

## **BILLY BELLO, LOST PROMISE**

**by Steven J. Canton, May 12, 2009**



Billy Bello was born on December 6, 1942, in Bayshore, L.I., New York. He died on July 20, 1963. In between, he led a life of great promise, hope, and contradiction.

When Billy was fourteen, after playing stickball with his friend John Caserta one day, he came by the Mt. Carmel CYO gym, in the Bronx, where John's father, Charlie, was a trainer. Billy told Charlie that he wanted to become a fighter. At first, Charlie tried to talk him out of it, but he saw that Billy was serious. So, he put him into the ring right away with one of his better flyweights, Pete Toro, just to see how serious Billy really was. Charlie could see that Billy had plenty of natural ability, good footwork, fast hands, and after getting hit a few good shots, he showed plenty of heart and courage, as well. Charlie was impressed with the tall skinny kid and told his partner, Chick Vitti, about him. They decided to train him. Four years later Billy had

amassed an amateur record of 66 fights, winning 61, half by knockout.

He came from a good family, had never been hungry and was not fighting to get away from his environment. He still lived with his parents, in a happy household, that included his hero-worshipping brother, Ralph, who was 10 years his junior. He was free of the financial and domestic worries that beset many young fighters. Not the typical background for a future boxing great.

In January 1961 the two partners called in Cy Crisci, a Brooklyn restaurateur, with plenty of money, ideals, and a vision. Crisci liked boxing and liked to manage fighters, and he was good at it. He treated fighters well and he was the perfect manager for Bello, who was a sensitive, deeply religious, and thoughtful teenager. Crisci didn't want to disrupt the routine that Billy had gotten used to. Rather than take him away from his familiar surroundings he allowed him to continue training at the Bronx CYO, but brought in Paolo Rosi, a world class lightweight contender he also managed, to train with him.

On Friday and Saturday afternoons Billy would work in a small Bronx, New York shop selling religious articles. On Sundays he would spend most of the day at church, or Sunday school, or some other Catholic function. Otherwise, you would find him in the gym, or training at home, or dreaming of being a world champion. He showed so much potential that many boxing experts predicted that he would fulfill his dreams and indeed become a world champion. He reminded many of the great Billy Conn. Not only in the way he was built...loose and rangy, with long, lean muscles, and broad shoulders, with a slender, sturdy waist, but with his good looks and self belief. He was Billy Conn, but with a punch.

Another thing that set Bill apart was that he was a fine, upstanding and caring person, who was a real role model for other teenagers. He was the kind of person that civic leaders and educators would point to with pride, and wonder why can't they all be like him?

There was a dark side to Billy though. Two years earlier, when he was still 16, and winning big...as an amateur, he wanted to turn pro, but couldn't, because of his age. He got frustrated and quit boxing for awhile. He was depressed and fell in with the wrong crowd for a time. As a result of that period, he had gotten two risque tattoos, that were somewhat embarrassing to his fellow church-goers. After he came back to boxing with a renewed focus, he said he was going to keep the tattoos on, as a reminder to watch his step and not allow himself to return to the dark side.



Bello, a 5' 10 ½" 147 lb. welterweight, turned pro with much fanfare, on April 10, 1961. He scored a TKO 3 victory over Mike Martinez, at the St. Nicholas Arena, in New York. He followed with four more wins via stoppages, before suffering his first loss, a four round decision to Levon Bowdry, in Boston. As his experience increased, so did the level of his competition. He picked up a few losses along the way, but he was learning his craft. Finally, he faced top contender Gaspar Ortega, one of the better fighters of the day. Ortega entered the ring at New York's Madison Square Garden on July 6, 1963 with a record of 96-27-3. Billy Bello, who had a record of 17-5-1, at that time, was fighting his first 10 round main event at the famed arena, and it

was his first nationally televised fight. Ortega won a very close 10 round split decision. It would turn out to be Bello's last fight.

Fate blind-sided Billy Bello exactly two weeks later. On July 20, 1963, the twenty year old Bello was found life-less on the fifth-floor hallway of a tenement in the Bronx section of New York City. He had lived close by, with his mother. His body had been found by a tenant shortly before noon. On the stairway near the body police found three empty envelopes of the type used to package powdered narcotics, and needle marks on his left forearm, indicating that he had been using drugs. Friends said that he had talked of a rematch with Ortega in September. Another tenant had come across his body about 10 hours earlier, but had dismissed Bello as a drunk and did not call police. An autopsy confirmed the suspicion that he had died of "acute intravenous narcotism."

Years later, in an interview, Charlie Caserta said "I couldn't tell back then, to me he always looked smooth and strong, kids weren't involved with drugs then like they are now, I haven't been fooled since." Charlie Caserta's boxing career started in 1920 and included 113 total fights (between amateur and professional); he trained his first Golden Gloves Champion in 1927. Since then he has trained 39 more champions, and has received countless honors for his dedication to the sport of boxing. He has worked with Renaldo Snipes, Doug Dewitt, and Lou Savarese, among many others. However, Charlie once stated that the boxer who had the most influence on him was Billy Bello, and that Bello could have won the world welterweight championship if fate hadn't intervened.