

Adios Art “Golden Boy” Aragon & Luis Magana

Written by David A. Avila
Tuesday, 01 April 2008 19:00

Art Aragon, California’s original Golden Boy, and Luis Magana a boxing writer then publicist, both passed away last week.

It’s definitely the end of a golden era.

“Art Aragon was a hero in the boxing world,” said Oscar De La Hoya who became the next “Golden Boy” from East Los Angeles. “He was the true Golden Boy.”

When Aragon fought, he became the surest thing to a guaranteed sell out when he appeared on fights card from the 1940s to 1960. The lightweight slugger with movie star looks from East Los Angeles packed them in with people looking to see him knock out or get knocked out.

Outside the ring he proved just as irresistible to fans and onlookers who saw the prizefighter regularly clown and joke his way in and out of trouble.

Aragon was unique.

“A lot of people booed him, especially the Mexicans,” said Leonard Castillon, 93, who saw Aragon fight numerous times at the Olympic Auditorium. “He would say things to make the crowd mad and mug the crowd. He didn’t care. He would beat the Mexican fighters and thumb his nose at the people. Ooh, that would get them mad.”

At the early age of 16, Aragon was beating up more mature fighters in the historic Main Street Gym in Los Angeles. Though still in Roosevelt High in East L.A., he decided to enter the professional ranks. It was the right decision.

“He used to handle the older guys with ease when he was just 16,” said Bennie Georgino, a resident of Sun City who first met Aragon in the old Main Street Gym in Los Angeles. “He was such a kidder, you never knew if he was serious or not.”

Once female fans got a look at Aragon’s strong athletic physique, jet black curly hair and good looks, the crowds suddenly filled with more women, including Hollywood’s most attractive damsels such as Marilyn Monroe, Jayne Mansfield, Mamie Van Doren and Sophia Loren.

It was common to see Aragon arm in arm with Monroe at Ciro’s or Van Doren in one of the Sunset Strip haunts.

Hollywood was captivated with the charismatic Aragon.

“Once we were in a movie together and Art took this actress upstairs to talk business,” said Georgino. “He got the girl pregnant but she never got him in trouble. She really liked Art. He always seemed to be able to wiggle out of trouble.”

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William Holden, the star of the movie Golden Boy, tagged Aragon with the moniker.

“William Holden was another friend of Art Aragon,” said Georgino. “Movie stars used to love to watch him fight.”

During the 1950s boxing was the biggest sport attraction in the Southern California area. Before the Dodgers deserted Brooklyn, or the Lakers departed from Minneapolis, it was Aragon who was the top ticket seller with his flare for dramatics in and out of the ring.

The Olympic Auditorium and the Hollywood Legion Stadium were the places to be and massive lines formed in front of the ticket booths around 2 p.m. For Aragon’s fights, it was nearly impossible to get a last-minute ticket.

Publicist Bill Caplan said Aragon was the only sports figure who could attract a standing-room-only crowd in the pouring rain. “Nobody in L.A. goes to an event in the rain. But people lined up to see him fight even when it rained. That tells you the kind of attraction he was. Because people in Los Angeles won’t go anywhere in the rain.”

Female promoter Aileen Eaton was the queen of the West Coast and she ruled boxing like a tyrant. It was through her whim if a fighter was granted permission to get his head knocked off. Boxers curried favors and often called her begging for an opportunity to fight in the Olympic.

Aragon owned the town.

“Art Aragon didn’t care about nothing. He was the only one that got what he wanted from Aileen Eaton,” said Georgino, who was Aragon’s best friend for many decades. “That’s the kind of guy he was. You couldn’t change him.”

Aragon showed his grit in more than 100 battles against stalwart fighters in the boxing crazy area that featured boxing shows almost any day of the week from San Bernardino to Santa Monica. In many of those fights Aragon rarely trained hard after spending many a night carousing and chasing women.

“Aragon was a great fighter. He could really hit,” said promoter Don “War a Week” Chargin, who matched many fights at the Olympic. “He could have been a champion.”

During his peak the lightweight slugger Aragon fought numerous times to sold out crowds at both the Hollywood Legion Stadium and the Olympic Auditorium. Among those he engaged in the ring were Carlos Chavez, Jimmy Carter, Lauro Salas, Don Jordan, Cisco Andrade, Chuck Davey and Enrique Bolanos.

“When he knocked out Enrique Bolanos he felt bad,” said Georgino who saw both fights between the popular California boxers. “He told me that when he knocked out Bolanos he felt bad because he liked him. But Bolanos was way past his prime when they fought.”

By 1958 it was Aragon who was on the last days of his pro boxing career when he met New

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York’s former middleweight champion Carmen Basilio in a non-title fight at Wrigley Field in Los Angeles on Sept. 5, 1958. All 22,000 seats were sold.

“Art was past his prime and a 10 to one underdog against Carmen Basilio. He had no chance,” Georgino said. “Maybe if he trained properly he could have stood a chance. But Basilio was at the top of his game.”

Basilio, who captured the welterweight and middleweight championship in his career, remembered that fight when he last visited Los Angeles several years ago.

“I was too strong for him,” said Basilio who had just fought two battles with the great Sugar Ray Robinson before engaging Aragon in L.A. “His punches were like nothing to me.”

Many observers said that despite Aragon’s penchant for the Hollywood nightlife, once he got in the ring he became a different human being.

“He clowned around a lot, but inside that ring, boy he meant business,” said Georgino. “He gave it his all.”

The closest the Golden Boy came to a world championship came in 1951 when he beat champion Jimmy Carter in a non-title affair at the Olympic. Three months later they fought again, but this time for the world championship belt. Carter ran away with the victory and knocked down the Golden Boy in the fifth and 15th round. Though he never fought for the title again, he did get revenge when he met Carter a third time five years later. Aragon battered Carter for 10 rounds in an easy victory.

“Aragon was one of the best finishers I ever saw,” Georgino said. “Once he got a guy hurt, he’d come in with those combinations and it was over.”

When Aragon retired in 1960, no other fighter could draw fans for as long as he did.

“Mando Ramos had a pretty good following,” said Art “Handsome Slim” Carillo, a trainer who frequented the Olympic. “It didn’t last long.”

After he retired, he convinced Georgino, who owned two bars and a restaurant, to try out the bail bonds business. The two businesses were side-by-side across the street from the L.A. County Jail in the 1960s.

“He needed someone around him all of the time,” said Georgino, who often received phone calls from Aragon at ridiculous times. “We once went to Boston to return a guy who ran away (from a bond). We came back in an airplane and the guy we had tied up wanted to go to the bathroom. He said you take him, I said you take him. He was a lot of laughs.”

Many recall Aragon’s womanizing ways and willingness to accept dares to seduce an unsuspecting female.

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“Girls would pass by alone and you knew they had someone in jail. He would call them over,” Georgino said. “Once they were inside he would negotiate business.”

Aragon’s slogan was “I’ll get you out if it takes 10 years.”

“You never knew what he was going to do,” Georgino recalls vividly. “He’d go so far as to steal another man’s wife.”

Aragon would often tell his friends, “Do you think I could get that girl?”

Georgino said he stopped daring him because he knew he would do it and felt sorry for the women who often fell for Aragon’s charm.

Movie stars like Mickey Rooney played golf with Aragon and others convinced the irrepressible boxer to appear in motion pictures like Fat City. But the well-known Aragon never sought further fame or a conventional path.

Later, Aragon moved his bail bonds business to Van Nuys, around the corner from Joe Goossen’s current gym.

This writer met Aragon for lunch in 1995 in hopes of getting an insight on the very first Golden Boy. At the time, De La Hoya was beginning to get a name for himself, including the nickname “Golden Boy.”

That afternoon Aragon welcomed me into his bail bonds business and told me he was hungry, that I had to buy him lunch. We walked next door to the Salvadoran restaurant where he called the waitress over who was familiar with him as a business neighbor, but not of his fighting career.

He talked about his fights with little interest, instead he wanted to try out new jokes and asked me what I thought of them. He had a comic flair about him and made me laugh most of the three hours I spent interviewing him. For him, boxing was a thousand years ago. But he talked about the woman he was living with and how good a person she was. And he talked about his kids.

When I mentioned De La Hoya, the original Golden Boy paused and said, “it’s too early to call him the Golden Boy.” He also mentioned that if De La Hoya were a real Golden Boy he would sell out arenas.

Five years later, when De La Hoya was about to face Pomona’s Sugar Shane Mosley for the first time at the Staples Center, I called Aragon to ask his opinion of the new Golden Boy.

Without hesitation Aragon said, “that kid is the real Golden Boy. He deserves the name more than me. He’s making millions. I wish I made as much as the kid does.”

Though he never won a world title Aragon set a high standard for future boxers. He died at 80

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years old.

“He’d always go around saying ‘very important, very important,’” said Georgino.

Yes he was.

Magana

Another important man in the boxing world was Luis Magana, 97, who passed away on Easter Sunday in Boston. For years he was an important cog in the boxing world between the 1920s and the 1990s.

The well-dressed dandy was a boxing writer, publicist and advisor in the Los Angeles area who made it a point to greet and guide every boxing writer regardless if they were Mexican or Anglo. All that matters was that the writer was covering his sport: professional boxing.

“People say that if you don’t know who Luis Magana is, then you’re not a real boxing writer,” said Hector Zapata, a reporter in Los Angeles.

Ramiro Gonzalez, a former boxing writer for La Opinion who now works as a publicist for Golden Boy Promotions, recalls Magana’s willingness to assist young boxing writers.

“It was Luis Magana who convinced La Opinion to hire me,” said Gonzalez who spent a decade as a boxing writer. “Magana even had his own table in La Fonda Restaurant. Nobody else could sit there. The glasses even had his name, Luis Magana, on them.”

When the Olympic Auditorium first opened in the 1920s Magana was there covering boxing for various Spanish language newspapers including La Opinion. Later he worked at the historic boxing venue and would bring celebrities like Gilbert Roland, Lupe Velez, Anthony Quinn and other movie stars to the fight.

It was Magana who persuaded the local Spanish language newspapers to give more space to boxing coverage.

“He was a real smooth talker,” said Gonzalez.

As a new reporter for the L.A. Times Spanish language section, Magana called me up and introduced himself on the phone. He asked me a few questions about my background and when I told him I had boxed and came from a boxing family, he invited me for lunch. We met at his house where he showed me photos of boxing in the past. Later that day, we drove to Enrique Bolanos' house in Pasadena. I met the humble former prizefighter who had fought Aragon twice and the great Ike Williams three times.

It was an education.

After lunch we watched an old film of Bolanos' second fight with Williams at Wrigley Field. It was

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impressive footage of two great former fighters that time had forgotten. Magana made sure I saw it.

A few months later, Magana took me to meet Richie Lemos, a former featherweight world champion from East L.A. We drove out to Rowland Heights and met the reserved man who fought his first pro fight at 17 during the Depression.

Later that year, we called Ike Williams on the telephone and set up a time to meet for an interview. The Hall of Fame champion was living in the Wilshire District of Los Angeles and said he would meet us.

We never got the chance to visit Williams, he died later that week. Magana was always one of boxing’s great secrets to the outside world, but for boxing writers, he was the guru of the sport.

As the years passed I often called Magana for help locating older fighters. He was always willing to help or show old film of a particular fighter. Sometimes he’d ask me to look at photos of some of the current fighters of the 80s on up and identify them. He didn’t know the “new guys.” His period came before the 1980s from Dempsey to Ruben Olivares. That was his period of interest.

During his time with promoter Eaton, he would trek to Mexico to sign various pro boxers. Later he would be influential in bringing Mexican wrestlers too. People would call Magana “Lucha Libre.”

“He would go to Mexico to have them sign the contracts,” said Bob Resendez Magana, a nephew to Luis Magana. “He brought back fighters like Jose Becerra and Raton Macias. He did everything including working the ticket booths.”

One thing about Magana, he hated to stand still. Even in his 90s he wanted to go out to restaurants or visit his boxing friends whether they be fighters, writers, managers or promoters. You could always spot him with his fancy cane and well-kept hat. Boxing was his world.

“Luis would try to sneak out of his house, he hated to stay home,” recalled Gonzalez, who visited Magana to see films of old fights in a room dominated by a huge talking parrot in the living room. “One time we were trying to sneak out quietly and some weird voice said, ‘Luis, where are you going?’ It was his big parrot. Luis would say I’m going to get rid of that parrot one day.”

Magana’s funeral was held last week. Services for Aragon took place Tuesday at Mount Sinai Memorial Park in Los Angeles.

A big chunk of boxing history is gone forever.