

Memories With Maldinich: Guy Casale

Written by Robert Mladinich
Saturday, 01 December 2007 19:00

Although onetime heavyweight prospect Guy “The Rock” Casale was being billed by his management as a Rocky Marciano reincarnate, few people gave him much of a chance to defeat Bobby Halpern when they squared off in the main event of a May 1978 show at Madison Square Garden.

A few months earlier, the 44-year-old Halpern, a rugged ex-convict who had just been sprung from prison after serving 17 years for robbery, kidnapping, assault and grand larceny, had been the subject of a nine-page feature story in Sports Illustrated.

Fans turned out in droves to see Halpern, who came into the Casale fight with a 9-3 (6 KOs) record. He had gone 2-1 in 1958, the year before he began serving time in some of New York State’s toughest prisons.

Since his release in 1976, he had amassed a record of 7-2 (6 KOs), with one of those losses coming by third round TKO to future heavyweight titlist Trevor Berbick.

“I was a tune-up for Halpern,” laughed Casale, who is now 52 and a detective with the Essex County Prosecutors Office in New Jersey.

“There was talk of him getting a fight with Larry Holmes if he got a few more wins. Nobody gave me a snowball’s chance in hell of beating him.”

Although Casale, who was then 23, had only started boxing three years earlier, he was undeterred by Halpern’s reputation as a tough guy, as well as the fact that the fight was elevated to main event status after Gerry Cooney, who was supposed to headline the show, withdrew with an injured hand.

At a press conference shortly before the fight, Halpern made fun of Casale’s first name. “He was saying he could never lose to a guy named Guy,” said Casale. “It sounded silly and stupid, but I knew then that I had his number. He was trying to get under my skin, but it just showed me he could be taken.”

Serving as an inspirational muse for Casale was heavyweight prospect Beau Williford, who to this day is one of the most positive forces of nature you will ever meet.

“Beau trained with me at the gym, and he kept telling me there was no way I was going to lose to this guy,” said Casale. “He’d tell me that Bobby was a criminal, and I was the guy on the white horse in the white suit.”

By fight time, Casale was a man on a mission who would not be deterred. “I remember telling my manager I was going to take his head off,” he said.

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Instead, in the first round it was Halpern that nearly decapitated Casale with his vaunted right hand. "I take a pretty good punch, but I felt that punch to my toes," Casale said. "I've never been hit so hard in my life."

When he came back to his corner, Casale's team, which consisted of manager Nick Baffi, trainer George Baffi, and cut man Chickie Ferrara, implored him to go to the body.

"My trainer reminded me that I could hit, too," said Casale. "In the second round we knocked the bleep out of each other."

Afterwards, George Baffi and Ferrara told him, "You got him. He looks like a guy walking up a hill."

The third round began nearly as wildly as the second, but Casale was pulling ahead.

"Bobby was still swinging hard, but his punches didn't have the oomph to them," said Casale.

"He was telegraphing his punches, so I got up on my toes to lure him in. I saw him get ready to throw a right hand, so I threw my own. It didn't travel more than six inches, and it knocked him out."

"He was the toughest man I ever faced. The fight was a war, and I was glad when it was over."

After two more victories and a draw, Casale squared off against Scott Frank for the New Jersey State heavyweight title in March 1979. To this day, he has few good things to say about Frank, who later challenged Larry Holmes for the heavyweight title.

"He was a very crass guy," said Casale. "He had no diplomacy and was trying to use Muhammad Ali-type intimidation tactics that didn't work. I could have put up with his bleep until he made it personal. He'd say things like they'd need dental record to identify me after the fight."

What made that statement so troubling was the fact that Casale's mother, Elena, was aghast over the fact that her son was a boxer. She had raised four children on her own, and couldn't understand how two men could beat each other up for a living.

In the first round of the Frank fight, Casale blasted him with a right hand that sent Frank against the ropes. Instead of following up right away, he says, "I stopped to admire my work and he was saved by the bell."

In the second round, Casale says he was intentionally thumbed by Frank. His eye blew up like a balloon, was completely closed by the third round, and the fight was stopped in the ninth.

Casale, who had been attending college, was unsure if he wanted to continue fighting. However, after taking a few months off he went to training camp in the mountains of Pennsylvania.

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It was there that broke his shoulder in a bicycle accident. The injury required two separate operations. He didn't begin training again until 1980, at Cus D'Amato's camp in upstate New York. Casale soon rattled off four straight victories, all by knockout.

That set the stage for his fight against then undefeated Marvis Frazier, then 5-0, on the undercard of the epic first encounter between Sugar Ray Leonard and Thomas Hearns in Las Vegas in September 1981.

"It was a thrill for me to be considered good enough to be on that card," said Casale. "I saw it as a major accomplishment, and I was very proud to be there."

After being stopped in the fourth round, Casale was wise enough to reconsider his career choices. One of the biggest influences in his choosing to retire was the late, great trainer Eddie Futch.

Years earlier, when Casale was a relative novice, he would spar regularly with Duane Bobick. A 1972 Olympian, Bobick was trained by Futch and seemed destined for superstardom. But Casale used to give Bobick fits in the gym.

"Eddie was always so encouraging, telling me I had a great future ahead of me," said Casale. "He couldn't believe I could do what I did with Duane with my limited experience. After the Frazier fight, he told me that I was no longer the young man I was three years ago."

As disillusioned as Casale was with boxing, he was equally unhappy with his management. Thinking he'd give boxing one last go, he continued on with a fellow named Rocky Napoli, who scheduled him to fight the aging Jerry Quarry in Albuquerque in 1981.

However, Casale sustained an injury in training and was forced to pull out. That solidified Casale's decision to call it a day. He could not forget Futch's words, which had left an indelible impact on him.

"If I couldn't be championship material, I wasn't going to become a war horse, a tune-up for anyone."

Casale decided to go back to school, and never fought again. His final ring ledger was 14-3-3 (7 KOs), with one no contest.

Like so many other boxing sagas, the fighting Casale did in the ring is just one highlight of a life that has been well-lived. Even though he grew up in a rough section of Newark, organized boxing was never at the forefront of his mind.

He was an adept street fighter who once asked a friend, an amateur boxing standout named Frankie Gabriel, for some pointers. Casale was 20 years old, and interested in boxing only as a means of self preservation.

Like so many others, the first time he set foot in a gym he was hooked. With very little training

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experience, he was scheduled to compete in the 1976 New York City Golden Gloves tournament.

A few days before the fight, Nick Baffi thought it was important for him to see his first real fight live. Casale admits to feeling sick when he saw a boxer get knocked unconscious.

Ironically, he knocked his very first opponent unconscious a few days later, lost his next fight, but then won eight straight. The following year he squared off against Mitch "Blood" Green in the finals of the 1977 Gloves.

"He was 6'5" and I was only 5'11", but I was chasing him all night," said Casale. "He had a big reputation, but I didn't care about that."

The fight wound up being stopped by referee Randy Sandy, but Casale says he did well in many subsequent sparring sessions with Green, and would have loved to have fought him as a pro.

Around this time, Casale had been attending St. Peter's College in Jersey City where he majored in pre-med. After having immense difficulties with chemistry, however, he enrolled in another college where he earned a bachelor's degree in sociology.

Because his father was a "knockaround guy" who was never there for the family, Casale's mother was the pillar of strength in the household. It troubled him that she was so adamantly against his boxing for a living, especially because he was bright and determined enough to pursue other options.

He believes that much of her consternation came from the fact that she had lost her first child just three days after being born. Casale, the oldest of her children, came along four years later.

"She would tell me, 'I went through four years trying to have you, so why would you want to do this?'" he said. "Maybe I had to prove something to myself."

Casale believes that his father, although absent, might have been an unwitting motivational force. "He fostered a tough guy image, so maybe I (subconsciously) wanted that to," he explained. "What I did know was that I wanted to help my mother be more comfortable, and not have to work so hard for the rest of her life."

To this day, Casale thinks of all the time his mother spent at home praying for his well-being.

As much as Casale's mother hated boxing, she would still have much to be proud of when it came to her son.

He was smart enough to get out of boxing with his faculties intact, he steered clear of alcohol and drug abuse, earned a bachelor's degree, and is a few classes short of a graduate degree in public administration.

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The only reason he did not finish that degree is because he was accepted into law school, from which he graduated in 1994. And the only reason he is not practicing law is because it would be a conflict of interest with the current law enforcement position he has held for nearly two decades.

Casale's only regret is not putting his foot down when the Baffi's tried to pass him off as the next Rocky Marciano. "That generated a following and sparked an interest, but the downside was that people didn't come to see Guy Casale, they came to see the next Rocky Marciano," he explained.

On November 8, Casale was inducted along with 12 others into the New Jersey Hall of Fame. Joining him for the festivities were his fiancée, Janice Massaro, an assistant prosecutor, and his beloved daughters Nicole, 16, and Marissa, 13.

"It made me realize that I left a mark," said Casale. "I realized just how good I really was. Two guys that I fought went on to fight Larry Holmes for the world title. If I had won those fights, that could have been me. Being inducted was my validation."

Casale says that his daughters were "overwhelmed" by the event and that on that night he felt "bigger than life" in their eyes. "They told me how proud they were of me, that they'd seen the films but this really put everything in perspective for them," he said.

One person who couldn't help but take notice of Casale's joy was Harry Hascup, the President of the New Jersey Boxing Hall of Fame.

"He had a big smile on his face all night long," said Hascup. "All he kept saying was thank you, thank you, this is my heavyweight championship."