

RIP, Jose Torres

Written by Ron Borges

Tuesday, 20 January 2009 19:00

Jose Torres could fight and he could write but most of all he could laugh. If you knew him well that is what drew you to him first.

The former light heavyweight champion passed away this week at 72 after suffering a heart attack at his home in Ponce, Puerto Rico, where he had returned to his island roots two years ago after an on-going battle with diabetes had begun to slow him down. It is difficult to think of Torres in that way for he was never slow, either in the ring where he was a quick-handed puncher and technically sound boxer or in a debate on almost any subject.

From the art of how to slip a punch and counter to the art of slippery politics in a great urban center like New York, where he grew up and grew famous first as a fighter and later as a writer and political operative in the Hispanic community, Jose Torres always had an opinion and a smile when he delivered it.

Fame first came to him in 1956 in Melbourne, Australia, where he won the silver medal at the Summer Olympics after having had only 25 amateur fights. Torres had joined the Army and there realized if he boxed there was much drudgery that could be avoided. Naturally gifted, Torres quickly took to the sport, reaching the gold medal round before being out pointed by one of the Olympics' legendary champions, three-time gold medalist Lazlo Papp of Hungary.

Torres would fight on as an amateur for two more years before making his professional debut on May 24, 1958, knocking out Gene Hamilton in Brooklyn. Trained by the legendary Cus D'Amato, who also handled future heavyweight champion Floyd Patterson at the time and later Mike Tyson, Torres didn't lose a fight for five years, finally being stopped for the only time in his career by Florentino Fernandez in 1963.

That loss did not dissuade Torres, who came back to beat Don Fullmer, Skeeter McClure and Gomeo Brennan before stopping former middleweight champion Bobo Olson on Nov. 27, 1964 in one round. That knockout convinced the handlers of then light heavyweight champion Willie Pastrano to give Torres an opportunity he would turn into a landmark moment in boxing.

Torres desperately wanted that title shot but he told officials at Madison Square Garden he would not get into the ring unless the Puerto Rican national anthem was played along with the Star Spangled Banner. They agreed, making Torres a Hispanic cult hero around New York.

Lured to the Garden on March 30, 1965 by Torres' popularity and drawing power, Pastrano ran into a 28-year-old opponent in the prime of his career. Torres battered Pastrano until he finally quit on his stool after the ninth round, making Torres the first Hispanic light heavyweight champion in history.

Instantly, Torres was a celebrity in New York, especially in Spanish Harlem. By then he had also become a cult hero to a group of New York writers led by novelists Norman Mailer and

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Budd Schulberg and newspaper columnists Pete Hamill and Jack Newfield. They loved him not simply for his acumen in the ring but also for his quick-witted personality, his celebrity and his growing array of interests outside the ring.

Yet D'Amato always believed Torres would have lasted far longer as a world champion had his focus been more narrow. In the end, Torres would hold the title for only 18 months, defending it three times including in the 1966 RING Magazine Fight of the Year, a 15-round decision over Eddie Cotton, But on Dec. 16, 1966, Torres dropped a disinterested decision to Dick Tiger and then lost a close, split decision to him again six months later.

"You could say Jose's interests in staying a champion were compromised by the other interests he had," recalled Teddy Atlas, who trained fighters under D'Amato and grew close to Torres over time. "He was a bright guy. A good writer. As those abilities got polished by Pete Hamill and Norman Mailer they began to draw Jose away from boxing a little bit.

"Cus always felt Jose expanding himself intellectually hurt him in the ring. Hurt him as a fighter because it took away the urgency to fight and it distracted him.

"Jose wrote a column for the New York Post and for El Diario (a large Spanish language newspaper in New York). He had an interest in politics and he hung around with writers more than fighters. That concerned Cus a little even though he loved his intelligence in the ring and out of it.

"After he was finished boxing Joe wrote two very good books ("Sting Like a Bee" and "Fire and Ice," the latter an unauthorized 1987 biography of Tyson that seemed to capture him in all his ambiguity, contraction and fragility). But Cus felt Jose's intellectual pursuits, his celebrity and his relationships with those kind of top writers made him aware of the things boxing can do to you that he should not be aware of to be a great fighter. The type of damage it could do to you.

"Unlike a lot of guys, Jose didn't have blinkers on. He knew what the sport could do to you even if you were as talented as he was."

Torres' second loss to Tiger in a 1966 rematch was a fight so close two judges had it 8 rounds to 7 for Tiger and the third saw it 8-7 for Torres. By then his interest in boxing was waning or perhaps it would be better say other interests were growing. Regardless, he would fight only twice more after the losses to Tiger, retiring at 32 after being dropped twice by a journeyman named Charley Green before he got up and KOd Green in the second round.

Clear in his mind that his best days in boxing were behind him but his best days in life were not, Torres quickly turned to the writers' life. His biographies of Muhammad Ali and Mike Tyson and his wealth of newspaper columns were as impressive to some as his work inside the ring. Same was true of his growing political power in the Spanish-speaking areas of New York.

Eventually he would serve as chairman of the New York State Athletic Commission from 1984-1988 and as a supervisor for the WBO but outside the ring perhaps his biggest moment came while serving as an aide to then New York City mayor David Dinkins in the 1990s. During

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a bruising campaign, Torres claimed Dinkins' opponent, future New York mayor and presidential aspirant Rudy Guliani, appealed to the Ku Klux Klan element in New York.

It was the kind of hard-hitting comment you would have expected from Jose Torres, a guy who could fight, could write and most of all could think.

"Jose looked at things philosophically," Atlas said. "He would look at things a little deeper than the average person. Cus loved the intellectual side of Jose even though he thought it maybe hurt his boxing career.

"He was a passionate guy who didn't mind showing it. If he saw you he'd come up and hug you and have that big smile. You felt good to see him. And he was a fierce advocate for boxing, the positive sides of the sport and how it could save a kid if he bought into the discipline the sport demanded. He loved to delve into what a fighter had to deal with and he was one of the rare guys who could do it and also articulate it."

If ever there was a fistic renaissance man it was Jose "Chegui" Torres, fighter, writer and most definitely a citizen of the world and ambassador for a sport that could use one today. Boxing will miss him, but the world beyond it that Jose Torres became so fully engaged in will miss him just as much.