

## Gianfranco Rosi, IBF/WBC Light Middleweight King

Written by Luca De Franco  
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In Italy, Gianfranco Rosi's story is so unique that could be the subject for a movie: he worked his way up to the top like the old-timers did, getting his first shot at the world title eight years after his pro debut, and became WBC light middleweight champion beating an outstanding fighter like Lupe Aquino. Rosi defended the belt against Duane Thomas and lost it to Donald Curry. One year after that, Gianfranco accepted to move to Atlantic City to face IBF light middleweight king Darrin Van Horn. Surprising everybody, Rosi knocked the American down and then beat him largely on points. Gianfranco kept the crown for five years and two months successfully defending it eleven times against top opposition; in his 12th defense, he was beaten in four rounds by Vincent Pettway. Between 1979 and 1997, Rosi built a record 58 wins (17 KOs), 5 losses, 1 draw and 1 no-contest. That's enough to understand why the Italian is still remembered by the boxing people in the United States. During my recent visit to the Top Rank Gym in Las Vegas, I noticed a poster of Rosi vs. Aquino on the wall and famed trainer Jesse Reid told me that Rosi was a legitimate champion who deserved a lot of respect. After his loss to Verno Philips in 1997, Rosi said that he would retire for good. Six years later, he decided to get back in the ring. Since the Italian boxing commission doesn't grant a licence to fighters older than 40 (if they don't have a major title), Rosi was forced to move abroad. Since 2003, he fought and won one match a year in Croatia, Serbia and Hungary against journeymen. What's the former world champion's goal? Let's ask him.

### **Why did you come back?**

Because I love boxing. After retiring, I bought a gym in my hometown of Perugia to keep involved in what I like the most. But that wasn't enough for me, so I started considering to get back in the ring. I went to the doctor who said that I was in perfect physical conditions, then I started training seriously and after about one year I realized that I could still be competitive. My goal is to keep on fighting until I can defeat my opponents. My dream would be winning the world middleweight title.

### **Let's talk about your career, what fight changed your career for the better?**

The one against Darrin Van Horn because I became world champion in the United States easily beating the local favorite. Nobody gave me a chance, but I paid no attention to the critics and trained harder than ever before. I traveled to America absolutely convinced that I would win. When I sent Van Horn to the mat with a left hook, I realized that it was my night and gave my best. By the way, I saw tapes of Van Horn and prepared that left hook in the gym: that was the only time that I studied a move. Usually, I just cared about my physical and mental condition, about improving my technique and throwing a big number of punches. I never spent time considering how to land a big single blow. In fact, my opponents were never worried about getting KOed by a power punch.

That's why many of them didn't protect themselves properly and got hit by hundreds of my "ordinary" punches.

**When they proposed you to fight Darrin Van Horn in his territory, weren't you worried about a partisan verdict?**

No, because I knew that in the United States they give the victory to the fighter who deserves it. It's true that if the local boxer won by 4 points, the judges can give him 8 points, but they are not stealing a victory from somebody else. This doesn't happen in other countries. Speaking in general, when a boxer fights abroad he must dominate or he can lose. Going back to Van Horn, while the match progressed I realized I was dominating so I was sure to get the verdict on all the scorecards. After the last bell, I remember thinking that maybe I lost one round and two were even. The judges scored 117-109, 118-108 and 116-109 in my favor. The rematch was also one-sided, even if there was less difference on the scorecards: 115-112 (twice) and 116-113 for me.

**Were the Van Horn fights your best performances?**

No, I performed better against Lupe Aquino whose record was 31-2-1. At the time, the Italian journalists wrote that I had no chances of winning. I knew that the Mexican was tough because I was ringside when he beat Duane Thomas for the WBC light middleweight title. I was scheduled to face the winner, so I didn't miss one moment of that battle: it was very violent and I understood that I was going to fight an exceptionally gifted athlete. So, I gave 100% and beat Aquino winning my first world title.

**Some people still talk about your match against Duane Thomas.**

My defense against Duane Thomas was also a great performance. It happened on January 3, 1988: during the seventh round, I hit him with a series of punches and the referee declared the TKO. I never threw such a beautiful combination again. Duane was an excellent boxer, he had a record of 29-2 and had beaten (TKO 3) John Mugabi for the WBC title on December 5, 1986.

**After Van Horn, you fought twice another champion in his territory: Gilbert Delè.**

I fought and beaten twice Gilbert Delè, in France and Monte Carlo. Delè was a southpaw who had been French, European and WBA light middleweight champion. He had a record of 34-1-1 and was the local favorite also in the Principality of Monaco, where the first language is French. The first time two scorecards were 116-111 in my favor, while the third one was 114-113 for him. In the second fight, two judges scored 116-111 and 114-113 for me, while one official saw it 114-112 for Delè. If the matches were held in Italy, probably I would have gotten unanimous decisions.

**What about your loss to Donald Curry?**

I just had a bad night and he beat me easily. I went down five times and realized that I was going to lose, so I remained on my stool at the start of the tenth round. I never look for excuses, when I lose. I think that a real champion must put his loss in the closet immediately and start thinking about his next fight. After Curry, I trained very hard, became a contender again and one year later defeated Van Horn for the IBF title.

### **Was Don Curry your toughest opponent?**

Lloyd Honeyghan and Chris Pyatt were as tough as him. I lost my European welterweight title against Honeyghan (KO 3) in 1985. He caught me with a big right hand to the chin. Back then, he was in the best shape of his career, which he closed with a record of 43-5. After beating me, he became WBA, WBC and IBF welterweight champion. I consider him an all-time great. As for Chris Pyatt, I beat him on points for the European light middleweight crown in 1987. That was one helluva battle: he cut my eyebrow early and the match turned more difficult than it was supposed to be. Chris Pyatt was another great champion; he compiled a record of 46-5 and won many major titles like the British and European light middleweight and the WBO middleweight belts. Those fights against Honeyghan and Pyatt proved that I could lose only by KO. I never lost on points because I always trained very hard to last 12 rounds and studied the right strategy. No strategy can save you from a good punch to the right spot. I like to say that "you can beat any fighter on points and be KOed by anybody."

### **Somebody else turned out to be tougher than expected?**

Yes, Angel Hernandez. I saw him fight and didn't think much of him. Besides, he had a record of 22-16-4. When I faced him, the Spaniard gave his best and forced me to do the same. I remember that it was an hard battle, which I won by 6th round TKO.

### **Since you fought so often abroad, you also trained in foreign gyms?**

No, I always trained in my hometown with my coach Giovanni Bocciolini. I traveled to the city of the fight only a few days earlier. Giovanni is with me even today. I miss my manager Silverio Gresta, who passed away. I will never replace him, so I'm my own manager now.

*Gianfranco Rosi*

Born on August 5, 1957 in Assisi. This town is in the Umbria region of Central Italy

Stance: Orthodox

Pro debut in 1979

Record: 61 wins (18 KOs), 5 losses, 1 draw and 1 no-contest

Welterweight Titles

Italian and European champion

Light middleweight Titles

European champion

WBC world champion from October 2, 1987 to July 8, 1988

IBF world champion from July 15, 1989 to September 17, 1994

Today, he lives in Perugia where he owns the "Accademia Pugilistica Perugina" gym