

He Never Had One Street Fight

Written by Robert Mladinich
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When Armando Muniz challenged WBC welterweight champion Carlos Palomino in January of 1977 in Los Angeles, it was the first time in history that two college graduates had competed for a world title.

Muniz, who had represented the United States as a member of the U.S. Army at the 1968 Olympic Games in Mexico City, had earned a bachelor's degree in education from UCLA, while Palomino possessed a bachelor's degree in recreation from the University of California at Long Beach.

The action-packed fight was a barnburner, with Palomino stopping Muniz at 2:24 of the 15th and final round. It also proved that educated men could fight, that Palomino was a great champion and that the Mexican-American Muniz's immense popularity was hard-earned and well-deserved.

He never took a backward step against Palomino, or against any of the other championship caliber opponents he faced during a career that lasted from 1970 to 1978. Against the likes of future Hall of Famers Emile Griffith, Eddie Perkins, Palomino (twice), Jose Napoles (twice) and Sugar Ray Leonard, Muniz compiled a respectable record of 44-14-1 (30 KOS).

Although he lost to all of the aforementioned fighters, he was only stopped twice, by Palomino and Leonard. He drew with tough champion Oscar "Shotgun" Albarado and beat Clyde Gray, Ernie Lopez, Hedgemon Lewis and Pete Ranzany.

For the last 20 years he has made his living as a math and Spanish high school teacher at Rubidoux High School in Riverside County, California.

Although Muniz was known as a battle-hardened veteran who always brought the fans to their feet with his exciting style and never-say-die mentality, his background belied the reality of his ring career. Surprisingly, he never had even one street fight in his life.

He was born in Mexico but was living in El Paso, Texas, where by the age of 13 he was a self-described "crybaby." His father, Sabino, was a crane operator and former fighter who loved watching action boxers like Floyd Patterson and Carmen Basilio.

"Those guys had guts and were real men," said the now 61-year-old Muniz, who laughs easily and exudes an abundance of positive energy. "My father and his friends loved them. I wanted to impress my father, and I thought the best way to do that was to become a fighter."

One day, in 1961, he saw an ad for a local Golden Gloves tournament and immediately signed up. Because he was a few months short of the mandatory minimum age of 14, he lied about his age. Thankfully the tournament sponsors didn't check up on him.

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Within months, Muniz made his inauspicious debut against a more experienced youngster named Tony Ramos. "I got my butt kicked, but the experience was incredible," laughs Muniz. "I knew I wasn't going to win the fight, but I never stopped trying."

The rewards for the young and impressionable Muniz were as immediate as they were powerful.

"My dad was so proud of me," he said. "It was the first time in my life that he called me a man. I said, 'Oh my God, my dad called me a man.' It was great."

The accolades continued with his schoolmates, one of whom told Muniz that he never realized what a "tough guy" he was. Hearing that was like music to his ears.

"The minute that fight was over, I knew I was going to be a fighter," said Muniz. "I thought, 'this is what life is all about.'"

Muniz, whose family moved to Los Angeles shortly afterwards, was a quick study. In 1968, just seven years after engaging in his first scrap, he was drafted into the U.S. Army. Because of his by then extensive amateur boxing experience, Army boxing coach Pat Nappi recruited him onto the team.

He soon earned a berth on the Olympic squad, where one of his teammates was heavyweight George Foreman. The Games took place in Mexico City, which was in Muniz's country of birth. At just 22 years of age, he had come a long way in a short time.

Besides the enormity of the Olympic experience from a sporting perspective, Muniz has other equally strong recollections.

He describes Foreman as "a big, strong kid who didn't have a lot of schooling but was not dumb at all." Moreover, he says that underneath Foreman's tough exterior beat the heart of "a good man."

That became apparent to Muniz one day as he and Foreman entered an elevator after coming back from a training session. Foreman was approached by several track stars who wanted him to take part in a bold political statement they were planning.

After winning their medals, they planned on raising their hands in a Black Power salute. "I didn't understand all of the political things, but George did," said Muniz. "He told them he came to Mexico City to win a medal, not to make a (political) statement."

After winning his gold medal, Foreman opted to jog around the ring waving an American flag. To this day, those actions have left as an indelible impression on the American psyche as the one delivered by the protesting athletes.

"I think George won the public over by taking that stand," said Muniz.

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Muniz doesn't hide the fact that his participation in the Olympics precluded him from serving in the war in Vietnam, which was raging at the time.

"Even though I was a soldier, I was happy to be in the Olympics and not in Vietnam," he said. "A lot of people were dying over there for nothing."

Muniz wound up losing to an Argentinean in the quarterfinals and returned home to Los Angeles without a medal. He enrolled in UCLA, which was also immersed in student protests over the Vietnam War. Muniz began to better understand the futility of the conflict.

"I was not involved in the protests, but I understood we didn't need to be there," he said. "It was a very difficult time in our history."

Because of his 82 amateur fights, which included the Olympic experience, Muniz was matched tough when he turned pro in July 1970. He won 12 fights in a row, 9 by knockout. The first blemish on his record was the draw with Albarado.

Five fights later he lost a 10 round decision to Griffith in Anaheim, California. "I hurt a lot of guys' hands with my face," jokes Muniz. "I couldn't avoid punches, but I always fought back. You either knocked me down or I knocked you out. Griffith was a great champion. Even, at (age) 36, he could outbox a guy like me. He was slick."

Muniz still considers Perkins, who will be inducted into the International Boxing Hall of Fame in Canastota, New York, in June, as probably the second toughest all-around fighter he ever faced.

"He was a real hard guy to fight," said Muniz. "He was a Floyd Mayweather-type who boxed well inside and out, but he never ran away. He was much better than Mayweather; a wise fighter, a real pro. He never ran and would box with you, punch with you, and stick a thumb in your eye."

Muniz concedes that Perkins beat him handily in their first encounter, in January 1973, but feels he got ripped off in their rematch 14 months later. At stake in that fight was the NABF welterweight title. Once again, Perkins won a decision.

"No way I lost to him the second time," said Muniz. "But in boxing, you have to take the good with the bad."

As tough as Perkins was, Muniz says that Napoles was without question the best opponent he ever faced. Their first fight took place in March 1975, while the rematch took place four months later. Muniz lost decisions in both world title bouts.

"I caught him near the end, but he was still something," said Muniz. "I was a rugged Joe Frazier-type fighter who didn't go down easy. If I had won, I believe I would have been the first Mexican born welterweight champion. I thought my dream would come true, but Napoles had other ideas."

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While Muniz is more than happy to concede Napoles' greatness, he still laments the fact that the champion blatantly fouled him in the 11th round of their first fight. "He hit me so hard and so intentionally in the crotch, and nobody did anything," said Muniz. "Anyone else would have been disqualified."

By the time Muniz tangled with Palomino for the first time he was 31 years old. He had evolved into a natural middleweight, but was still campaigning as a welter. The toll the training took on his body was immense.

"It was horrible for me to make weight," said Muniz. "I could make 150 with no problem, but those extra three pounds took a lot of work and drained me. For our first fight, I did not eat for three days. In those days, you weighed in on the morning of the fight, so you couldn't load up on water and food after a weigh-in that was held the day before the fight. It was very difficult for me."

In the May 1978 rematch, which Muniz lost by decision, he was physically spent by the eighth round. "I knew I shouldn't have been in there," he explained. "I was hoping for a miracle, that Carlos would trip and break his hand or something. I had no strength, but willed myself to go 15 rounds."

Seven months later, in December 1978, the always popular Muniz would take part in his last fight, a sixth round stoppage loss to Leonard. Muniz was unable to continue due to tendonitis in his left arm.

"Leonard was a great boxer, the class of the (1976) Olympic team who fit the mold of a champion," said Muniz. "He could do it all, offensively and defensively. He was a great champion."

Although Muniz still loves boxing, he finds it hard to be a fan these days. He points to the recent Floyd Mayweather/Ricky Hatton bout as a prime example of all that is wrong with the once Sweet Science.

"Boxing has become a circus," he said. "Fans appreciate a guy who fights because boxing is a struggle for survival. That's what the fans relate to. Ricky Hatton made the fight against Mayweather. If it wasn't for him, there wouldn't have been a fight."

As adamant as he is about the integrity of the game, he is equally steady in his private life. He and his wife Yolanda have been married for 40 years, and are the parents of three children and the grandparents of four.

In addition to teaching, he is also involved in a bail bond business appropriately named Armando Muniz Bail Bonds. He is surprised at how many customers still remember his name from his fighting days.

They are not the only people that remember his name. In the early nineties, he was inducted into the World Boxing Hall of Fame in Los Angeles. He now sits on the executive board of that

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fine organization.

The day of his induction was bittersweet. As happy as he was to be recognized by his peers, his father had died six months prior. Muniz was overwhelmed when a friend of his dad's named David Sotello showed up unannounced at the event.

"He told me he was there for my dad, who had always been so proud of me," said Muniz. "He had read about the induction in the paper and had to be there. That meant so much to me."

During the most recent World Boxing Hall of fame induction ceremonies in Ontario, California, in October 2007, Muniz was presented with an "Uncrowned Champion" belt from Ring 8, Veteran Boxers Association, in New York.

Muniz, who epitomizes all that is great about such an often maligned sport, wrote from his heart in a thank-you letter to the venerable organization.

"I am grateful for all of my blessings," he said. "This was a very nice honor to receive, especially from a group of your stature. Thank you so much for thinking of me."

Muniz is much too humble to realize that it is impossible for anyone who ever saw him fight to forget him. He never took a backward step, and never once forgot his stalwart fans. During an era of great television fighters, he was one of the best.

He gave no quarter, expected none in return, and displayed the heart of a lion in both his victories and defeats.

"I've done a lot with my life, and will do a lot more," said the immensely likeable Muniz. "But when I tell someone that I used to be a prizefighter, I always feel a little pride. Other than my wife and kids, boxing was the most important thing in my life. It made me the man that I am today."