

Danny “Little Red” Lopez Fought Out of LA

Written by Robert Mladinich
Wednesday, 15 June 2005 19:00

Few people will argue that former WBC featherweight champion Danny “Little Red” Lopez was one of the most popular fighters of the seventies. A former dead-end kid who had been shuttled from one foster home to another, he found his salvation as a boxer. Of Irish, Mexican and Native American ancestry, Lopez, who fought out of Los Angeles, was the ultimate crowd-pleaser.

As his final ledger of 42-6 (39 KOs) will attest, he could bang with both hands. But what made him most popular was the fact that he got knocked down with regularity. However, in almost all of those cases he roared back to knock out his opponent in the very same or the next round.

“Danny Lopez was Matthew Saad Muhammad before there was a Matthew Saad Muhammad,” said Showtime boxing analyst Steve Farhood. “He was as hard a puncher as I’ve ever seen in the featherweight division. He was also very slow, and was always getting off the floor to win, which made for great television fights. If he could hit you, there was nobody he couldn’t take out.”

“I only knew how to fight one way,” said the 5’8” Lopez, who will turn 53 in July but still looks like he could make the featherweight limit. “I was very busy and always tried to come forward. I kept myself in good shape, so my stamina was never a problem. I’d just keep punching until I knocked my opponent out.”

Among the championship caliber opponents Lopez did beat early in his career, which began in May 1971, was the previously undefeated Sean O’Grady, who he stopped in four rounds in February 1976, and Ruben Olivares who he stopped in seven.

He was also stopped in nine by another red-hot California prospect, Bobby “Schoolboy” Chacon, in May 1974. More than 16,000 fans turned out for that bout, which took place at the Los Angeles Sports Arena.

In late November 1976 Lopez won the title by beating David Kotey in the champion’s hometown of Accra, Ghana, by a 15-round unanimous decision. Lopez was so revved up for that fight, he was oblivious to the 120,000 fans in attendance who were cheering on their local hero. The fight took place in a soccer stadium that usually accommodated 80,000 people.

“I didn’t let it bother me a bit,” said Lopez. “I have a very strong character, and a will to survive. That’s what made me a good boxer. It didn’t matter where I went to win that title. I was going to bring it home. In Ghana there were about 15 or so Marines and people from the Peace Corps [in the arena]. They were the only people rooting for me. I was never so exhausted in my life as I was after that fight.”

Lopez would make eight defenses of his title, seven of which he won by knockout, the other by disqualification. In June 1979, in his seventh defense, he stopped Mike Ayala in the 15th round

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of the The RING magazine’s Fight of the Year.

Lopez was dethroned by the late, great Salvador Sanchez, who scored a 13th round TKO in February 1980. Four months later, Lopez hung up the gloves, presumably for good, after being stopped by Sanchez in the 14th round of their rematch.

He had one comeback fight in 1992, scoring a third round knockout over Jorge Rodriguez, and then hung up the gloves for good. He has never looked back.

“Twice I fought Sanchez, who was a great fighter, no doubt,” said Lopez. “But more people remember the fight with Ayala than the two with Sanchez.”

Lopez, a self-described troubled youth who spent much of his childhood in Utah before moving to California as a teenager, began boxing when he followed his brother, welterweight Ernie “Indian Red” Lopez, to the gym. Indian Red was seven years older than his kid brother, who worshipped him.

Indian Red would go on to have a respectable pro career. In compiling a 47-13-1 (23 KOs) record, he beat Hedgemon Lewis two out of three times, but was stopped twice in title fights with Jose Napoles. He also lost to such fistic luminaries as Emile Griffith, Armando Muniz and John H. Stracey.

“Ernie was always my big brother, he still is,” said Little Red. “I really looked up to him and wanted to do what he did. That’s how I got interested in boxing. It turned out to be a very good thing for me.”

After his career ended in 1974, Indian Red hit the skids. His marriage dissolved and he was living with the daily weight of regret. He began drifting around the country, and Little Red got used to getting sporadic calls from him from all over the country.

One month it might be New York. Six months later it would be Texas, Denver, Montana or Florida. One day the calls stopped, and Little Red didn’t hear his brother’s voice, or anything else about him, for ten years.

“It was rough,” said Little Red. “We made a lot of calls, but couldn’t find anything out. Of course, I assumed the worst, but always held out hope that he’d come back, that he was alright.”

“Danny is a great brother, just like he’s a great father,” said Little Red’s wife Bonnie, a personnel clerk in the Walnut Valley Unified School District, not far from where the Lopez’s reside in San Bernardino County, California. “He was real close with Ernie, and then he just disappeared. It was rough for everyone in the family.”

The story had a surprisingly happy ending when a Los Angeles detective tracked Indian Red down to a Fort Worth homeless shelter, where he possessed nothing more than the clothes on his back. When he was reunited with his ex-wife, he learned that he had more grandchildren than he remembered and that he was about to be inducted into the California Boxing Hall of

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Fame.

“It was like he came back from the dead,” said Little Red. “It was good to have him back.”

While Indian Red had trouble dealing with the stresses of daily life, and he often escaped them by going on the road, his younger brother is the picture of stability. Working in construction, where he lays pipe and digs ditches, Lopez still looks incredibly fit. His voice is raspy, which he attributes to boxing, but his faculties are intact. It is obvious that he and Bonnie, who met as teenagers when she babysat Indian Red’s children, adore each other. He calls her the “wind beneath my wings.”

They have three children. Bronson, 32, is a field manager for a national food chain, and Jeremy and Dylan, 30 and 26 respectively, are both warehousemen.

“Danny was a wonderful fighter, and he is a wonderful father and grandfather,” said Bonnie. “He was always coaching Little League or taking the kids fishing. He had a difficult childhood, and didn’t want them to go through the same thing.”

She still marvels at how accommodating he is to his fans, and how much he seems to genuinely appreciate their support. This was clearly evident at this year’s Hall of Fame induction weekend in Canastota, New York. Lopez was mobbed everywhere he went. He declined no requests for autographs or photos, and was more than happy to exchange chitchat with each and every one of his stalwart fans.

Asked if he ever tired of hearing he was so many people’s favorite fighter of a bygone era, he just laughed. “I’ll never get tired of hearing that,” he said. “It’s great to know that I left an impression.”