

The Crazy Life of Johnny Tapia

Written by Aaron Tallent
Sunday, 23 July 2006 19:00

Professional athletes often fall into the same trap as politicians when telling their life stories, and the end product is a self-serving, glossed over manuscript. Part of the reason for this is that athletes, like politicians, are conscientious of the legacy they leave. They also bring ghost writers onto the project, and as a result lose some of the rawness for the sake of a reader's ease. However, there are exceptions, and *Mi Vida Loca: The Crazy Life of Johnny Tapia* is one of them.

Tapia, a five-time world champion, has won belts at super flyweight, bantamweight, and featherweight, facing the likes of Danny Romero and Marco Antonio Barrera along the way. While the weight divisions he fought in usually garnered little attention, Tapia spent most of career on the edge of superstardom; partly because of his relentlessness in the ring, but mostly because his name is synonymous with dysfunction in the eyes of boxing fans.

He never knew his father. His mother was murdered when he was eight years old, and he was forced to live with his grandparents and a dozen relatives in an Albuquerque ghetto. Growing up, drug use was so common that he would help family members and neighbors shoot heroin by gripping their arms to help them locate a vein. He lost aunts and uncles to prison, addiction, and murder. As an adult, he became a drug addict himself. He has died four times, attempted suicide, and spent time in prison. Through most of it, he managed to stay undefeated as a boxer.

Most fighters' stories involve overcoming severe hardships. What sets Tapia's narrative apart is that his story outside the ring is compelling enough to stand on its own. The fact that he was able to successfully box and win championships in spite of it makes the story even more remarkable.

The death of his mother has driven Tapia throughout his life. The tragedy is the foundation of his self-proclaimed crazy life and his conflicted feelings towards his family. The night she was murdered, his mother took him to stay with his grandparents so she could spend an evening out on the town. Tapia later woke up in the middle of the night to see his mother chained to the front of truck passing by.

When he ran to tell his grandparents, they told him to back to sleep. When she did not come home the next day, the police were not notified. As Tapia states, "When you live in the ghetto the last thing you do is call the police. The police stand for everything bad. The police are the enemy."

Two days after her disappearance, his grandfather and aunt saw a report in the newspaper of an unidentified woman having been stabbed. In an attempt to locate her, the article featured a picture of his mother's jewelry. After his grandfather returned from identifying her body, he told Tapia that she had died. When Tapia started to cry, his grandfather slapped him, saying, "A man doesn't cry. A man doesn't show his feelings." For his mother's viewing, rosary, and burial,

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he was left at home, never getting the chance to say goodbye.

One never recovers from such a horrific loss. The pain often serves as a pernicious life companion who cheers one on through bouts of self-destruction and anger, and finds a way to make his presence known in times of joy. For Tapia, it is the catalyst for his bouts of depression and subsequent drug addiction. But those feelings are also what fuel his pit bull-like ferociousness in the ring.

Before he was ten years old, Tapia was already beating opponents twice his size in street fights. As an amateur, the results were the same as Tapia won bout after bout. His professional career began with a 21-0-1 start before his heroin addiction sent him into a three and a half year hiatus. Many more battles with drugs would follow.

The fact that the boxing public gave Tapia chance after chance through his failures is not surprising considering his likeability and talent. What is surprising is the fact that he did not lose a fight throughout much of it.

The reader will also finish the book with an utmost appreciation for Tapia's wife, Teresa. When they first met, she correctly sensed trouble and vehemently avoided him. How she became his indefatigable wife, nursing him through drug addiction and deplorable husbandry, and eventually his manager is truly remarkable.

Her support is ultimately what helped Tapia win world titles, and her wit shepherded him towards lucrative contracts with both Bob Arum and Don King. She also helped renew efforts to find the person responsible for his mother's murder.

While that search and the painful resolution that followed are the crux of his story, boxing still plays a major part. There are humorous stories about Teresa's negotiations with King and Arum, along with fascinating accounts of Tapia's fights in the gyms and parks of Albuquerque.

However, one should not purchase this book expecting vivid retellings of any of Tapia's fights. Most receive only a sentence or two of description. In this instance, it is perfectly acceptable because Tapia's most compelling stories took place outside of the ring.

His prose in telling them is definitely raw, giving it authenticity. Coauthor Bettina Gilois is a producer/screenwriter whose credits include *Glory Road*. She is also rewriting the script for a Jerry Bruckheimer movie based on Tapia's life. Her screenwriting expertise allows the book to flow as if the reader is hearing Tapia tell his life story over several beers. Those types of sports autobiographies will have historical significance unlike many of the water-downed books you see on shelves today.

The only problem is that they can leave a reader uninformed too. A person with little knowledge of boxing could very well finish this book with no clue which championships Tapia won or the significance of his bouts with Romero and Barrera. He offers very little background on his fights, the fighters, or the state of boxing in general. It may sadly diminish the widespread appeal of his story.

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The typos will not help either. Everyone makes mistakes from time, but some of the ones in this book are glaring. In one instance, the same paragraph is repeated twice. If a consumer pays \$15-20 for a book, he or she should be given a clean manuscript.

But in the end, the boxing community has given Tapia several chances because of his overall contribution. The literary world will likely follow suit.