

The Original Slick Willie: Prime Pastrano

By Mike Casey



My father, who has always shared my love for the purest form of boxing, has seen many a sublime exhibition between the great practitioners of the Noble Art in his 60 years around the fight game. To this day, he picks out one contest above all others that exemplified pure boxing at its finest and subtlest, and his choice will probably surprise you as much as it did me. You might not even know of it unless you have some silver in your hair or are just an incurable boxing geek. It was the 10 rounds heavyweight bout in which Joe Erskine of Wales outpointed Willie Pastrano of New Orleans at Wembley Stadium on February 24, 1959.

Now there are a couple of names to send the blood-and-thunder brigade running for the hills! Joe and Willie, bless them, couldn't punch their way out of the proverbial paper bag. And that's the point. They were artists. They were painters with boxing gloves for brushes. When you can't hit, you've got to be pretty darn well schooled in all other areas of the game in order to skip around the lions and tigers.

Years after the wonderful fencing duel between Erskine and Pastrano, Angelo Dundee acknowledged Erskine as a master of his trade. Dundee had been confident that his man Willie could come back from England with a nice little win on his ledger. "No excuses," Angelo said. "No cop-outs. Erskine was brilliant and the better man on the night. I was surprised at his skill. If he had only been a bigger man, and if he could have developed a heavier punch, he would have been a world beater. As it was, he beat Pastrano and a lot of other good fighters. Willie and I left England knowing we had to re-think our plans for the future."

My father, explaining why that fight continues to stand out in his mind, said, "It was the finest exhibition of classic boxing I have ever seen. They tricked and slipped and fainted each other all night long. They baited each other with all manner of subtle shifts and manoeuvres. It was a master class in boxing at its best and you didn't want it to end. It was televised at the time and I don't know whether it is still available or lost in the archives. But it would serve as an excellent training film for any young professional."

For Willie Pastrano, the defeat was a psychological blow which continued to nag at him on his return home. He entertained serious thoughts of quitting the game and pursuing less rigorous pleasures. Angelo Dundee had other ideas. Joe Erskine's lack of size and a commanding punch kept coming back into Angelo's mind. Pastrano was no less handicapped and he was hardly likely to win the world

heavyweight championship. Floyd Patterson was on the throne, Ingemar Johansson had all but killed Eddie Machen and Sonny Liston was thundering across the plains like a charging buffalo. "I boxed heavyweights for four years till I realised Sonny Liston wasn't my cup of tea," Willie later recalled.

The comparatively peaceful waters of the light heavyweight division seemed a far more sensible place to dwell.

Fat Ain't Beautiful

Weight had always presented a problem for Willie Pastrano, right from his painful youth, when the cruel taunts of other kids placed him in a no-win situation with his dad. When Willie ran away from street fights, Papa Pastrano would threaten to beat his son unless he stood his ground and fought. Willie would recall those torrid times with his typically colourful humour. "I used to run from fights, when guys would run up and punch me behind the head, bop, and I'd say, 'Cut it out'. I was anywhere from ten, eleven, twelve. And Papa would see it from the steps, he'd take his fuckin' belt, he'd say, 'All right, me or him?' and I'd go beat the piss out of the kid. I'd say, 'Enough, Dad?' 'No, keep going.' And the kid, I'd have him down, I was punching him, and I was pulling my punches and he was crying, the same kid who belted me. 'Enough, Dad?' He'd say all right. I had to be pushed to fight."

Much like his great contemporary, Emile Griffith, who was similarly averse to fighting as a youngster, Pastrano was staggered by the way that boxing and training quickly seduced him. He would compare the great pull of the sport to the hard drug habit that would take its place when he finally retired and didn't know what to do with himself. Delightfully self-effacing, Willie kidded about preserving his looks (and he was indeed a handsome so-and-so) and winning a few trophies to impress his girlfriend. But behind the humour and an eternally rampant desire to seduce any passing female, Pastrano was one of the great boxing troubadours of his golden era. When I was a boxing-mad like lad in the late sixties, I could never help coupling Willie with that other great 'forever' man, Joey Giardello. Both were tough cookies, both were sublime boxers at their very best and both suffered bitter disappointments before reaching the top of the mountain. They fought anywhere and everywhere and never seemed to have an easy fight. They countered adversity and bad decisions with wry humour and very rarely squawked about being screwed, gypped or victimised by their modest ethnic backgrounds. Being white never made these two guys fireproof.

In an era when the competition was white hot, Pastrano and Giardello were often referred to by the writers of their day as 'in-and-outers'. Now go and look up their records. It is hard to be anything other than an in-and-outer when you are fighting men of equal and near equal talent every time you go out there.

Fellow writer, Ted Sares, has many positive memories of Pastrano. Says Ted, “The thing that stands out in my many memories of this very tough guy was the level of his opposition. Like Ralph Dupas, Willie fought everyone and the combined win/loss record of his opponents would be astounding.

“In fact Pastrano’s first pro fight was against a guy with 29 fights under his belt. Seven fights later, he fought Al (Kid) McCoy, 17-13 coming in, and iced him in two!

“Of course, coming off his great win against Terry Downes in Manchester, England, Willie then lost to Jose Torres, and the thing I remember about that one is that Torres threw the most vicious body punches I have ever seen. Ouch!

“In 1960, Willie fought a guy I knew from the Army, George (Peppy) Kartalian and stopped him on cuts.

“Willie never had a bad patch in his career. He always fought well, started his career strong and finished it strong, albeit with a loss. He was truly a warrior.”

To this day, Pastrano strikes a chord with many around the fight beat. Drop his name and the reaction is always favourable. Gifted with a killer smile and the staying power of a tiger in the bedroom, perhaps Willie was the kind of dashing, freewheeling spirit we all yearn to be. When I mentioned to a few select friends that I was writing about the man from New Orleans, I pretty much anticipated their reaction. “Willie Pastrano was my kind of guy,” said my fellow historian from New York, Mike Hunnicut. One could almost see the twinkle in Mike’s eye, since he holds Harry Greb, Mickey Walker and Max Baer in similar esteem in his gallery of likeable rogues who also happened to be pretty good scrappers.

Stephen Gordon, editor-in-chief of the Cyber Boxing Zone, who is kind enough to give this hack a room at the inn, says, “Pastrano was absolutely one of a kind, and most people don’t realise what a big influence both he and Luis Rodriguez were on Muhammad Ali. Makes sense since they were all trained by Dundee.”

Stephen makes a very relevant point here. The young Ali, or Cassius Clay as he still was, hit it off immediately with Pastrano and the transplanted Cuban ace, Rodriguez, and was all too eager to learn from the two masters. Never make the mistake of omitting Rodriguez from the list of genuine Cuban greats. His star should shine much more brightly than it does in the pantheon of boxing legends. Willie, needless to say, found Ali a hoot from day one, discovering a playmate of similarly mischievous energy.

Stylist

It was Ralph Dupas, another great stylist of the age, who encouraged Pastrano to persist in the early days and ignore the jibes about his weight from fellow gym mates. It is hard to imagine Willie ever being shy, but so self-conscious was he about his 'Fat Willie' image that he only agreed to accompany Ralph if they could be granted a special key to go into the gym late.

The excess pounds began to fall off Pastrano as his love of food was replaced by a growing passion for the Noble Art. He loved to do, in his own words, a 'beautiful job', where he would come out of the ring with the satisfaction of knowing that he had created his own little masterpiece. Willie was no hypocrite. He didn't enjoy getting bashed around and took little pleasure in bashing lumps out of others. The challenge, for him, was to outmanoeuvre the opponent.

The lovable thing about him, from the beginning to the end, was that he never stopped being genuinely modest. In his own mind, he was just a scared cat who kept getting away with it. Much in the way of Paul Newman's classic and playful portrayal of Butch Cassidy, Pastrano could do the business when it came to the crunch but much preferred it if the crunch never came.

Willie was lazy too. Incurribly so. If a five minute walk down the street was required, he would still take a cab. As for that training business, man! It was OK for losing weight, but it was darned tedious when you had to do it every day. Angelo Dundee never ceased to be both frustrated and amused by this side of Willie's nature. There is an old story, and I have no idea whether there is a grain of truth in it, that Dundee pushed the elevator button in his hotel one fine day and found Pastrano inside, on his knees with his pants down, in the hot embrace of an air stewardess. Willie claimed he was doing his roadwork. He did quite a bit of roadwork with air stewardesses. In the 'Fly Me' era of the jet age, Willie might just have flown them all.

"Willie was a great athlete, but keeping that guy in shape was a pain in the butt," Dundee said in later years. "We had been together since 1952 when he was just a 16-year old kid. Willie and I had a lot in common. We were both of Italian extraction, we both loved Italian food and we were both married, although Willie never let his wife interfere with his idea of marriage. I once asked him what Faye would do if she caught him fooling around. He was quite serious when he answered that it was a compliment to Faye, he missed her so much he had to have substitutes."

If ever a man looked the part, it was Pastrano. Like Max Baer before him, the kid from New Orleans was tall, perfectly proportioned and possessed of charisma and a sparkling wit. Dundee noticed that women would look at Pastrano with positive lust in their eyes.

Willie was a lightweight when he first joined Dundee, but quickly matured into a finely chiselled heavyweight of the era. He seldom scaled more than 190lbs and his lack of a knockout punch would

have eventually found him out in the dreadnought division as Liston and the other bigger heavyweights came to the fore.

As it was, Pastrano competed well among the heavier men and regularly held down a place in the world's top ten. He possessed delightful skills, an instinctive touch and was rugged and durable into the bargain. He proved his mettle many times, notably in his first win over an established contender in Utah's rugged Rex Layne in 1955. Outweighed by just over 23 pounds at 185 to 208 ½, Willie scored an impressive, bloody decision over Layne at the Municipal Auditorium in New Orleans.

Pastrano comfortably outboxed Rex, opening an old cut over Layne's left eye in the fourth round. Willie may have been a gentle soul by nature, but he was a businesslike professional in the ring who wasn't hesitant in taking advantage of a good break. From the moment Layne began to bleed, Pastrano rapped him in the face continually with sharp jabs and crosses. The victory was an emphatic one for Willie. He got the vote of all three officials with referee Francis Kercheval giving Pastrano seven of the ten rounds.

Willie's toughness should never be underestimated. His 'pretty boy' image tended to mask his physical hardness and grit. Only in the last battle of an honourable 83-fight career was he legitimately stopped inside the distance. Tired and 'old' at 29 after nearly thirteen years of consistent campaigning, Pastrano was battered into retirement by the ferocious body punching of the young Puerto Rican tiger, Jose Torres.

Pastrano might not have been naturally inclined towards hard work, but he never quit on the job. In his 1957 fight with the experienced and dangerous John Holman in Louisville, Willie was cruising along quite pleasantly in the opening round when Johnny belted him square on the nose with a left hook. The nose was broken and began to bleed heavily. Angelo Dundee worked his magic in the corner and sent Willie out for the second round with instructions to dance and move. For the remaining nine rounds, Pastrano didn't just dance and move, he made himself virtually invisible. Holman could barely lay a glove on the young maestro, who picked up a unanimous decision before a packed house.

Jackie LaBua And Other Toughies

Pastrano never forgot Jackie LaBua and their little set-to under southern skies. "Jackie LaBua is a tough son of a gun, man. I fought him in Miami Beach. Jimmy Grippo came into his dressing room and hypnotised him and told him he was Jake LaMotta, gave him Jake's leopardskin robe, and coming through the crowd he looked like Jake. I'm in the ring and I'm looking down and I see this guy mauling through the crowd with that leopardskin robe and it's Jackie LaBua. Jake's behind him.

"What a night I had! This motherfucker gave me more than I could handle, believe me, man. I won the fight on like a point. He was a bull. He was crazy, he was wild that night."

I'm sure there must have been times in his early career when Willie, in the tradition of every carefully nurtured hopeful, had an easy time of it against opponents who were never likely to hurt him. But once he graduated to the deep end of the pool, it seemed he was locking horns with fellow contenders and fringe contenders all the time. Just the other day, I refreshed my memory on the records of Joey Giardello and Dick Tiger. Why? Because both of those mighty logs are a virtual A to Z of any contender who mattered in the fifties and sixties. Willie Pastrano's record is a similarly excellent point of reference. Take out the men he fought in title contests and you are still left with the likes of Del Flanagan, Italo Scortichini, Al Andrews, Willie Troy, Joey Maxim, Chuck Spieser, Paddy Young, Pat McMurtry, Charley Norkus, Jerry Luedee, Sonny Ray, Chic Calderwood, Jesse Bowdry, Archie Moore, Wayne Thornton and Mike Holt.

Willie also became a very popular visitor to England, where he scored points victories over Joe Bygraves, rugged Welshman Dick Richardson and split a couple of fights with the temperamental and notoriously unpredictable Brian London. Willie outpointed Brian in their first meeting before suffering a cuts defeat in the fifth round of their return. This was the only other occasion, aside from the Torres TKO, that Pastrano was stopped inside schedule. Then, of course, there was the aforementioned classic with Joe Erskine. Willie would return to the British Isles much later to defend his light heavyweight championship against Terry Downes, and we will come to that dramatic contest a little later.

Pastrano did it his way, which didn't always please Angelo Dundee. Like so many 'wired' men who can't abide the mundane and have to keep moving along, it seemed that Willie was always looking for something to pep him up and take the boredom out of the every day grind. When he was building himself up to a heavyweight, Dundee encouraged him to drink lots of milk. A great idea, but milk doesn't exactly rate with whiskey as a kicker. Put the two together, however, and you have yourself a drink that makes the world seem a terrific place. A carton of 'milk' became a permanent fixture in Willie's right hand until Dundee discovered why such a simple drink was making Willie so blissfully happy.

How great could Pastrano have been if he had drilled diligently himself all the way? At his very best, he would prompt Dundee to think, 'How good this guy could be'. One loved Pastrano but one wanted to give him a good shake at the same time. Much like that other master boxer of yesteryear, Philadelphia's Jimmy Slattery, Willie was born to the game but could never seem to grasp the significance of his great blessing. For all that, he was still poetry in motion when everything clicked.

Seeing The Light

The decision to quit the heavyweight class and go hunting for the light heavyweight championship was a wise one. After years of going nowhere fast on a highly competitive treadmill, Pastrano began to make meaningful progress and see the light at the end of the tunnel; although he seemed to be slowly

fading from contention when the unexpected breakthrough came against the already legendary Archie Moore at the Sports Arena in Los Angeles on May 28, 1962. For all his years, old Archie was in cracking form and somewhat bristling at having been deprived of the last vestiges of his light heavyweight championship by the boxing authorities. His old foe Harold Johnson was now the undisputed champion.

Archie's indignant reply was to floor poor old Pete Rademacher eight times in a sixth round TKO victory and then knock out Alejandro Lavorante and Howard King. Many believed that Moore would inflict similar damage on Pastrano. Willie was drifting. He hadn't won for nearly two years since outpointing Sonny Ray in Chicago in June, 1960. Since then, Pastrano had dropped decisions to Chic Calderwood and Jesse Bowdry and hacked out a draw with Lennart Risberg in Sweden.

Moore and Pastrano were the equivalent of chalk and cheese as ring mechanics. Archie was the crafty old spider trying to catch the fly. Willie was more than happy to be the fly, flitting in and out, dancing all around and pecking away with the jab. He boxed quite beautifully and Moore couldn't find the one hammer blow that would end proceedings. Not that Pastrano escaped without experiencing Archie's special brand of kidology. Chatting away to Willie in the second round, Moore repeatedly complimented his opponent on his dancing skills. "You're looking good, kid. You're the next champ. Dance, dance pretty, Willie." Flattered and mesmerised, Willie danced and really began to put on a show. It was classic hypnotism. Then he heard the barking command, "Stand still!" and his brain went into gridlock. He stood still and Moore smashed him with a right hand that left Willie sitting on the bottom rope. Pastrano didn't stand still after that. He shut his ears to all further praise and boxed his way to a very creditable draw.

Thirteen months later, after splitting a three-fight series with Wayne Thornton, Willie got his championship chance against Harold Johnson at the Convention Center in Las Vegas. Knuckling down completely, seeing that this was now or never, Pastrano employed his best boxing and evasive tactics to ghost and skip his way to a split decision victory over one of the great modern day ring mechanics. The scores in Willie's favour couldn't have been closer: 69-68, 68-69 and 69-67.

Fans were equally divided on who won the fight. I still have my copy of *Boxing Illustrated*, in which Johnson's fans rained in letters of protest. One enraged individual got particularly personal and suggested that Willie Pastrano sounded like something you put in a sandwich. But Willie was the new king and the rightful winner in the eyes of many others.

Ups And Downes

Perhaps it was sheer relief or just the accumulative affects of a long and gruelling career coupled with a pretty racy lifestyle; but once Willie had scaled the peak, one got the feeling that he was holding on to the crown by his fingernails. The tank was nearly empty and Pastrano had to navigate his way

through his two successful title defences with all the skill, bluff and guts he could muster, as well as some good fortune. He outscored Ollie Wilson and Mike Holt in non-title fights, but dropped a wide decision to the tough and wily Gregorio Peralta at Miami Beach. Greg had earned himself a title shot and he got his big return against Willie seven months later in April, 1964, in New Orleans.

What a shame that contest ended prematurely, for it was shaping up as an intriguing and possibly classic encounter. A cut over Peralta's right eye ruled him out in the sixth round, but was the cut really so bad that it warranted a stoppage? Not in the opinion of Peralta's manager, Charley Johnston, who was quoted as saying, "I've never seen a fight like this stopped for a cut like this." The two camps differed on how the cut was inflicted in the fourth round. Reporters felt the injury was caused by a solid right. Peralta and Johnston claimed a butt.

Pastrano's boxing was rarely more sublime than in the early going of this bout. 'PASTRANO AT HIS VERY BEST' trumpeted The Ring's headline. Editor Nat Fleischer, sitting at ringside, believed he had witnessed some of Willie's finest work. It was indeed impressive stuff while it lasted. Willie was technically masterful as he made himself a slippery and elusive target and struck Peralta with accurate blows. But Peralta was a tough, persistent and knowledgeable fighting man who would go on to hold his own with the formidable likes of George Foreman, Oscar Bonavena and Ron Lyle. Greg was really beginning to come on at the time of the stoppage with a steady body attack. The fifth round saw the Argentinian step on the gas and bang Pastrano hither and yon with a sustained assault. One judge, Pete Giarrusso, scored the fight even at 2-2-1 when it was waved off.

It was a big night for Pastrano, who said joyfully, "I've always dreamed of winning a championship fight in New Orleans and now I've done it." However, the going was getting ever tougher for the Don Juan of the light heavies. I wondered then, as I wonder now, if Pastrano's body was slowly winding down in that fight after a long and tough career. A desperate, see-saw struggle with Terry Downes would follow, and then Jose Torres would tear the crown from Willie's head with a savage performance at Madison Square Garden.

The sapping war with the bullish Downes was the tip-off that Pastrano was teetering on the brink. Downes, the English former world middleweight champion and ex-US Marine (a whole story in itself!), had stepped up to the 175lb class with relish and threw everything he had at Willie for the first ten rounds at the Belle Vue Stadium in Manchester. Tired and wilting, Pastrano received the verbal lashing of a lifetime from Angelo Dundee prior to the bell for round eleven. Angie's fatherly lecture did the trick. Something finally clicked inside Willie's tired brain as he burst into life and opened up on Downes with a burst of punches that culminated in a hard right that unhinged Terry and dropped him for a count of eight. It was Downes who looked suddenly weary as he arose, and Pastrano wasted no time in moving in for the kill. He fired in another combination to score a second knockdown and referee Andy Smythe had seen enough. "I was coasting," Downes said bitterly, protesting the stoppage.

Sunset

Willie was heading for his fistic sunset and he was gunned down brutally in his final face-off against Jose Torres. Tough as ever, though, the great old pro wouldn't be counted out. It was a torrid end to a noble career in which Willie was floored for the first time as a professional in a tortuous sixth round. Torres, a fabulous fighter when inspired, was all over Willie and decked him with a terrific left hook to the jaw and a following left under the heart. Like an old actor reluctant to leave the stage, Pastrano seemed to crumple to the canvas in slow motion as the pain and shock of the blows kicked in. Forever etched in my memory is the picture of him clutching the ropes on his knees as he stares out to the crowd and gasps for breath. He would say that nobody hit him in the body as Torres did that night.

Pastrano courageously avoided another knockdown before the one-sided fight was finally called off by referee Johnny LoBianco at the close of the eighth round. Said Johnny, "Pastrano was taking too much punishment. He had nothing left. Dr Harry Kleiman had told me to stop it if he took any more after the eighth round."

LoBianco had asked Willie at one point if he knew where he was. Humorous to the end, Pastrano replied, "You're damn right I do. I'm in Madison Square Garden getting the shit knocked out of me."

Willie never fought again. "I retired," he said simply, "I guess I was tired."

Wilfred Raleigh Pastrano wasn't one of the greatest light heavyweight champions. But for a man who would rather have been out on the town at fight time, he did pretty darn well. And the self-effacing humour always masked an inherent toughness. He was tough enough to beat his heroin addiction when the empty days of his post-boxing life began to chew at his nerves and eat into his brain. He died all too young at the age of 62 in 1997.

"I'm one handsome Wop," Willie once proclaimed. And indeed he was.

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