

DEPOSING MARAVILLA

Written by Springs Toledo
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Sergio "Maravilla" Martinez is the middleweight king. Five other so-called champions sit on waiting room chairs in the offices of alphabet organizations—he sits on a throne. By defeating Kelly Pavlik, who defeated Jermain Taylor, who defeated Bernard Hopkins, who became king the moment he defeated the second-ranked Felix Trinidad, Martinez became the rightful successor to the alpha idol of his country, Carlos Monzon.

Martinez is a rare phenomenon, a fugitive from other sports. A natural athlete blessed with extraordinary coordination, speed, and stamina, he spent his teenage years cycling and playing soccer. Boxing was "like a religion" in the Martinez living room though its gods were small ones—images flashing to and fro on a television screen, cheered on by his father and uncles. Sergio preferred being outdoors. He was 20 when he began boxing and even then it was a means to another end: He wanted to get into shape for the soccer season. But there was something seductive in the staccato rhythm of speed bags and by the time he was offered a contract to

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play for Argentina's Club Atletico's Los Andes, a first division team, he turned it down. He had found a new love.

Whether his new love would love him was another question.

The ring is a jealous place and the gods that guard it are larger than they appear on television. Athletes from easier sports (and they're all easier) are discouraged from it; sometimes they're bluntly reminded of how limited their physicality and muscle memory is when it comes to fist-fighting for 30 minutes. At a news conference announcing a possible bout between Muhammad Ali and seven-foot Los Angeles Laker Wilt Chamberlain in 1971, Ali walked in and began yelling "TIMBERRR!" In a moment of seriousness, Ali looked at Chamberlain with dead eyes and said "if he was smart, he wouldn't fight me." Chamberlain was smart and didn't fight him.

Martinez was unfamiliar with even using his hands when he ventured into the tiniest of fields where there is no escape, no time-outs, and no teammates to pass the ball to. As a cyclist he could cruise past trees on the road to catch a second wind but how do you adjust to a tree that actively tries to give you a concussion? Boxing burns more energy than cycling, soccer, and nearly every other human activity imaginable and yet it isn't conditioning that brings victory so much as advanced technique. And those classes begin during childhood.

Boxing grins a bloody grin at late entries who skipped classes and think that athleticism is enough.

Rocky Marciano grinned a bloody grin right back. A natural athlete blessed with extraordinary strength, power, and endurance, he spent his teenage years playing baseball for the local American Legion team and as a catcher did enough squats behind home plate to develop thighs bigger than Beyoncé's. By the time he had his first amateur fight of record he was 22 and he embarrassed every Italian in Brockton when he brought up a knee against a black opponent at an Irish social club. In the spring of 1948, he still had balls on his mind. He hitchhiked to North Carolina to try out for the Chicago Cubs farm team. They turned him down. Trainer Charley Goldman didn't lay eyes on him until he was 24. "I got a guy who's short, stoop shouldered, balding, with two left feet," Goldman told Angelo Dundee, "and God, how he can punch!" But there was a problem. Marciano was getting beamed too much and his orthodox aspirations were to blame—he was trying to be a stand-up boxer. So Goldman taught him to be true to himself. He taught him to crouch. Heavyweight history swerved at that moment.

Martinez grins a grin that is seldom bloody. He moves around the ring on wheels with soccer stamina. "My defense," he says, "is not in my arms, it's in my legs." Everything is in his legs. When boxing replaced soccer in his life, he spent about as much time reconfiguring his athleticism as Goldman did convincing Marciano to stop trying.

The middleweight king, a southpaw, has defended his throne four times and no challenger has finished the fight. Nine times they prostrated themselves before him; two did for ten seconds plus. What separates Martinez from his rivals in the ring isn't athleticism; it is the same thing that separates rivals on battlefields and chess boards. His victories are the premeditated results of closed-door planning that see him concentrating on images flashing to and fro on a television screen. He isn't cheering.

"Good luck!" he routinely tells his opponents before the first bell.

It will take more than luck to end his reign.

HALF THE BATTLE

Martinez is an atypical counterpuncher with a mission statement: *Provoke blows to provoke mistakes*. "When we want to throw," he says, "that's when we are most exposed." When he leads with a single punch it is no different from when he flinches, feints with his feet, or drops his hands and leans forward. He'll slide in, jerk a shoulder and slide out to draw you out so he can counter (what you think is) your counter attack.

This bluff and blast strategy is general. He insists that "it can be done with all."

He was born three years after the death of the once-famous trainer Jack Hurley and his timing only serves to confuse the truth once again. The truth is Martinez is a Hurley fighter. "You can tell a Hurley fighter from the others as easily as an art expert can tell a Rembrandt from

something by Harry Grunt," wrote W.C. Heinz in 1967, they "come out with that shuffle step, the hands low and in punching position, and they just invite you to lead so that can move off it, step in and knock your block off with the counter."

"The average counterpuncher is a guy who don't do a damn thing," Hurley said. "If you throw a punch he ducks it and he hits you quick." Hurley raised the counterpunching game from checkers to chess. Martinez adds his own nuances. Half the time he knows what shot will be thrown because it is precisely what he invited in the first place. The end result is that the shot misses by an inch and he lands a *simultaneous* counter, reducing his reaction-time to nearly zero. What commentators are hailing as incredible speed has as much to do with planning and timing. What looks like natural power is really a product of a collision between his fist and the incoming face —what Hurley identified as "the difference between a push punch and a shock punch."

And he has a secret that no one has figured out yet: He kills jabs. The jab is the evolutionary leap that separates boxers from flailing brutes and enables the former to routinely dominate the latter —literally single-handedly. Martinez invites the jab and then sneaks over a looping right with it. He uses two counters besides. In the second round against Matthew Macklin, he timed Macklin's jab, slipped outside of it, and countered with a straight left that sent him flying into the ropes. Later, Martinez slid to his left off of Macklin's jab and countered it with a left uppercut. He does this so well no one's sure he's doing it, least of all the one it's being done to. He does it again and again, against everybody, and yet they keep right on jabbing, faithfully, to the end.

Martinez's offense is not bait for his counters every time. He's liable to attack the moment he senses an opponent getting set to punch or when the opponent is not expecting it. This is not only disruptive it is disheartening. Like Manny Pacquiao, Joe Calzaghe, and other discordant rhythm fighters, Martinez understands the human tendency to follow predictable patterns (move, set, punch 1, 2 —repeat.) and he anticipates and exploits that predictability. His is a jazz style with riffs as disorienting to his opponents as Miles Davis was to Percy Faith.

The Maravilla strategy becomes clear. His is the comprehensive counterattack of an athlete. He doesn't simply "duck and counter," he's constantly provoking offense to his advantage and using mobility and discordant rhythm to confuse.

It's all quite complicated, but the Sweet Science has answers.

COUNTERING THE COUNTERPUNCHER

Cautious trainers spot counters and tell their fighters to stop throwing the shot that is getting countered. These types, said Hurley, "breed fear" and produce boxers that stink joints out. Nobody gets hit, nobody gets hurt, and nobody in the audience cares to see what Hurley called "two old women fighting over the back fence." Hard-line trainers recommend crowding a counterpuncher. The idea is to swamp him. Paul Williams tried this on Martinez. It didn't work. Martinez is more eager to fight than his style suggests, he just isn't eager to lead. In the eighth round against Kermit Cintron, the fifth round against Pavlik, and the second round against Macklin, he hollered at them to throw punches. He thrives on aggression —careless aggression.

Defeating him demands calculated aggression —calculated aggression and double bluffs.

Martinez kills jabs? He kills unthinking jabs. Instead of being safe and throwing less of them, throw more. He'll respond as he usually does and you can get the jump on him. How? Two ways:

1. Telegraph a jab and then, shifting your weight onto the back foot, spring in with a straight right, dipping left as you do. His counter should miss and you can catch him leaning in (see *figure 1*)



Figure 1

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2. Throw the jab half-way, hooking off it as you pivot off to your left (*see figure 2*). Martinez often slips outside jabs to his right as he counters with a straight left. Pivoting will enable you to slip his left counter; hooking as you do will enable you to catch his head sliding into your hook. Punctuate it with a right hand because if your hook lands, it will force his head into the range of your right.

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Figure 2



Figure 3