

Giorgio Campanella: "When I Knocked Oscar Down"

Written by Luca De Franco

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Giorgio Campanella had an outstanding amateur career, winning four Italian titles (in the lightweight and super lightweight divisions) and the European championship (at super lightweight). Between 1990 and 2000, he fought 38 professional bouts, scoring 31 wins (24 by KO), 6 losses and 1 draw. He became Italian super featherweight champion and fought three times for a WBO belt. His accomplishments grant him a place in the history of Italian boxing, but what makes him special isn't a belt: it's the left hook that dropped Oscar De La Hoya on May 27, 1994. The match was held in Las Vegas and the Golden Boy was WBO super featherweight champion. Nobody believed that an unknown fighter coming from Italy had a chance against the De La Hoya, but during the first round the unthinkable happened: Giorgio Campanella threw a left hook to Oscar's chin which sent him to the mat. Let's ask Giorgio how he did it.

Giorgio, was that a lucky punch or did you prepare for it during training?

I'll tell you something that I never told before to the press: I studied that left hook for days because it was my only chance of winning. The day before leaving Italy, I KOed my sparring partner with a punch to the forehead which broke my right hand. I decided to go to Las Vegas anyway because it was the chance to make it big and maybe I wouldn't get a second one. Beating De La Hoya would have guaranteed me huge purses. I had signed to give Oscar a rematch if I won. With the second fight, I would have got as much as I asked. If he had won the second match, a third battle (and a third big paycheck) would have been a natural. Besides, I knew that Oscar would have left the WBO super featherweight division after the match. I could have fought another challenger for the vacant belt, but it wouldn't have been the same thing. Maybe I would have won, but nobody would have cared. When I arrived in Las Vegas, I didn't tell anybody about my right hand. I wanted to put some anaesthetic, but I discovered that it wasn't allowed by Nevada regulations. That's why I studied a strategy to open his guard for a big left hook to the chin. It worked! My regret is that I got him one inch lower; if I hit the proper target, he wouldn't have had the strength to get up.

What happened after that hook?

I went for the kill and he went down again. The referee ruled it a push and didn't start the count. At that moment, my chances of beating the Golden Boy became zero. I just couldn't win fighting with only one hand – even in perfect conditions. In the second round, Oscar hit me really hard with power punches and I went down on one knee. I understood I couldn't get a decision, not when he hit me many times behind my neck and the referee didn't deduct him any points. That's why I accepted the brawl. In the third round, I didn't have the strength to answer his punches and my cornermen threw in the towel. Now, I understand they did the right thing.

After his recent losses, some people in the boxing business said that Oscar De La Hoya has always been overrated. What's your opinion?

Nonsense, Oscar De La Hoya is one of the greatest fighters of the last 50 years. I know that he

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remembers our match. I read somewhere that he said that only two fighters hurt him: Giorgio Campanella and Felix Trinidad. If that’s true, I want to thank Oscar.

You had a second opportunity for the WBO super featherweight belt, against Regilio Tuur. Tell us about that.

It was on December 23, 1995. Once again, I wasn’t in good physical conditions. I had an inflammation to the right leg. I wanted to put some cortisone, but the doctor explained me that I would have resulted positive to drug tests.

Why didn’t you pull out?

For the same reasons I didn’t pull out against De La Hoya: I wanted to make the most of every opportunity I received – even if that meant going to my opponent’s backyard. I went to Amsterdam to fight Regilio Tuur. Because of my right leg, my performance was very poor. Regilio won by unanimous decision.

What about your third world title match, against Artur Grigorian?

It was for the WBO lightweight championship. We fought in Hamburg (Germany). That time, I didn’t have any physical problems. The match was even until the 8th round, but then I started getting tired. The referee noticed it and stopped the fight at the 10

th round. I cannot complain about his decision. I made quite an impression in Germany and Grigorian advised me to stay there. According to him, it would have been the best thing for my career. I discussed the proposal with my wife; we already had two children and decided to keep living in Italy. You know, Grigorian was so worried about fighting me that he hired Evander Holyfield’s trainer.

How do you compare Regilio Tuur and Artur Grigorian to Oscar De La Hoya?

They were good fighters, but never had Oscar’s technical skills.

You had to go abroad to get your world title shots. Weren’t you afraid of the judges?

No, because I never had the intention of letting the fights go to the judges. Before facing De La Hoya, 80% of my wins were by KO. After that, my percentage of KO wins dropped, but I could still get the job done with both hands. Everybody knew that I would bring excitement to their shows. That’s why I was hired by promoters in France, Switzerland, Germany (twice), Holland, Las Vegas and Atlantic City. I must admit that I would have been more comfortable if the big fights were organized in Italy. It’s a matter of knowing the people you work with, the city, the gym where you train, having the fans rooting for you. In your hometown, you give 110%.

Among today’s champion, who do you like the most?

Miguel Angel Cotto. His last fight was the most exciting of the year. Of course, it’s also because

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of the high quality of his opponent. Ricardo Torres is a tough guy.

Every once in a while, an unknown fighter from Latin America rips apart a famous champion. Do you think that, speaking in general, Hispanics are better fighters?

I never gave any credit to those discussions. In my amateur and professional careers, I travelled the world finding good and bad fighters everywhere. I never underrated my opponents. Every time a boxer does it, he loses.

Do you have any regrets about your pro career?

Yes. I should have only fought in the lightweight and super lightweight divisions. Those were my natural divisions. In fact, I always competed in those categories as an amateur. There's something I'm very proud of and nobody ever writes: I was the youngest Italian boxer to fight at the Olympics. It was in South Korea, in 1988, and I was 18 years old. I won the first match; then I lost to the future gold medallist Andreas Zuloaga. I knocked him down during the first round. In my professional career, I had the biggest opportunities among super featherweights. Losing the weight to enter the limit was a nightmare.