

# The cut man



**Mischa Merz** meets Joe Souza, a man with boxing in his blood who has made blood his career

**I**MAGINE you go to Central Casting looking for a wily old boxing character with a gap-toothed mouth from which flows stories of great champions and high drama.

His language is scattered with colourful expletives which he calls "cussin".

He wears thick-rimmed glasses, a bomber jacket with a pair of boxing gloves embroidered on the breast and sports a white buzz cut.

Underneath is a T-shirt that reads: "Don't box ugly people. They've got nothing to lose".

His tattoos are a blue-green blur. He has to have a certain charm and easy familiarity yet also be feisty and belligerent when he needs to be.

Any bets Central Casting will hand you Joe Souza who, tomorrow, will be plying his trade in the corner of Texas-based junior welterweight Jesse James Leija when he faces triple world champion Kostya Tszyu at Telstra Dome?

But Souza has more than the right look and lingo to play that old boxing character. He also has the knowledge.

He's one of the four or five best cut men in world boxing and can make the difference between winning and losing a title fight.

His job is to tend cuts and stop the bleeding between rounds. He's in constant work, flying all over the US and beyond to tend to boxers such as former IBF super featherweight champion Arturo Gatti, Fernando Vargas, former WBC welterweight champion Pernell Whitaker and now Leija.

▲ **Cut above:** Joe Souza will be in junior welterweight Jesse James Leija's (training in the background) corner when he faces triple world champion Kostya Tszyu.

Picture: BRUCE MAGILTON

The ring is a lonely place. A boxer's corner is the closest thing he has to a team. Mostly three or four men have no more than about 45 seconds in which to give the boxer a drink, wipe him down, cool him with an ice pack, apply Vaseline, tell him how the fight is going, tell him what he is doing wrong, or doing right, give him encouragement, inspire him, cajole him, reassure him and send him out for another three minutes of battle.

If he is cut, those 45 seconds are all Souza has to stop the bleeding and swelling. It's no place for panic.

His actions can keep the fighter in the game. Yet there are no accolades and not much glory in the work. Only die-hard, cable TV viewing boxing fans would recognise the face.

But a good cut man can be as

► **Anyone who's successful is a man who's been in the game a long time . . . my secret is that I have a passion for blood, that's the God's honest truth**

important to a boxer as any strategic advice. Souza says it's a job in which old men dominate. And it certainly needs a calm, focused disposition. Someone who isn't squeamish and has pretty much seen it all.

"Anyone who's successful is a man who's been in the game a long time."

**A**ND for Souza, that's more than 30 years. He retired as a bantamweight fighter in 1964 after a first round KO in his fifth professional fight.

He became a trainer and when he retired, his kids begged him to go back to the gym because, as he says, he was "driving them nuts" at home.

He's been operating at the San Fernan-

do Boxing Gym in San Antonio, Texas ever since, though he originally hails from Massachusetts. At 68, he's ready to travel anywhere he's needed; New York, Las Vegas, New Jersey and now, Melbourne.

"I was doing little stuff, club stuff when I just happened to get lucky with James (Leija) and Arturo Gatti, although I still do the little guys, the four and six rounders. Never forget the little guys," he says.

His gym is usually full of amateurs, but he's been in the corner for some of the world's best professionals.

"My secret is that I have a passion for blood, that's the God's honest truth."

His forearms are streaked with tiny white scars where he has experimented, like a mad scientist, on his own flesh to come up with the best methods for stemming the flow of plasma.

In Australia, the only legal substance used is adrenalin mixed with Vaseline — one part to 1000. In the US authorities also permit clotting agents Avitene and Thrombin. "Other than that, it's pressure," Souza says.

He won't talk about Leija before the fight, but word has it he cuts easily.

Leija has done no sparring in the two weeks he's spent in Melbourne preparing, while Tszyu has been clocking up the rounds in the competition ring set up for him at Telstra Dome.

An accidental cut that stops the fight before the start of the fifth round will automatically end the contest in a draw. It will go to the judges' scorecards if it is stopped after the fifth round.

But this is a no-go zone for the tight-lipped Leija camp.

But Souza will reveal some dramas when dealing with other fighters of note, such as Gatti, who is known to cut easily.

"In the Gatti versus Wilson Rodriguez fight, Gatti went down in the fourth and the doctor comes over screaming and yelling at me to look at the cut and I'm praying to him (if you know what that means) and he's grabbed my arm and I'm trying to keep him from looking at the cut. Then later I've got Gatti in a headlock, putting pressure on the cut and he's screaming 'It hurts' and I'm telling him 'Shut up', but he KO'd Rodriguez in the sixth round," he says with certain pride.

A doctor can stop a fight if a cut is bleeding too much and Souza is determined to prevent that happening.

Sometimes it's not the doctor who causes him trouble, though. He remembers heavyweight Michael Grant's reaction to being cut for the first time.

"He came back to the corner and he was just going berserk. It was just a small laceration but he went bananas. 'Oh, no I'm cut, I'm cut'. I just told him it was fine. Even with a big cut, you know what you're doing, it's like going into your favourite supermarket and knowing where the fruit is. I know what I need to do. I know I'm there for the cuts. If you've got two guys workin' the fighter I don't say nothin'," he says. "I just do what I gotta do."

Leija has a modest, close-knit entourage and his preparation has included morning runs and gym sessions.

Souza has been watching and waiting. His time may or may not come during the fight. But if it does, he's sure to be ready.

Despite the big occasions and often spectacular contests, he says he doesn't get too excited while he's working.

"My highlight is going from the dressing room to the ring. Then when I go home and watch the tape, that's when I get excited."