

REMEMBERING JUNIOR MIDDLE CHAMP RALPH DUPAS

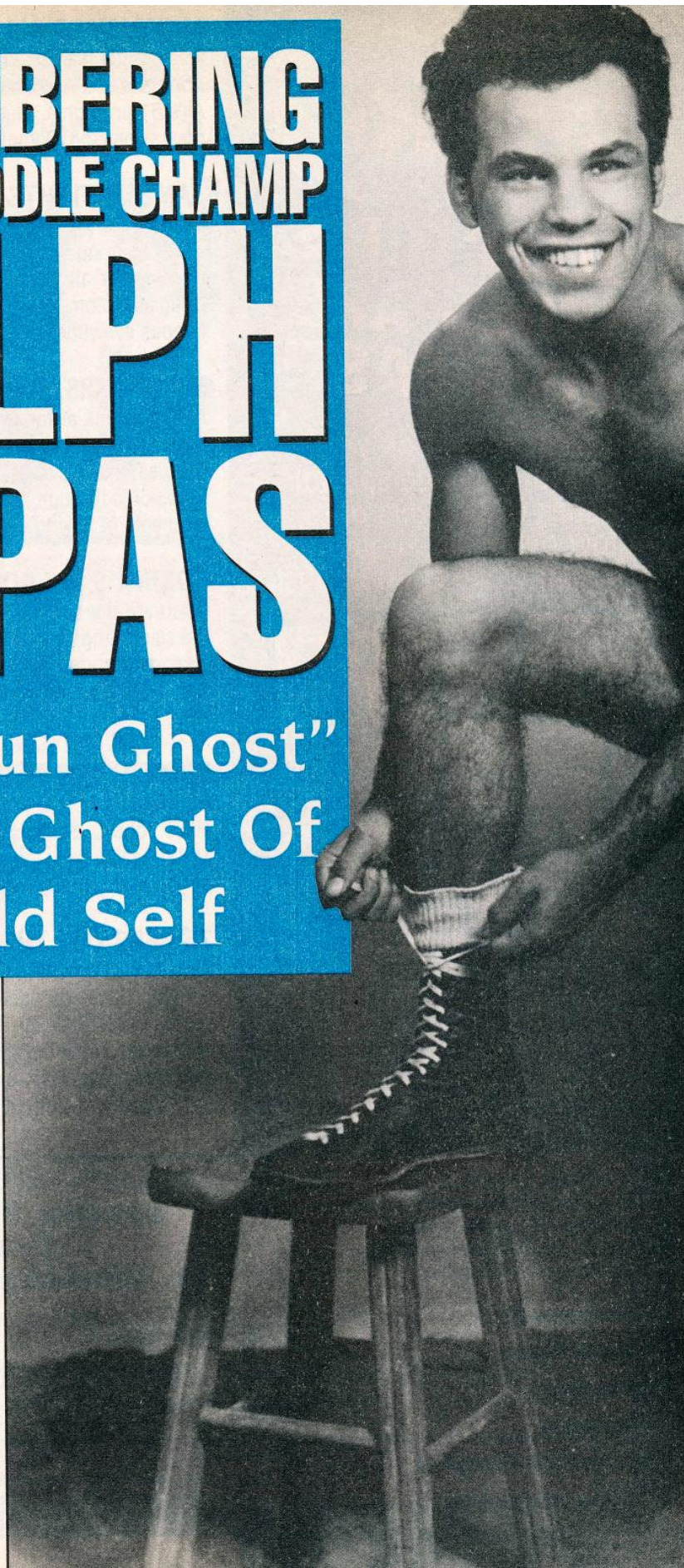
“The Cajun Ghost”
Is Just A Ghost Of
His Old Self

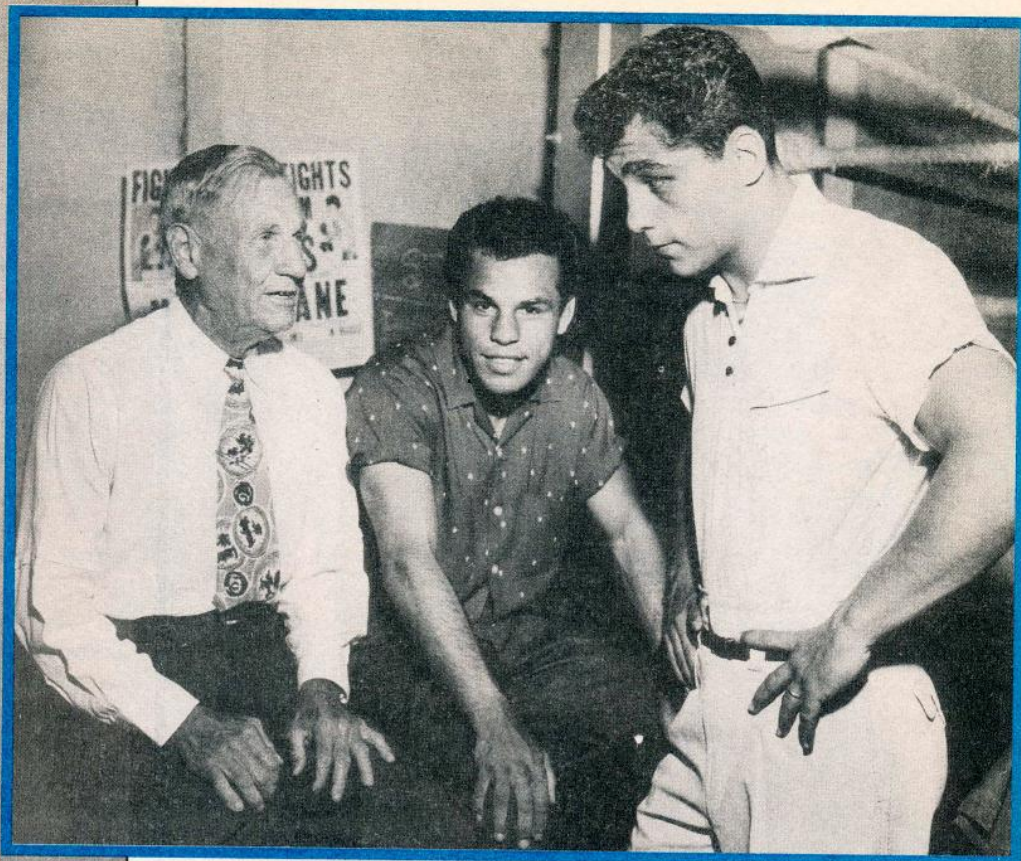
By Pete Ehrmann

Outside of the ropes they were as close as brothers can be. But inside it was a different story. The New Orleans newspapers' accounts of the younger brother's fights almost invariably started off, “Tony Dupas, who fights just the opposite of brother Ralph ...”

“There was no comparison” said Tony, now 62. “I was a slugger. I couldn't carry my brother's shoestrings.”

A lot of other fighters found themselves in the same clueless boat against Ralph Dupas, who moved so fast that in his hometown they called him “The Native Dancer.” In Australia, where the second





Dupas with his beloved manager Whitey Esneault and his best friend Willie Pastrano (right). Boyhood pals Dupas and Pastrano were both slick and speedy boxers who became world champions within two months of one another under Esneault's guidance.

man to hold the junior middleweight title was a favorite in the 1950s and '60s, Dupas' ability to bounce on his toes for 15 rounds made him known as "The Cajun Ghost."

Dupas was one of Angelo Dundee's world champions, and the Hall of Fame trainer doesn't hesitate to pronounce him "a great boxer who could give anybody a bad time. He was like a jumping bean, in and out with amazing quickness."

But Dundee also remembers that Dupas "went through so many trials and tribulations, it was scary," which brings us back to the present. The trouble with ducking punches for 16 years is that eventually even the fleetest boxer slows down too much to get away from them all. Today, at 63, Dupas is more ghost than dancer, residing in a New Orleans nursing home, his mind and memory fading like Mardi Gras fireworks.

The irony of it haunts Tony Dupas.

"I should be there in place of Ralph because I took two punches to land one," he said. "But I did all right because I quit

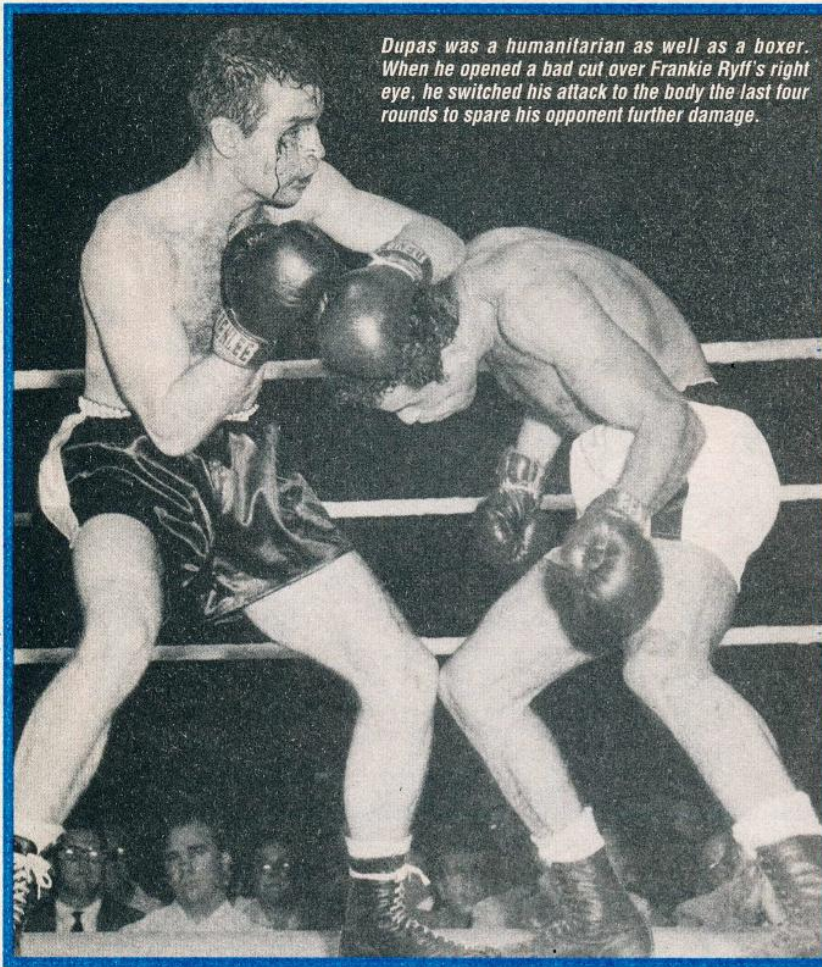
when I was supposed to. Ralph didn't quit when he was supposed to."

Ralph didn't start when he was supposed to, either. The minimum age for professional boxers in New Orleans was 18, but when Dupas fought a four-round draw with Jitterbug Smith on August 7, 1950, he was just 14 years old.

The second of 11 children born to Peter and Evelyn Dupas, Ralph wanted something better for his family than the four-room house they occupied in the ghetto section of the French Quarter. Peter was a fisherman, and after he sold his day's catch in the Quarter, "We used to hope he'd bring home enough fish for us to eat," remembered Tony. "That's how bad it was in those days."

The night Ralph won his first eight-round bout in New Orleans was memorable in the Dupas household.

"His purse was \$800, and he got paid off in \$20 bills," said Tony. "We just laid in bed and threw the bills in the air. The very next day, Ralph went out and looked for a new house for us."



Dupas was a humanitarian as well as a boxer. When he opened a bad cut over Frankie Ryff's right eye, he switched his attack to the body the last four rounds to spare his opponent further damage.

'52, when he came to New Orleans with a couple of fighters from his Miami stable. Ralph was managed by legendary local trainer Whitey Esneault, a one-time insurance salesman who started him (and later Tony) off at his St. Charles Street gym. "Mr. Whitey," as Tony still respectfully calls the late trainer, didn't like to travel, but he let Dundee take Ralph back to Florida that summer. Dundee's brother, Chris, was promoting there, and by shortening the length of the rounds to two minutes each, persuaded the boxing commission there to let the Louisiana prodigy fight 10-round main events.

That also went for Ralph's best friend, Willie Pastrano, who started boxing because when he was 14 years old, he was 5'2", weighed more than 220 pounds, and was called "Fat Meat," all of which was a hindrance to meeting girls.

"They grew up together," said Tony. "Ralph and Willie used to shine shoes on Bourbon Street, and would split the money up. Ralph kind of took care of him. Willie really wanted to lose weight, so Ralph took him to the gym at night because Willie didn't want to work out in front of people. They used to do roadwork together and then go to church and say the Rosary."

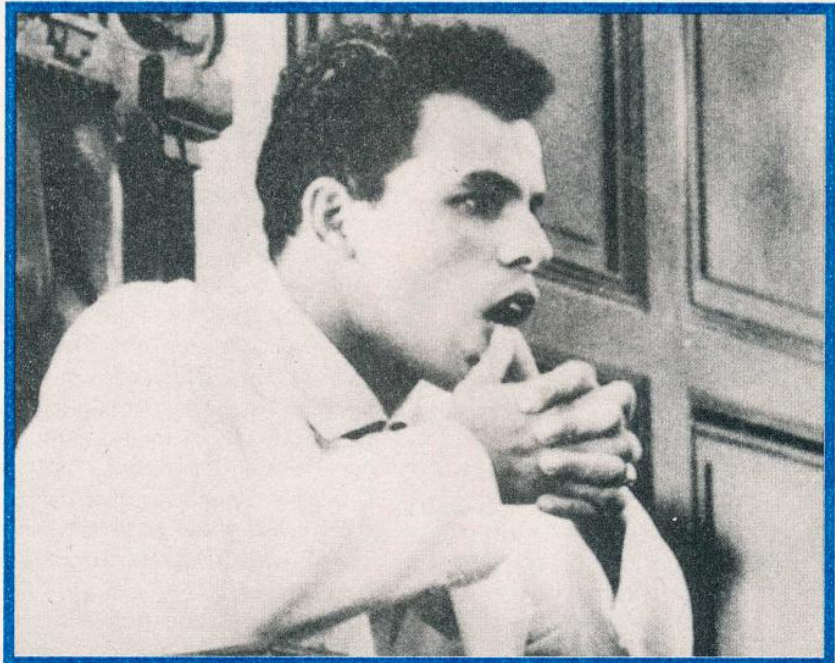
The workouts and the prayers worked. Not only did Pastrano end up losing over

As economically pivotal as that fight was for the family, an even more momentous one for Ralph personally occurred earlier against a South African called Kid Centello, who knocked him out in the second round on October 30, 1950. It was Dupas' eighth pro fight, and until then he fancied himself a banger in the ring.

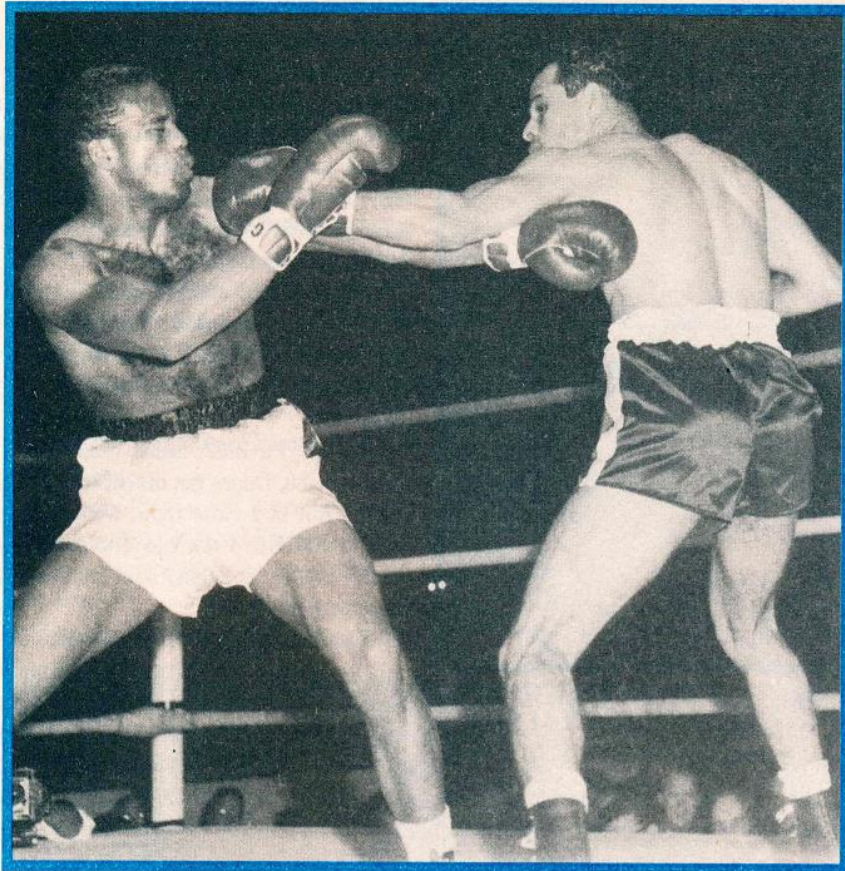
According to his brother, "Ralph didn't want that to happen again, so he started to move around. He was constantly on his toes, moving side to side, in and out, always bouncing."

It paid off. Ralph didn't lose again until Freddy Monforte took a decision from him a year and 13 fights after Centello. Dupas reversed that one with an eight-round decision in November '51, but then the commission demoted the Big Easy's growing attraction to six-round main events after discovering that Dupas wasn't yet old enough to have a driver's license, much less one for boxing.

Dundee got his first look at Dupas in



Dupas testifies at a hearing in New Orleans designed to ascertain whether he was black or white. At the time, bouts between white and black boxers were illegal in Louisiana.



Dupas was so quick on his feet, welterweight contender Gil Turner, who tangled with damned near every top welter and middleweight during his career, said he didn't want a rematch after the New Orleans dancing master outpointed him in Montreal.

100 pounds, but he followed Ralph into the pro ring and, in 1963, they both became world champions—Pastrano winning the 175-pound belt—within two months of one another.

That was a whole decade after Dupas first broke into the lightweight ratings by beating Armand Savoi on June 29, 1953. He was 17 then, and after Dupas won a decision over top-ranked Johnny Gonsalves before 10,000 fans at Pelican Stadium in New Orleans three months later, the teenager jumped into the number-three spot. By August '55, with wins over Kenny Lane, Cisco Andrade, Frankie Ryff, and former champ Paddy DeMarco, Dupas was the top-ranked contender.

Tony recalls the Ryff fight for a couple of reasons. It drew more than 11,000 customers to Municipal Auditorium on May 17, 1955, and grossed \$50,000 at the gate, "Still the largest gross gate in New Orleans for a non-title bout," claimed Tony. That showed how popular Ralph was in his hometown. What he did against Ryff, said

Tony, proved why he deserved to be.

"Ralph was not only a good fighter, he was such a humanitarian," the younger Dupas said. "Ryff was a bleeder; he used to cut easy. Against Ralph, his face was a mess, full of blood. But the referee wouldn't stop it, so Ralph punched Ryff only in the belly for the last four rounds. Later, he said, 'I didn't want to hurt him anymore.' That's the kind of person my brother was."

Dundee seconds the motion, calling Ralph, "the nicest human being God ever put on this earth."

But boxing is known more for the other kind, and as Ralph was bouncing into the big time, the local mob made a play for him. According to Tony, when Ralph spurned their advances to stay with Esneault, the gangsters "threatened that they'd destroy his life."

The best way to accomplish that in the segregated Deep South of the '50s was by spreading the word that New Orleans' best fighter was actually a black man, or at least

had racially mixed blood. A black fighter could not meet a white boxer in the ring in Louisiana then, and to be legally classified as a Negro would have crippled Ralph's career just as it was really taking off.

The reason Dupas was able to pass himself off as 18 when he started fighting professionally in 1950 was that no official birth certificate was on file for him. Dupas was brought into the world by a midwife, not a doctor. The mobsters used that against him, planting the story that his mother was black. The boxing commission demanded that Dupas produce a birth certificate showing him to be Caucasian.

"He went through hell and back," said Tony.

In a scene that sounds bizarre and surreal now, there was a hearing at which friends and neighbors of the Dupas family testified that Evelyn Dupas was white, and the judge observed for himself that the boxer's mother "appears to be a white woman. Her hair is straight and her complexion is not dark."

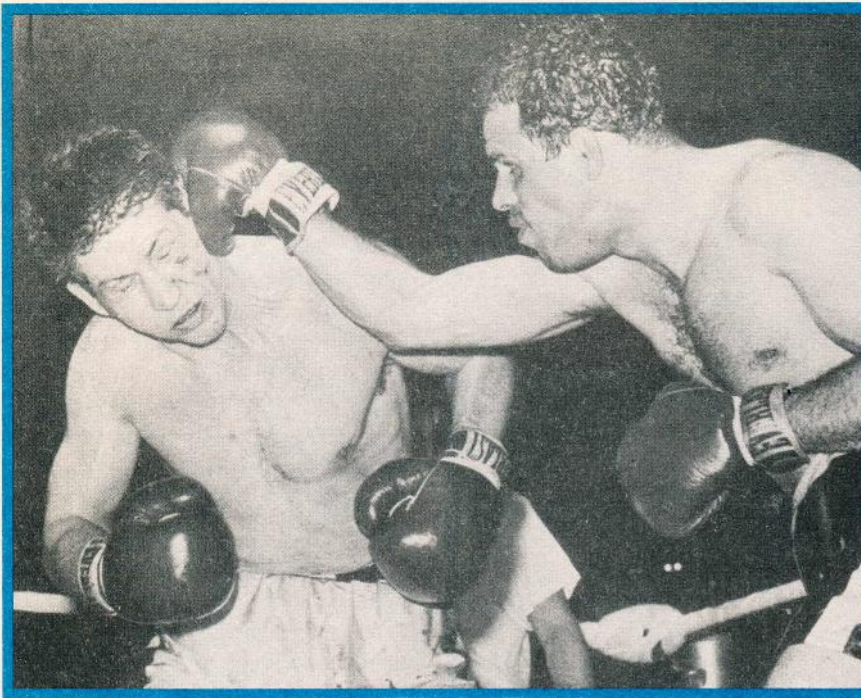
On Halloween of 1957, District Court Judge Rene A. Viosco ruled that "after serious consideration of all the evidence presented, this court believes that the City of New Orleans has failed to establish beyond reasonable doubt that [Dupas], a man who has been commonly accepted as Caucasian, is in fact of colored ancestry in either his maternal or parental lineage."

Ironically, when Dupas finally got a crack at the lightweight title on May 7 of the following year, the champion was a black native of New Orleans, Joe Brown. They fought in Houston, Texas, and by then the problem was no longer Dupas' color but his size.

"To get the fight, Ralph had to lose 16 pounds in 21 days," said Tony. "I was his chief sparring partner, and I knew something was wrong with him. We worked out hundreds of rounds before that, and I found myself many times punching the ropes, and there was Ralph standing behind me, smiling. But this time, I could push him around. He was weak from losing too much weight."

After Brown stopped Ralph in the eighth round, the severely dehydrated challenger "didn't even have a drop of sweat on him," according to his brother.

"You got the fastest pair of legs I ever seen, and I don't want to fight you no



Future middleweight champion Joey Giardello was so badly beaten by Dupas in 1961, some boxing writers figured that Giardello was washed-up. Dupas was such a great defensive boxer, his lack of a knockout punch was seldom a handicap.

more," former 147-pound title challenger Gil Turner told Dupas after Ralph won the decision in Montreal, five months after the Brown fight.

Tony accompanied his brother on Ralph's first trip Down Under in early-1960, and remembers the Sydney crowd's reaction after Ralph's 12-round fight with British Empire champion Guy Barnes on April 11.

"In the seventh, Barnes got Ralph in a corner and threw 15 punches at him, and landed only one of them," said Tony. "Before you knew it, Ralph was behind Barnes. The whole crowd stood up and clapped for Ralph."

Such testimonials to Dupas' wizardry weren't uncommon. When he outboxed Ray Portillo a few years before the Barnes bout, his "exhibition was so exciting," wrote Ike Morales, THE RING's New Orleans' correspondent, "that a majority of the fans stood up and cheered the local boy from the eighth round through the 10th."

When an opponent did manage to tag him, Dupas rose to the occasion himself. Esneault's favorite Dupas fight was in '54 against tough Billy Woods, who floored Ralph in the seventh round. Dupas got up, and by totally befuddling Woods actually won the round on the judges' scorecards.

In 1961, Joey Giardello was still two years away from winning the middleweight title, but Dupas' total mastery of him in their March 6 fight, in spite of an 11-pound weight advantage for Giardello, caused *Boxing Illustrated's* Robert J. Thornton to



Hall of Fame trainer Angelo Dundee, pictured wrapping Dupas' hands in 1958, says that he thinks Muhammad Ali picked up some of his moves after watching Dupas train at Dundee's Miami Beach gym.

conclude that Giardello was washed-up.

As noted, without Dupas there would have been no Pastrano, who adopted his friend's slick ways in the ring. And according to Dundee, without them, it's conceivable that the career of a young heavyweight just getting started under Dundee in '61 would have ended up a little less incandescent than it did.

"When Dupas and Pastrano were both in the gym, it wouldn't surprise me if Muhammad Ali copped a few moves from those kids; they were so smooth," said Dundee.

On July 13, 1962, in his 115th professional match, Dupas got his second shot at a title. But in a close fight, welterweight Emile Griffith took the decision. "It could've gone to Ralph," said Dundee. "It was that kind of fight."

Dispirited, Dupas went to London two months later and fouled out against Empire champion Brian Curvis. But he was more like his old self against Sugar Ray Robinson in Miami Beach on January 30, 1963, although for all the good it did him, Dupas might as well as phoned in his part. Outweighed by 12 pounds, he still controlled the fight, only to have two of the three officials call it for the five-time former middleweight champion. The decision

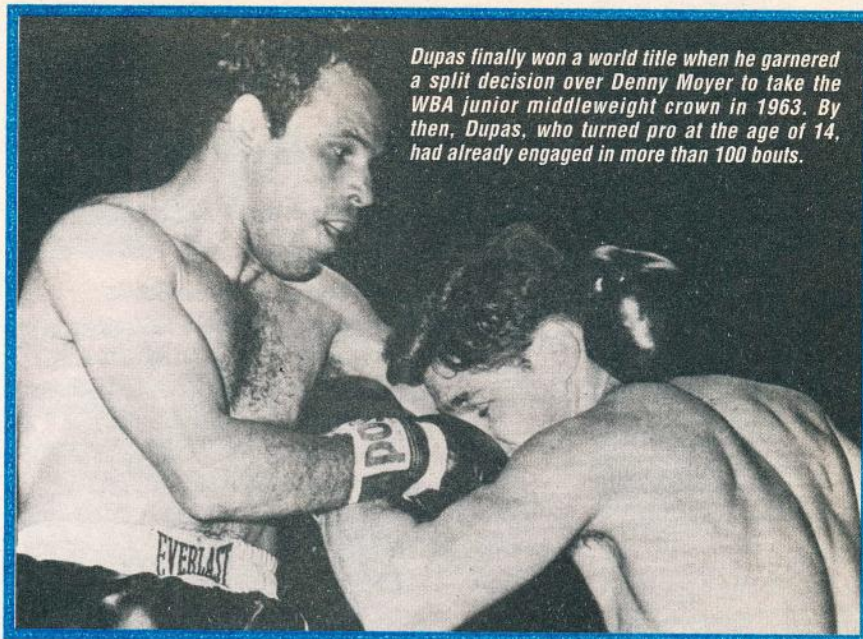
prompted the *Miami Herald* to headline its report of the match: "Christmas Comes Again For Sugar Ray Robinson."

"It makes you want to retire," said Dupas, who, luckily, didn't. He became champion in his next fight.

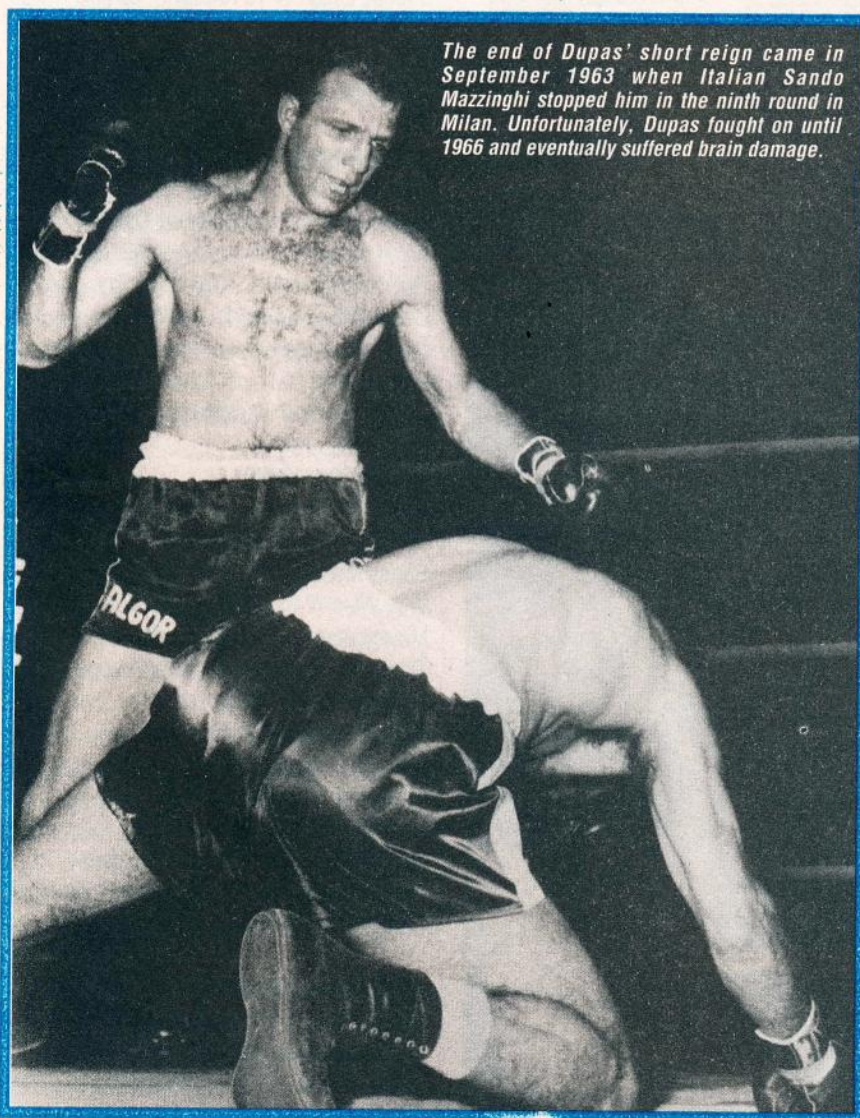
Minted by the WBA the year before, the 154-pound junior middleweight title had been won and defended once by Denny Moyer when the Portland boxer came to New Orleans to risk it against the Native Dancer on April 29, 1963. Going into the 12th round, it was close. Dupas' stretch rally gave the 27-year-old favorite son his 100th victory and New Orleans its fourth world champion.

"This is for me and the City of New Orleans," cried the joyful Dupas as he lofted the championship belt won by dint of a split decision.

The verdict was unanimous when



Dupas finally won a world title when he garnered a split decision over Denny Moyer to take the WBA junior middleweight crown in 1963. By then, Dupas, who turned pro at the age of 14, had already engaged in more than 100 bouts.



The end of Dupas' short reign came in September 1963 when Italian Sandro Mazzinghi stopped him in the ninth round in Milan. Unfortunately, Dupas fought on until 1966 and eventually suffered brain damage.

Dupas out-spaced Moyer in a rematch two months later, but on September 7, 1963, Dupas went to Milan, Italy, and was separated from the title and his senses in the ninth round by Sandro Mazzinghi. Dupas went out in the 13th round of a rematch, and after that, 147-pound champion Griffith stopped him in a non-title bout.

"He just didn't quit when he should have," said Tony, who had made his own exit from boxing in '61 after losing nine bouts in a row. While the younger Dupas became a pipe-fitter upon leaving the ring, Ralph kept chasing his pipe dreams inside of it until South African Willie Ludick knocked him out in late-'64. Then he retired and moved to Las Vegas, where he dealt blackjack at Ceasars Palace.

"When Ralph lost his title, he had to go bankrupt," said Tony, "mainly because a lot of people owed him money and he invested in certain things and a lot of people took him for a ride."

An even bigger mistake was falling for a pitch a guy threw him about a comeback in 1966, against the advice of Dundee and others. After three quick wins, clubfighter Joe Clark knocked out the former champion in the 10th round. At 31, Dupas, 104-23-6 (19), was finished with boxing for good. Back in Louisiana, Tony was hearing bad news about his brother.

"A friend told me that for a couple of days after the Clark fight, Ralph was hear-

(Continued on page 64)

Ralph Dupas

(Continued from page 49)

ing voices and imagining all kinds of things,” said Tony.

Ralph’s mental deterioration eventually cost him his casino job, and one day about 15 years ago, Tony got a newspaper clipping about Ralph, then employed as a trash-picker, with a photo showing him in a bug-infested apartment. Tony brought his brother back to New Orleans and took care of him at his home until five years ago, when Ralph required professional supervision and care.

“I took him to a neurologist, who said, he’s brain damaged and he’s not getting any better,” said Tony. “His memory’s real bad. He remembers some things that happened years ago, but if you tell him something, in 20 minutes he won’t remember what you told him.”

While Ralph no longer recalls all he was in the ring, his brother would like other people to, and has spent “God knows how long” since his retirement from pipe-fitting writing letters to boxing writers and others who nominate and elect members of boxing’s Hall of Fame.

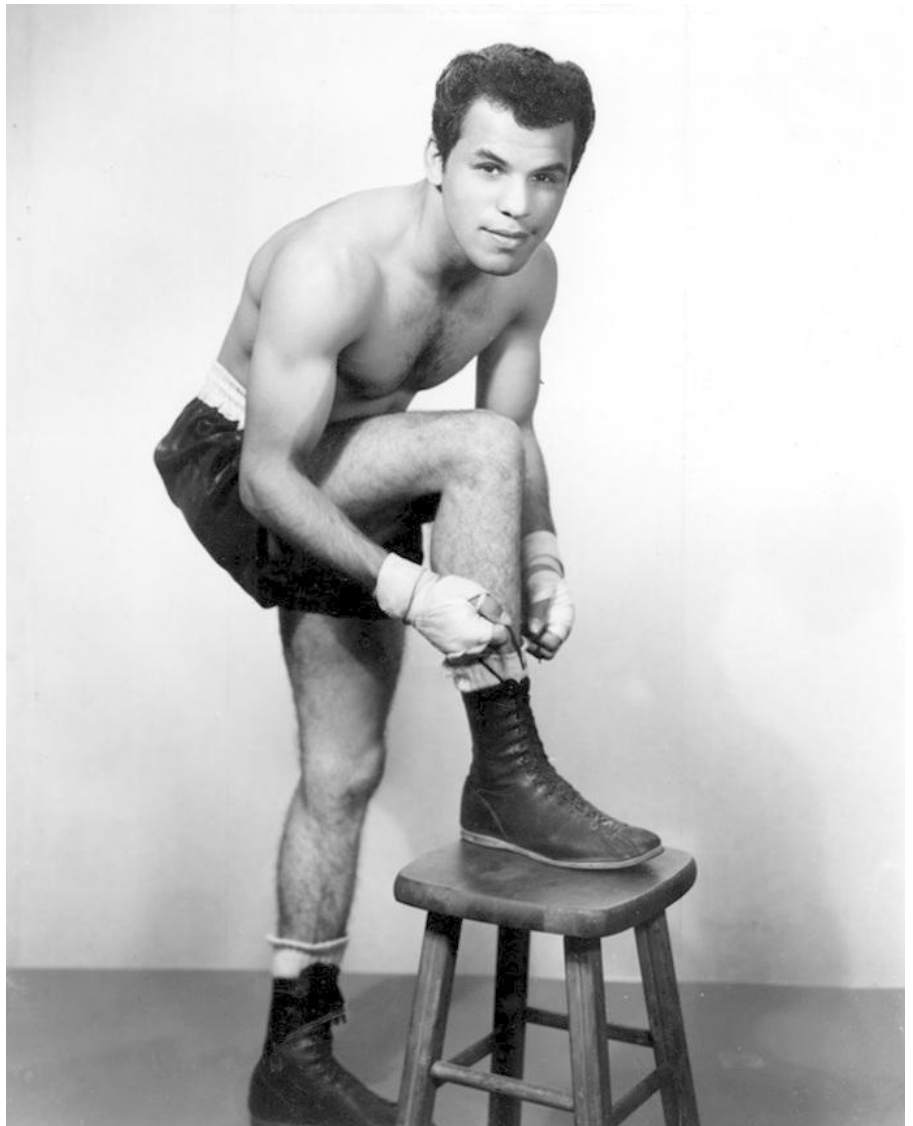
“My brother has been ignored all these years,” said Tony. “How many fighters are there who fought for three different world titles, and for 10 straight years was in the ratings, beginning when he was 17 years old?”

Fighting for Ralph is the least he can do, said Tony.

“He did so much for us. He took us out of the ghetto. He sacrificed for us. You’d have to know Ralph when he wasn’t messed up in the head to appreciate him. He used to go to bed with a smile and get up with a smile. I just can’t do enough for him.” ■

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After he retired, Dupas began to exhibit signs of dementia pugilistica. His brother Tony, also a former fighter, moved Ralph from Las Vegas back to New Orleans and put him in a nursing home. In 2001 Dupas' health had deteriorated because of brain damage from the countless blows he took. His brother Peter Dupas stated after his death on January 25, 2008, at the age of 72, that Ralph had been bedridden for about five years, and he could not do anything, and it just got worse and worse.