

Jack Cruz Control

Written by Robert Mladinich
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Jack R. Cruz, who managed former light heavyweight contender Alvaro “Yaqui” Lopez for his entire career – and was also his father-in-law – passed away on December 9th at his home in Stockton, California. He was 82-years-old and had been battling congestive heart failure and a host of related ailments for several years.

At his side when he died were several family members, including Lopez, who Cruz once told me was “the best son-in-law anyone could ever ask for.” Lopez’s wife Beno (Beatrice) was one of Cruz’s five children. His only son, John L., was killed in a motorcycle accident several years ago.

“He was so sick, it was almost a blessing,” Cruz’s daughter Judy told The (Stockton) Record. “After he took his last breath, he looked 20 years younger. He went so peacefully. He took one breath and sailed off. He lived a full life. He instilled a lot of values in us. None of us were rich or famous or doctors or lawyers, but he instilled morals and a closeness and [healthy] competitiveness.”

Several years ago I had the pleasure of meeting Cruz, and he left an indelible impression on me. I was in California’s Central Valley on personal business when I decided to look up Lopez. Somehow I got a phone number for Cruz, who told me to come by his home anytime. Unlike any other sport, boxing people are like that.

Whenever that was, Cruz said, Lopez would be easily accessible. He lived directly across the street from him, and spent at least a few hours a day caring for him.

The day I visited is one I will never forget. Although Cruz was in failing health, he had a bear-like friendliness that enveloped you. Just as he said, Lopez came by minutes after my arrival. He was soon followed by Hank Pericle – a dead ringer for the Paulie Walnuts character on *The Sopranos* television show, and Benny Casing, a former featherweight fighter.

I’ve written about a lot of subjects over the years, but the emotional bond I developed with this foursome was inexplicable. There was an innate decency and integrity about all of them. They broke each other’s balls incessantly, but the love under the laughter was readily apparent.

Cruz and Pericle had known each other since they were kids, and Lopez and Casing had known them for over three decades. In fact, all had appeared together in the classic boxing film *Fat City*, which was filmed in Stockton when it still contained a classically seedy Skid Row consisting of transient hotels, pool halls, bootleg fight venues, gambling dens, labor camps, and brothels.

“Jack was a real Morey Amsterdam type of guy,” said the 80-year-old Pericle who, like Cruz, served in the South Pacific during World War II. (In 2004, Pericle received a long overdue Purple Heart for injuries he incurred during a kamikaze attack on the U.S.S. Lamson. At the

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time of the incident, he refused the Purple Heart because he was afraid that the news of him receiving one would kill his mother.)

“He always remembered jokes and was great with one-liners,” Pericle continued. “Some jokes he must have told me 100 times, and I always laughed. You couldn’t help but laugh around him. He was a larger-than-life character.”

Cruz, who was a cabinet maker by trade, always had a passion for boxing. He was a small-time promoter when his teenaged daughter Beno began dating the gangly Lopez, a native of Zacatecas, Mexico, whose dreams of becoming a bullfighter were dashed when his right leg was gored by a bull.

“I remember thinking that at 6’2”, he was tall for a Mexican,” said Cruz, who was of Irish and Mexican descent. “Albert (the anglicized version of Alvaro) was so green, the first time I put him in the ring he was walking around looking for the gate to get out.”

However, Cruz saw a lot of raw talent in his daughter’s suitor. He soon took him to a nearby Indian reservation for his first amateur fight. When asked what tribe Lopez belonged to, the quick-thinking Cruz responded “Yaqui.”

“That was the only name I could think of,” he said. “Albert has been known as Yaqui ever since.”

Under Cruz’s stewardship, Lopez learned his trade by fighting against inmates in penitentiary smokers. At 19-years-old the young prospect not only married Beno, he also turned professional.

Nobody would have guessed that Lopez would become one of the most popular fighters of the seventies and early eighties. His fights were as thrilling as those involving Arturo Gatti today.

Campaigned from 1972-84, he compiled a 63-15 (40 KOs) record against such championship caliber competition as John Conteh, Victor Galindez (twice), Mike Rossman, Matthew Saad Muhammad (twice), Michael Spinks, S.T. Gordon, and Carlos DeLeon. Four times he fought for a world title, and four times he came up short.

“Hell, Yaqui arguably won at least two, possibly three, of those fights,” said veteran California official Marty Sammon, who was referring to a split decision loss to Conteh in Denmark and two decision losses to Galindez in Italy.

At his apex, Lopez was so popular, the mythical Archie Moore considered him one of his favorite fighters. Spinks said he was the toughest man he ever faced. Former champion Eddie Mustafa Muhammad, who never fought Lopez, said that if Lopez was around today he wouldn’t be able to wear all the belts he would own.

As memorable as all of those fights are, it was Lopez’s rematch with Saad Muhammad for which he is best remembered. In an astounding eighth round, Lopez hit Saad Muhammad with

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20 unanswered punches, but the champion somehow managed to stay on his feet and stop Lopez in the 14th round. *The RING* magazine called it 1980's Fight of the Year.

"The fighters were different then," said Lopez. "You couldn't sneak your way into contention. You had to earn it. Saad Muhammad got his second wind. I didn't. It's that simple."

Because Lopez engaged in so many ring wars, one would expect him to be walking on his heels today. In actuality, the opposite is true. He is extremely intelligent, engaging, articulate, lucid, and sincere. His memory is nothing short of astounding.

"Albert could have been a doctor if he chose," Cruz said. "He's brilliant. He learned English by himself. To be as sharp as he is with all the fights he had, imagine if he had no fights and went to college instead."

Beno says that her husband's reputation for being a strictly offensive-minded fighter is inaccurate. "So many punches rolled off his shoulders," she explained. "He got hit a lot less than people think. But for some reason God didn't want him to be a champion."

The heart that Lopez showed in the ring is only rivaled by the heart he showed as a human being. That was never more apparent than in Cruz's final years. Cruz's wife had passed away in the 1980s, so he lived alone with his dog Laura. Not a day went by that Lopez didn't visit.

Over the last few years he would not only play dominoes and chitchat with Cruz, he would cook and clean, give him his medication, and even take him to the bathroom or clean up the mess if he didn't make it that far.

"Those guys loved each other," said Pericle. "They would have gone through the gates of hell for each other."

In July 2004, Cruz sent me a copy of an emotional letter that he had sent to a member of the Northern California Veteran Boxers Association.

"Yaqui just got through giving me my shot in the butt, he did the dishes, vacuumed the house, fed my dog, and then took off for the gym," he wrote. "Really, I don't know what to do with him. But I don't know what to do without him. Yaqui is my angel in disguise."

The weeks after Cruz's death were particularly difficult for everyone. "I really miss that son of a gun," said Pericle. "The way he was, I know it was for the better that he died but it doesn't make you miss him any less."

Pericle had stopped by Cruz's house earlier on the day that we spoke in late December. The only thing that had changed was the fact that Cruz was no longer there. However, Lopez was there, taking care of Laura, who seemed as heartbroken over Cruz's passing as the human side of his family.

"You miss Daddy Jack, don't you girl," Pericle asked the dog. The dog responded with a

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whimper.

“You try to put life and things in perspective when people you love are still alive,” Pericle mused. “But in this case, it’s overwhelming when I think of how many people Jack touched. He was all about love.

“He was loved – and he was loved in return. He led a good life, had a lot of great experiences. He loved his family more than anything. And Yaqui – man were they close. It was like they were joined at the hip.”