

Lenny Mancini sat in a wheelchair at ringside on the night of October 3, 1981. In the archives of the old man's head were images of a fight that never happened –his title shot against Sammy “The Clutch” Angott. Negotiations were in progress when Mancini was drafted into the army a month after the attack on Pearl Harbor. He requested a six week furlough and offered to donate the entire purse to the Army Relief Fund. Uncle Sam turned him down. Lenny was hit by mortar shrapnel in France and got a purple heart, but he never got that title shot. It left a hole in his life.

When he was forty-one years old his third child was born, a son.

Ray Mancini had fifty fights as an amateur, developed a swarming style reminiscent of his father's and was bequeathed his father's nickname: “Boom Boom”. With a promise that he would complete the Mancini boxing legacy and become lightweight champion for both of them, Boom Boom went big time.

This was supposed to be the night of dreams. The twenty-year-old challenger entered the ring with a record of 20-0 with 15 knockouts and the build of a brawler. Like Rocky Marciano and a host of others from boxing's golden era, Mancini fought with the kind of ethnic, neighborhood, and familial pride perfected by Italian-Americans. There's power in that hot blood. Like another left-hooker in Smokin' Joe Frazier, he was a converted southpaw, so his lead hand was souped-up. Mancini's assets didn't stop there: his movie-star good looks suggested neither the heart of a lion, which he had, nor did they suggest that he was a student of boxing history, which he was. The kid was a bello bull with brains.

The lightweight champion standing across the ring had the shape of a whip. At almost 5'10 he was known as the “Explosive Thin Man” and with a record of 72-5 with 57 knockouts he was a veteran of many wars. In 1974, he knocked out his idol “Rockabye” Ruben Olivares and became a featherweight champion. He went to Ruben's dressing room after the bout and got down on his knees with a promise of his own: “I will defend this title with every drop of my blood.” In 1981, he took the lightweight title from Scotland's Jim Watt. After the fight he told the man he had just defeated that he will defend the title for him with his blood and his heart. And he did. He insisted on fighting the finest challengers and had twenty-two title fights in four divisions by the time he was finished. The thin man was also a technician extraordinaire. Snapshots of the hook off the jab that finished Alfredo Escalera in the thirteenth round of their rematch can be used in an instruction manual. It landed after a grueling trench war that left both victor and vanquished bloodied. His right hand was famous. When that crossed onto a cheek, it sounded like an M-80 on the Fourth of July. It would set off car alarms outside the casino.

His name was Alexis Arguello.

The fight against Ray Mancini was Arguello's first defense of his third title. It was a classic. Lenny watched as his son mounted a relentless, two-fisted attack –the attack of two men. Incredibly, Ray was ahead after the twelfth round on two of the three judges' scorecards. But

Arguello was a long-term investor. Enduring volatility in the market of the ring was nothing to him; he could stomach a loss in the value of his investment over several rounds. His mind was on the end, and he moved toward that end as inexorably as the stock market countdown. In the twelfth round, Alexis landed his money punch and Ray's point advantage at once began to depreciate as he crashed. Ray was tough; he got up, though the long-term investor is patient. In the fourteenth, the champion delivered a left hook, an uppercut to the middle, two more left hooks, and then a right cross. Ray went down again and the fight was stopped.

The elder Mancini's eyes fell to the floor for a moment and then found Ray, who was being assisted back to his corner by the referee. Alexis' celebration was restrained. He saw the man in the wheelchair, leaned over the ropes and called out "I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

Minutes later, the champion was being interviewed in the ring. Ray walked over and Alexis's eyes lit up when he saw him. He clasped Ray's hand and embraced him. "Good, good, good, good," Alexis strained to express himself in English but communicated his affection as flawlessly as any Italian. He pinched his cheek. He gave him perspective: "I love your father. That's the most beautiful thing you have..." He offered encouragement: "I promise if I can do something for you, let me know, please, okay?" The Nicaraguan said these things with the tip of his thumb touching his first fingers, like an honorary paisan. Alexis knew about Lenny's dream, he knew about Sammy Angott, he knew about the draft. On the way out of the ring, he took Lenny's hand and embraced Ellen Mancini, "I'm sorry, it's my job," he said, "I love your son. He will be a world champion."

At the press conference, Alexis quietly spoke to Ray about how he himself lost his first title shot when he was barely past twenty years old, how he cried, and how he won it in his second try.

Ray too would win a title in his second try only seven months later when he stopped champion Arturo Frias in one round. His parents celebrated in the ring with him. Alexis Arguello was there. "I told you! I told you!" he said to the Mancinis.

Four months later, Alexis fought southpaw James "Bubba" Busceme in Busceme's hometown of Beaumont, Texas. Clive Gammon of Sports Illustrated and other reporters noticed that after Alexis stopped him in the sixth round, he took Busceme's head in his gloves. "I told him that he was a man," Alexis revealed in the dressing room, "I wanted him to feel strong again, and give him his pride back. I told him he fought like a man, just like Mancini." The day after the bout, Bubba Busceme was in a local restaurant celebrating his 30th birthday. Alexis brought him a cake. Still at a loss last week, Busceme, now 57, asked the Beaumont Enterprise "How many guys would do that? How many world champion boxers would bring the person they just fought a cake?"

Roberto Elizondo, who was also knocked out by Arguello, told the San Antonio Express-News that Alexis "was always very gracious to me and my family. He was one of the best."

When Jim Watt was introduced at the weigh-in at Wembley before their bout, Alexis was in the background, clapping for him. "Be nice with everyone," Arguello told the Ocala Star Banner in 1982, "That's the most important thing I've learned in 14 years of fighting."

Alexis Arguello

Written by Springs Toledo
Tuesday, 07 July 2009 19:00

Aaron Pryor, the former junior welterweight champion who stopped Alexis from becoming the first quadruple champion, speaks now of how Alexis taught him to carry himself with dignity in public; how they were friends from the moment they shed tears together after their rematch –Alexis in his disappointment and Aaron for Alexis. “I’m finished,” Alexis said as he stood in defeat, head bowed.

The tears of Aaron Pryor mingle with millions now.

Alexis Arguello’s body was found in his home with a hole in the heart on July 1. News reports said there were no signs of violence in the room and that traces of gunpowder were found on his hands.

Officials in Nicaragua confirmed that he shot himself in the chest with a 9mm pistol.

Gary Smith’s Sports Illustrated profile of Arguello in 1985 opened with the story of his father’s attempt to commit suicide by jumping headlong into a well. He survived the fall but when they lowered a chair tied to a rope, he took the rope off the chair and looped it around his neck, then yelled “¡hale!” [pull!]. Despite his efforts, he survived. Alexis was six years old. By the time he was fourteen, Alexis found boxing.

The Sweet Science anchored him. It is a common irony among fighters that sees the ring as a safe harbor. For him, it was a place of clarity, a place where his compassion followed his competitiveness on a valiant platform. “I am a reincarnated gladiator”, he told Smith. Gladiators faced ferocity in their virtual existence but were exempt from the distressing uncertainty of civilian life. They lived to fight and fought to live and there were no devils because there were no details. Their economy could be placed on a single coin –on one side was life/victory, on the other death/defeat. Combat is simple, the objective clear. It is outside the coliseum or the ring where things get complicated. Ask Mike Tyson. “I thank God that I found something to give me hope,” Alexis attested in an interview from the mid-1990s, “for giving me the chance to be somebody.”

After a fifteen year career capped off by legendary wars with Pryor, Arguello retired. It was like stepping out of Narnia and into a gray world where nothing mattered and no one seemed to care. Depression set in. Addictions spiraled out of control. The specter of suicide inherited, perhaps, from his father began to whisper in his ear; pointing to the corruption of his beloved country, the darkness in the world, the emptiness of his life. The end was almost in 1984. Alexis sat in his yacht off the coast of Florida with a gun to his head –his finger on the trigger. Something dark whispered “¡ale.” “Pull.” After several tense minutes and the pleadings of his twelve-year-old son, he relented.

Alexis was staring into the abyss and the abyss was staring into him. He returned to the ring briefly in 1985 and again in 1994. He had to. It was safe there.

God knows he had issues. You don’t watch your father try to kill himself twice, grow up in poverty in a third world country, endure war, exile, financial ruin, and the death of a younger brother shot and lit on fire as he lay on a pile of tires –and not have issues. For Alexis, a living

rebuke to the calloused brutes of pugilism's stereotype, these issues were magnified. His empathy was matched by his sensitivity. Most of us natural cynics hear about misery, corruption, or exploitation and shrug our shoulders –this man would grow indignant or sink into a morass of despair.

He was interviewed by Peter Heller in 1986 and spoke openly about how he is “lonely in the world”, about how he did not want to keep living because of the “wrong things” that seemed to be everywhere. Disturbingly, he wished that he could have “the guts” to commit suicide, “I wish I could. I wish I could, Jesus Christ, leave this place.” Most retired boxers will tell you that they have to find a way to make a living. To Alexis, still waters ran deeper –he wanted to find a way “to live again.”

Perhaps those dark whispers finally managed to drown out everything else –his faith, his family and fans, the rising star of his political career, his courage to go on. He once said that he was “disenchanted”, that the “beauty of the world had disappeared.” There can be little doubt that he was engaged in an internal back-and-forth battle with despair that made his ring wars seem like Sunday strolls. Fifteen rounds? This looked like an existential crisis that lasted over two decades. Dr. Viktor E. Frankl, the late author of *Man's Search for Meaning* saw a powerful connection between feelings of meaninglessness and the neurotic triad of depression, aggression, and addiction. Suicide, he said, is depression's sequel.

Ray Mancini doesn't believe that Alexis Arguello committed suicide. “He was the face of Nicaragua,” he told me recently, “he relished that. He loved that.” However, there were allegations that his election last November as mayor of Managua was marred by ballot rigging and intimidation and he himself was under investigation for misappropriating public funds. Perhaps he felt himself disgraced, defiled even, and forgetting that he was a Roman Catholic, did what a Roman patrician might have done under the same circumstances –fell on his sword.

I don't know. I only wish that he had found a way to beat the count ...because those he left behind didn't hear a bell.

Thankfully, those he left behind still have his immortal image on fight films. We'll marvel at this legend all over again and affirm how his spirit surpassed even the level of his skill and the splendor of his achievements. Despite his faults and failings, despite whatever happened at the end of his life, Alexis was noble. It should never be forgotten that during the last great era of boxing, he taught fatherless boys from poor neighborhoods all over the world about the divinity of kindness and the meaning of chivalry. I was among them. God knows we needed his example.

I hope he heard the applause of multitudes as he slipped between golden ropes to a place that's better than this, to a place where every tear is wiped away and broken hearts are healed. May he shine like the sun.

Adios ...y gracias, Alexis Arguello.

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