing in this outfit?" It was a crux. He could succumb to stage fright and toss Smoky aside forever, or go on with the show.

He went on, and now he and a whole lot of kids — grown and growing — have some wonderful memories.