

The World Was A Better Place With Him In It

Written by Ron Borges
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What made him special is what left him dead. Vernon Forrest was a fighter right to the end.

That is why the 38-year-old, two-time world champion pulled a gun and chased the two men who tried to rob him and apparently carjack his Jaguar as he tried to fill a tire with air Saturday night at an Atlanta gas station. Eventually he gave up after a brief gun battle and turned to walk back, so witnesses claim, when a hail of automatic weapon fire from behind drove him to the street with seven or eight bullets in his back and all the life pouring out of him onto the ground.

Had the murderous thieves simply asked Forrest for his money, giving him some sort of sob story of bad luck or broken dreams, he very likely would have given them every dime he had. He would give you the shirt off his back and his socks too, if you needed them. That's who he was. Fighting was just what he did.

But try to snatch something from him, especially something he'd worked so hard for, and you were going to meet some resistance. That's what happened in Barcelona in 1992 when Forrest was a member of the Olympic boxing team. Somebody stole his hat off his head one day and he chased the guy a quarter mile to get it back. When challenged, a fighter fights. So be it.

Yet the truth is what really made Vernon Forrest special was that he was much more than a fighter. That was obvious to anyone who knew him or knew about him, which is what made his senseless murder all the more tragic. He was a boxer with a gentlemen's heart, a person who understood fighters existed outside the ring as well as in it and he fought for them as hard as he fought for world titles.

He never should have ended up face down in the street with a gun in his hand, which was where he was lying when he breathed his last. He should never have ended up with his back riddled with bullets, his 11-year-old godson standing stunned, with a candy bar in his hand and more than 20 casings from an automatic weapon on the ground, as he came out of a gas station convenience store after going off to buy some sweets.

As they fled the murderers had no idea they'd left for dead the father of a 12-year-old boy, a loyal son and brother, a world champion boxer and, most of all, a man who before he'd ever had any real success as a prize fighter supported with his time and his money a group home for young adults with mental disabilities in Atlanta called Destiny's Child that helped them earn respect by taking care of themselves with a little help from their friends.

He used to introduce them as "my guys." They called him "Uncle Vernon." None of them ever had a more loyal friend than Vernon Forrest and he may not have had any more loyal friends than them. And now he's gone for no good reason but that some people grow up poor and turn sour while others have the same experience and, like Forrest, become as sweet as rose petals.

You do not make the Olympic team, win two world titles and become the first man to beat

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Shane Mosley without being a good fighter, but Vernon Forrest was much more than what he did. He was someone who cared about people who are asked to walk a difficult road, perhaps because he'd walked one himself, all the way from poverty growing up on the side of Augusta, Ga. that doesn't know anything about the Masters but the caddy shack to being a world champion in a Jaguar. Long walk, to be sure.

"The world was a better place with him in it," said a grief-stricken Al Haymon, Forrest's fistic advisor and friend, choosing not to mention that the opposite was also true. It's a lesser place today without him.

Although he was a good fighter he was not really a terribly popular one. Worse, he was also unlucky, being stopped by wild man Ricardo Mayorga in his first fight after beating Mosley a second time, being named RING Magazine's 2003 Fighter of the Year and signing a lucrative deal with HBO .

After that luck seemed to elude him. He lost a second time to Mayorga by majority decision and then was out of boxing for two years with shoulder and elbow problems that required three surgeries. Eventually he would come back and win the junior middleweight title, lose it to a fighter 10 years his junior, and then win it back from him but by then he was 37 and his best days were behind him.

Still, after another year-long layoff due to nagging injuries, he intended to return to boxing this fall for one last run at a world title, possibly as a middleweight. He was battling age and the high cost of fighting since he was a kid but he believed he had one last great night in him. Maybe he did but that was snatched away while he was putting air in his tires.

There are people you meet in life for whom a tragic end really comes as no surprise. Vernon Forrest was not that kind of guy. His violence was always well contained between four strands of rope but sometimes evil enters through the back alley, creeping up in the dark and taking you out before you have time to think.

You wonder why this happens but you know there's no answer so all you're left with is a tear and your memories. The ones of Vernon Forrest are, like him, all good.