It was a vicious and perfect right lightning bolt to the jaw that dropped Julio Gonzalez for the third time. He looked gone. He was flat on his back and staring at the lights. Behind the right hand was the hard punching Light Heavyweight Julian "Mr. KO" Letterlough (R.I.P.). It seemed like it was all over in the tenth round.

Gonzalez refused to take no for an answer. "I never give up. That's just something about me. I'm not going down without fighting until the end," said Gonzalez of the fight.

He got up, survived and dropped Letterlough the very next round in what turned out to be an instant classic. There were a total of five knockdowns in a fight tabbed by many as "fight of the year" for 2001. To this day, the fight is regularly rebroadcast on ESPN. "Every time he landed the right hand he put me to sleep," remembers Gonzalez. "The first two knockdowns were flash knockdowns but the third one was just tremendous."

The 6'2" Huntington Beach native whose family had struggled to make it to Orange County from the beautiful and blazing Vizcaino desert in Baja California had finally broken through. "That's when everybody started paying attention to me. It was that win that got me the Roy Jones fight," Gonzalez (41-3, 25 KO's) said.

In 2001, Roy Jones Jr. still had his superhuman instincts and blazing reflexes intact. He was considered by some as the top pound for pound fighter in the world. It was a packed house of over 19,000 at the Staples Center in Los Angeles that showed up to see Jones Jr. vs. Gonzalez along with Erik Morales taking on In Jin Chi. The roar of the crowd smothered Michael Buffer's ring announcements. Gonzalez was there to rumble but Jones proved too fast, too athletic and too accurate. "I was trying to get him to fight my fight but he was too smart and incredibly fast," Gonzalez said. Jones danced and countered his way to a unanimous decision win. "I did my best. I got knocked down three times and continued to fight," Gonzalez said. It was disappointing, but that show of fortitude on his part eventually helped to earn him another title shot.

Dariusz Michalczewski was the undefeated WBO titleholder who was making an incredible 25th defense of his title. On October of 2003, in the German-Polish fighter's own backyard, Gonzalez proceeded to defeat the European superstar. "I had a good plan on how to beat him and I was in the best shape of my life," Gonzalez said. "I knew I'd have to win convincingly in order to take the title since it was his home turf." It was a historic moment for boxing since Gonzalez became the first light heavyweight champion of Mexican descent.

The taste of world title success didn't last long since he lost the belt in his first defense to Zsolt Erdei. Again, Gonzalez had to fight in his opponent's home turf of Germany. Gonzalez concedes that he lost the match without controversy. "I don't think I studied Erdei well enough, he outboxed me and counterpunched me well. I don't think my focus was totally there for that fight," Gonzalez said. "He's still the world champion. Maybe we'll have a rematch sometime

soon."

After wins over Orlando Rivera, David Telesco and Montell Griffin, Gonzalez earned himself a third title shot in 2005 against Englishman Clinton Woods in Sheffield, England. Woods won a decision that Gonzalez felt was much closer than the scorecards indicated. "I have no excuses. He won. I felt it was very close. Having to fight in Europe made things more difficult for me but that's the way it goes," said Gonzalez.

Gonzalez, who is now thirty years old, is slowly working his way back into title contention under the Goossen Tutor Promotions banner. A title eliminator is in the works for the #2 ranked I.B.F. and #6 ranked W.B.C. contender. "Goossen Tutor is working on something. I really can't talk about it right now," Gonzalez said. "If I win, I'll get a fourth title shot."

Julio's come a long way from the dusty town of Vizcaino that's a stopover near the middle of the Baja Peninsula. His parents moved the family to La Habra where young Julio was introduced to boxing. "That's where I put on my first boxing gloves. It was with Dave Martinez at the La Habra boxing club," Gonzalez said. "If it wasn't for him opening the doors and taking us to tournaments when we were kids, I don't think I would've continued. He's been a good trainer and a good friend. He's influenced me a lot. "

From the little Orange County gym, Gonzalez found success early as an amateur. "I represented Mexico in the 1996 Olympics and lost to Vassily Jirov who eventually won the gold medal and was awarded the most outstanding boxer award," Gonzalez said.

After ten years as a professional, the father of two boys feels he's achieved most of his goals. "Boxing has been good to me. I'm very happy with what I've done but I feel I can do a little more. I'm very close to another title shot," Gonzalez said. "I want to become a world champion again. That's the goal for 2007."

Once he ends his run in the sport, Gonzalez plans to give back to boxing. "I'd like to become a trainer. I think I have a lot of potential," Gonzalez said. "I'd teach young fighters about giving it all they've got. I'd teach them to become the best they are capable of becoming and to always be satisfied with their performance as long as they give their best. That's what it takes to be a real winner."

If anyone knows about being a winner, it's Julio.

For more on Julio Gonzalez go to www.juliogonzalez.net