

## Former champ Mark Medal ... nice to be nice

Written by Robert Mladinich  
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There were no shortage of local celebrities from the sporting and entertainment industries at the "Back to the Future" boxing show, which was promoted by Main Events in North Bergen, New Jersey, on November 30.

One of them, former IBF junior middleweight champion Mark Medal from nearby Jersey City, was treated like royalty by everyone he came in contact with. He couldn't walk more than a few feet before being accosted by another fan.

The 48-year-old Medal attributes his popularity not only to his boxing, but also to the fact that he has been a Jersey City police officer since 1989. Because the always smiling Medal, who lived in his native Puerto Rico until he was nine years old, is such a people and community oriented person, he says both vocations have enabled him to garner more fame than he could have ever imagined.

"People joke that I'm like the unauthorized mayor of Jersey City," said Medal. "The city means a lot to me because I grew up there and represented it as a boxer. I do the same thing as a police officer."

Medal's currently assigned to prisoner transport at the municipal courthouse. Because he treats everyone with whom he comes in contact with respect, he is accorded the same respect in return.

"Life is too short to take anything for granted," said Medal. "I've accomplished a lot and am proud of what I've done and who I am. It's nice to be nice."

Campaigning from 1979-87, Medal compiled a 24-3-1 (20 KOs) record against some pretty formidable opposition. He fought often at Madison Square Garden's Felt Forum, as well as in the arena's big room, and in Atlantic City.

It was at the Sands Hotel and Casino in Atlantic City that he won the vacant IBF title from the hard-punching, previously undefeated Earl Hargrove in March 1984. Coming into the fight, Medal had one loss in 23 bouts while Hargrove had won all 24 of his bouts by way of knockout.

"I was the first IBF champion to win my title in the ring," said Medal, alluding to the fact that the organization, which had just been formed, had anointed most of its champions, including heavyweight king Larry Holmes. "All the other titles were handed to the champions. Hargrove had one helluva punch.

"I noticed that everyone he hit went down and didn't get back up," he added. "I said going into the fight, if I go down I'm getting up and I'm going to knock him out."

In a ferocious battle of punchers, Medal stopped Hargrove in the fifth round. Unfortunately,

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however, his title reign didn't last long. In his very first defense eight months later, he lost a unanimous 15-round decision to the slick-boxing Carlos Santos of Puerto Rico at the Felt Forum.

"That was heartbreaking," said Medal. "I worked so hard to win the title, and then lost it in a fight that probably could have gone either way."

That was not the only heartbreaking aspect of Medal's career. In August 1978, a little over a year before he turned pro, one of his best friends, light heavyweight Kevin Smith, 12-2-1 (10 KOs), had apparently shot himself to death outside of a local restaurant called the Gridiron.

Smith, who was close to getting a fight with then champion Michael Spinks, enjoyed the same type of local popularity that Medal has to this day. They had known each other since grammar school, and had come up through the amateur ranks together.

"Kevin was like my brother," said Medal as his eyes welled up a bit. "If Kevin ever got the opportunity to fight Spinks, he would have surprised a lot of people. He had so much heart and determination."

So did Medal, who after losing to Santos fought three more times. After an eighth round TKO loss to Thomas Hearns for the WBC junior middleweight title in June 1986 and a ten-round draw with unheralded Donald Johnson in November 1987, he called it quits. He was only 30-years-old.

"My trainer, Bernard Forbes, who is Emile Griffith's cousin, died," explained Medal. "Then my managers, Edward Allen and Bob McNamara, died. Suddenly going to the gym wasn't fun anymore. In the early days, especially with Bernard, it was always fun."

After joining the police department in 1989, Medal, who grossed about \$1.9 million during his career, has never looked back. The only thing he thinks about is the astronomical amounts of money some fighters make today.

"I can't even imagine what that would be equal to today," he wondered. "Life might be a little different if I was born a little later."

Medal, who has been married for 29 years and is the father of six children who range in age from eight to 30, lives by his own golden rules.

"Take care of yourself, treat others fairly, live a decent life, and work out," he said, stressing the latter. "Live life and enjoy it. We're all here on borrowed time, so make the best of it."

As far as any long-range plans, Medal only has one. Having recently visited Hawaii with his wife, he is determined to live there someday. "It's the most beautiful place on earth," he explained. "I've never seen any place like it."