

Yaqui Lopez Never Took a Backwards Step

Written by Robert Mladinich
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Long before there was Arturo Gatti, there was an equally exciting light heavyweight named Alvaro “Yaqui” Lopez. Hailing from Stockton, California, Lopez, who campaigned from 1972-84, spilled gallons of blood and took hundreds of facial stitches but never took a backwards step in compiling a record of 63-15 (40 KOS) against such championship caliber opponents as Victor Galindez and Matthew Saad Muhammad, each of whom he fought twice, Michael Spinks, Mike Rossman, S.T. Gordon, and Carlos DeLeon. In his heyday, Lopez was so popular, even the venerable Archie Moore said he was one of his favorite fighters of all time.

“Yaqui fought for the light heavyweight title five times,” said Marty Sammon, a longtime Northern California boxing official. “Even though he never got the win in any of them, he won at least three of them.”

Lopez’s title fight against John Conteh, which occurred in Copenhagen in October 1976, is a prime example. “Lopez, his manager and father-in-law Jack Cruz, and co-trainers Benny Casing and Hank Pericle, the latter of whom bears a striking resemblance to the Paulie Walnuts character on HBO’s “The Sopranos,” arrived in Denmark just three days prior to the bout. Although feeling the effects of jetlag, by most accounts Lopez was beating the champion handily.

“Albert hit him with a body shot, and the ref picked Conteh off the floor,” said Cruz, who still calls Lopez by his anglicized first name. “Then the ref gave an eight-count, even though the eight-count had been waived.”

Lopez also lost two heartbreakingly close decisions to Galindez, both in Italy. As controversial as those fights were in their day, Lopez is best known for his two epic battles against Saad Muhammad. In their first bout, in October 1978, Saad Muhammad, who was still known as Matt Franklin, stopped Lopez in the eleventh round. The fight, which took place in Franklin’s hometown of Philadelphia, was for Franklin’s NABF title. By the time of the rematch 21 months later, Franklin not only changed his name, he also held the WBC title. In the eighth round, Lopez hit his arch nemesis with over 20 unanswered punches, and looked to be en route to winning the long elusive title. But the champion miraculously stayed on his feet, and roared back to stop Lopez in the 14th round of The RING magazine’s 1980 Fight of the Year.

“He got his second wind and I didn’t,” said Lopez, who still resides with his wife and two grown sons in Stockton, directly across the street from Cruz.

The 79-year-old Pericle, however, assumes more responsibility for that loss. He insists that he abided by a rule prohibiting smelling salts, while the Franklin corner did not. “I didn’t use them, thinking I was doing the right thing,” he said. “But people kept telling me Saad’s head was jolting up and down between rounds. When we looked on the floor in his corner after the fight, there were capsules everywhere. If I had used salts, Yaqui would’ve gotten his second wind and been light heavyweight champion of the world.”

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Although Lopez was stopped seven months later by Michael Spinks, Spinks told him he had never been hit harder by any other opponent. Along the way, Lopez also stopped Mike Rossman, who was then the number-one contender, in six brutal rounds at New York's Madison Square Garden, and beat such top contenders as Tony Mundine in Australia, Jesse Burnett, Gary Summerhays and Mike Quarry.

"We live in a different era today," said Lopez, now 53 and a seemingly fit 195 pounds. "The fighters today are not the same caliber as they were in the sixties and seventies. They were real good and took nothing for granted. You couldn't sneak your way into a title shot back then. You had to earn it."

Given Lopez's humblest of beginnings, it is no wonder that he takes nothing for granted. Born in Zacatecas, Mexico, he dreamed of being a bullfighter but had his right leg gorged at the age of 12. His family then moved to Stockton, where they found seasonal work picking fruit and vegetables in the broiling sun for 12 hours a day. Lopez, who dropped out of junior high school, eventually got a job at a local cannery and felt relegated to living a humdrum life. That all changed when he met a lovely young girl named Beatrice Cruz, who was of Irish and Mexican descent. Her father Jack was a small-time but well-known area boxing promoter. Lopez was not only in love - he finally saw an opportunity for a better personal and professional future.

"I remember thinking, at 6'2" he was tall for a Mexican," said the gregarious Cruz who is now in his early eighties. "Albert was so green, the first time I put him in a ring he was walking around looking for the gate to get out."

During an early amateur fight, on an Indian reservation in Eureka, California, Cruz was asked what tribe his protégé hailed from. The first word that came to mind was "Yaqui" and Lopez immediately garnered the nickname that he holds to this day.

Although Cruz says that Lopez initially had "two left feet," the young fighter fought hard and often, devouring all the knowledge he could along the way. He apprenticed in smokers throughout California's Central Valley, and even against inmates in local and state prisons. Not long after Lopez married Beatrice, at the age of 19 in 1971, he turned pro. Within a year he was fighting ten-round main events throughout California and beyond. Against the rugged Al Bolden in Portland, Oregon, the \$1,500 in coins that was thrown into the ring by ecstatic fans was triple the fighters' \$500 purses.

"With Yaqui, attitude was everything," said Pericle. "He was as tough mentally as he was physically. It was obvious that he would make his mark. And he did, even though he never won a title."

Although Lopez was known as a blood and guts warrior, his wife says he was a lot more talented than he is given credit for. "He was like a ballet dancer in the ring," she said. "People remember all the blood, but that was because his skin cut so easily. He looked like he was hit hard, but he rolled with most of the punches and they slid across his neck. All you have to do is listen to him today to see that he didn't take too many head beatings."

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She's got a point. Not only is Lopez extremely articulate, his memory is downright photographic. "Albert could have been a doctor if he chose," said Cruz. "He's brilliant. He learned English by himself. To be as sharp as he is with all the fights he had; imagine if he had no fights and went to college instead."

After retiring from the ring, Lopez became a garbage hauler, but seriously injured his back. Although he has endured five surgeries, he refuses to take the prescribed pain killers and stays fit by walking two to three miles a day, eating healthily, and doing lots of stretching. He also dotes on his ailing father-in-law, dispensing his medication, doing his cooking and cleaning, and playing dominoes with him on a daily basis. They are as tight now as they were when Lopez was one of television's premier attractions. "I don't know what I did to deserve such a good son-in-law," said Cruz. "It's like God sent him to me."

In many ways, Lopez the fighter is as much of an anachronism as Stockton the city is to old-timers like Cruz and Pericle, the latter of whom was recently awarded a Purple Heart for injuries he incurred during a kamikaze attack while serving aboard the U.S.S. Lansom during World War II. At the time, the 19-year-old Pericle did not request the medal because of fear that the news would find its way to his mother. She had already suffered a cerebral hemorrhage that doctors attributed to her other two sons being engaged in combat.

The Stockton in which Cruz and Pericle were reared, and in which Lopez was developed, was generally regarded as a frontier town where rules were flouted and the only law of the land was lawlessness. The skid row so well chronicled in the classic film "Fat City" is gone, as are the labor camps, gambling dens, whorehouses, bootleg fight venues, transient hotels, and pool halls with names like the Bataan Pool House and Daddy Blacks. Gone too are fighters like Lopez, who brought pride and dignity to a city that was much too often, and too easily, maligned for all of the wrong reasons.

The way Beatrice sees things, her husband represented all that was good about Stockton, long before it became "sanitized" by its modernization and gentrification. "For some reason God didn't want him to be a champion, it just wasn't in the books," she explained. "So many times, big time promoters tried to steal him away from my father. But loyalty was so important to him, he wouldn't go. When he fought, he gave it all. He had too much respect for the sport, and his fans, not to. And when he quit, he never looked back. My father got many offers for him to return, but he always said no. Both my husband and my father lived life on their own terms. They did things their way, and are as close now as they were then. That's not always the case in boxing families."