



## **Florentino Fernández: One Shot at Glory** **By Carlos Acevedo**

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It was a revolution that forced Florentino Fernández, who died of a heart attack on January 28 at age 76, to chase his dreams at the grimy Fifth Street Gym in Miami.

With the battle of Sierra Maestra all but decided by August 1958, Fidel Castro sent forces led by Che Guevara and Camilo Cienfuegos to Las Villas, where the guerillas succeeded in dividing Cuba in two. Fulgencio Batista, facing certain defeat and, perhaps, a firing squad, fled Havana for the Dominican Republic on January 1, 1959, but over the next few months and years he would be followed by thousands of Cubans who sailed to Florida amid the upheavals of the era Che hailed as that of the “New Man.” Elections were suspended, President Urrutia resigned, newspapers were shut down or censored, show trials and summary executions took place, and a mass land expropriation program was announced. To many Cubans, particularly—middle-class professionals—the pandemonium was untenable.

Nor could a boxer prosper in such chaos. “I was in Cuba three days after the revolution,” Angelo Dundee, who trained Fernández, once told Robert Cassidy. “I stayed at the Hilton, where Castro stayed. At that time, Castro still wanted things to go on as usual and he wanted there to be a boxing show. He was at the card and so was his brother Raul and Che Guevara. The atmosphere was always sensational at the fights in Cuba. But now, there were soldiers with machine guns at the fights too. One guy, his machine gun went off straight up in the air. What a scene that caused.”

Determined to be more than just some fulano swallowed up by the zeitgeist, Fernández made his way to Little Havana not long before Castro banned all professional sports across the island. “It was really hard,” he told Cassidy. “Florida was unknown territory, but I had to leave because with Fidel Castro in

power things were going from bad to worse.” He was among several world-class prizefighters who arrived in Mexico and the United States in the late 1950s and early 60s, including Luis Rodriguez, José Nápoles, Sugar Ramos, Benny Paret, and Douglas Vaillant. But no one—no one—hit as hard as Florentino Fernández.

Among the most feared KO punchers of the 1960s, Fernández, billed as The Ox because of his physical strength and KO power, could turn cinderblocks into dust with his left hook, and a kill-or-be-killed attack that saw 53 out of his 67 professional fights end via stoppage ensured that he was a coast-to-coast regular during the waning days of the television Golden Age. A converted southpaw, Fernández hit so hard that he broke bones when he fought. Indeed, his freakish power left Gene Fullmer with, of all things, a shattered elbow. Fernández regularly rearranged features in the ring the same way a Cubist did via paintbrush on canvas. But, in some kind of symbolic counterpart to his dreams and ambitions—

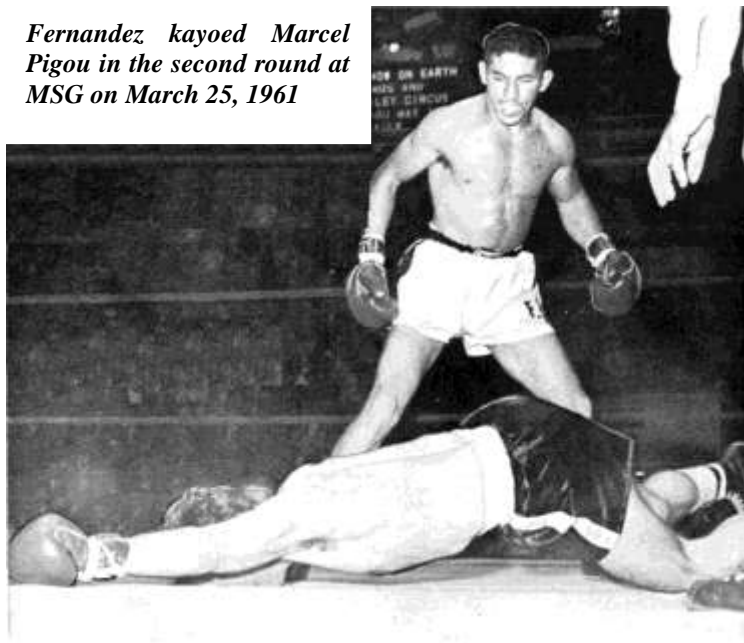
the same ones shared by all fighters—he was often too brittle for the rigors of his own pitiless style. He was stopped by Jesús Rivero, Dick Tiger, and Jose Gonzalez in some of the most brutal free-for-alls of the 1960s. Limited Rocky Kalingo knocked him out in one round, and fearsome Rubin Carter stopped him in just 69 bloodcurdling seconds.

That Fernández failed to hear the final bell on so many occasions could almost be considered a natural byproduct of facing some of the toughest fighters of his era. Between 1959 and 1967, when he retired for the first time, Fernández fought Emile Griffith, Gene Fullmer, Dick Tiger, Phil Moyer, Gaspar Ortega, Joe DeNucci, Ralph Dupas, Stefan Redl, Joey Giambra, Jose Torres, Carter, Gonzalez, and Argentine strongman Juan Carlos Rivero. Incredibly, Fernández climbed through the ropes against Rivero four times.

In arguably the highlight of his career, Fernández crushed future light heavyweight champion Jose Torres in five relentless rounds in San Juan in 1963. Torres was unprepared for the soul-crushing power Fernández wielded. How could anyone be? The Ox trampled Torres before a howling crowd at Hiram Bithron Stadium. But San Juan loved him, anyway. In those bygone days, Puerto Ricans—like Mexicans—admired all fighters with *casta*, and Fernández became a popular figure there, fighting in “La Isla del Encante” six times during his career. That kind of reverence was later extended by the Puerto Rican *afición* to figures like Alexis Argüello and—considering some of the inflammatory comments he made about Boricuas—even Roberto Duran.

On August 5, 1961, Fernández met spiteful Gene Fullmer for the NBA middleweight championship in Ogden, Utah. After 15 punishing rounds, Fullmer edged out a split decision that Fernández would moan about for the next fifty years. Fullmer, with a neck as thick as a fire hydrant, was nearly indestructible, but Fernández had him slanting and whipping like a palm tree in a hurricane during the last few rounds. It was the only title shot Fernández would get in more than fifteen years as a professional prizefighter.

*Fernandez kayoed Marcel Pigou in the second round at MSG on March 25, 1961*



By the mid-1960s, Fernández was splintering from the grueling schedule, and he began losing fights regularly. Less than five years after challenging Fullmer for the middleweight title, Fernández was retired from boxing and was working as a dishwasher in Miami. Still, his guttering dream haunted him, and he returned to the ring in 1969. Like most boxers, Fernández lingered on too long, the way a man may stand on the end of a quay, watching his lover sail off into twilight.

Fighters from Cuba still appear in professional boxing. They wind up in Germany or Ireland now—not just the United States or Mexico—after defecting from international tournaments. Guillermo Rigondeaux won a world title in his seventh professional bout. Yoan Pablo Hernández is one of a handful of cruiserweight champions. In a few short years, Yuriorkis Gamboa has won two world championships. Odlanier Solís is already a millionaire despite having accomplished nothing and despite being terrified of jump ropes.

Boxing was less merciful when Fernández toiled under the hot new television lights. There were fewer dreams to pursue in boxing then: eight weight classes, generally one champion per division, and many more fighters vying for glory than there are today. Fernández paid a heavy price for pursuing such longshot ambitions. “I miss Cuba very much,” he told *Boxing News* in 2001. “I miss the family and friends I left behind. I miss the beaches, the beautiful people, seeing Malecón. I miss the Cuba of 42 years ago.”

Although he never won a world title, Fernández was one of the most dangerous men during the last hard years of prizefighting in America, before neophytes won titles after less than a dozen starts, before long-term contracts sent fighters on the path of least resistance, before the dreams of all young men in a hurry were cheapened by sanctioning bodies and television networks. Yes, in the end, Florentino Fernández was, like so many of the exiled, a symbol of *atrevimiento*.

***Carlos Acevedo's work has appeared in *Boxing Digest Magazine*, *MaxBoxing.com*, *Boxing World Magazine*, and *Boxing Insider*. He is a member of the *International Boxing Research Organization (IBRO)* and a full member of the *Boxing Writers Association of America*. He is also the *American Editor for ESQUINA* and a contributor to *Undisputed Fight Magazine*. In addition to *The Cruellest Sport*, he also runs another boxing website, *The Living Daylights*.***