

The Purity of Ross Puritty

Written by Bill Knight
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He has traveled his own path, sometimes even on the periphery of the spotlight ... most often not.

Ross Puritty has had somewhat of a unique boxing career. For better or worse, though, he has always done it his way. The big man is in the twilight of that career now, dropping a unanimous decision to undefeated prospect Eddie Chambers Tuesday night on an ESPN show from the Blue Horizon. The official ring record for the 38-year-old Puritty is 30-19-3 with 27 knockouts.

But a mere record can barely scratch the surface of his story.

A rough and tumble kid growing up in Phoenix, Puritty was pushed toward football. He went to El Paso, played four seasons for UTEP — starting at defensive tackle as a senior on the team's Independence Bowl squad. But his heart was never really in football. The summer before his senior season, he went to sweaty San Juan Gym, an old place not far from the Rio Grande River and Mexico. He said he finally felt at home.

Puritty never had an amateur career, learning on the go as a pro. He made his debut on a hot night in May 1989. There was more litter left than fans when Puritty made his first trip from locker room to ring in the El Paso County Coliseum and so only a few witnessed his first round knockout of Sergio Araujo. He was still just a football player trying to learn to box and his ensuing record was ample testimony. He lost eight of his first 16 fights.

This was a man who was big, scary big at 6-foot-3, 250 or so pounds. He had a massive physique, he had some power, but he was still learning. He adopted his own version of Floyd Patterson's peek-a-boo style. He usually blocked more than he threw, usually making fans impatient.

But he had found a home.

Puritty once described the difference between football and boxing: "You'd think playing football in front of 40,000 people would prepare you. But when you're playing football, you have on your uniform, your pads, your helmet and there are 21 other guys out there. Step into that ring — even in front of just 3,000 or 4,000 people — and you feel pretty nervous, pretty exposed. You're just in a pair of shorts and it's just you and another guy."

It has been an interesting ride for Puritty, the man who never hooked up with anyone. He and his wife have managed his career. He lives in a suburb of Norman, Oklahoma, out of the way of boxing's mainstream. He and his wife have three children of their own, two adopted ones, and the intelligent, articulate, soft-spoken giant of a man plays Mr. Mom most of the time.

His career has been one of shooting stars, not really fireworks.

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He knocked Tommy Morrison down twice and broke Morrison's jaw in a bout that was ruled a draw in 1994. He scored a TKO over Wladimir Klitschko in the Ukraine in December, 1998. He has lost decisions to Michael Grant, Hasim Rahman, Corrie Sanders, Larry Donald and Chris Byrd.

Most of all, his career has been marked by long stretches of inactivity.

We love our heavyweights in this country. A heavyweight showdown drains every ounce of glitz and glamour from the sport. But there are men like Puritty, fighters who toil just beyond all that glitz, all that glamour. Some call them journeymen. Some call them pros.

Ross Puritty never quite made it to the top. Tuesday night he was an opponent — just as he was for Morrison and Klitschko and all the others — one more time. Interestingly, he weighed in at 253 — just as he did for that fight in El Paso in 1989. Perhaps it was his last chance. Perhaps there will be others. But the ride is coming to an end.

And so there he is. Ross Puritty. 30-19-3 (27 knockouts). A man, a story, a career on the periphery.

But, no matter the ride, no matter the frustrations, it was always a career on his own terms.