

A Conversation with Al Certo

Written by Luca De Franco
Monday, 17 October 2005 19:00

I met Al Certo a year ago in a Jersey City, New Jersey gym. Actually, it could hardly be called a gym: it was a room, with a boxing ring and two heavy bags. *That's all you need to become a professional boxer,* Mr. Certo told me. He doesn't believe that lifting weights and using the ultra-modern machines that you find in fitness centers is useful for a fighter. Coming from a man with 61 years experience in the sport, you can take it to the bank. I met Al again last July, in a real gym located in Teaneck. He was glad to see me again and to share his thoughts about the people he met during his illustrious career and about the state of boxing.

Mr. Certo, you have known them all: good guys and bad guys. Among them, you also got to know the legendary Frankie Carbo and Blinkie Palermo. Countless articles, books, movies, TV documentaries have given us a sinister portrait of these two men. Can you tell us the real story?

Forget the magazines, books and fictions; Frankie Carbo and Blinkie Palermo ran boxing like it should be run. They promoted six shows a week, they had money from the TV networks and from many sponsors, their events were so good that always got national exposure and attracted thousands of spectators. If they matched a champion against a bum, nobody would have paid to see it. Frankie Carbo and Blinkie Palermo produced so many events that everybody worked (fighters, trainers, cutmen, managers). That's why most boxers who were active in those years (1949-1961) had a record of over 70 bouts. Some of them even reached the 100-fight mark. More importantly, Frankie Carbo and Blinkie Palermo knew every aspect of the game. They could talk about training, fight strategy, contracts, and everything else. By the way, sometimes contracts weren't even needed. They just called you and asked *Do you wanna fight at the Miami Beach Auditorium next month for \$2,000?*

If your answer was yes, that was it. You knew that you would have received the \$2,000, because they were men of their word. Today, many people involved in boxing don't know what the hell they are talking about.

What do you mean?

There are too many Fifth Avenue guys in boxing. Those people have a lot of money to invest, so they pick a promising fighter, they give him \$20,000 up front, buy him a car, rent him an apartment, and go around bragging they'll turn him into a champion. The point is that they have no idea about how guiding a fighter to the world title. They don't even have the experience to recognize talent, if they see it. Most times, those Fifth Avenue guys choose a bum. When it is clear that the bum won't make it, the Fifth Avenue guys understand that they lost all the money invested. Thinking about it, who would want to train every day after having received \$20,000, a car and an apartment? Money changes people's minds. The fight game is for hungry, tough guys.

You mentioned the Miami Beach Auditorium. Did you fight there?

A Conversation with Al Certo

Written by Luca De Franco
Monday, 17 October 2005 19:00

Yes, because I was a friend of Chris Dundee. In the 1950s, I used to hang around with Chris, Angelo and Joseph De Guardia Sr. I like Joe a lot. He is a legitimate tough guy. His son is a good promoter.

What about the other promoters?

There are many good promoters out there, like Bob Arum and Murad Muhammad. In my opinion, Don King is the best in the world. Just consider the number of shows he promoted, everywhere, and the money he was capable of grossing. Thanks to him, the fighters keep busy and make money. The ones who brag that Don King is a crook should remember what they were doing before meeting him. Most likely, they were fighting for \$10,000 in some minor show. I'll explain you what happens. A boxer who usually gets a \$10,000 purse receives an opportunity to fight for \$100,000 in a Don King show. The fighter cannot believe that Don King noticed him and accepts with enthusiasm. Later, he discovers that another fighter on the same card got a \$250,000 purse and tells everybody that Don King stole \$150,000 from him. The truth is that, thanks to Don King, he made \$90,000 more than usual. Besides, nothing is owed to anybody in this world. The fighter must have a good manager who knows how to get the biggest purse possible. The fighter must also know that he cannot get the same money of a famous champion, no matter who the manager is.

Talking about the most famous champions, how do you rate Oscar De La Hoya?

He is a very good fighter, but he doesn't belong in the same category as Sugar Ray Robinson. The Latin fighter showed his limits when he threw away the last 3 rounds against Felix Trinidad. He lost many fans that night. A Mexican (or Mexican-American) fighter is supposed to accept the slugfest. I must recognize that Oscar was the best in building his own image. He became a real star, like Robinson in his own era.

And Mike Tyson?

Mike Tyson could have been a great one, but turned out to be just a big puncher. In the 1950s and 60s there were many big punchers who never became world champions. Mike's problem was that he didn't live like a fighter.

You are very critical.

That's because I'm a trainer. My job is to see a fighter's faults and correct them. You know, too, many people think that boxing is a simple sport. All they do is stand up, throw jabs and right hands. Even some famous champions always fight the same way: *jab, jab, right hand*. Boxing is a very scientific sport. A fighter must know the proper way to throw and avoid punches, the footwork, the infighting. He must be able to adapt to his opponent's style. In boxing, every move should be a surprise.

What champions do you like?

Winky Wright is a very talented kid. He could beat a lot of more famous boxers. I also like

A Conversation with Al Certo

Written by Luca De Franco
Monday, 17 October 2005 19:00

Bernard Hopkins. I consider him one of the old-school. He could be an all-time great, like Marvin Hagler.

Do you think that Hopkins could have beaten Hagler?

Honestly, I don't think that anybody could have beaten Hagler in his prime. If Hagler wasn't around, Mustafa Hamsho could have become world champion. He was a very talented kid who closed his career with a record of 43 wins (27 by KO), 6 losses and 2 draws.