

TSS Where Are They Now: George Chuvalo

Written by Shawn Murphy

Sunday, 23 November 2008 19:00

Say what you will about George Chuvalo, you cannot demean the man's heart or his chin. He fought the hardest punching heavyweights of his day, including George Foreman and Joe Frazier. He was known for his cast-iron chin; in ninety-three professional fights he was never knocked off his feet. He would fight Muhammad Ali twice and lose by a wide margin each time. But that isn't to say he was merely a punching bag. Chuvalo adamantly insists to this day that he beat Ernie Terrell in their 1965 WBA title fight.

Notables that Chuvalo beat during his career were Doug Jones, Cleveland Williams, Jerry Quarry and Manuel Ramos. Chuvalo is in several Hall of Fames including the Canadian Sports Hall of Fame (inducted in 1990) and the World Boxing Hall of Fame (in 1997). He also was made a member of the Order of Canada in 1998 and has a star on Canada's Walk of Fame.

His personal life has been marred by real tragedy, including the loss of two sons to drug overdoses and his wife and yet another son to suicide. Chuvalo has survived, and currently travels and lectures about the dangers of substance abuse.

(SM) Mr. Chuvalo, when did you first take up boxing?

(GC) I was about seven years old. I was in a convenience store and saw a magazine called The Ring. I think it was about 1944 or 1945. I opened up the pages and saw the guys with muscles and thought that was for me. I go home and ask my mother to buy me a set of gloves. She ended up getting them about two years later. I started fooling around with some kids at a parking lot we called the Macaroni Field. I learned how to jab and throw a hook to the head. I had a sporting card with Joe Louis on it that showed how to do it. I ended up going to the gym and had my first fight when I was ten. I was 16-0 as an amateur.

(SM) You turned pro in 1956 and knocked out four guys in one night, how did that happen?

(GC) It was a pro tournament, like a Golden Gloves tournament, but you could not have more than twelve fights. It was a pro show though.

(SM) Who would you say were some of the hardest punchers you faced?

(GC) I would say guys like George Foreman (1970), Mike DeJohn (1963) and Mel Turnbow (1966). These guys were big bangers.

(SM) What do you think was the biggest win of your career?

(GC) I don't know really. I knocked out three guys who were ranked four at the time in the world. Those were wins over Doug Jones, Jerry Quarry and Manuel Ramos. Those three were all good wins for me.

(SM) You were the #1 contender for the British Empire HW title for years, why didn't Henry Cooper fight you?

(GC) I was the #1 contender for ninety-nine years! (laughing). Because he was afraid of me is

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why he didn't fight me. The British Boxing Board always protected Henry. I was always #1 in the Empire and always ranked ahead of Henry in the world rankings. His manager said I was too ugly anyway to fight. He said that about anyone that was too good for Henry including Sonny Liston. I was pretty proud of being too ugly! They just always protected Henry.

(SM) What do you remember most about the two Ali fights, in 1966 and 1972?

(GC) The first fight was the most memorable. There was so much going on at the time. Particularly, it was in the middle of the civil rights movement and the Vietnam war stance with Ali. It was a pretty chaotic time. Elijah Muhammad and the black Muslims were making a lot of news at the time. So it was memorable from that aspect. Ali was under a lot of pressure at the time. Ali was very popular for a time but then became sort of a pariah for his stance on Vietnam. At the time he was considered an outcast, a social outcast. That's why the fight took place in Canada. Ali was supposed to fight Terrell and that fight was chased out of the United States. I fought Terrell instead and lost the fight. I know I beat Terrell.

Terrell couldn't hit me in the fanny with a bowl of sand. He had the ring guys behind him, the mob guys. They intimidated everyone in Toronto. So to make a long story short, Ali was supposed to fight Terrell and Terrell pulls out and who in Canada would Ali fight but me. So they call me up and I tell them I have to ask my wife first if we had anything going that night. She says no, we weren't going to the movies or anything so the fight was on, that's how it came about. I had only seventeen days notice. I was training but not training like I was in a big fight. I had to call in a lot of guys to spar with from Chicago and New York. So I trained the best I could in the short period of time I had. We had a tough fight but Ali got the decision. I always say I won that fight because Ali went to the hospital with bleeding kidneys and I went dancing with my wife. They said I was hitting him low during the fight, but Ali had his cup and trunks pulled up so high, you can see that on film. It was kind of like Bugs Bunny fighting Elmer Fudd. Bugs had his trunks up right over his head with his ears sticking out. And that's what it reminded me of. None of the reporters at the fight ever mention how high Ali's trunks were. Most reporters who covered fights only covered them every once in awhile. They didn't hang around the gym and learn about the sport. Boxing is a very complicated sport.

(SM) You were never knocked off your feet, you were the Canadian Heavyweight Champion for twenty-one years and in several Hall of Fames, does it bother you that you could never add the World Heavyweight title to that list of accomplishments?

(GC) It can only weigh on you for so long. I know I beat Terrell. The referee even told me so. They intimidated the referee, my managers and they threatened them. I know I should have had the title in 1965 though.

(SM) Any regrets looking back on your career?

(GC) No, not really. I've had 1001 happy times. But all in all I still say I've had a pretty full life in boxing. Maybe I would have had different managers and trainers but all in all you only have one crack at life, and you make the best of it. When I think back on my career I had a lot of exciting things happen to me. Peaks and valleys but by and large, it's been real exciting.

(SM) What do you think about the heavyweight division today?

(GC) They are the worst bunch of heavyweights I've seen in a long time. The only thing going for them is their size. They're huge now. As the eras go, the heavyweights get bigger. I fought

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a few guys that were 6'6 and 240-250 pounds. That's pretty standard now for the heavyweights today. Too many champions, I can't even name them myself.

(SM) After boxing what did you do?

(GC) I was in a few movies. I also speculated in the real estate market a little, that was about it.

(SM) A big part of your life now is speaking about substance abuse, tell me about that.

(GC) I give a lot of speeches to young kids about the dangers of substance abuse. I do quite a bit in the United States as well. I was on ESPN a couple months ago and got a good response. My agenda is actually preventative medicine. I share a story with the young people about my family and let the chips fall where they may. I talk to them about the choices my sons made and that the most important time in their lives is when they're young. When you're young the decisions you make last a lifetime and are the most important you will ever make. I always talk about how education is the single most important decision you will make in life. I talk about self-esteem and how you should see yourself in a positive light. If you don't get the proper education your future may be bleak, but if you do it may be very positive for your family. If you don't see that future for yourself you're not happy. If you're not happy you're pulled off track because it's much easier to be pulled off track during these times. It doesn't matter who you are, we all want our families to be proud of us. One of the ten commandments says to honor our mother and father. When you do this you also end up honoring yourself. That's a lot of what I talk about, my family and the decisions they made, the paths they chose in a crucial time of their lives. My two kids now are doing great. My other three sons got messed up on drugs and it was the worst thing that could happen to a family. Love of family and love of friends is what you need. I've remarried, what a beautiful young lady she is. She's my strength in so many ways. I have my two kids, my grandchildren, and I still have a lot of love in my life. You know, I just stay on my feet!

(SM) George, what a great message that is, thank you for speaking with me.

(GC) Thank you Shawn, and look for my book possibly coming out next year.

Please log on to retiredboxers.org, Murphy's pet organization