

## Lou Esa – Size Matters

Written by Robert Mladinich  
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In the mid-seventies, heavyweight Lou Esa, who was 6'6" tall and weighed more than 250 pounds, was a good enough prospect to be taken under the wing of Angelo Dundee and Ferdie Pacheco. Having done some amateur boxing in his native New Jersey, Esa was spotted by the famous duo after moving to Miami to try his hand at professional football.

He had played defensive end at St. Peter's College in Jersey City, and hoped to win a spot on the Miami Dolphins. While convalescing from an injury one day, he heard that his boyhood idol, Muhammad Ali, was going to be training at the fabled Fifth Street Gym in Miami Beach.

Hoping to just shake The Greatest's hand, Esa rode his motorcycle to the gym, paid his \$3 entry fee and, while waiting for Ali's arrival, instinctively started hitting the heavy bag.

"Angelo came right up to me and asked who I was," recalled Esa, now 53. "The next day he introduced me to Murray Gaby, who became my manager, and before you know it I'm fighting every other Tuesday at [the Miami Beach] Convention Hall. They called me the Sunshine State Mammoth."

With Dundee training him, and Pacheco working as his cutman, Esa turned pro in July 1975 with a first round knockout at Convention Hall. By December of that year he was undefeated in five fights, all of which were won by first round knockout, and all of which occurred at the same venue. His third fight is especially noteworthy today because the opponent he stopped was Hydra Lacy, the father of current IBF super middleweight champion Jeff "Left Hook" Lacy.

Esa sparred regularly with the power-punching Jeff Sims, and was at the gym on the day that Sims cut Ali so bad in a sparring session that Ali had to grow a moustache. He was learning fast and fighting often, mostly in Florida but also in his native New Jersey and at Madison Square Garden.

His biggest fight occurred in October 1977, when he took on John Tate, 5-0 (3 KOs), at the Aladdin Hotel in Las Vegas. A year prior Tate had won a bronze medal for the United States at the Olympic Games in Montreal.

Although Tate stopped Esa in the first round, it was the events leading up to the fight that Esa remembers most. The day before he left for Las Vegas he says he broke up a brawl in Miami. During the fracas one of the participants was tuned up bad enough for him to have an arrest warrant lodged against Esa for assault.

Esa told the police his side of the story and was asked not to leave town while they investigated the case further. Not wanting to miss out on the payday, he headed west without telling any members of his team about the dust-up.

Not long before he was scheduled to leave his hotel room for the Aladdin, Las Vegas cops,

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who had been dispatched by their Miami counterparts, came to his room with their guns drawn. Obviously intimidated by his size and the nature of the charges against him, they wanted to handcuff him while he was still in his underwear.

“I told them to let me put my clothes on or we were going to fight,” said Esa. “They did, but then they walked me through the casino in handcuffs, right past Angelo, Ferdie and Murray. It was embarrassing and humiliating.”

Esa was released just minutes before he entered the ring against Tate. He said he “wasn’t even looking or thinking about Tate” and was stopped in the first round for the first time in his career. The charges were later dropped when he got back to Miami, but the writing was on the wall.

He won only one of his next four fights. One of those losses was an eight-round decision to a New Jersey rival named Bill Connell. The winner was guaranteed a shot at Scott Frank, who held the New Jersey state heavyweight championship. Two months after he beat Esa, Connell was stopped in eight by Frank, who went on to fight Larry Holmes for all the marbles several years later.

Esa retired for good with a 19-6-1 (16 KOs) record after being stopped again in the first round by Flossie Schmidt in Honolulu in August 1981.

Esa didn’t have much time to miss boxing because he was involved in so many other endeavors—some good, some not so good. He got involved in the nightclub business, bought and sold properties, and also immersed himself in the underworld. He rarely saw his wife and twins, Louis and Julie, who are now 26.

While he had some successes over the years, what stands out most are the actions that eventually cost him both his pride and his freedom. While living in Spain in the early nineties, Esa was extradited back to the United States because he was knee-deep in a narcotics racketeering conspiracy, for which he eventually served seven-and-a-half years in federal prisons in New York and Florida. He was released in 2003.

“I had left the country to get away from the craziness, to get a new start,” said Esa, who takes full responsibility for his actions. “My life was crumbling around me. It was like the domino theory. My life was out of control, and the prison sentence was a real wakeup call. I realized I had to broaden my horizons, and start seeing and doing things differently.”

While incarcerated, Esa made a conscious decision to straighten his life out for good. However, living behind the wall meant that was easier said than done. “I was a big white guy who had the look so a lot of guys wanted to test me,” he explained. “That was a big mistake on their part. They’d see what I did to someone who messed with me and say ‘leave that guy alone.’”

Since being released from prison, Esa has made good on his promise to stay straight. He is blissfully married to a woman named Gina, and loves being a doting stepfather to her two children, Gabriella and Emily, who are eight and six respectively.

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“I love taking the kids to soccer and helping them with their homework, doing all the things I missed with my other kids,” said Esa. “I would never do anything to risk that.”

He is also the proprietor of the Square Ring boxing gym in Montville, New Jersey. The facility has 120 members, including many martial artists, Muay Thai practitioners, white collar warriors, police officers, and a slew of professionals of varying skill levels.

Esa is currently training the Paterson, New Jersey police department for an upcoming match with the nearby Passaic County sheriff’s office. He is not at all averse to getting in the ring and going eight or ten rounds several times a week.

“It’s funny how all these years later, I’m back in boxing,” said Esa, whose warm demeanor makes it difficult to believe he led the life that he did. “Boxing is something that always lingers in your system. After all my crazy years, I’m very happy to be living the life I am now. I do regret not seeing much of my children when they were growing up, but things happen for a reason. Sometimes you have to learn hard lessons. I learned a lot of them. If things didn’t happen the way they did, maybe I wouldn’t be where I am now. And where I am now, I wouldn’t change for anything.”