

LOUIE BURKE: CHILD OF DESTINY

By Austin Killeen



Louie and his father were doing an interview with ESPN before his fight with Freddie Roach in Las Vegas in 1983. The reporter asked Sammy Burke when he first knew his son would be a boxer. Mr. Burke quickly answered, “six months before he was born.” Like the Fullmer brothers, Louie was born into a boxing family. “My earliest memories were tagging along to the gym with my older brother and father. Instead of clowns and horses, my dad put a pair of boxing gloves above my crib.”

The patriarch of the family, Sammy Burke was an outstanding amateur boxer in the late 40’s. He would often hitchhike to El Paso, Texas, 45 miles from Las Cruces, New Mexico, just to box. His career was interrupted by the Koran War when he joined the Marines. A battle field injury ended his dream of turning pro, when a piece of shrapnel hit him under the right arm. The injury caused partial paralysis to the right side of his body. Not discouraged by the setback, the senior Burke became a trainer. He pursued his new vocation for the remainder of his life, often having a positive impact on his charges both inside and out of the ring.

Louie’s older brother, Rocky, was also an outstanding amateur with a record of 63 & 8. Among his many accomplishments; he was NM State Golden Glove and NM State A.A.U. Champion and 1976 Western Olympic trial runner-up. Rocky lost a split decision to future world champ; Bruce Curry in the finals. In the punch-for-pay ranks, Rocky was undefeated. Turning pro at the late age of 26 he retired to work in the family sign business after a year in the sport. Today, Rocky is one of the best referees in the business and can often be seen working his trade on ESPN. You will have to look hard to see him, like the excellent refs of the 50’s he rarely is in the picture. He allows the action to unfold, interrupting the combatants only if he sees a major rule infraction. Boxing would be better served if it put politics aside and assigned Rocky some major title bouts to officiate. Sadly boxing assignments seem to be based on who you know, not what you know.

Louie’s introduction to the square circle occurred when he was seven. His father had started a boxing program at the local Boy’s Club and used Louie to fill out a card. One of his early opponents was Gene Fullmer’s son Bart. For the next seven years Louie would drift in and out of the sport playing bantam football, little league, track and basketball in Elementary and Middle School. Turning fourteen, the younger brother got back in the sport in a big way. He captured the Western Regional P.A.L. Championship, National P.A.L. Runner-UP and Regional A.A.U. Championships. In all he had 60 amateur bouts, winning 45 but considered his style more geared to the pros.

Louie’s professional introduction took place in San Antonio, Texas in May of 1981, stopping hometown veteran Gilbert Garza in the third round by TKO. Remembering the bout, Louie commented; “he was a southpaw and we traded hooks. The punches landed simultaneously and I heard something pop in my left ear. My left hook landed hard to his rib cage. When I stepped

back he was lying on the floor and the referee wouldn't allow him to continue. His punch broke my eardrum.”



Not noted for his punching power in the amateurs, his swarming offense and superior endurance was made for the pros. Burke quickly ran his pro record to 4 and 0 all by stoppage. Although these bouts took place in small venues in Texas and Arizona, the tornado from Las Cruces was starting to get noticed. This resulted in his next several bouts taking place in Las Vegas, where he would gain greater media exposure.

Watching videos of his fights, his style was nonstop aggression, switching his attack from head to body and back to the head again. Using an orthodox style, he fought from a more open stance quickly closing distance on his opponents. He appeared to be susceptible to a good left jab but excellent head movement allowed him to slip punches with a high degree of success. Once under his opponent's extended arm, Louie would drop lefts and rights to exposed ribs. Watching from ringside, spectators must have thought that the other guy was suffering from an asthma attack. Whatever the cause, the result was usually insufficient oxygen for his gasping opponent.

His first bout in Vegas was at the Silver Slipper against Jose Pozos. Pozos had been in against bangers like Irving Mitchell, Andrew Ganigan and Rafael Limon and he took the inexperienced Burke the distance for the first time in his career. Three more KO's and the Las Cruces sensation was now eight and zero with 7 coming early. One of those bouts was a first round KO over Rick Meeman on ESPN. The fight was a walkout bout when most of the other matches ended early. This was Burke's first exposure on TV. His next bout would temporarily derail the New Mexican express. Although stopping Aurelio Martinez in four rounds, Louie suffered an orbital blowout to the left eye. The hottest export from Las Cruces would be on the shelf for seven months while surgery was performed to repair his fractured eye socket.

Returning to action in August of 82' Louie's eye seemed to suffer no ill effects from the surgery. Traveling to Bakersfield, California, Burke scored a second round stoppage of John Baltierra. Interest in the young fighter from Las Cruces was gaining momentum, but unlike many hot prospects he was not backed by one of the big name promoters with influence in the sport. Returning from the "Golden State" Louie scored two more KO's in El Paso and Odessa, Texas. His record was now eleven and zero with 10 coming early. Under the guidance of his father Sammy, his career would now be taken to the next level. From now on when opponents were under pressure they wouldn't fold but fight back even harder. Welcome to the world of professional boxing!

Louie traveled to El Paso for a ten rounder against veteran Roberto Garcia in a co-feature with Earnie Shavers. Garcia had been in against some of the best in the division in a fifty bout career. This included a draw against Rocky Burge, the only blemish of his otherwise undefeated career. Jimmy Paul, Roger Mayweather, Edwin Rosario, Tony Baltazar, Bobby Chacon and Ruben Castillo were some of the names Garcia had faced. Although the underdog, he wasn't anxious about facing a youngster with only eleven fights under his belt. Commenting on the fight, Louie

stated “I was intimidated a little because he had fought a draw with my brother. Maybe if I had been a little more aggressive, I could have stopped him.” Lacking the same aggressive style that had stopped most of his victims, Louie had to go ten rounds for the first time in his career. The win resulted in his first main event on TV against Freddie Roach.

My acquaintances were very supportive of my success, but a lifelong friend, Tony Baca, was always telling me “don’t ever fight that guy.” When my father told me I’d be fighting Freddie, Tony became very worried regarding the upcoming match. This just made me train even harder for the twelve rounder in Las Vegas. The bout was to be on TV for the ESPN Junior Lightweight Championship. I’d seen Freddie fight on ESPN and knew he would be tough.

“Sweet Lou”, didn’t let the admiration and respect, which he had acquired from watching Roach a number of times, get in the way when the bell rang for the first round. “I knew a win would mean bigger and better things for my career if I won, and I fought accordingly.” In the second round Freddie’s eye began to swell and his right hand was injured. Both got progressively worse as the fight went on and by the tenth, Roach’s eye was completely closed. Despite his injuries, the fight was dead even and the Las Cruces native needed the last two rounds to win a close decision. “We met in the middle of the ring and there wasn’t much defense” stated Louie. Tony Baca’s friend had won the biggest test of his two year career.

“Two months later I was back in Vegas for what was supposed to be an easy fight for me. Jimmy Montoya the match maker in Vegas thought I was going to walk right through this guy Martin Galvan because I’d been beating him in practice.” You don’t have to make weight when sparring in a gym. Burke was naturally bigger and stronger than Galvan. “My opponent had lived and trained with me for a time in Los Angeles. He couldn’t speak English, so I acted as an interrupter for him and we had become good friends.”

“I had a hard time making 130 lbs; I dehydrated myself for that fight.” The fight was a war and Louie had weakened himself making weight. Being familiar with Louie’s style, Galvan fought much better than he had in their sparing sessions. Burke had a big fourth round, battering his opponent all over the ring but failed to score a knockout. Exhausted by his effort, Burke actually lost the fifth round to his surprisingly refreshed ex roommate. “Although I won a unanimous decision by a comfortable margin, most of the rounds were very competitive.”

After taking a few months off for rest and recuperation, Louie was back in Las Vegas on the undercard of Hagler/Duran in November of 83’. The opponent was the now familiar Mr. Roach. “My strategy was to box more because he’s not going down like everybody had been telling me before the first fight. To me it seemed like it was an easier fight. But like the first fight it was even going into the final two rounds. With 15 seconds left in the bout we butted heads. I needed 16 stitches to close a cut over my right eye.” For the record, Burke won a close but unanimous decision in what the newspapers described as a war much like their first bout.

While waiting for his next name opponent, Burke marked time facing veteran cutie, Jose Hernandez. Hernandez lived up to his defenses reputation but lacked any offense, losing a lopsided unanimous decision in El Paso, Texas. Staying busy, Louie faced crafty journeyman Rosendo Ramirez two months later in Las Vegas. The Las Cruces came away with another

unanimous decision. He was rewarded with the biggest fight of his career and his first fight in front of his hometown fans in Las Cruces. In a battle of unbeatens, Louie would be facing Top Rank's Charlie "White Lighting" Brown. Brown had already been booked into a title match by fight promoter Bob Arum in September against Henry Arroyo. Additionally the fight would be carried live on national TV by CBS sports.

Interestingly, Louie could have also fought for Top Rank. Allegedly, Sammy Burke had been approached by a representative for Top Rank after Louie's first win over Freddie Roach. When asked to sign with Bob Arum's promotional company, Sammy responded, "why?" Why indeed, his son was undefeated and doing just fine under his guidance. Unfortunately in the shark infested waters of professional boxing, few boxers have been bigger than the sport itself. In the 80's Sugar Ray Leonard could make his own deals with promoters on a fight by fight basis. In the history of the sport, very few pugilists were ever in the same position as Sugar Ray. If Louie defeated Brown, would he replace his rival in a title bout with Arroyo? A small town boxer not dependent of any promoter, making deals for himself? Highly unlikely!

Commenting on his brother's upcoming match, Rocky stated "this was a very difficult time for our family. Two months earlier my father passed away from heart failure. Returning home after dining out with my mother, he had a bad reaction to medicine he was taking. He passed away during the night. Knowing that it would be what my father would have wanted, we pressed ahead in preparation for the big bout. It was very difficult for my mother, but perhaps working behind the scenes for the match helped occupy her time."

Tim Ryan would be host and blow-by-blow announcer. Joining him at ringside on the telecast would be Hall of Fame trainer Gil Glancy and the popular former world champion, Sugar Ray Leonard. On July 22, 1984, not only Louie Burke, but the city of Las Cruces itself would be in the national spotlight. The bout lived up to the anticipated prefight excitement, as it was a war.



Louie looked nervous at the opening bell and fought without purpose for the first three rounds. Working behind an excellent left jab, Brown was dropping overhand rights and left hooks to the bewildered home town boy. In the fourth round everything changed, slipping Brown's jab Louie started landing counter punches to both the head and body. Confused, Brown started backing up going into a defensive shell. The crowd started to really get into the fight, as did all three announcers. On two occasions Gil Glancy stated "it looks like a man fighting a boy" in reference to how "Sweet Lou" had taken over the match. In the last two rounds, Brown went on the offensive again behind his ripping left jab. It didn't matter to Louie as he just continued his own offensive assault. It was pandemonium when the final round ended the war, leaving fans breathless while both boxers embraced in a show of mutual respect.

After what seemed like an inordinate amount of time, the ring announcer finally spoke into the microphone. "Dick Cole scored the bout 95-95, Duane Ford 96-95 and Judge Chuck Minker 97-93 to the winner and still undefeated Charlie "White Lighting" Brown." The verdict was met

with two seconds of stunned silence followed by angry protest by the home town fans. Ring announcers Ryan, Clancy and Leonard all had Burke the winner. Speaking to Tim Ryan immediately after the verdict, Burke showed amazing class. "I think Brown is an excellent fighter and has a bright future. Only when Ryan pressed Louie further, did the hometown boy express disappointment; "I felt I gave a hundred and ten percent and won the fight."

Having watched the video several times, I can only conclude Chuck Minker watched the fight on his car radio. In an article written the day after the fight by Joe Muench of the Las Cruces Sun-News entitled "Burke really won, TV-wise", the Burke entourage claimed politics cost them the fight. They claimed that co-fight promoter Bob Arum chose the three judges (Cole from Dallas, TX and both Ford and Minker from Las Vegas) and the local commission had no input into the selection. Louie said, "We didn't have any bargaining power." The great sports writer Jimmy Cannon once remarked "boxing was the red-light district of sports." Perhaps if Louie's father had heard Cannon's famous quote when he was allegedly approached by Top Rank after the Roach fight, he would have had a different answer to their offer.



U.S. Senator Pete Domenici, Louie's mother Elba and Louie. 1984

In September of 84' Burke traveled to Houston, TX to face the lone star state champ, Reggie Watson. Showing no ill effects from the disappointment of the Brown match, Louie stopped Watson in seven rounds. Due to his impressive showing in Texas and the response by CBS sports he was offered a match in Atlantic City against former junior lightweight champ, undefeated Hector Camacho. The promise was originally made by CBS top fight man, Mort Sharnik, after the Brown fight and he was about to keep that promise.

The fight itself was held at the Trump Plaza. The controversial "Macho Man" entered the ring wearing a fur coat with matching Leopard skin rope, trunks and shoes underneath. A notorious self promoter, Camacho was giving new meaning to the term "sartorial splendor." Perhaps unnerved by the circus like atmosphere Camacho had created, Louie answered the opening bell seemingly without purpose. The lighting fast, hard punching Puerto Rican quickly took advantage of his opponent's confused state of mind. By the end of the first round, Burke's left eye was quickly closing and he had a cut on his nose.

If Burke's corner had hoped the 60 second rest had settled him down they must have been disappointed. In the opening seconds of the second round the left handed Camacho dropped Louie with a short right hook and left to the head. Gil Clancy said to his partner Tim Ryan, "Burke's hurt, this fights over." Apparently Hector's punches accomplished what Louie corner couldn't due, settle him down. For the next two and a half minutes the kid from Las Cruces drove the "Macho Man" all over the ring with combinations to the head and body. Suddenly Clancy was saying "I don't believe it, Camacho lying on the ropes and his mouth is open. He's tired Tim!"

In the third round, Burke continued his assault, forcing Hector to the ropes where his body punching was sapping his opponent's strength. The Puerto Rican fought back in flurries, but it was clearly not his round. Burke unable to see out of his left eye and continuing to bleed from the cut on his nose was allowing Camacho to once again gain control to the fight. At the end of the fifth round, the referee gave Louie a standing eight count. At the rounds conclusion the match was stopped. A game effort by Burke, but not the result he was looking for.

Four months later on August 5th 1985 Louie would enter the ring for the last time in his home town. The match was for something called the WBC Continental Americas Super Featherweight Title. A match Burke should never have taken. Now a lightweight pushing 140 pounds, he depleted his strength to make the 130 pound weight limit. His opponent, Rocky Alonso of Mexico didn't need much time to realize he was facing a dead man walking. A left hook would fracture the bones around Louie's right eye in the third round. For two more rounds the stubborn Burke refused to quite. Mercifully the match was stopped at the end of the fifth.

In the dressing room after the fight, Louie went from dazed to incoherent. Rushed to the hospital and examination showed he had almost totally dehydrated himself. He had a potassium level of zero and a heartbeat of twelve per minute. Additionally his kidneys shut down leading to uremic poisoning. The last rights of the Roman Catholic Church were administered to him that night. It was a miracle that Louie survived, his nurse told him she had four other patients who had zero potassium levels and they all died.

Louie spent several months deliberating his future after the Alonso bout. "The drive and discipline was no longer there. If friends called and wanted to go out for a beer, I'd go with them. You can't have that mentality and fight professionally; you'd just be kidding yourself." His retirement ended an exciting chapter in New Mexico boxing.

In the race for life not everyone is assigned a spot on the starting line; Louie was one of the lucky ones. Born to a loving but demanding household, Sammy and Elba Burke expected their three children to always work hard and take pride in everything they did. The lessons were well learned, as Rocky, Louie and baby sister Shelly all made their parents proud. During the interview he took great pride in talking about his lovely daughter Samantha and his little boy Vicente. Louie has a degree from New Mexico State and is firemen for the Las Cruces Fire Department. Like his father before him, Louie has remained active in boxing having served as a member of the New Mexico Boxing Commission for 10 years and as a trainer. One of his top students is undefeated junior middleweight (21 and 0), Austin Trout. Judging by his first name, Trout can't miss. He is fond of a quote his father told him when he was having success early in his boxing career. "Always be nice to the people you meet on the way up because they will be the same people you meet on the way down." Knowing both Louie and his brother Rocky, I can't imagine they could act any other way.



*Louie Burke and Austin Killeen
Las Cruces, NM May 2010*