

HBO's Ray Torres' Dream Come True

Written by Robert Mladinich
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When Ray Torres was chosen by HBO to serve as the Spanish translator for their very first Boxing After Dark (BAD) telecast in February 1996, he could not believe his good fortune.

He was so excited about the assignment, he had to contain himself from telling HBO executives that he would have done it for free. Torres wound up doing the translating for the epic battle between Marco Antonio Barrera and Kennedy McKinney.

The fight is arguably one of the best ever seen on BAD, and it set the stage not only for future BAD telecasts but also for Torres' recurring role as HBO's Spanish translator.

Since that night, Torres has called fights all over the world. Although he has been involved in bouts featuring some of HBO's biggest stars, he says that hands-down his most vivid memories are related to bouts involving Barrera, Erik Morales and Felix Trinidad.

"I do an average of ten shows a year," said the 63-year-old Torres, who looks more like an aging matinee idol than an ex-boxer who was undefeated in a total of 33 amateur and pro bouts.

"The most exciting for me was probably the Barrera-Morales trilogy," he continued. "Any fight with Barrera or Morales is always exciting. And Trinidad is always in a good fight. Even if it's a bad fight on paper, he makes it exciting."

The best part of his job, says Torres, is that he only has to work for the minute between rounds. He is free to enjoy the action in the ring for the other three minutes.

"Ray has so much enthusiasm," says Harold Lederman, HBO's unofficial judge, who recommended Torres for the job. "He's a natural showman and just loves boxing. I am very proud of him, and I believe he is a great addition to HBO."

Having been involved in boxing for what seems like forever, there is very little that Torres has not seen or done.

He was a longtime amateur official and professional matchmaker in New York. Before that he was a helluva fighter.

Torres moved to New York with his family from their native Puerto Rico when he was nine years old. The year was 1951 and there were very few Puerto Rican fighters plying their trade at the time.

As a result, Torres and his brothers, several of whom became local New York attractions, wound up idolizing Kid Gavilan who was Cuban.

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"We loved him," said Torres. "He was our hero."

Torres and his brothers, who lived in the Washington Heights section of upper Manhattan, soon began boxing at Cus D'Amato's Empire Sporting Club on 14th Street.

They all found varying degrees of success in the squared circle. Ray won the 135-pound New York City sub-novice Golden Gloves title in 1964.

A year later he won one bout and had a bye, but was unable to compete in the finals after incurring a serious cut. After compiling a 22-0 amateur record, he turned pro in October 1965 with a four round decision victory over Benny James at the fabled Sunnyside Gardens in Queens.

Six of his eleven pro bouts occurred at Sunnyside. He also fought twice at the Audubon Ballroom where Malcolm X was assassinated, and once at Madison Square Garden.

As he became a fan favorite in his hometown, Torres was named a Prospect of the Month by The RING magazine.

All of his pro bouts occurred within 20 months, and he also sparred regularly with such champions and contenders as Carlos Ortiz, Joey Archer, and less heralded but alligator tough gym fighters like Miguel Baretto and Jose Gonzalez.

After amassing a record of 11-0 (3 KOS), Torres found himself engaged in the fiercest fights of his life. In 1967, at the height of the Vietnam conflict, he was drafted into the U.S. Army and sent overseas.

As a combat infantryman he saw plenty of action during his one year tour of duty. He was awarded several commendations before being honorably discharged from the service.

Returning home he took a job as an assistant manager in a shoe store, and then as a sales representative for the Nabisco corporation. For some inexplicable reason, his competitive drive to be a boxer had been left on the battlefields of Southeast Asia.

Even though he no longer wanted to box, Torres still loved being around the fight game. He and Lederman became close friends as they waded through the amateur New York boxing scene garnering whatever experience they could.

"I retired as an undefeated fighter," said Torres, the father of two sons. "I was never beaten as either an amateur or a pro. I am very proud of that."

Torres eventually grew weary of New York winters and followed several family members to California in 1980. He managed to get a lateral transfer from Nabisco and has never looked back.

"Los Angeles has got the best weather in the world," said Torres, who lives in Monterey Park

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with his third wife Maria, a stunning Nicaraguan beauty. "New York is always either too cold or too hot. Living here is perfect."

Several years ago Torres retired from Nabisco and now works part-time as a customer service representative for the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power. The job is flexible enough to allow him to travel to HBO events.

When the fights are held in the United States, more times than not he and his wife will make a weekend of it.

"It's a dream come true for me," said Torres. "I get to sit at ringside without buying a ticket. What could be better than that?"

Asked how he manages to stay so youthful in mind, body and spirit, Torres laughs aloud. "That's easy," he said. "I have a great wife, two great jobs, and I go dancing a lot with a young woman. My wife is 35. I guess those are my secrets, even though they're not secrets anymore."