

The Z Bantams Zarate and Zamora

Written by Pat Putnam
Sunday, 10 July 2005 19:00

Across from the Atlas Gimnasio, the children were barefoot and laughing as they raced through the drifting refuse of Zarco Street. That is, all the children but one, a six-year-old wisp they called Pepe, huddled beneath a cardboard lean-to, waiting with dark empty eyes for someone to buy one of the browning oranges he had lined up neatly near his naked feet. A smothering gray-black blanket of smog covered Mexico City, which blistered under the heat of a sun seldom seen. Rain had fallen the afternoon before, but on Zarco Street not even the heaviest of storms could scrub away the indelible stamp of poverty.

On the other side of the narrow one-way street, a few feet from the entrance to the gym, Costenito Gonzalez leaned over and flicked a cloth across his new light-brown shoes; whisking away any suspicion of grime. For most of his 19 years the junior lightweight boxer had helped his father scratch out an existence on a farm at the base of *El Tacaná*, an extinct volcano near the Guatemalan border. Now Gonzalez wore the confident air of a man who had fought as a professional 19 times, was undefeated, and had recently purchased a two-year-old 1974 red Ford.

A stocky man carrying a stylish light-blue equipment bag came with purpose along the street. Seeing Gonzalez, the stocky man paused and rasped: "It is noon, Costenito." With that, the stocky man turned and disappeared into a nearby doorway next to a furniture store where you could buy on terms, no interest – *su credito es bueno*.

A slender lefthander, Gonzalez glanced at a sparkling gold timepiece on his right wrist, assuring himself that it was time to go to work. He smiled at a man standing next to him; the thin smile did not reach his eyes.

When he spoke, it was with lasting sadness. "It is not easy to make a living in Mexico. Hunger is never a stranger. When I told my father I wanted to be a fighter, he said no. Then he told me if I won my first fight, he would give me his blessing. My first fight was against a veteran who carried the scars of many fights. I broke his jaw and put him in the hospital for 43 days. It was two days before Christmas in 1973. I was 16 years old. Fighting is hard, but there are harder things."

Gonzalez's emotionless eyes shifted to the cardboard lean-to across the street, where Pepe slumped in poor posture staring into the desolate future. A shadow flickered across the fighter's gaunt face. Without another word, he turned his back on the street and hurried through the doorway that led to the gym three floors above.

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In the seventies, there were nine more such gyms in Mexico City, with at least three times that number elsewhere in the country. Give or take a dozen of the desperate young men, there were 7,000 professional fighters in the Federal republic, the home of 100 million people, most of them

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thrust by birth into poverty and ordained by the heritage of their fathers to die in poverty. At that particular moment, five of the 7,000 were world champions. Two of the five, Carlos Zarate and Alfonso Zamora, were bantamweights.

A street brawler from the time he vaulted from the crib, Zarate was no stranger to the brutal jails of Mexico City. He was a child of the slums, praying that a future operation to be paid by the earnings of his fists would restore the sight of his blind and beloved mother. He ruled the World Boxing Council's 118-pounders. The other bantam champion was Alfonso Zamora, a similar product of the streets but one introduced to the ring early by an ex-fighter father, handsome, 22, married with two children, bedeviled by suspicions and bitterness. He ruled the World Boxing Association.

A few weeks before Christmas of 1976, the magazine had sent me south to Mexico to do a story on Zamora and Zarate, "the Z Bombs," my editor Gil Rogin said, already writing a headline in his head. Zamora and Zarate were good friends and former stablemates, and when I first met them they had knocked out 69 of the 70 men they had faced. The lone survivor was a journeyman featherweight named Victor Ramirez who lost to Zarate over 10 rounds.

By the second day of breathing brown air 7,349 feet above sea level, and after visits to three of Mexico City's boxing gyms, I was reminded of a comment by Willie Pastrano, a light heavyweight champion of the 1960s: "When I was growing up, if I had a chance to do anything else, God himself could not have talked me into a fistfight." During that short period I was in Mexico City, there were 23 world champions and 15 of those came from Latin America. The score had been 17 of 23, but in October of that year Royal Kobayashi of Japan had lifted the super bantamweight title from Rigoberto Riasco of Panama, and Kobayashi's countryman Yoko Gushiken had relieved the Dominican Republic's Juan Guzman of his junior flyweight title.

Latin domination of the sweet science was no mystery to Chris Dundee, the late Miami Beach promoter, who had said: "The fight game in the United States started down when the Army, in World War II, began drafting all the young men. The Army taught them a trade or paid for their educations later on, and any man with a good trade is not about to get knocked on his ass to make a dollar. Things became better in Europe, too. It just opened the door in boxing to all those hungry Latins."

In 1975, the per capita income of the U.S. was \$5,901. The PCI in Mexico was \$780 and the peso (and the buying power of the people) was plunging. The minimum daily wage for a Mexican was 90 pesos, which in October of 1976 converted to \$7.20. Two months later, with the peso plunging, the minimum wage converted to \$4.50. As Constenito Gonzalez pointed out so poignantly, an empty belly is no rarity below the Rio Grande. Faced with a life of empty pockets, empty stomachs and empty dreams, most young men will offer themselves up to the gods of war. Today little has changed: last year, in 2004, the estimated per capita income of the United States was \$40,000; in Mexico, where there are only two economic classes, the extreme wealthy and the abject poor, the PCI was \$9,600.

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On the ground floor inside the street entrance to the Atlas gym is a diminutive single-chair barbershop. Many of Mexico City's boxing gyms reside above similar shops. Never are there any shorn locks on the floors. Either all the barbers are extraordinarily neat, or, as I suspected, no one ever goes to such places for a haircut. On the landing between the first and second floors is a caged security checkpoint, where boxers exchange their valuables for locker keys, and where visitors to the gym are relieved of a small admission price. Twenty-nine years ago the fee was 15 pesos, the equivalent then of 75 cents.

There were two caretakers at the checkpoint, Horace Casaola, a bulky former wrestler who's older brother Raul owned the gym, and Ginger, a thin but mean-looking Doberman pup. Ginger's look was misleading; she treated every visitor as a possible playmate. According to Raul, Horace had a similar personality. "They both are a couple of pussy cats," said Raul. "Still, for some reason no one ever tries to give them a hard time."

The Atlas was Raul's second gym. He owned another, the Tabasco, in a distant corner of the ancient city. "I've seen a thousand hungry kids come through the door," he said. "They all have the same look: flat bellies and hungry eyes. Some are just babies, but not like any babies you have ever seen. I send them all on up the stairs. If they have any money we ask for a small fee. Horace keeps all the fees. Show him Horace."

Horace laughed and unfolded a huge fist. The palm was empty.

The second floor is the domain of the weightlifters, a place holding no attraction for the fighters. Muscles are for bodybuilders, folks who would not survive five minutes of combat on the floor above them. The gym on the top floor was small but surprisingly clean. No one spit on the floor here. There is barely room for two rings. In another small area, no more than 20 feet by 20 feet, hang three heavy bags, several speed bags, and a scarred but sturdy rubbing table. The only other furniture in the place is a three-seat shoeshine platform, which Horace lugged up the narrow stairs one day to win a \$10 wager.

The walls are unmarked and painted a lively green; the vivid color clashes violently with a maze of steel roof supports, most of them painted vivid lavender. The warm air is thick with the scent of sweat and rubbing alcohol and the fear of failure. But the endlessly changing stream of tough young men who keep the place busy during daylight hours come not to admire the ambiance. The training routine seldom varies: a quick loosening of lean muscles; four or five rounds of sparring, which really are a series of four-minute wars; two rounds on the heavy bag followed by two on the training bag; eight minutes on the speed bag; a little rope skipping and *adios*. Mexican fighters work endlessly trying to perfect four punches: the jab, to which they devote the least amount of time; the left hook; the right hook; and a murderous hooking uppercut, usually with the left hand.

"The hook is a Mexican tradition," said Bazooka Limon, a Zarate stablemate and future super featherweight champion. "Why play with the rapier when you can cut a man in half with a machete?" His grin was wicked.

One afternoon I was in the gym when one of the young tigers arrived carrying a young child,

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which he placed carefully in a corner. "Don't move," he ordered. Then he pulled a glove on his left hand, tied it fast with a strip of silver tape, and proceeded to bedevil a groaning heavy bag with savage left hooks. He'd work for four minutes; rest for a minute, which he used to check the child; and then he'd work for another four minutes. He followed that routine for most of an hour. When he finished, he slipped the glove off and into his bag, picked up the marvelously disciplined child, and left. While he was there, he spoke only to the child, and then but briefly.

"He must have an injured right hand," I said to Cuyo Hernandez, Zarate's manager.

Cuyo laughed. "No, if you are here tomorrow you will see him come in and just work on hooks with his right hand. One day, the child, his son, will be in here doing the same thing."

The Atlas was Zarate's training ground. Each day at 1 p.m. a vacant parking spot in front of the gym appeared for Zarate's red Mustang Cobra II. (When a Mexican fighter is successful he first buys a Volkswagen, then a Ford, followed by a Mustang. Those at the very top drive Thunderbirds. All their cars are red.) Seemingly no one ever arranged Zarate's parking slot to be vacant at the proper time, it was just appeared, not always in the same spot, but close. When he entered the gym, all motion ceased. It was a silent tribute, passing as swiftly as a salute. Mexicans have always treated their champions like minor gods, Tezcatlipoca in short pants and red leather mittens.

Zarate was tall (5'9") for a bantamweight, and thin, as one might consider a barracuda thin. His would be the look of a hawk, except that the punches had eroded his once prominent nose to a lesser fierce state. Legend has it he took his first step while trying to attack a boy two years his senior.

"Yeah, and he took his second step trying to run away from the police," said his old brother Jorge, a former cop who grew tired of seeing his fellow officers haul Carlos off to jail, turned in his badge, and began training his violent brother for the ring. "I finally realized that nothing could make him stopped fighting, so I decided he should do it someplace where he would not get arrested."

The fighter was born May 23, 1951 in the Tepito barrio of Mexico City. Ten square blocks of ugly squalor and fierce violence, a low-rise Bedford-Stuyvesant where the only escape is the poor Mexican's white lightening, *pulque*, the juice of the cactus; or grass that comes not from a lawn; and the meeting place is a teeming open air market on Costa Rica Street where anything can be bought and most of the merchandise has been stolen.

On my fourth morning in the city, before going to the Atlas, I caught a cab in front of the hotel and asked the driver to take me to Tepito. "You're crazy," the driver told me. "I will drop you off, but I won't wait for you." I told him I did not intend to get out of the cab; I just wanted to see the place.

"Besides," I said, "it is daylight."

The driver said, "Daylight, do you think that makes a difference to those guys? Every stitch of

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clothing you have on will be on sale in the market 10 minutes after you hit the street.”

“Are there no police there?” I asked

The driver made a rude sound.

I had Zarate’s address, but I decided not to push it with the driver. No matter how much wealth a Mexican boxer may accrue, he seldom settles down far from the slums of his childhood. Zarate could afford a more comfortable home in a better neighborhood, but he still lived with his mother, two of his five brothers, and one of his three sisters on the edge of Tepito.

“It’s a social problem,” Jorge Zarate explained to me. “It would be nice to live in a better place, but we have a lack of preparation to do it.”

Zarate was an infant when his father died. When he was two, he and his mother, Luz, moved into a public school in nearby Ramos Millan, another urban combat zone, where she became a combination custodian and the server of government-sponsored breakfasts. On the side, she operated a small concession stand. As he became older, it was Zarate’s job to maintain order during the bedlam of the free breakfasts, and to see that everything taken from his mother’s concession stand was paid for.

“I loved it,” Zarate said. “There were always three or four guys trying to hustle an extra breakfast or trying to steal a candy bar. I never needed an excuse to fight.”

In his first fight as an amateur, he knocked out a veteran Golden Glover in the second round. The veteran claimed he was out of shape. “Train and then come back,” Zarate told him coldly. The Golden Glover did; this time Zarate knocked him out in less than a minute. That is when Jorge dragged him to a gym and told him if he was going to fight, he might as well train for it.

“He gave me 10 pesos a day for food,” said Zarate. “It was enough. I came from a humble family, but I had eggs and corn to eat at home. With Jorge’s money, I could buy meat and salads.”

As an amateur, Zarate went undefeated, winning 30 by knockout, three by decision. In 1970, he was the Mexican Golden Gloves flyweight champion. A few days later, he became a professional under the flag of Cuyo Hernandez, one of the country’s most respected managers. Jorge became his fulltime trainer. He was paid 800 pesos for his first fight, a scheduled 10-rounder that lasted just two, in Guernieva. That set the pattern; he won his next 21, all by knockout.

He admits he went wild. “I made a lot of money; I had a lot of crazy friends,” he said. “I would go into Tepito, drink a little *pulque*, and get into trouble with the police. I was the only one with money so I always had to pay. It was no good. Then one time Jorge came to get me out of jail and it hit me that I was doing wrong. If you do not learn the first two times you go to jail, you are born to be a killer. Most people change. I did not want to be a killer. I knew I was born to be a champion. I left my wild friends.”

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It is an old truism that Mexicans do not mind their champions becoming drunks, they just want them to wait until they retire.

On May 9, 1976, Zarate became the WBC world bantam champion by leaving the former titleholder, 30-year-old Rodolfo Martinez, lying unconscious beyond the ropes on the apron.

“At that moment, as they raised my hand, all I could think of that beautiful moment was now I would be able to earn enough money to pay for an operation for my mother, who has gone blind,” said Zarate, sadness filling his dark eyes. “I would give all the money I have and everything I will ever earn to make that possible.”

If Zarate was tall for a 118-pounder, Zamora was relatively short, 5'3½" in his stocking feet, and tended toward pudginess. He had the unmarked looks of a movie star; a beautiful wife, Angelica; and a son and a daughter, both of whom he doted on. The Zamoras lived in a luxurious apartment in a complex of 107 high-rise buildings that housed 12,000 families. The housing development, then the largest in Mexico City, is just a few blocks from Maria La Redonda, the neighborhood where Zamora lived as a child.

As a youth, Zamora's upbringing was four or five levels above that of Zarate. While Maria La Redonda is not Beverly Hills, it certainly is not Tepito. Zamora's father owned a small fleet of taxis, which he sold when his son became a fighter, and the family lived in the same apartment building as Ernesto Gallarado, a boxing manager of small successes. It was Gallarado who first took notice of Zamora's preoccupation with street brawling.

“Don't let him fight in the streets,” Gallarado urged the senior Zamora. “Take him to a gimnasio, train him, let him win some trophies.”

The father did, and the son so impressed him with his fighting ability he permitted him to drop out of school at the age of 15. In 1972, that fighting ability carried him to the Olympics in Munich, where he lost in the finals to Cuba's great Orlando Martinez. It was Zamora's only loss in 55 amateur fights.

His memory of that fight was bitter. “The day before the final my father and I discovered that I would not be able to make the 118-pound weight.” Zamora said. “In desperation, I ate a box of laxative tablets. I made the weight, but it left me so weak I could hardly move. Even then, the fight was very close.”

When he came home with his silver medal, he was awarded an audience with then President Luis Echeverria, who told him how much he admired what he had done, and gave him a used car. Zamora was not impressed.

“What I needed was money,” he said. “After I won the medal, our Olympic committee said they would give me financial assistance. They gave me nothing. No one keeps promises. I was not a young boy in the streets. I did not ask my parents for money. What I need was a job.”

Gallarado was waiting with a professional contract, but the Zamoras told him to get lost.

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“Gallarado was something else,” said young Zamora, his face grim. “When I started as an amateur, I was less than 18. Gallarado asked my father to sell him a contract. He wanted the rights to my life, to sell myself to him forever. He said he wanted to adopt me. Maybe he loved me, I don’t know. I believe he thought I was his ticket to a lot of money.”

Instead, Zamora signed with Cuyo Hernandez, the man who guided him through his amateur career. A short bear of a man, when he signed Zamora to a pro contract, Hernandez had lived for 65 years, all but 15 of them spent in boxing. His stable of fighters was so large, greater than 150, he had to spread them between two gyms, where they were handled by four fulltime trainers. In addition to the two Z-bombers, he handled the great Ruben Olivares, who at different times held both the world bantamweight and featherweight titles, and helped develop two other former titleholders, Juan Zurita and Manuel Ortiz.

Early on, Zamora’s father suggested that Hernandez had not done enough on his son’s behalf. “You are devoting more time to Zurita and Olivares, and too little to Alfonso,” said the father. Then the Zamoras accused Hernandez of not giving them all the money they had coming. It got ugly. Normally, a manager will not give up the contract of a young champion under any circumstances.

“I did,” said Hernandez, who sold Alfonso’s contract to the father for \$400,000. “Anything to get rid of the father. He knew nothing about boxing and always invented things to make me tired. There are a lot of fighters like Zamora; the streets of Mexico are flooded with tough young kids who can punch. His father thinks he is smart, but he is stupid. Selling the son was one of the best business deals I ever made.”

After leaving Hernandez, Zamora successfully defended his title five times, all by knockout. His purse total did not add up to \$400,000. Then talk began about his fighting his friend, Zarate.

“It makes sense,” said Zamora. “We should fight, but not for our titles. In a non-title bout, over-the-weight. I have been offered \$100,000 and it sounds good. It is business, Carlos knows that. We’d still be good friends but we could make a lot of money. That is why we should do this.”

Never one to walk away from a fight, Zarate agreed, but refused any deal that did not put have both titles on the line. “I like Carlos,” Zamora said, “but we should settle this business of two championships. It is stupid to talk of non-title fights. No matter what they call it, one will win and one will lose. Only one should walk away the champion.”

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Night fell quickly on Zarco Street, doing what the rain could not, hiding the stains of poverty. Hours earlier, Consenito Gonzalez had finished his workout. The unbeaten southpaw left the gym with a satisfied grin, saying he had an appointment to look at a new Mustang, red, of course. As the night took control, little Pepe stirred beneath his cardboard lean-to. His day had not gone well; all of the oranges remained in their neat line near his feet. A stranger crossed the street and looked down at Pepe.

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“Oranges, senior?” said Pepe, hopefully.

The stranger asked a Mexican friend to tell Pepe in Spanish that he hoped someday the boy would cross the street, climb those three flights of stairs and earn enough to buy a new red Mustang Cobra II.

Pepe did not understand. “Oranges, senior?” he said again.

Nodding, the stranger handed Pepe five 20-peso notes. “Tell Pepe I will get the oranges on my next visit,” he said to his Mexican friend. With the night came a refreshing coolness. It felt like rain.

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The next time I saw Zamora and Zarate together was in April of 1977. They had signed to meet in a non-title fight at the Forum in Inglewood, California. Zarate weighed in a pound over the bantamweight limit; Zarate a pound and a half over. Zarate knocked Zamora down three times in the fourth round; the fight ended when the senior Zamora threw a towel into the ring. Cuyo Hernandez looked pleased. The friends never fought each other again. I hope Pepe got to go up the three flights of stairs.