

## RIP, Alexis Arguello

Written by Ron Borges  
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Whoever took the life of Alexis Arguello in the wee hours Wednesday morning knew him well. They knew they had to take his heart to stop him.

The first man from Nicaragua ever to win a world boxing title was found shot to death at his home in Managua, the Sandanista Party's government Radio Ya quickly claiming it was a suicide even though a gunshot wound to the chest would seem to hint of something more nefarious.

Whatever the truth it was the saddest of endings for the 57-year-old three-time world champion who a year ago was elected mayor of Managua in a disputed election in which the opposing side contended voter fraud in an election he won with a reported 51.3% of the vote, defeating Eduardo Montealegre, who had challenged Nicaraguan president Daniel Ortega.

However that end of the story plays out, Alexis Arguello was no fraud in the boxing ring. At 14 he began fighting for \$10 purses and soon knew he had found his calling. Despite being stopped in his first professional fight in 1968, Arguello was undaunted, a few years later showing up in Los Angeles and begging for a chance to spar with the great Ruben Olivares. Olivares gave the untutored Arguello a black eye and a boxing lesson but by late November 1974 Arguello was back in front of Olivares, this time at the Great Western Forum in Los Angeles, challenging for his featherweight title. By then Arguello had already lost a 15-round decision for the WBA title held by Ernesto Marcel in what would prove to be Marcel's final fight.

Soon after Olivares won it and now Arguello was back, believing his moment had come. It did in the 13th round when he and Olivares simultaneously landed sweeping left hooks to the head. Arguello shuttered and held on, Olivares crumbled to the floor, a place he would visit a second time in that round before Arguello's hand was raised.

He would defend that title six times before moving up to super featherweight and taking the title from Alfredo Escalera and then beating him in a bloody rematch in Rimaldi, Italy. Doctors recommended Arguello stay in Italy but he refused, hopping a train immediately after the fight for Rome to catch a plane back to Nicaragua the next day.

So concerned about the cuts he'd suffered, an Italian doctor accompanied him and performed plastic surgery on Arguello while he was awake riding the train. Neither hard knocks nor sharp needles seem able to hurt him as he moved on to become only the sixth fighter in history at the time to win a world championship in a third weight division when he dethroned lightweight champion Jim Watt in 1981.

Standing a rangy 5-9, Arguello had crushing leverage on his punches and devastating power on the end of them, points he made obvious as he chopped and hammered his way through Bazooka Limon, Bobby Chacon, Ray Mancini, Cornelius Boza-Edwards, Ruben Castillo and anyone else who stood in front of him.

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“Bring me the best and I’ll knock him out,” Arguello once said and so he did time and again before moving up in weight one more time in 1982 to try and become the first man to win world titles in four different divisions.

On Nov. 12, 1982, Arguello entered the Orange Bowl to challenge WBA 140-pound champion Aaron Pryor. It was a fight whose brutally savage beauty boxing would never forget.

For round after round they dug at each other, Arguello repeatedly hurting the bigger man and Pryor returning the pain until it appeared Pryor had given his all. Then, mysteriously, Pryor’s trainer, the infamous Panama Lewis, called for a special bottle which he gave Pryor to drink after a 13th round in which he seemed exhausted.

Suddenly revived the world never knew from what, Pryor came out blazing, stunning Arguello and then lambasting him along the ropes as if he was a man trapped inside a revolving door. As he had proven so many times before however, Arguello’s heart did not pump Kool-Ade. He stood his ground, taking what Sports Illustrated later described as “one of the longest unanswered fusillades in boxing history.”

Twenty-three unanswered times, Pryor struck Arguello before he finally fell, his heart demanding he stand while his legs adjourned on their own. Arguello was never quite the same after that night, losing a rematch to Pryor in a 10th round knockout a year later and admitting later he’d contemplated committing suicide one dark night on his boat with his young son sitting across from him begging him not to pull the trigger.

He didn’t but by then the Sandanista rebels had ejected his mother and sister from one of his homes in Managua and confiscated all his property. His homes, his Mercedes, his BMW, his gym, his chicken business, his boat and his bank accounts, all gone and even the very mention of his name by the Nicaraguan media was now banned by the government. Nicaragua’s greatest fighter was now an exile without a title or most of the things he had bled for.

Angry about his loss and worried about the fate of his country, Arguello joined the Contras, the forces supported by a then unknown Marine officer named Oliver North, fighting in the jungle for a time after training in Costa Rica at a Contra training base supported by United States funds. But he grew disillusioned with them and with the hypocrisy of life and drifted into a dark world of cocaine and alcohol abuse, womanizing and a profligate lifestyle.

Predictably, the rest of his money soon disappeared, the IRS claiming he owed nearly \$600,000 in back taxes. That cost him his home in Miami, his lifestyle and nearly his family. But eventually Arguello fought back one last time, returning to boxing in 1994-95 for a brief stay before eventually stabilizing his life and returning to Managua as a member of the Sandanista Party.

He was elected vice-mayor of his hometown in 2004 and then became mayor last year, the last crowning achievement of a life filled with glory, pain and tragedy.

Yet despite the tragic ending, anyone who ever saw Arguello fight will always think of those

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moments first. He was quite possibly the greatest super featherweight in history and RING magazine once rated him the sixth best lightweight of all-time.

His long-time promoter, Bob Arum, recalled Arguello fondly saying he was “one of the world’s greatest fighters and champions but more importantly he was a real man.”

Thinking back on that night Arguello and Pryor beat on each other at the Orange Bowl, Arum added, “It was a brutal, brutal fight. That was something I will never, ever forget as long as I live.”

For all his skills as a boxer, and they were many, Arguello’s heart was his calling card. Not simply the measure of it he showed the night he and Aaron Pryor battled each other for 14 brutal rounds at the Orange Bowl before the larger Pryor finally stopped Arguello’s quest for a fourth world title by pinning him along the ropes and tearing at him until the referee had no choice but to intervene because Arguello refused to do the sensible thing and fall to the floor. The larger measure of his heart was revealed not in the boxing ring but in his love for the people of Nicaragua, a war-torn country for many of his best years as a fighter and a place to which he returned in triumph late in life only to die in tragedy.