

The artistry of Willie Pep

Written by Robert Cassidy Jr.
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There is an old boxing cliché that says, "Savagery sells tickets, artistry sells hot dogs."

Whoever said that never saw Willie Pep fight.

Willie Pep, the master boxer, died on Thanksgiving at the age of 84. He was a featherweight champion and a Hall-of-Famer with over 200 wins in a career that stretched over two decades. The obits have all been written and the career retrospectives have been rehashed. This piece is not about four fights with Sandy Saddler, the Lulu Perez controversy, plane crashes or gambling. This is an appreciation of a man who defined the art of boxing. This is a testimonial from those who witnessed him and studied him.

"At the absolute pinnacle, you can find some fault with even the greatest of the greats and Pep didn't have great punching power and he wasn't as strong as a lot of other featherweights," said boxing historian Mike Silver. "But he more than made up for that with taking boxing to a level that has not been seen since. It was a very sophisticated way of boxing. The greatest compliment, I think, any boxer could ever get was having Sugar Ray Robinson, say, and I remember him saying this, that he admired Pep's boxing ability more than any other fighter he'd ever seen."

Pep turned pro in 1940 and won the New York version of the featherweight title by decisioning Chalky Wright in 1942. He was champ until 1948 and made title defenses against Sal Bartolo, Phil Terranova, Jock Leslie and Humberto Sierra before running into another hall-of-famer, Sandy Saddler. Saddler stopped Pep in the fourth round of their first bout, but the Will o' the Wisp" regained the title four months later with a performance for the ages.

"His shining moment was the return bout with Sandy Saddler," said Silver. "Pep was never quite the same after suffering that injury in the plane crash. He was slightly diminished. He broke his back in a plane crash, most people don't know that. But Pep came back to defeat Saddler in a 15-round decision in what was one of the greatest boxing performances of all time. It was two great fighters against each other. But Pep had to be at his absolute best to do that. Without question it was one of the greatest pure boxing exhibitions that any boxer has staged since fighter's put on gloves."

Pep would make three more defenses after the Saddler rematch but would then lose two subsequent fights to Sandy and never challenged for the title again.

Although few films of Pep exist, Silver has studied several of his fights – including the third and fourth Saddler fights and wins over Ralph Walton and Ray Famechon.

"His sense of timing was impeccable," said Silver. "If you watch his fights, he never moves too far out of position or too close where he can't land his punches properly. He was always in the right position. He did a lot of things you just don't see a lot of fighters do any more. His footwork

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was of a type that is also not seen today. You just watched his feet and it was a show itself. He was the Fred Astaire of boxing."

More succinctly put, Fabela Chavez said after his 1952 bout against Pep: "Fighting Pep is like trying to stamp out a fire."

Over the years, this writer has spoken to a pair of men with intimate knowledge of Pep. One shared the ring with him, the other viewed his mastery from the opposing corner.

The late and great trainer, Vic Zimet, trained Curley Nichols for a fight against Pep on May 4, 1942. Pep came way with an eight-round decision. "The fight was in New Haven and it was during the war years," recalled Zimet before he died. "We had to be back in New York the same night. I was in the Coast Guard and Curley was on my ship, a 110-foot cutter. Curley was doing well, holding his own. He was a good boxer, but not in the class of Willie Pep.

"Pep was a very clever boxer. He made extremely quick moves. I appreciate a fighter who can think. You could see his mind working and then he'd execute immediately. He was fun to watch because he was clever. Every move meant something. He was a throwback to the great thinking fighters like Benny Leonard. When I got back to New York I told everyone I just saw the next featherweight champion of the world. Six months later he beat Chalky Wright."

Pat Marcune fought Pep at Madison Square Garden on June 5, 1953 and was stopped in the 10th round. Marcune was tough and talented and beat the likes of Bill Bossio, Eddie Compo and Lauro Salas in his career. It was the 185th fight of Pep's 242-fight career and the former champion still had enough to win.

"Pep didn't hurt me," said Marcune. "I hit him. He's in front of you, in back of you. He's all over the damn place. But he never stood toe-to-toe with you. I still don't know why they stopped the fight. I wasn't hurt. I wasn't cut. I got knocked down, I got up. Petey Scalzo was the referee and he stopped the fight. I was a young kid and Pep was on his way out. But Pep was a great boxer. I don't think I could ever duplicate him. I don't think anyone could ever duplicate him. I don't feel bad that I lost to him. He wasn't a bum."

Indeed, he was not a bum. In fact, for years legend had it that Pep actually won a round without throwing a single punch. That myth was debunked when a member of the International Boxing Research Organization (IBRO) researched Pep's fight against Jackie Graves in 1946.

"Even if that didn't happen, it was still believable, and that says even more about Pep than if it really happened" said Silver. "There is no other fighter you could even say that about and have it somewhat believable."

Pep retired in 1959, fighting long past his prime. He made a comeback in 1965 and won nine straight before being stopped in his final fight. After a 26-year-career, he retired with a record of 230-11-1 and 65 knockouts.

"If you couldn't write a complete obituary," mused Silver, "if all you could write was Willie Pep,

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former feather champ passes away and here is his record, 230-11-1, that would be enough. Just that record says enough. Think about those numbers. It's an amazing record."