

When Gene Fullmer Gave Pain the Elbow

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The Fifties and Sixties were awash with so many dangerous and talented middleweights that boxing fans were wonderfully spoiled for choice. The names rang like a bell and any man among the top fifty could upset the apple cart and have his day in the sun. There were boxers and punchers and boxer punchers. There were straight out sluggers and teak-tough journeymen who lost as often as they won but who could tie you in knots and give you a very unpleasant evening.

One of the most feared contenders among the big punchers was Florentino Fernandez of Cuba. Tall, lithe and lean, with a terrific punch and the strength of an ox, Florentino was a little too fragile against his fellow big hitters to climb to the very top of the tree, but he very nearly won the NBA middleweight championship from Gene Fullmer in a brutal fight at Ogden, Utah, in the summer of 1961.

In a 67-fight career, Fernandez knocked out 43 opponents in his 50 wins, losing 16 bouts and drawing one. The majority of his defeats came after his narrow loss to Fullmer. Florentino was stopped in the fifth round of a great fight with Dick Tiger and destroyed in less than a round by the prime Rubin (Hurricane) Carter. Fernandez, however, always remained dangerous. In 1963, he traveled to Puerto Rico and halted future light heavyweight champion Jose Torres in five rounds, knocking down Jose twice.

But the great battle of Ogden against the ferocious Fullmer was probably Florentino's finest hour, even though he couldn't quite cross the line. For Gene, who prevailed by a 15-round split decision,

the battle was a desperate and seemingly endless night's work which encapsulated all of his magnificent fighting qualities. For Fullmer was battling two opponents during the latter part of that almighty struggle; the ever threatening Fernandez and the searing pain of a broken elbow.

A short time after the fight, champion Gene was inevitably asked who had given him his toughest fight to date. It had to be Ray Robinson, surely, or perhaps Carmen Basilio. Lord knows, Fullmer had enough names to choose from. He had locked horns with a multitude of golden fighters from a golden generation, including Paul Pender, Gil Turner, Del Flanagan, Bobby Boyd, Rocky Castellani, Ralph (Tiger) Jones, Eduardo Lausse, Charles Humez, Wilf Greaves, Ernie Durando, Chico Vejar, Spider Webb and Joey Giardello.

Toughest

"Very often people ask me which was my toughest fight," said Gene. "I guess they all expect me to say Ray Robinson or Carmen Basilio. They were tough fights, all of them, but the fight with Florentino Fernandez last August is one I will always remember. Florentino is a bull-like fighter who has the best single punch of all middleweights in the ring today.



"When he hits you flush with that left hook of his, you wilt. He hit me plenty when I defended my title against him, but I was winning the fight on all scorecards until the twelfth round. Then it happened. I threw a looping right hand at Fernandez and I heard something snap in my right elbow. The pain made me sick to my stomach.

"When I came back to my corner at the end of the round, Marv Jensen (Fullmer's manager) suspected I had hurt my arm. He asked me what was wrong and I couldn't answer him. I was afraid if I opened my mouth I would vomit. The pain from my elbow was going through my whole body, and it seemed to settle in the nerve center of my stomach. I was worried, real worried. How was I going to get through the next three rounds with only one arm? Would I be able to stand the pain? Would I empty my stomach right in the center of the ring the next time I used my right hand?"

Gene's other major concern was not knowing how much Fernandez and his handlers knew about the injury. Did they know at all? Did they know everything and were planning an all-out bombing mission? It was never a garden party when Florentino Fernandez started bombing.

Said Fullmer: "I suspected Fernandez knew he had me in trouble because he fought with renewed vigor toward the end of the twelfth. In spite of a frenzied mind, I answered the bell for the thirteenth round with my mind made up to stay away from Fernandez as much as I could. He rushed out of his corner very unlike a fighter who had been beaten up to that point. Now I knew he was aware of how badly I had been hurt.

"I went on the defensive for the first time that night and for one of the few times in my career I could do nothing else. Fernandez chased me from one side of the ring to the other. I was still sick to my stomach. All the hours that Marv Jensen and Angelo Curley, my trainer, spent teaching me defensive boxing suddenly paid off. I was making Florentino miss with his murderous left hooks, ducking underneath each one and managing to stick a left jab into his face.

"The jab was light but it was enough to keep Fernandez off balance and make him back up a step or two. He was so anxious to knock me out, he swung himself out in the thirteenth and fourteenth rounds. When the bell rang for the fifteenth and last round, we were almost on even terms physically. He was tired and I was hurt. I knew he was tired so I just kept jabbing him., and I did it often enough to win the last round. When the final bell sounded, it was like the end of the war.

"In my own mind I thought I had won the fight with some to spare, but didn't really realize it until I saw Jensen and Curley jumping with joy in my corner. Later, in my dressing room, the doctors told me I had fought the last three rounds with a broken elbow."

Injuries

Those of us who have suffered similar injuries will know of the craving desire to cut our losses and retire to a quiet and peaceful place until the storm blows over. Even a hangover from too much of the hard stuff is a painful reminder of how long a day can be and how difficult it is to perform the simplest of functions.

Yet we know there is no hiding place in life, and there is certainly no refuge in the ring when Florentino Fernandez is trying his level best to take your head off. Some boxers raise the white flag, but they are a tiny minority. Most are natural born warriors at heart who regard it as their sacred duty to hear the final bell, whatever their pain and whatever the result.

Fighting in his own back yard that night, Gene would have surely been forgiven by his home crowd if he had sat down on his stool at some point during that terrible nightmare and told Marv Jensen that he couldn't go on. But quitting was never on the agenda for this toughest of Utah sons.

"Never once during the panic that ran through my mind did I think of quitting," said Gene. "I had every excuse in the world to call it quits in my corner at the end of the twelfth. Nobody would have called a guy with a broken elbow a quitter. Certainly I would have had another chance at Fernandez, even if I quit right there. But, like I say, it never even came to my mind."

It never did with Gene Fullmer.

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