In what has seemed like an endless rain of tears, boxing took another crushing blow yesterday when Brazilian authorities announced they now believe former two-time world champion Arturo Gatti committed suicide earlier this month at a seaside resort, hanging himself with his wife's purse strap.

Gatti's wife, 23-year-old Amanda Rodrigues, had been held without bail since his death and was listed as the only suspect in what police originally claimed was a murder. Rodrigues insisted she was innocent and a preliminary autopsy report concluded Gatti had likely taken his own life because he was found "suspended and hanged.''

Rodrigues' attorney insisted she would never have been able to lift Gatti, who reportedly was in a drunken stupor when the two of them returned to their room after arguing at a bar inside the resort. Police refused to comment but seemed to begin to waver from their original murder claim soon after the autopsy findings became public.

However, Gatti's family and friends in boxing continue to question the finding, insisting at his funeral last week that he would never have taken his own life. While they expressed their doubts about the finding, yesterday lead investigator Paulo Albees announced Rodrigues was about to be released from a jail near Rio de Janiero. Asked if Gatti had been found to have taken his own life he said only that the autopsy and investigation that followed it, "excludes the possibility of murder.''

There had been some whispers that Gatti might have engaged in the same kind of odd sex ritual, called auto-erotic asphyxiation, that has been suggested as the reason behind the recent death of television actor David Carradine but the police have never hinted at what they now believe the circumstances of Gatti's death were.

According to Gatti's mother, he and Rodrigues had a stormy relationship that was near a dissolution. She has said publicly they "fought all the time'' and that his wife had gotten a restraining order in April in Montreal. Yet the two had come to Brazil with their one-year-old son on a month-long holiday vacation that at some point quickly went bad.

Gatti was best known for his trilogy of fights against Micky Ward and wild brawls with Gabriel Ruelas, Ivan Robinson and Angel Manfredy. Fights against both Ward and Robinson were selected as Fight of the Year by RING magazine and the Boxing Writers Association of America and Gatti became an HBO staple and one of the biggest draws in boxing.

Because of his all action style, he was all but guaranteed to sellout Boardwalk Hall in Atlantic City, the New Jersey arena that over time became his personal home field.

At various times Gatti held the IBF super featherweight title and the WBC light welterweight championship. He fought professionally for 16 years, finishing with a 40-9 record, and was living

in comfortable retirement in a penthouse in Montreal, where he owned rental property, and was reportedly financially secure.

For a man who never gave up in the ring, even when badly beaten and with eyes swollen nearly shut, the thought that he grew so despondent he simply gave up his life seems almost impossible to fathom. It is of course true that anyone can become depressed and it is well known that the transition from world-class athlete and performer to just another civilian can be daunting.

Yet if you ever saw Gatti pick himself up off the floor as he did against Ruelas, Ward and Wilson Rodriguez and battle like a Spartan to win, it is baffling that he would come to such an end. What is sadder is that a man who won the hearts of so many boxing fans with the size of his own heart in the ring would lose heart so completely because of problems in his personal life.

In the end, we may never know the exact circumstances of what finally laid Arturo Gatti down for the last time. So what it might be best to remember about him is all the nights he lifted himself, and everyone who watched him fight, so high.