

**“The eyes of Roberto Duran. There’s a sinister look there.... even now.”**

~ Al Bernstein, 1989

On the evening of February 24, 1989 a thirty-seven year old Panamanian has-been stood in a boxing ring in Atlantic City. A snowstorm raged outside but the crowd that filed into the Convention Center was undeterred –they came like believers to Lourdes, looking for a miracle. This was the boxer’s 92nd bout in 21 years as a professional. The touched-up beard and glistening hair recalled Charles Manson. His size and stature did as well –standing only 5’7 with his shoes on. In the opposite corner the powerfully built WBC middleweight Champion Iran Barkley stalked about, his features half-hidden under a hood.

Six years earlier, the man with the black beard had brutalized Barkley’s friend and fellow champion Davey Moore en route to an eighth round TKO. Moore died some time later in a freak accident and Barkley was dedicating this bout to his memory. For Iran, this was a revenge fight.

The Panamanian wasn’t worried: “that’s not my problem, that’s his problem.” Yet problems abounded. Iran wasn’t a 3-1 favorite by accident. He had bombs on both fists and stood over six feet. He was the kind of middleweight who looked like a light heavyweight with a rigged scale.

The flag of Panama waved up in the cheap seats as both men walked to ring center for the pre-fight instructions. Duran was eye-level with Barkley’s chest. Within moments, the timekeeper sounded the bell and round one began. The sold-out crowd roared and a familiar chant echoed off the walls as the boxers converged for battle: “Dooo-ran! Dooo-ran! Dooo-ran!”

### **Odyssey**

Roberto Duran Sameniego began as just another dirty face in the sprawling barrios of Central America. He was a shoeshine boy who started boxing for coins at the age of eight. Like many before and after him, the rumblings of an empty stomach produced a great fighter. The kid fought as if he were possessed by thirteen devils, eventually growing into the lightweight division. He was barely out of his teenage years when he dominated the WBA champion Ken Buchanan, ending the fight with a shot that launched Buchanan’s testicles into his esophagus.

Duran had by this time come under the wings of two old Jewish corner men, relics from the golden age of boxing. In 1950, Ray Arcel was in Ezzard Charles’ corner when he handed Joe Louis his first defeat since Schmeling. Freddie Brown was the cut man in Rocky Marciano’s corner who plugged up the gaping wound on the champion’s nose long enough for him to overcome Charles four years later. They trained 26 champions between them since the 1920s and together they took the raw material that was Duran and unleashed one of the greatest lightweights in history. Brown streamlined the heavy-handed aggression and added finesse while Arcel taught him to think in the ring. Neither trainer tampered with the source, resolving never to touch the fire that burned in Duran.

## ROBERTO DURAN-The Fourth Crown

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A commentator later described his style as “back alley baroque” but it was more than that. Brown once asserted that that in all of his decades of training fighters, only Henry Armstrong was close to Duran.

The Hands of Stone’s reign of terror in his natural division began with Buchanan writhing on the canvas at his feet and ended with Esteban De Jesus in a similar posture in 1978. Having unified the lightweight title, Duran and his ancient corner targeted larger prey and greater glory.

Duran’s invasion of the welterweight division commenced with a challenge to former welterweight champion Carlos Palomino, a solid and proven fighter. Duran took nine of ten rounds. One year and three wins later, Duran stepped into the ring against one of the premier welterweights in history –the undefeated Sugar Ray Leonard. A ferocious Duran, on the books as a 9-5 underdog, beat Leonard over 15 grueling rounds. Leonard did not disappoint, erasing forever any notion that his warrior credentials were suspect. When asked after the fight if Leonard was the toughest of his 70 opponents to date, an exhausted Duran hesitated for a moment and then conceded: “si.” It is widely considered his peak performance, a perfect blend of skill and aggression. But it was more than that. It was an historical anomaly. To find a natural lightweight defeating a natural welterweight champion before this, you’d have to go back to 1906 when Joe Gans defeated Mike “Twin” Sullivan –and Sullivan was no Leonard.

Roberto Duran became a living legend.

Then came the fall. Five months later, Duran quit in the rematch against Leonard. “No quiero pelear con el payaso” (“I do not want to fight with this clown”) were the words he uttered to the referee. Howard Cosell bowdlerized it and the phrase “no mas” entered the American lexicon forever. Freddie Brown and Ray Arcel walked away in disbelief. Overnight, the proud name of Roberto Duran became a punch line for comedians on late night television. He hid out in Miami, refusing to go home to Panama where passions ran deep.

Roberto Duran became a pariah.

The real drama was only beginning. Duran began challenging larger fighters at precisely the time that the powers he commanded in his youth were waning. Age is a thief, and Duran’s passion was among the victims. At times he seemed to forget who he was, or he didn’t care. The Leonard rematch was only the first of his humiliations. More would follow: the Kirkland Laing and Pat Lawlor fights among them. His would be the walk-out bout. He’d struggle against fighters who couldn’t carry his spit bucket in his prime. Duran would be reduced to fighting for coins again, often badly conditioned enough to look as if his name were Rotundo Duran.

But then he would rise from his own ashes like a phoenix. The first resurrection brought him a third title, once again from an undefeated bigger, younger, and faster champion in junior middleweight Davey Moore. Five months later, he faced one of history’s greatest middleweight champions -Brockton’s own Marvelous Marvin Hagler. Only a loco lightweight would challenge middleweights, but this one became the only one of Hagler’s title challengers to go 15 rounds. Unlike Leonard who waited until Hagler was slowed down enough and even then insisted on 12 rounds, Duran fought him in the pocket for 15 rounds when Hagler was near- prime. At the last

bell, Duran stood in defiance, scowling with those Manson lamps. It was a glorious defeat.

Duran was offered \$500,000 upfront to fight Thomas “The Hitman” Hearns. Duran, foolishly believing that Hearns was a “chicken” after watching his fight with Leonard, trained like a hedonist at Woodstock. He spent two rounds snarling and missing, and after Hearns connected in the second round with a right hook, Duran said, he “shook all the alcohol, all the women, and to the mat I went!” He was carried out on his shield –it would remain the first and last time in 119 fights that Duran finished a fight horizontal.

Over the next four years, Duran fought only one top contender in Robbie Sims, and he lost by a split decision. When Duran and Barkley converged like David and Goliath on that snowy evening in 1989, Duran was 25 pounds and a decade past his peak. He had never fought anything the size of Barkley except perhaps for that horse he was said to have knocked out. Meanwhile, Barkley had just vanquished Duran’s conqueror in Hearns with two right hands, the second landing as Hearns was in the act of falling. “I’m gonna finish off these legends,” declared the former Bronx gangbanger. Unlike either Duran or the horse, the WBC middleweight champion was in his prime at 28 years old.

### **Kleos Aphthiton**

Iran Barkley began his first title defense with a demonstration of what his strategy would be. Any stogie-chewing, bent-nosed chief second would have grunted his approval: work behind a varying jab, pound the body, feint, give angles, get physical, and set a torrid pace. The older, smaller Duran had no advantages except for a good memory. His only chance for victory was to fight Barkley in the eye of the storm, counterpunch, angle out, and capitalize on any mistakes that were made. Duran didn’t have to wait long for a mistake. Barkley threw a jab with 10 seconds left in the first round and left it hanging out there. Duran slipped it and came over with an overhand right that caught Iran on the side of his head. Barkley’s legs sagged. The crowd went berserk. Commentator Gil Clancy, who was in Ken Buchanan’s corner on the night that Duran stopped him in 1972 hollered, “Barkley is hoit! He-is-hoit, no question about that! We mentioned the fact Duran has not shown punching power as a middleweight... there it was!”

The struggle quickly became epic. Every round, Barkley made a serious investment in body punching, bending at the knees and cranking left hooks that seemed to come out of Duran’s back. It didn’t slow him down. In round four, Barkley pushed Duran into the ropes like a rag doll and Duran bounced off with a right-left-right-left combination that stunned the champion. Later, Duran grazed Barkley with a left hook in close, fall-stepping to his right as he did, then twisting back with a right hand. This was a mirror image of a move that Rocky Marciano did against Ezzard Charles in the eighth round of their second fight. Somewhere, the ghost of Freddie Brown was nodding in approval. Nevertheless, Duran was having difficulty with the size and strength of this champion because although he was standing on a dime and making Iran miss, anytime the larger man connected anywhere, Duran was knocked sideways.

Round seven was a showcase of Duran’s genius. He slipped six punches in a row before stunning Barkley again with a right. Moments later Barkley bent his knees and landed two short left hooks. A dazed Duran started to tilt and fell into a clinch, but resumed fighting a moment

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later as if his chin matched his hands of stone. At the end of the round, Duran stood ring center and stared at the champion as if to say “mas”. Ray Arcel was almost 90 years old when he watched this bout in his Manhattan apartment: “I just sat there...and I mean, I was laughing,” he told Ronald K. Fried in “Corner Men”, “this is my baby.”

In the next round, Barkley went low and came up with another short left hook that snuck in behind Duran’s guard. Barkley never threw a better one. Duran’s eyes rolled around in his head like a Looney Tune, and he stumbled. The black light was beckoning.

In rough fights, including ones like this where the momentum swings like a pendulum, the expectation is that young lions will outlast old lions. Barkley’s corner operated with that expectation. In the eighth round, they thought that their strategic investments against this aging ex-champion –the pressure, the pace –were beginning to pay dividends; and that left hook looked like a cleanup.

They were wrong. The phoenix saw the ashes at his feet, and something primal rose again in him shaking a stone fist at past failures, at age, at giants, at any and all who doubt Duran.

And he came roaring back. In the eleventh, Duran exploded a left-right-left-right combination that left Barkley sprawled on the canvas like an advertisement. In the last round, it was David who was stalking Goliath, and Goliath’s eye (like Leonard’s, Moore’s, and Hagler’s) was decorated with an ugly hematoma. Duran was triumphant. The mythical fourth crown was his. And there wasn’t a scratch on his face.

The storied history of twentieth century boxing strains to find something comparable to Duran’s victory over Leonard, but it has no precedent for this. Aging, natural lightweights don’t beat full blown middleweights. It simply doesn’t happen. And yet it did. In a last act of defiance, Duran gave the finger to history, to the laws of physics, and to Father Time. It has been twenty years since the Panamanian seized his fourth crown. The days of blood and shame and redemption and glory are long gone, and at 57, he is as round as he is happy. But don’t let the twinkle in the eyes of Roberto Duran fool you... he just might be the greatest fighter we’ve experienced in a half century.

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