

Nobody's Sweeter Than Sugar Ray Robinson

Written by Joe Rein

Wednesday, 01 June 2005 19:00

Growing up, when the few blocks around the Brooklyn Navy Yard was the entire universe and sports heroes rose above the sky scrappers -- and our only contact with them were the bubble gum trading cards we carried for currency -- Sugar Ray Robinson was the supernova that fired my imagination and lifelong love for boxing.

Even with all Roy Jones' phenomenal gifts and ringmanship, Robinson has meant so much in my life; Jones could never take his place.

All of New York was a hotbed of boxing activity, and as long as I could remember, people spoke in awe of Robinson. His picture with gloves held low was on fight posters tacked up all over the neighborhood. Grainy shots of him in dinner clothes, flashing that signature smile, hobnobbing with celebrities, graced the tabloids daily.

We crowded around the radio to listen to his fights, and to catch glimpses of him in his fuchsia Cadillac or when he was being mobbed in the streets for autographs.

Robinson was every young boy's hero. When we play fought, we all wanted to be him. He captured the imagination of every boy as surely as Superman or Robin Hood. He was movie star handsome, gracious to opponents, soft-spoken, feted by royalty, always in the presence of beautiful women - and the best fighter on the planet.

The first time I saw Robinson in the ring, my dad took me to the old Garden in '46 to see him against Tommy Bell for the vacant welter title.

Bell was no slouch, in his own right . . . not the least cowed by Robinson's reputation.

Robinson glistened in his corner waiting for the bell. He was sleek and lean, with a dancer's legs and long supple arms that looked even longer because of his sloping shoulders. While the introductions were being given, he windmilled his right arm, like David getting ready to smite Goliath with a sling.

Robinson and Bell were mirror images of each other in style - both stand-up boxer-punchers - though Robinson enjoyed a few inches in height.

Bell fought with hands high and with a tighter stance. Robinson's guard was lower and he was turned slightly to the side, in a concession to defense, but his stance was wider and gave him more leverage.

They dueled on pretty even terms for 15 rounds, but to me, Robinson's punches had more authority and his combinations were like the repeated crack of a bullwhip.

Some thought Robinson lost that night - it was that closely contested - and Bell dropped

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Robinson in the second round with left hooks. Bell hit the canvas in the 11th, and was almost stopped in the 12th.

I think like most people there, though, it was almost impossible not to watch Robinson exclusively: Every movement was as classic for a fighter as every Fred Astaire movement was distinctive for a dancer. Robinson glided over the canvas. And, even in the bitterest exchanges, he had the baring of royalty. His combinations were flashes of fire to the head and body; you could hear the THWACKS! echo through the arena.

The die was cast: I couldn't wait to get to the gym the next day.

After the Bell fight, I went with my dad and uncles to all Robinson's fights in New York, Philly, New Jersey, Wilkes Barre, Scranton and Connecticut, as well as watching any bouts on TV that we couldn't get to.

There were no end zone dances by Robinson when he dropped or KO'd somebody with a salvo. Usually, he was almost turned away headed for a neutral corner while they were falling . . . like a hit man that knew his job.

Whether it was third-tier guys like Floyd Sebastian and Gene Buffalo, or the very best around, like Georgie Abrams, Kid Gavilan, Steve Belloise, "Sugar" Costner, Charley Fusari and Bo Bo Olson, Robinson struck with the same lightening suddenness, electrifying crowds.

There were times it seemed Robinson's opponent came into the ring with gloves, whereas Sugar Ray had an assault weapon. Every one of his punches seemed like he'd teed up the man's head and hit him full force with a golf club. And he had the accuracy of a sniper.

He fought in the trenches when he had to, beat-up the brawlers, outthought the boxers, could beat anyone at their own game, but mostly dictated the action, even backing up. He could do it all. We'd have paid to see him hit the heavy bag.

But what defines Robinson for me, and separates him from fighters like Jones, who've totally dominated the competition with other-worldly athletic ability, is something very accessible: In many fights, Robinson had to bite down hard on pain and adversity and look within himself to find the courage to rage back and win. Much like a parable for all of us in the cheap seats.

Certainly, he was head and shoulders above everybody else, but it made you want to root for him: Nobility has always been in short supply . . . and he was thrilling.

When Robinson dramatically ended a fight, as he usually did, I couldn't wait to get home and relive the moment in front of the mirror, supplying the roar of the crowd myself.

At the Uptown Gym and Stillman's -- the General Motors of fight factories -- where legends, amateurs and journeyman went about the daily grind in a democracy of sweat, everybody stopped what they were doing to watch Robinson spar and do his floor exercises.

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Robinson was always cordial, calling me by name, showing me how to extend my jab by dipping a knee, how to draw a right hand and counter over it . . . and countless other tips and encouragement.

Robinson, at best, was only a friendly acquaintance; I wasn't part of his clique. I was a kid; he was a man - a giant figure on a world stage. And, I could only fantasize about the richness of his life.

I tried to emulate everything about him, from what he wore in the gym to his stance in the ring. But it did me no more good than trying to hit home runs copying the stance of Ted Williams. And, as far as his gym gear, no matter how I pulled and tugged, it never looked quite the same on me.

Once after sparring a round, I looked down and saw Robinson at ringside. He gave me an approving nod. I couldn't have been prouder if I'd won a title.

I saw the arc of Robinson's whole career, from welter to middle, all of his title victories and losses, the ticker tape parade down 5th Ave. after regaining his middleweight crown from Turpin, and every other glorious moment . . . until time and too many fights reduced him to a mortal, and he was only a Ray Robinson look-alike in his final days in the ring, eking out a payday for the use of his name on a marquee.

Even in his very last fight in '65 against Joey Archer, he showed flashes of the old Robinson - and I was on my feet, hoping for a miracle, but it was not to be; he couldn't pull the trigger often enough.

I don't recant anything about Jones' brilliance, but for me, there'll never be anyone sweeter than "Sugar."

True, Robinson was far less heroic as a human being than as a fighter . . . but I still get chills thinking of ring announcer Harry Balough, with his shellacked hair and shiny tuxedo, grabbing the microphone at center ring in the old Garden and trying to shout over the 17,000 fans straining on the edge of their seats to hear him say:

"IN THIS CORNER . . . S-U-G-A-R . . . R-A-Y . . . R-O-B-I-N-S-O-N!"