

Salvador Sanchez one of Boxing's Greats

Written by Sam Gregory

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The sport of boxing has had more than its share of personal tragedies in and out of the ring, everything from boxers losing battles with drugs and alcohol, rape convictions and domestic violence, to the death of a fighter as a result of a beating during a fight. The first tragedy I remember as a fight fan was that of the great featherweight champion Salvador Sanchez. It happened twenty-two years ago last summer, August 12, 1982, when the car he was driving collided with a pickup truck, killing Sanchez and his passenger.

Like all tragedies that happen in boxing, the media went on a feeding frenzy. They were like a shark picking up the scent of fresh blood. The press was quick to report: "Salvador was returning to his training camp at around 5:00 a.m. when he plowed into the back of a poultry transit from a rendezvous with a mistress who remains nameless." The thought was that he had done it before, but that the Popeye-like tough guy had always made it back before his trainers got up, and in turn woke him.

It was during the time in my life when I totally dedicated myself to being a true fan of the sport. Growing up in the 1970s, all the attention in boxing was on the heavyweights, Ali, Foreman, Frazier, Larry Holmes, etcetera. It was in the late 70s and early 80s that my attention was drawn to the lighter weight classes in boxing.

There were several great fighters in the lighter weight classes from that era. One of the greatest was Salvador Sanchez.

Born on January 26, 1959 in Santiago Tianguistenco, Mexico, Sanchez turned pro at the age of sixteen, winning 17 of his first 18 bouts by knockout. His first and only loss came against the 13-3 Antonio Becerra in a bid for the vacant Mexican bantamweight title, Sanchez's nineteenth pro fight.

On February 2, 1980, Sanchez beat the reigning featherweight titleholder, Danny "Little Red" Lopez by pummeling the champ for twelve straight rounds. The fifteen round title fight was stopped in the thirteenth round, Sanchez winning title by TKO.

Sanchez made his fifth title defense on March 22, 1981 when he stopped Roberto Castanon in ten rounds. The following August Sanchez fought what most boxing historians consider the best fight of the 80s when he KOed 32-0-1 Wilfredo Gomez in eight rounds to retain the featherweight title. On December 12, Sanchez won a close fifteen round decision against Pat Cowdell, the British champion.

Salvador defended the title nine times, defeating six top-ten contenders in a row, including a rematch with Danny Lopez. In July of 1982 Sanchez faced a relatively unknown novice with a 13-0 (10 KOs) record from Ghana named Azumah Nelson.

The title fight was a round by round battle. By the fourteenth round the fight could have gone

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either way. Azumah Nelson had only gone ten rounds five times to that point in his career, yet by the final round he found himself facing a warrior who could have gone another ten rounds. Sanchez stopped the very game Nelson in the fifteenth and final round of the fight. It was also the last round Salvador Sanchez would live to fight.

In forty-six professional fights Sanchez had 44 wins with 1 loss and 1 draw. He was only 23 years old.

In an interview with Sanchez shortly before his death, he said the Nelson fight was to be his last fight at 126-pounds. Sanchez and Alexis Arguello had tentatively agreed to fight at 135-pounds.

Although thirty-two of his forty-four wins came by way of knockout, Sanchez was considered more of a tactical boxer than a heavy puncher. Salvador was once quoted as saying, "The KO's come through undermining my opponents."

In Salvador Sanchez's seven short years as a professional fighter, he accomplished more than many that fought twice as long. He was willing to fight all comers, a quality in too short supply twenty-two years after his untimely passing.