

Detour Ahead: Georgie Abrams And The Middleweights Of The 1940s

Written by Carlos Acevedo | 06 April 2010



To begin with, he does not resemble a prizefighter. There is the receding hairline, unusual for such a young man, but you can almost imagine a puckish little cowlick plastered on his forehead whenever he is away from the gym. Then there is a hint of mischief in his look; his pursed lips almost seem to be restraining a smile. Even the bruise visible under his right eye cannot take away from a certain impishness. Finally, there is that name, of course, Georgie. Hardly fitting, it seems, for a man who makes his living hurting and being hurt. But for two or three years, before hard luck sticks out its foot and trips him up at every turn, he is one of the top middleweights in the world.

In fact, they call him the “Uncrowned Champion.” Years later, when his fractured, luckless fighting days are over, they forget him, and, through a haze of confusion, he rides his bicycle up and down scorched Las Vegas streets, hoping to be recognized by someone, anyone, formerly the Number One ranked middleweight in the world, the man they called Georgie.

George Freedom Abrams was born on November 11, 1918, Armistice Day, in Roanoke, Virginia. His middle name, given to him by his mother in a fit of optimism, would cause Abrams no end of trouble on playgrounds and schoolyards throughout Old Southwest. Son of a shoe cobbler, Abrams grew up just north of Highland Park and, ironically, only a few blocks away from Luck Avenue. When the Great Depression struck Roanoke, it struck hard, and the Abrams family soon swapped Magic City for the urban opportunities offered by Washington, D.C. In a few years, however, visions of middle-class success were replaced by the grinding reality of genteel poverty.

As a teenager, Abrams, athletically and academically gifted, took up boxing and began training at the Washington Boys Club under the tutelage of former New York pro Sid Fishel. After winning the Washington D.C. AAU title and a Golden Gloves championship as a welterweight, Abrams decided to turn professional in 1937. It was, as is almost always the case in boxing, hardship that kickstarted his career. “I turned down two college scholarships because I had to work,” Abrams told the Miami Herald in 1959. “A chance to swim for Notre Dame or box for Catholic University, and me a Jewish kid. But I had three growing sisters. Times were rough in 1937. I fought because I had to.”

After little more than two years as a pro, Abrams had already scored decisions over former middleweight champions — and future Hall of Fame inductees — Teddy Yarosz and Lou Brouillard. By late 1939 Abrams had begun to hit his stride. Over the span of a year, Abrams whipped skillful Billy Soose twice, baffled destructive Ernie Vigh and copped a close decision over veteran contender and boxing history mystery, the Cocoa Kid. Abrams also fought to stalemates with tough Australian import Fred Hennenberry and ultra-gifted Charley Burley. Only a loss to Brooklyn hard case Henry Chmielewski — later reversed — marred a spectacular two-year run. By this time, Abrams had relocated to New York under the tutelage of Chris Dundee. Although Dundee would form close ties with infamous prizefighting capo Frankie Carbo, he insisted on moral rectitude in the fighters he managed. To avoid the sketchier crowds in New York, Dundee sent Abrams to Bernie “Schoolboy” Friedkin, popular East Side lightweight. “So I got Georgie Abrams a room opposite me boarding with a Jewish family,” Friedkin told Allen Bodner. “You know the Depression, you rent out a room. And we buddied out for about two years. Georgie Abrams. He was a clean boy. He always came to the house, and knew my family. Georgie was a very clean, shy fellow. Not what the movies would depict

a prizefighter to be. Georgie was very nice. Not terribly aggressive outside the ring. Inside the ring he was.”

Between the ropes, however, his aggressive style, at odds with his lighthearted personal demeanor, confounded more than just his friends: it was sheer bewilderment for the opposition. Sugar Ray Robinson, who once admitted that Abrams was the toughest opponent of his career, told Life Magazine about his frustrations in fighting the man they called Georgie. “He has a very hard style, that boy,” Robinson said. “Most fighters don’t know how to move their heads. But he knows how to maneuver his head. Makes you start a punch and miss it.” Indeed, Abrams, a master shincrack, dipped, blocked, feinted, countered, parried, slipped, and shimmied his way to the top of the world middleweight ratings. Or, as Irving Rudd once put it, “Abrams could stand on a dime, give you change, and box your ears off.” His only real weaknesses were a lack of power and a susceptibility to cuts.

In 1941 Abrams joined the Navy at the behest of former heavyweight champion Gene Tunney, now a Lieutenant Commander, and was stationed in Jacksonville, Florida, where he taught physical fitness to soldiers. That same year, after wins over Jimmy Leto and Coley Welch, Abrams was also ranked number one in the world among middleweights by Ring Magazine. No sooner did Abrams reach this goal, however, than bad luck, one of many occupational hazards he faced as a prizefighter, threatened to topple him at every turn.

Since 1931, when Mickey Walker vacated his title, the middleweight championship had been in splintered disarray. The European Boxing Union, the New York State Athletic Commission, and the National Boxing Association, like the dysfunctional Alphabet Soup Groups of today, needed counseling when it came to agreeing on a middleweight champion. At times, three different fighters laid claim to the title simultaneously, and when Ken Overlin won the NYSAC version of the championship by slapping around Ceferino Garcia in 1940, Abrams was faced with the first in a series of misfortunes that would blacken his career.

With Abrams and Overlin both managed by the same man, Chris Dundee, a shot at the New York portion of the title was impossible. “Say I’d risk it to see my two boys win,” Dundee would say, with levity, to the Miami News. “How would that be—Overlin against Abrams for the entire middleweight championship? I’d have to work in Ken’s corner one round and Georgie’s the next. Gosh, I’d get dizzy running around the ring.”

On the other hand, Tony Zale, NBA champion, was considered a regional fighter at the time, and his management, particularly Art Winch, was leery of dealing with Madison Square Garden Mephistopheles Mike Jacobs. For Abrams, cross-purposes surfaced again when Billy Soose defeated Overlin for the title on May 9, 1941. Soose, who had already been schooled by Abrams twice, saw no pressing reason to give the man they called Georgie a chance at the crown. The best Abrams could get was a non-title 10-rounder against the reigning champion, who put his short spell at Penn State to good use by insisting on an over-the-weight bout.

On July 30, 1941, Abrams, on furlough from his stint in the Navy, put the hex on Soose for the third time in as many starts, scoring a lopsided decision at Madison Square Garden and earning the designation of uncrowned champion from sports writers across the country. Eventually, Soose would relinquish his middleweight title to move up to light heavyweight, although perhaps the prospect of facing Abrams for a fourth time seemed as unappealing to Soose as guzzling a pint of castor oil.

With Soose making a clean getaway, the path was clear for Abrams to meet Tony Zale for the undisputed middleweight championship of the world. After receiving the imprimatur of both the

NYSAC and the NBA, and with Winch coming to hush-hush terms with Mike Jacobs, the stage was set to crown the first undisputed middleweight champion in over a decade.

Tony Zale, whose reputation as a pitiless brawler had been thus far confined to Chicago and Wisconsin, was an unknown quantity to the Broadway Smart Set and entered the ring as a 7 to 5 underdog. It was his desperate battle with Abrams, in fact, that earned him coast-to-coast fame. On November 28, 1941, nearly 10,000 fans gathered at Madison Square Garden to see Abrams drop Zale like a burlap sack full of submarine rivets within a minute of the opening bell. But Fate, the wicked stepmother, stepped in once again to give Abrams the works. In the 2nd round, Abrams took a thumb in the eye that caused hemorrhaging, and from that point on he fought through a swirling film of darkness. “He thumbed me,” he said years later, “and I was half-blind the rest of the fight, but I’m not crying. I never cried and it’s too late to start now.”

Zale and Abrams went on to hammer each other relentlessly over the next 45 minutes in a fight Meyer Ackerman of *The Ring* called “15 rounds of blazing warfare that equaled anything in ferocity that historic middleweight battles down through the annals can offer.” Concentrating on wicked hooks to the body and straight rights to the heart — a technique long since forgotten — Zale pounded out welts on Abrams that could be seen from the cheap seats. When Abrams began to drop his hands, Zale would switch his attack to the head. With his vision halved, Abrams stood his ground and fought back as if his life depended on it. In a way, it did: This was the only title shot Abrams would receive in a career that would last over a decade. It was a remarkable display of bravery. “By the fourth round the eye was shut tight,” wrote Stanley Weston. “He was literally half-blind. It took every drop of his extraordinary skill and courage to still be on his feet when the bell ended round 15...”

Even with his right eye virtually useless, Abrams soaked up everything Zale threw at him and roared back, nearly stopping the champion in the 8th round with an overhand right that caught Zale square on the jaw. “Zale stiffened in his tracks,” reported *The Ring*, “but instead of going down, wobbled unsteadily around the ring while Georgie opened a cross fire attack that was as vicious in its intent as any seen in a Garden ring.” But few fighters ever lived up to their nicknames the way Zale, “The Man of Steel,” did, and he survived the onslaught long enough to be saved by the bell. Zale recovered during the rest period, continued hurling punches hard as brickbats, and earned a unanimous decision that exhausted all who witnessed it.

After the fight, Abrams was rushed to Polyclinic Hospital where doctors told Abrams that his right eye would have to be surgically removed to avoid the possibility of its infecting the left, but Abrams, with his mother by his side, refused the operation and took his chances. It would be one of the few instances of good fortune in his career. Abrams spent weeks convalescing and miraculously recovered from his injury.

Six months passed before Abrams fought again, notching a decision over former NBA title challenger Steve Mamakos in May 1942, and when Zale pulled out of a rematch scheduled for August, Abrams could only shrug. Then the Navy furloughs ceased, and Abrams, along with hundreds of thousands of other young men in a hurry, disappeared into the smoke of World War II.

Four years later, Abrams returned to the ring, but after a few tune-up bouts (including an unexpected draw against undistinguished Jimmy Mandell) it was clear that the man they called Georgie would never be the same. Like Willie Mosconi or The Gibsons, inches — fractions of inches, to be exact — were crucial to his game. Even when Abrams, as a 3-1 underdog, nicked a close decision over Bronx blockbuster Steve Belloise on August 23, 1946, it was obvious that his timing was off and his supernatural ability to avoid punishment seemed diminished. But Abrams was determined to win the

middleweight title, and his narrow decision over Belloise thrust him back into the middleweight ratings.

Next Abrams faced pied noir superstar Marcel Cerdan, “The Casablanca Clouter,” muse to Edith Piaf and cafe society VIP. Easily one of the greatest European fighters ever to lace on gloves, Cerdan entered his bout at Madison Square Garden with a 97-2 record, 56 knockouts, the French middleweight title, and the kind of Continental fame usually reserved for brooding film stars and wall-eyed philosophers. Both of his losses up to that point, it should be noted, had been via disqualification. On December 6, 1946, Georgie Abrams, still only 28 years old, was determined to play gate crasher against Cerdan, who was making his American debut.

But somewhere on the roiling war seas Abrams had lost his timing and his precision footwork, and when Cerdan stormed out of his corner at the sound of the opening bell to set a harrowing pace, Abrams could not elude him and he was forced to swap punches with a man practically born to go toe-to-toe. In a bout the United Press called “10 rounds of savage fighting,” Cerdan and Abrams ripped into each other with a zest bordering on sadistic. Within five minutes, Abrams was cut over his delicate right eye, and trying to hold off the onrushing Cerdan in the ring became that much harder. Time Magazine compared Cerdan to a Normandy windmill; The New York Times, to a cyclone. In round six, Abrams offered the boxing equivalent of quid pro quo, ripping a gash over the left brow of the swashbuckling French idol. Both fighters landed big shots, Cerdan churning punches to the body and Abrams working his jab and straight rights.

“Even when the grueling pace began to tell, and he showed signs of tiring during the middle rounds,” wrote Jersey Jones, “Cerdan continued to bore forward, chin hunched behind shoulders, both arms pumping away ceaselessly.” Just when Cerdan appeared ready to assume control, Abrams scored with a spectacular left hook in the 8th that rocked an exhausted Cerdan on his heels and left him staggering around the ring like a man who had spent too much time at the hookah. By the end of the round, both fighters were spent, but it was Cerdan who scored a knockdown for a short count in the 9th, and it was Cerdan who closed the fight as he had opened it: like a sirocco. “Cerdan continued his furious assault in the tenth,” reported Jones, “but Abrams, near exhaustion, and with a nasty gash over his right eye bleeding profusely, fought back with as courageous an exhibition as Garden fans have seen.”

When the bell rang to end the bout, the crowd of nearly 17,000 feverish spectators erupted. In those days a supplemental points system was used in case of draws, and Cerdan earned the nod on that basis when two judges scored the fight 5-5 in rounds. Referee Ruby Goldstein turned in a strange 6-2-2 vote in favor of Cerdan, and just like that, Abrams, bruised and bloody, became an old fighter in the eyes of the press. And perhaps to himself. Soon, Abrams, a gifted illustrator who would go on to have an exhibition of his paintings mounted in New York City, was talking about a postfight career as an artist.

But a few months after the disappointing loss to Cerdan, Abrams was back in the ring, easily outboxing Anton Raadik in Chicago. Then, in order to keep himself in the mix, Abrams accepted a bout with the hottest name in boxing: newly crowned welterweight champion Sugar Ray Robinson. They met on May 16, 1947, in Madison Square Garden. Unfortunately for Abrams, misfortune continued to stalk him up and down Eighth Avenue. Realizing that Sugar Ray was too quick to outbox, Abrams bored in on Robinson and turned the bout into a close quarters brawl. Abrams mauled Robinson on the inside and used his entire repertoire of defensive trick to keep the future legend off-balance. Robinson was so frustrated, in fact, that he lost two rounds for low blows and was warned once for hitting on the break. He also suffered two cuts during the bout. Somehow, Robinson, 77-1-1 at the time, managed to squeak by with a split decision. The Associated Press scored the bout

6-3-1 in favor of Abrams and the United Press had Abrams ahead 6-4. “Robinson,” the AP reported, “wound up with two cut eyes and a solid cuffing about the head, as well as the decision.”

“Funny thing,” Abrams recalled years later, “Robinson was one of the easiest fights I ever had. Chris told me not to go near him in the last round — that I had it won anyway. But I ploughed in and had my best round.” Boos were not something Sugar Ray Robinson was accustomed to hearing, but that night, once the verdict in his favor was announced, the crowd exploded in a cacophony of hisses, cat calls, and jeers. A frustrated Abrams would later call for the invention of some kind of machine to count punches during a fight, anticipating Compubox by nearly 40 years.

Abrams must have sensed the end was near, and when Steve Belloise demolished him in five brutal rounds two months later, he must have been certain. He could not replace the four years he had lost. Although his dream of becoming champion drifted further out of reach with each passing day, Abrams continued to fight. He lost a majority decision to Fred Apostoli in San Francisco despite scoring the only knockdown of the fight, and when Robinson withdrew from their scheduled rematch in Chicago, Abrams might have been tempted to throw in the towel there and then out of sheer frustration. Instead, he was embarrassed by late substitute Anton Raadik, whom Abrams had toyed with only a year earlier. Raadik, the crude but crushing puncher from Estonia, floored Abrams three times and battered him into submission for a gory 10th round TKO. “I’m going to retire him,” Chris Dundee said of Abrams immediately after the Raadik disaster. “He’s fought his last fight. I’ve got his contract and he can’t fight without me.” Georgie Abrams, at 29, was through.

Abrams finished his career with a record of 49-10-4, but post-WW II he was a dismal 4-5-1. Prior to his four-year layoff, Abrams had reversed all but one of his losses. Only Tony Zale, who withdrew from a scheduled rematch with Abrams in 1942, managed to avoid having Abrams even the score.

Over the next thirty years, Abrams struggled with the restlessness that often afflicts fighters in retirement. Nothing seemed to give him purpose. His original plan—life as an illustrator or an artist ala Mickey Walker—was unsuccessful, and Abrams bounced from portraitist to salesman to saloonkeeper. From time to time he picked up some pocket money as a referee. In the late 1950s Abrams left Brooklyn and moved to Florida, where he painted portraits on the beach, became a doorman in Miami, and parked cars for the Fontainebleau Hotel. He was twice divorced. At the Fontainebleau, Abrams palled around with another ex-fighter at loose ends, Beau Jack, who ran a shoeshine stand in the hotel lobby.

By the 1970s, Abrams was living in Las Vegas, traditionally the last stop for forgotten pugs, and working as a security guard at the Tropicana, where he remained well into his sixties, adrift among the high rollers, washouts, and coolers, the roulette wheels, and blackjack tables, until a heart attack forced him to retire. In 1984 Abrams married his third wife, Vicki Lee, who once sang for Tommy Dorsey.

When Alzheimer’s set in late in his life, Abrams rode his bicycle aimlessly up and down the streets of Sin City — Flamingo, perhaps, Paradise, maybe, Desert Inn Road. At times, he could not recall his own name.

The man they called Georgie, who might have become middleweight champion of the world with a few breaks here or there, died in Sunrise Hospital on June 30, 1994.

Forty years after his last fight, Abrams still seemed wistful about his unfulfilled career. “Oh boy, do I miss the ring,” he told Cal Turner in 1988. “Ask any old fighter.”

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