On the evening of December 19, undefeated junior middleweight sensation Enrique Palau spent the evening gambling at the Foxwoods Casino in Connecticut with his trainer, onetime middleweight prospect Sean Fitzgerald.

Both hailed from Worcester, Massachusetts, where Fitzgerald, who was known as “The Irish Express” in his heyday, runs the Camp Fitzy boxing gym.

Although the 37-year-old Fitzgerald had known Palau since he was about ten, the two had become very close in recent years. It was Fitzgerald who convinced Palau, who had always displayed great pugilistic skills but lacked willpower and discipline, to finally utilize his God-given talent in a positive way.

Under Fitzgerald’s guidance, Palau turned pro in November 2005. Fighting throughout Massachusetts and Connecticut, he compiled a 7-0 (5 KOS) record in just 13 months. He was a slam-bang fighter with bone-jarring power and immense fan appeal.

There was no doubt that the 27-year-old Palau was going places. On the way back from the Foxwoods, where Fitzgerald says that both he and Palau made a few dollars, they talked about both of their pasts, present and futures.

Just four days earlier, Palau had won a unanimous six-round decision over Hollister Elliott at The Castle in Boston. Fitzgerald, who compiled a 29-2-2 (11 KOS) record during a career that lasted from 1990-2001, was still gently admonishing him for dropping his hands, loading up on his punches, and for putting himself in a position where he had to lose 12 pounds in one day in order to make weight.

Amid all the shop talk, the two still found the time to do what they did best when together, which was incessantly breaking each other’s balls.

Their night ended at about three o’clock in the morning. Palau, who was scheduled to fight again in February, called his trainer at one o’clock the next afternoon to say hello. He called again at nine in the evening to check on Fitzgerald’s father, who had received a medical treatment that day. Five hours later Palau was dead.

Fitzgerald knew something was terribly awry when he was awakened early the next morning. He was expecting an oil delivery man. Instead he was greeted by Worcester police officer Tom Duffy, who Fitzgerald knows personally, WBA junior middleweight champion Jose Antonio Rivera of Worcester, who Fitzgerald co-trains, and a local boxer named Flaco.

They told him that Palau, as well as a female companion, had been killed earlier that morning in a car crash. The accident is still under investigation, but it appears that the car ran a stop sign and crashed headlong into a stone wall. The chances are that neither Palau nor his companion

ever knew what hit them.

“We had a very special relationship,” said Fitzgerald as he choked back tears. “The day before we were talking about what a good year 2007 was going to be. This happening to him makes no sense. If God was going to take him, why didn’t he take him when he wasn’t doing good, when he was screwing up? He finally had his life in order. Things were really coming together for him. That’s why this is so hard to swallow.”

As a youngster Palau had won numerous amateur titles, including the New England Junior Olympics. Never known as a hard trainer, most of his success was attributed to his natural abilities, the bedrock of which was his tremendous physical strength and power.

“He only wanted to punch,” said Fitzgerald. “He just loved to fight, with or without mitts. He was the real deal, the kind of fighter that trainers dream about having.”

Palau’s amateur progress was interrupted by a conviction for armed robbery when he was 17 years old. According to Fitzgerald, Palau, who had been an A student, was fired from the fast food chicken restaurant that employed him.

An angry Palau returned to the eatery with his face obscured by a mask and demanded money. The owner knew right away that it was Palau who was hiding behind the mask, and implored him to stop the charade. Palau followed through with the robbery and was arrested, convicted, and ultimately sent away to some of the state’s most dangerous prison facilities.

Fitzgerald says that he, and many others, were surprised he got such a heavy sentence for what they believe was his first offense.

“He was a nice kid in a bad environment,” said Fitzgerald. “He was a little wild, like a lot of us are when we’re young, but he had a great heart. He was a really good kid.”

Upon his release from prison, Palau won the 2004 New England Golden Gloves 152-pound title. He even made it to finals of the national tournament.

“He got there without hardly training,” said Fitzgerald. “He’d come to the gym and spar with Jose, who was a world champion. He had unbelievable natural ability.”

Fitzgerald, who had squared off with the likes of Roberto Duran, Dana Rosenblatt and Peter Manfredo Sr. during his career, finally convinced Palau to get serious. He wasn’t getting any younger and he had so much to offer the pro boxing game.

“He was smoking cigarettes and hanging around the gym,” said Fitzgerald. “He’d spar with Jose, but not really try to get better. He just relied on what came natural to him. He was a fighter, so all he wanted to do was fight.”

Under Fitzgerald’s stewardship, Palau decided to make a serious run at boxing’s brass ring. He began training with diligence. By fighting so often he became better known in Worcester and the

best qualities in him came out. Prior to his untimely death, he had established quite a fan base at home. The roar of the crowd when he fought locally was deafening.

“He really learned from his mistakes,” said Fitzgerald. “He’d talk to the kids in the gym about doing the right thing. He’d help serve meals to the kids who weren’t going to have supper on the table when they got home. He’d give rock-solid advice.”

I had met Palau on the evening of September 23 in Hartford, shortly after he won a four-round decision over James North at the Connecticut Convention Center. I remember thinking to myself that he had a glow about him.

I don’t know if it was his boxing ability, the force of his friendly personality or the obviously tight relationship he had with Fitzgerald that was so appealing. What I do know is that I realized right away that this was a fighter worth following.

It was obvious that he was very comfortable with his boxing abilities, yet he didn’t seem the least bit boastful. And it didn’t bother him in the least that North was the first of five opponents to go the distance with him. He was glad to get the rounds in and more than happy to learn on the job against a well-traveled and durable journeyman.

Fitzgerald described Palau as having big balls. Coupled with his power and crowd-pleasing style, Fitzy assessed that he had superstar potential. He wholeheartedly believed that Palau had learned from his past indiscretions, and was mature enough to know that his best shot at a bright future was through boxing.

After Palau’s death, Rivera, who is a court officer by day, told the Worcester Telegram & Gazette that Palau knew he messed up when he went to prison.

But, added the well-respected champion who is scheduled to defend his title against the undefeated Travis Simms on January 6, “When he came out of prison, he came out repentant. A lot of people had given up on him, but he wanted to prove to everyone that he was serious. I saw him transform himself into a real man.”

Rivera thought so highly of Palau, he said he was hoping to pass his championship torch onto him in the not too distant future.

It is obvious that in his relatively short life Palau positively affected a lot of people. Earlier today he was laid to rest at the Hope Cemetery, which is within walking distance of Fitzy’s gym.

It is hard to imagine that Palau, who left behind two young children, will not continue to affect people in a positive way.

“This kid meant so much to me, to a lot of people,” said Fitzgerald. “His being gone has left a big void in my life, in a lot of lives. You don’t meet people like Enrique everyday. He was what boxing and fighting is all about. Building yourself up, chasing dreams, and becoming a better person. Guys like him don’t come around very often. He’s going to be missed by a lot of

people.”