

Some Like It Hot: Paolino Uzcudun

By Mike Casey on April 4, 2014



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He looks every bit as tough as he was as he stares out from the 1930s picture; dark hair swept back, eyebrows arched, fists held high and resting against his chest as if about to beat it in eager anticipation of the next scrap.

Stocky, muscled and all business, it seemed fitting that Paolino Uzcudun, the so-called "Basque Woodchopper" from Spain, was a butcher by trade. Certainly his prime objective was to butcher his opponents as he rushed to the attack with arms held high and ready to flail at any part of the target. There was little finesse about Uzcudun. His style was all about strength and persistence as he bulled forward with fists pumping. Popular in Europe, he won the affection of many American fans with his courage and willingness.

Newspaper writer Grantland Rice turned positively poetical about Uzcudun, praising the Spaniard thus in 1929:

This axman from the Pyrennees Is tougher than his native trees. And no man yet has made hint run, I mean Paolino Uzcudun.

He has a large and hairy paw, They break their fists upon his jaw; For socking rock is not much fun, I mean Paolino Uzcudun.

He has a chest built like a cask, This heavy, thick-set, burly Basque, Who grins to see his claret run, I mean Paolino Uzcudun.

After penning a few more stanzas on the wonders of Paolino, Mr. Rice said he could go on forever in expressing his admiration, but perhaps it was for the best that space restrictions nudged him on to his next piece about Lou Gehrig.

Nevertheless, there was indeed much to admire about the bullish Paolino, who would put up the shutters with his cross-armed defense and rumble into the fray like a human tank. Although devoid of silky skills, the Basque hard man was tough to hit with a clean blow and was always firing back with his own busy fists.

Born in Regil, near the Spanish port of Bilbao in May, 1899, Uzcudun became a professional boxer in 1923, campaigning mostly in Bilbao, Barcelona, Madrid and hopping across to France for a series of bouts in Paris. It was in 1925 that Paolino claimed his first significant scalp with a sixth round knockout over British Empire champion Phil Scott, who was already performing the trick that would earn him the scathing nickname of "Fainting Phil." Scott claimed to have been hit low by Uzcudun, but was overruled by referee Georges Carpentier and counted out. Five years later Phil would more famously try the same ploy against future heavyweight king Jack Sharkey, again without success.

Barreled

A year later, Uzcudun barreled his way to the European title with a points decision over Erminio Spalla, and after winning a couple of fights in Cuba Paolino began to campaign in American rings. It wasn't long before he made his presence felt, and no less fascinating to the media was his compressed physicality. Flesh, muscle and bone were squeezed concertina-like into his rough and solid frame, like the compact lump of an erstwhile car after it has been through the junkyard crusher. 'Knotty-muscled' was one reporter's description of Uzcudun.

After stopping Homer Smith and decisioning Knute Hansen and Tom Heeney, Paolino made his big splash when he knocked out Harry Wills in the fourth round at Ebbets Field in Brooklyn. A salvo of lefts and rights dispatched Wills under the lower rope for the full count. Wills was nearing the end of his career and in his previous bout had taken a shellacking from Jack Sharkey. Nevertheless, a win over Harry still carried value and Uzcudun was suddenly a stateside attraction.

In August, 1927, Paolino was matched with former light heavyweight champion Jack Delaney at Yankee Stadium and became the victim of some clever chicanery from Jack's manager, Pete Reilly. Delaney, the so-called "Rapier of the North" who is now sadly forgotten by many, was a wonderful talent and one of the great light heavies of all time. But having relinquished his crown to hunt the heavyweights, Jack found the water far too deep and needed all the assists he could get.

Finding it difficult to cope with the persistently pressuring Uzcudun, Delaney stopped fighting in the seventh round, clutched his vitals and walked awkwardly back to his corner. He might well have done this thoughtfully. Manager Reilly, moving with the

sudden rush of a stranded man trying to flag down a car, was suddenly in the center of the ring brandishing a dented protector. As many noted at the time, removing the protector without disturbing Jack's trunks had required great speed and a magician's sleight of hand. Referee Jim Crowley, clearly puzzled, gave Reilly and Delaney the benefit of the doubt and disqualified Uzcudun.

Undeterred, Paolino drew with Tom Heeney in a return match, dropped a decision to Johnny Risko and then reeled off consecutive wins over Pat Lester, Ed Keeley and the erratic but dangerous Quintin Romero Rojas, who had knocked out the young Jack Sharkey in a tremendous battle back in 1924.

Uzcudun's 1927 points loss to Johnny Risko, the "Cleveland Rubber Man" who would trim Paolino again three years later, brought an interesting and humorous tale from trainer Charley Goldman, who handled Johnny: "Paolino was hard to beat because he had a trick of getting down low, under the other fellow in close, and setting him back on his heels by pushing forward. He was short and strong and he was getting away with this against taller guys.

"But Risko was short too and just as strong, so we told Johnny that no matter how low Paolino got, he was to get even lower and push just as hard. They looked like a couple of guys looking for something on the floor most of the time, but Risko got lower and Paolino couldn't do anything about his own trick, so Johnny won both times."

Battle

Uzcudun had a grand battle with the towering George Godfrey at Wrigley Field in Los Angeles in February, 1928. Godfrey, at just over 236 pounds, was a splendidly muscled colossus and held a 44-pound weight advantage over the Basque slugger. Yet for much of the fight, big George looked like an elephant unnerved by a mouse as Uzcudun showed terrific stamina and strength in bulling his opponent around the ring.

A crowd of 40,000, paying a new coastal record of \$125,000, consisted largely of Mexican fans who took Paolino to their hearts and loudly booed the narrow verdict awarded to Godfrey by referee George Blake. It was certainly a spicy contest that caught fire in the sixth round when Uzcudun cracked a left hook to Godfrey's jaw that put the big man into retreat. Paolino also won the seventh and eighth rounds as he pumped punches to the body and swung for George's jaw.

Aware that the fight was slipping from his grasp, Godfrey rallied in the ninth and tenth rounds, drawing blood from Uzcudun's face with steady, clubbing blows. Paolino's purse of \$37,800 was one of the best of his career and some consolation for his frustrating loss.

While Uzcudun would never challenge for the heavyweight championship, he continued to give it a spirited fling and enjoyed himself immensely outside the ring too, lighting up the nights with his gold-toothed grin and a lust for fast cars and female company. "Don't fence me in" might have been his motto, for he didn't always adhere to a strict training routine.

By 1929, his "damn the torpedoes" style of fighting won him a pivotal match with German ace Max Schmeling, where the winner would meet Jack Sharkey for the world title vacated by Gene Tunney.

The fight took place at Yankee Stadium on June 27, 1929, and clever Max was a clear points winner over 15 rounds as he employed his greater skill and accurate punching to repeatedly breach Paolino's shell-like defense. The Basque battler was a tired man at the end, his cause not helped by an elbow injury he had picked up in training.

Uzcudun never scaled such heights again and his record gradually became speckled with more losses as his great strength and resilience slowly ran down. However, in 1931, he became an unlikely July 4 th hero to boxing fans as he pounded out a points victory over the upcoming Max Baer over 20 rounds at the Race Track Arena in Reno.

The taxing fight was waged before 18,000 fans in tremendous heat and a picture of Paolino's hand being raised by referee Jack Dempsey shows blood coursing down the Basque's right leg from his facial damage. The gloves and trunks of both fighters are soaked and soggy from their sweat. Baer, still in mental turmoil and erratic form after his tragic victory over Frankie Campbell, looks a picture of frustration as he learns that he has lost.

Uzcudun fought on for another four years, breaking even in his last 15 fights with a 7-7-1 record. Notably, however, he lost the big ones, to Tommy Loughran, King Levinsky, Mickey Walker, Ernie Schaaf, Schmeling again and finally Joe Louis on December 13, 1935.

Louis, the young and lithe Brown Bomber, was savaging every opponent in violent and cinematic fashion, and his fourth round stoppage of Uzcudun was particularly brutal. Columnist Jim Murray later said: "Louis knocked Uzcudun's gold teeth in so many directions, the ring looked as if somebody had stepped on a railroad watch."

Legendary manager Joe "Yussel the Muscle" Jacobs memorably remarked: "A guy who can break gold with a punch shouldn't be licensed."

It was cinematic but it wasn't pretty and Paolino Uzcudun fought no more.

Mike Casey is a Boxing.com writer and Founder & Editor of ALL TIME BOXING at <https://sites.google.com/site/alltimeboxingrankings>. He is a freelance journalist and boxing historian and a member of the International Boxing Research Organization (IBRO).