

Kemal Kolenovic: A real gutsy guy

Written by Robert Mladinich
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Immediately after stopping Ronny Glover in the first round at the United States Merchant Marine Academy in Kings Point, Long Island, on December 15, junior middleweight Kemal Kolenovic grabbed the microphone from the announcer and dedicated the fight to Agapito Sanchez, the top rated super bantamweight contender from the Dominican Republic who was shot to death in November 2005.

Kolenovic, a native of Montenegro in the former Yugoslavia who lived and fought out of New York, had trained alongside Sanchez at Gleason's Gym in Brooklyn for quite some time. Most boxing insiders agree that Sanchez was on the cusp of great things when he was gunned down.

Kolenovic had a lot to feel both nostalgic and hopeful about that night. Besides improving his record to 10-6-2 (5 KOS), he broke a three fight losing streak and established what he hoped would be a good future working relationship with local promoter Sal Musumeci.

Back in June 2003, the always busy Kolenovic had won the New York State welterweight title at Jimmy's Bronx Café on a card promoted by Musumeci.

Since then, Kolenovic had lost more than he won. One defeat, by eighth round TKO, was to Walter Wright in Tacoma, Washington. Wright recently achieved a degree of prominence as one of the participants in season two of "The Contender" reality television series.

Kolenovic had also lost an eight-round decision to knockout artist Carlos Quintana, then 17-0, in Poughkeepsie, New York, in August 2004. Quintana later upset undefeated, red-hot sensation Joel Julio and most recently incurred his first loss, against Miguel Cotto.

"Kemal was a very exciting, in-your-face fighter who bounced around quite a bit fighting for different promoters," said Musumeci. "He wasn't a very trusting guy, but I think he realized that both times he fought for me he got wins. He asked me for a promotional contract and I was happy to be associated with him."

Kolenovic and Musumeci had planned on formulating a game plan this week. Instead, the only plans that were being made by those closest to the fighter were for his funeral.

In the early morning hours of December 31, he was brutally murdered by a hit-and-run driver after an altercation outside of a Bronx nightspot called the Moonlight Restaurant and Bar. The establishment is frequented by Yugoslavian and Albanian immigrants.

He tried to break up a fight between several men. While facing a large crowd of onlookers, one of the men slipped away, entered a sport utility vehicle, and drove down the sidewalk at a high rate of speed.

Numerous onlookers were able to jump to safety, but Kolenovic, who was not facing the vehicle,

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incurred massive head injuries when he was struck and propelled head-first into a tree.

He was dead on arrival at the nearby St. Barnabas Hospital. Police sources have stated unequivocally that the case is being handled as a homicide, not a hit-and-run accident.

Several of Kolenovic's acquaintances have said they know people who know the driver of the vehicle. Some even suggested that he'd be better off surrendering to the police than getting caught by the friends that the fighter left behind.

Tony Kalaj, the publicist for Bronx promoter Joe DeGuardia's Star Boxing, knew Kolenovic well. As a youngster, Kalaj, who was born and raised in the United States, would visit his grandparents in Montenegro every summer.

His family knew Kolenovic's family, so when the fighter relocated to the Bronx in the early nineties, he and Kalaj became fast friends.

"He didn't have a bad bone in his body," said Kalaj. "He'd never say anything bad about anybody. He either knew, or knew of, both parties involved in the argument. That's why this is so senseless. He was trying to be a peacemaker."

What makes the death even more heart-wrenching is the fact that after some difficult years, Kolenovic was finally getting his life in order.

His father had died violently back home and, besides a sister and an uncle in America, he had no family here. Although he trained hard, he never had the support of a regular promoter and wound up taking whatever fights came his way, often on short notice for nominal purses.

"He was a tough kid who was always on edge, and he didn't seem to trust a lot of people," said Bruce Silverglade, the owner of Gleason's Gym where Kolenovic sparred with, among others, Vivian Harris, Paulie Malignaggi, and Yuri Foreman.

"He trained hard and would take whatever fights were offered him. He had the potential to be a John Duddy type fighter. He was a real gutsy guy. If you growled at him, he'd growl back. If you fought him, you knew you were in a fight."

"He was a rough-tough fighter with an action style, and he was always moving forward," added DeGuardia, who used him on several shows since Kolenovic turned pro back in August 1999. "I didn't spend a lot of time with him, but always found him to be a gentleman. What happened to him should not happen to anyone."

Muriqi still remembers the first time he met Kolenovic. It was in 1997, while Muriqi was training for the Golden Gloves at the Morris Park Gym. He saw Kolenovic, who was wearing a bandanna, slamming the heavy bag and was impressed. In the dressing room, they started talking and had been friends ever since.

"Back then he didn't take his career very seriously," said a shaken Muriqi. "He would smoke

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(cigarettes) while training. But he got better and better as the years went by. He was a tough person with a big heart. He had a tough life, but all that he had been through gave him a lot of character and self-respect.”

At about two o'clock in the afternoon of December 30, Muriqi made plans to see Kolenovic that night. Instead he got tied up with a date, so he called some mutual friends who said they would meet up with the fighter. Muriqi's voice drifts off as he wonders what would have happened if they got there just five minutes earlier.

Kolenovic had planned on 2007 being a very good year for him. There was talk of him fighting on DeGuardia's January 25 show at the Paradise Theater in the Bronx. If all went well, he was eager to see what the next chapter of his life would bring.

Instead, Kolenovic was waked on New Year's Day at the Islamic Unity and Culture Center of Plav-Gusinje, a Muslim mosque that serves the city's Montenegrin community. His mother had been hurriedly flown in from her home in Germany.

On January 2, Kolenovic's body was buried at a Balkan cemetery in upstate Monticello.

New York City has been touting its reduction in murders for quite some time. Back in the early nineties, when Kolenovic first set foot in the Land of Opportunity, the homicide rate was hovering at nearly 2,000 victims a year.

Crime reduction initiatives have reduced the once phenomenal rate to around 500. While statistically speaking that is a very good number, it provided no solace for Kalaj's mother, who clutched her son's face in her hand as she wailed uncontrollably.

Nor did it provide solace to Kalaj, who says Kolenovic was loved by a lot more people than he could have ever imagined.

“When you pulled up to the mosque, you would have thought a president or a rock star was on display,” said Kalaj. “There were people on line, all the way around the corner. He was very well liked. This is a tragedy, an absolute tragedy.”