

Camacho Had Own Mix of Style and Substance

Written by Bernard Fernandez
Tuesday, 27 November 2012 11:06



That old camera commercial featuring charismatic tennis player Andre Agassi advised viewers that “style is everything.”

Boxing fans knew better than to blindly buy into that sales pitch. Style counts for something, of course, but it’s hardly everything. Even substance doesn’t always count for everything; there are more than a few very good fighters who haven’t made the breakthrough to superstardom because they lacked a certain panache, an ability to make the public care about them in large part because of the power of their personalities.

Hector “Macho” Camacho, who was 50 when he was removed from life support on Saturday in Puerto Rico, four days after being shot in the face by an as-of-yet-unknown assailant, managed to bridge the gap between style and substance maybe as well as any boxer in recent memory. He posted a 79-6-3 record, with 38 victories inside the distance, in a 30-year professional

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career that spanned from 1980 to 2010, winning world championships in three weight classes. That is more than enough certification of the substantial talents he brought into the ring.

Style? He had oodles of that, too, inciting friend and foe alike with outrageous comments, even more outrageous costumes and shouts of "It's Macho Time!" whenever he made one of his flamboyant entrances. There were many fans of the Macho Man who liked his package of bluster and brilliance, and even more who reviled him for it. Ultimately, though, it didn't matter much to him if you watched him to cheer or to boo, so long as you ponied up for a ticket.

"Over the years, people have said I'm crazy," Camacho once said. "And I am. Crazy like a fox. My act is a smart act. It sold lots of tickets."

If it was an act, it was a convincing one. Camacho didn't turn off the constantly flowing faucet of controversy whenever his rumbles inside the ropes had concluded; he generated headlines outside the arena as well with frequent brushes with the law, crafting a reputation as a bad boy and hell-raiser that called to mind the many similar indiscretions of, say, Mike Tyson. If there was a difference, it was that Tyson hit a lot harder and his demeanor generally was cloaked in anger and surliness instead of an impish wink.

Perhaps it is that wink, a sense that he was pulling a prank on everybody that we either laughed at or we didn't, but paid attention to nonetheless, that separated Camacho from a host of imitators who lacked his distinctive ability to entertain or enrage. It is no small feat of legerdemain, given the fact that Camacho's boxing style, upon closer examination and through the prism of historical reflection, shouldn't have drawn so many in to begin with.

A defensively brilliant tactician who engaged only at his discretion, he was a master of clutch-and-grab tactics, infuriating and frustrating opponents with quick, not particularly damaging flurries followed by arm-entangling bear hugs, a process to be repeated over and over.

Prior to his atypical June 13, 1986, slugfest with iron-fisted Edwin Rosario in Madison Square Garden, Camacho frequently chose to stand and trade when the more prudent course of action for someone with his lack of a putaway punch might have been to continually stick and move. And although Camacho – who had gone into the Rosario fight with a 28-0 record and 15 KOs --

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escaped that trial by fire with a split-decision victory, retaining the WBC lightweight title he won 10 months earlier on a unanimous nod over Jose Luis Ramirez, he came away convinced that his long-term health and longevity hinged on making the sort of strategic adjustments that would significantly reduce the punishment he might otherwise incur.

Did it work? No question. Think about it: In 88 pro bouts spread over three decades, including matchups with some of the biggest bangers in the business, Camacho never lost inside the distance and only was knocked down twice, in his 32nd pro bout, against Reyes Cruz, a 10-round unanimous-decision victory on June 25, 1988, and in his 68

th

one, a 12-round, unanimous-decision loss to Oscar De La Hoya on Sept. 13, 1997. That is not to say there weren't occasions when Camacho was tagged hard; he was, particularly in the latter stages of his career when he was less mobile and his flawless defense developed cracks. But from his pro debut, a four-round points nod over David Brown on Sept. 12, 1980, to his final ring appearance, a unanimous-decision loss to Saul Duran on May 14, 2010, Camacho was dropped just those two times, in 673 rounds. Then-heavyweight champion Floyd Patterson was knocked down

seven

times in one round in the first of his three bouts with Ingemar Johansson.

Prior to Camacho's March 6, 1989, bout with Ray "Boom Boom" Mancini for the vacant WBO junior welterweight title, I summed up the differences between the fancy-stepping Puerto Rican icon Man and the relatively plodding Mancini, who was ending a –year retirement from the ring, thusly in my story for the *Philadelphia Daily News*.

Camacho is a sniper, a guerrilla, a master of the sneak attack. If they allowed bushes and trees to be placed strategically around the ring, the misnomered "Macho Man" would make full use of them. He would spring from cover for a volley of low-caliber punches before slipping beyond the range of the other guy's big guns. Fighting Camacho is like bleeding to death from a thousand small nicks. Mancini, on the other hand, is boxing's answer to Pickett's Charge. He is a proponent of the frontal assault. Fighting Mancini is like running through a minefield in snowshoes.

On that night in the Lawlor Events Center on the University of Nevada-Reno campus, Camacho again sent Mancini into mothballs by winning a split decision that the crowd didn't like but was entirely justified.

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So what was it about Camacho that enthralled us for so long?

He had a great back story, which is always helps to pique public interest. Born in Bayamon, Puerto Rico, as a toddler he moved with his family to New York's high-crime Spanish Harlem, interspersing displays of undeniable boxing talent (three consecutive New York Golden Gloves championships as a teenager) with a flagrant disregard for legalities. In 1977, the year he won the first of those GG titles, he served 3½ months for grand theft auto.

"Getting in trouble the way I did was my way of having fun," Camacho said of his youthful indiscretions. "If I stole a car, in my mind I was borrowing it. It was just part of a game."

It comes as no surprise then that Camacho could be irritating to his own promoters, managers and trainers, not to mention opponents. He almost always had difficulty making contract weight, having to lose as many as five pounds on the day of the official weigh-in, which back then often was held on the morning of the event. In addition to food, he also had a taste for controlled substances (he pleaded no-contest to possession of cocaine in 1988, the first of several such incidents) and night life. It wasn't unusual to spot him on the dance floor in hotel discos at 2 a.m. a few days before he was to fight.

Patrick Flannery, for 31 years an employee of the New York City public school system, first met Camacho when he was a 15-year-old problem student whose class attendance was spotty and his adherence to established rules even more so. Flannery became an adviser of sorts to the wild child, making for a long-term relationship that became something of a running comedy routine.

Flannery told reporters of the time that Camacho, who preferred to sleep in the nude, awoke, ready to boogie, late one night in his hotel suite. But Flannery had hidden all of Camacho's clothes, in the hope that the missing threads would somehow persuade the fighter to remain in bed and get his rest.

"He went out stark naked in the hall," Flannery said. "He went all the way to the elevator before I caught up with him and threw him a pair of pants."

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Camacho's choice of apparel was even more curious during ring entrances that were pure spectacle. At various times he stepped inside the ropes clad as an Indian chief, Roman centurion, matador, gladiator and designer-loincloth Tarzan. If you liked the getups, you might cheer. If you were there to cheer for the other guy, you probably booed.

"When I do good, they boo me," Camacho said of his frequent tweaking of the cash customers. "When I do great, they boo me. If they don't boo me, I get mad. When I make love to my girlfriend, she boos me."

And Camacho's method of making love apparently was as unconventional as everything else he did. There was the time he was driving down a stretch of rural road in Florida when he was stopped and arrested for "doing the wild thing," which is to say making whoopee with a female who was straddling him. Hey, when the mood strikes you ...

"My personality has been misunderstood," Camacho said of his penchant for occasionally making the wrong kinds of headlines. "When people meet me face to face, they like me. And that surprises some of them, because they keep hearing all this crap about what a bad guy I'm supposed to be."

More than a few of those who didn't quite get Camacho were his neighbors in Clewiston, Fla., where he built a house in the country with the perhaps unrealistic idea of gaining a bit of privacy.

"I just wanted to be alone for a while, you know?" he said of his break from the New York/San Juan rat race. "I raised chickens, geese, cows, horses."

Presumably, the good citizens of Clewiston never had seen a farmer the likes of Camacho, whose return to nature did not entail significant behavioral or sartorial modification. It was a case of culture shock on both sides.

"People didn't want me to be myself and I refuse to do that for anybody," Camacho said of his failed attempts to gain acceptance with the locals on his own terms. "It was mostly a racial thing."

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The rednecks down there didn't understand me, which is all right because this is America. You can feel about something or somebody any way you want to feel."

Camacho's life in retirement was less than tranquil in other ways. On Feb. 12, 2011, he was shot three times near a housing project in San Juan. Shortly after that he faced a felony child-abuse count for allegedly picking up a teenage son by the neck, slamming him to the ground and stomping on him at his ex-wife's home in Orange County, Fla. That would be the ex-wife who twice filed domestic abuse complaints about him before their divorce was finalized. And don't forget that the shooting that ultimately cost Camacho his life also ended in the death of the other person sitting in the car, Adrian Mojica Moreno, whom police said had nine bags of cocaine in his possession at the time. Those circumstances figure to at least raise suspicions that Camacho again had crossed over into the dark side of his notoriously split personality.

But one thing about Camacho has remained beyond dispute, now and forever.

"Some people come to cheer for The Macho an, some come to boo him," he said. "But in the end, they all go away saying, `Boy, can that guy fight.'"

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Buzz Murdock says:

Best article I've read on Camacho's untimely death...you touched all the bases.....

Radam G says:

Now all the haters know. Nobody could make the Macho warrior quit. Haha! Holla!

Radam G says:

And I will be MACHO TIME FUDGING with you haters for a while. SMILE! Holla!