

From Baronet to Sanchez: Who's to Blame?

Written by Deon Potgieter
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The boxing world was again rocked last weekend at the news of the death of Mexican boxer Martin Sanchez as a result of serious head injuries sustained in his bout against Russian boxer Rustam Nugaev in Las Vegas. Whenever a fighter dies we are reminded that boxing is not a game and that tragically some are made to pay the ultimate price for participating in this dangerous sport.

There are those who go as far as to say that these men who participate are victims of a system intent on gaining entertainment from what is nothing more than a blood sport. I didn't know Sanchez and won't assume to know what his circumstance was. I see by his record that all of his previous 20 fights took place in Mexico and that this encounter in Las Vegas was his first outside his home country. He won 13 fights, 10 by KO and lost 8. Including this fateful stoppage, Sanchez had lost by KO on 5 occasions. He was only 26 years old.

While there are many boxers who are only in the sport as a means to improve their life circumstances and perhaps fighting is their only means to do so, that's not boxing's fault; it never made the economical circumstance which has driven these men into the ring. In contrast, it has provided "a way out of the ghettos" for many. It is not only the hard-pressed, however, who enter the ring. Many boxers have abilities and talents which could give them other career outlets, but they are drawn to the squared circle.

One such man who could have been anything he wanted in the world, yet chose to be a boxer, was former world title contender Brian Baronet. Tragically he shared the same fate as Sanchez. The South African was one of the biggest draws of his era and attracted full houses almost every time he fought – right up to and including his fateful last bout.

A good looking man, Baronet had his own clothing line and would also lend his hand to modeling on occasion. He exuded charisma and was always popular amongst the fairer sex and men alike. A popular fighter amongst his peers and even with his opponents, Baronet brought a sense of class and charm to the sport which few others could equal.

"He had something very special about him." says promoter Mike Segal. "Enormously popular and exciting to see in action."

Brian's father Ernie was himself a former national feather – and bantamweight – champion. He was also a clever scientific boxer. Brian was also a smooth boxer, but in addition he was far more aggressive than his father and a terrific two-fisted puncher. Baronet scored an impressive ten knockouts in his first twelve fights and seemed invincible as he easily demolished the highly rated Aladin Stevens, who later himself went on to win two national titles.

After impressive victories over the likes of Juan Rondin and Ali Karim Muhammad, a murderous body puncher from Chicago, Baronet became a contender for the WBA junior welterweight world title. A match was made for him to meet Gene "Mad Dog" Hatcher early in

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1985. Hatcher lost the title in an upset to Ubaldo Sacco on a ninth round stoppage and Baronet's title shot was sidelined.

He persevered however and scored a sensational ninth round stoppage of the highly rated Domingo Ayala after he himself had been knocked down in the third and fifth rounds. This amazing comeback from the jaws of defeat made the gutsy Baronet even more popular and it seemed only a matter of time before world honors would be his. A warm-up fight was arranged between Brian and veteran boxer Arthur "The Fighting Prince" Mayasela.

Most people regarded the outcome as a formality – few gave the older Mayasela a chance against Baronet. "Even though Mayasela was also one of my heroes," says former 3-time world champion Dinga Thobela, "I favored Baronet to win. Because of his fighting style, I thought he was going to give Mayasela a beating."

Against all expectations Mayasela turned the tables on Baronet and systematically gave him the beating of his life. A rejuvenated and motivated "Fighting Prince" displayed a potent defense and outfought a man who approached this bout as if it would merely be an exhibition of his talents.

By the eighth round Baronet was bleeding profusely from a cut between his right eye and nose and by the ninth he was fighting on instinct alone. His heart would not let him falter, but the body can take only so much.

Realizing that a world title opportunity was at stake the referee Stanley Christodoulou – who had earlier shot to world fame with his handling of the Arnold Taylor vs. Romeo Anaya and Victor Galindez vs. Ritchie Kates world title fights – gave the popular Natalian the benefit of the doubt. It soon became apparent, though, that all Baronet was doing was soaking up punishment and the bout was stopped.

"It was a great shock," says Thobela. "Mayasela didn't outbox Baronet, he just caught him. It was a big upset."

Returning to the ring after his devastating defeat by Mayesela, Baronet set off to campaign in the USA. He scored three successive victories before being stopped in the tenth round by Harold Brazier, a durable, highly rated fighter he had previously beaten. He returned to South Africa towards the end of 1986 and retired from the ring with a record of 32 wins with 19 knockouts and only 3 defeats.

"The Golden Boy," as Baronet was called, made a comeback in 1988 and scored victories over Sammy Rivera and Davey Montana, but they were disappointing bouts. Baronet no longer had the grace, the style and the power he had before. His poorer performances did little harm to his popularity, however, and the crowds still flocked to his bouts.

"The problem was that Baronet went over to the USA alone," says veteran trainer Norman Hlabane. "Guys in the gyms, anywhere in the world, always look out for their own. They gave Baronet hard guys to spar with and they hurt him in the gym. It wasn't a fight that hurt him. He

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got a lot of punishment in the gym.”

On the 4th of June 1988, Baronet met Kenny Vice in Durban in front of a capacity crowd of twelve thousand, in a fight screened live on television. Unbeknownst to those at ringside, it was to be his last fight. Throughout the bout it was clear that something was wrong with Baronet. It was as if he was merely going through the motions of boxing. He went down in the tenth and last round after a few glancing blows from Vice.

Although he stood up, he collapsed a few moments later and went into a coma. The nation held its breath as photographs of Baronet were featured on the front pages of all the major newspapers. The prayers of his fans helped little, however, as he died a few days later. After his death there were rumors of him having been in a motor car accident a few days before the bout and that he'd been found unconscious behind the wheel at the scene of the accident.

“Going to the weigh-in Brian had been in an accident,” says Mike Segal, who promoted all of Baronet's comeback fights. “He was putting a tape into the tape deck – in those days we never had CDs – and there was a car in front of him which he only saw when he looked up. He braked quickly and hit his head against the windscreen and that must have affected something. He only told us this the night of the fight. When we got to the change room before the fight he was fast asleep. His trainer, Doug Dolan, said it was fine, he can sleep before a fight; some fighters do that. He went out there and he just didn't do anything. I was sitting ringside and looked up at him because he looked at me after every round. I said ‘Brian you're not fighting at all’ and he said ‘You're crazy. I'm winning this fight.’”

“I believe that he had a blood clot on the brain as a result of the car accident” says legendary SA boxer Andries Steyn and former trainer to Baronet. “I think that should have been looked into. Vice never landed any effective punches when Brian went down. Before the fight he also looked a little incoherent.”

Baronet's tragic death did ironically have a positive effect on the safety of future generations of boxers. It led to the introduction of the punishment index, whereby doctors at ringside monitor and record the amount of punishment a fighter receives in a bout.

“South Africa became the world leader with regard to safety regulations introduced after the Baronet tragedy,” says Stanley Christodoulou, who was at the time the CEO of the SA boxing commission. “We'll never be able to bring him back, but that's one good thing that came about as a result of and can be ascribed to Brian Baronet.”

“If things were jacked up like they are today with regard to safety for the boxers, then perhaps Brian could have been saved.” says Segal. “I mean we didn't even have oxygen at the ringside at the time. If we had known the real facts around his car accident then perhaps we would have postponed the fight. He didn't make a big thing about it and never complained about a pain, dizziness or anything.”

Those who were close to Baronet all agree. Irrespective of the way his life ended, if he were given the choice again, Baronet would have chosen to be a boxer, because that's who he was –

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a boxer.

A tragic tale of a man who loved the sport of boxing and seventeen years after his death we're still faced with circumstances in which our fighters are being killed. Are current safety measures and precautions enough? Are we doing all we can to ensure that in seventeen years time someone else won't be recounting the life of Martin Sanchez, following the death of another noble warrior?