

ALVARO “YAQUI” LOPEZ: THE ZACATECAS MATADOR

By Austin Killeen



Sitting in the comfort of Yaqui’s living room, I asked if he could relate a story from his early childhood. I was curious how this legendary contender from the 70’s and 80’s got his start in boxing. “I was born in Zacatecas, which is located in north central Mexico. My home was a couple of small rooms beneath a bull ring in the center of town.” That wasn’t the type of ring I was thinking of when I asked my question, but I wasn’t about to stop such an imposing figure.

Apparently, there were bull fights every Sunday at the stadium, but they were canceled one day due to rain. Noticing that two bulls had been left in the ring the following morning, Yaqui decided to forego school and launch his career as a matador. Borrowing a cape from a worker at the bull ring, Zacatecas’ newest matador approached one of the bulls. Little Alvaro picked the wrong bull, as it had considerably more experience than the aspiring 12 year old. It didn’t take the bull long to penetrate Yaqui’s right shin with one of its horns. Judging from the scars he showed me, commemorating his debut in the arena, all the blood in the sand belonged to the young matador. It appears that hiding behind his cape didn’t fool the more experienced bull. You’ll win a lot of bar bets, knowing that Yaqui was TKO’d his first time in the ring.

“When my mother and father found out what happened they decided on a change of scenery. They didn’t want me playing with the bulls. So we moved to Linden, California about 10 miles from Stockton (Yaqui was an only child). I went to school for six months, but didn’t like it. “Everybody made fun of me, my English was very poor.” I can’t imagine making fun of even a “little Yaqui”; apparently school insurance was very inexpensive.

As a result, Yaqui started working in the fields around the Stockton area, driving farm equipment and picking fruit. One day, a friend asked Lopez if he would give him a ride to his girlfriend’s house. This would prove to be a life changing experience for the retired matador. Yaqui discovered his pal’s girlfriend had a beautiful sister named Beatrice. It didn’t take long for Lopez to realize he was in love. For the next four years Beatrice and Yaqui dated, but quality time together was a scarce commodity. Beatrice’s mother or father would usually chaperon the young lovers on their dates. At age 21 Yaqui took Beatrice as his wife. I forgot to ask if any of her family members accompanied them on their honeymoon.

By now I knew of his failed attempt in the bull ring and the love of his life, but nothing of his introduction to boxing. Attempting to get back to the purpose of the interview, I asked the obvious question: how was he introduced to the squared circle? “My girlfriend Beatrice’s father, Jack Cruz, was a boxing promoter in the Stockton area.” This quickly led to Alvaro’s entrance into amateur competition where he compiled a record of 13 and 3. When asked if he was a banger in the amateurs, he laughed. “They tried to get me to jab, move side-to-side, but you just want to go.” Noticing the length of his arms, I asked if we could measure up. I certainly have a decent arm length but one of Yaqui’s arms was over 4” longer than mine. Throughout his amateur and pro career Alvaro would voluntarily give up his incredible reach advantage, preferring to work on the inside.

When I asked Yaqui if his nickname was the result of his Native American heritage, he replied “no”. “My future father-in-law had me fight for the Diamond Belt Championship in Eureka, California. I knocked the champion out to win the title. There were a lot of Indians in the crowd and one of them asked Jack Cruz if I was Indian. When Jack said yes, he wanted to know what tribe. He replied Yaqui because that’s all he could think of. I’m Mexican, with no Indian blood in me.” That night,

Alvaro not only won an amateur title, but he also knocked out the defending champ and got a moniker he would be known by for the rest of his life.

He turned pro against the infamous Herman Hampton, best known for having both his first and last names begin with the same letter. But unlike most prospects that are carefully matched to ensure lots of wins, mostly by stoppage, young Alvaro was matched tough. In his fourth pro bout he lost an eight round decision to Jesse Burnett, a future world contender in his own right. Ultimately they would split four bouts over the next six years.

Bouncing back from his first pro setback, Lopez won five in a row, four by stoppage. In March of 73' Alvaro traveled to Seattle, Washington to face West Coast gatekeeper Al Bolden. Like Jesse Burnett, Bolden's list of opponents included world champs and top contenders. After ten hard rounds, Yaqui would have a second loss on his record. "We were the walkout bout for Boone Kirkman. I got knock downed in the first round and the people started walking out. I got up and knocked down Bolden in the second round. By the end of the fight we had each scored three knock downs. The people started throwing money into the ring; both bills and coins. We got on our knees and started picking it up. Back in the dressing room we counted \$785 dollars, plus I got \$500 for the fight itself."

He was now 8 and 2 with 6 KO's, but more importantly he was learning his craft thanks to his father-in-law's tough selection of opponents. Over the next two and a half years Yaqui would ring up eighteen straight wins, half by stoppage, and capture the California State Light Heavyweight Title. His victims included Hildo Silva (3), Ron Wilson (2), Al Bolden, Andy Kendall, Willie Warren, Joe Cokes, Terry Lee and Mike Quarry. This impressive streak resulted in Lopez being ranked 2nd in the world by Ring Magazine.



I asked Yaqui when he first realized that he was pretty good at this and could make a living boxing. He responded; "When I knocked out the number 4 ranked contender Andy Kendall in five rounds, I think I got a chance to make it." The Kendall bout was in the mist of his win streak and ascent up the Ring Magazine ratings, so he must have been right.

On July 5, 1975, Lopez put his state title and win streak on the line in a rematch with Jesse Burnett at the Stockton Civic Auditorium. Burnett won the first two rounds landing quick combinations to the head. In the third round, Lopez picked up the action somewhat, but continued missing with wild punches. In the fourth round, Yaqui started finding the range and appeared to have Jesse in a little trouble after a good flurry. Burnett rallied in the fifth round, getting the best of the infighting in a relatively lackluster round.

In the next two rounds the momentum seemed to shift in favor of Alvaro, although neither seemed to be in any trouble at this stage of the fight. The eighth stanza was the best action round of the fight. Lopez appeared to have Burnett in trouble with counter punches to the body when he trapped his opponent on the ropes.

The champ appeared to come on strong during the next two stanzas, whereas the tiring challenger appeared hurt from stinging lefts and rights. In the eleventh and twelfth rounds, Burnett employed an effective defense to hold off Yaqui's barrages. At the final bell both combatants appeared weary, having left everything in the ring. The hometown crowd was surprised when Burnett captured a majority decision in Lopez's back yard. The win streak was over and Burnett was now 2 and 0 against Yaqui.

Just two months after losing his state title, Lopez was back in the ring with his crafty nemesis. The bout was a war from start to finish, with Burnett opening a cut over Yaqui's right eye in the first round. The cut would prove to be a problem for the challenger throughout the bout. Once again the LA visitor would build an early lead after three rounds. Although looking much sharper offensively than in their last fight, Alvaro never seem to figure out an answer to Jesse's stinging, cobra like left jabs. In the sixth round, the visitor was penalized a point for a low blow. This seemed to get the hometown boy to shift into a higher gear. The seventh was Lopez' best of the fight, but Burnett answered with his own rally in the eighth, only to have Yaqui come back in the ninth. During the next two rounds, momentum continued to shift back and forth between the bitter rivals. The twelfth was the exclamation point to an outstanding fight where the fans more than received their money's worth. The verdict was a split decision and the title was once again in the possession of the Stockton lad. The series was now 2 to 1 favor of Burnett, but Lopez had just broken serve.

Four more wins later, Yaqui was awarded the prize he was seeking: a shot at the Light Heavyweight Championship of the World. He would be facing the defending WBC champ, John Conteh, in a 15 round bout in Copenhagen, Denmark on October 9, 1976. The early rounds were dominated by the excellent left jab of Conteh. The American never seemed to find his stride and was unable to establish a body attack. "He was a better fighter than me. I think we put up a good show, but I never felt right since I arrived." Lopez's training in Denmark was disrupted when his equipment failed to turn up. In spite of the prefight problems the challenger faced, the bout was fought at a fast pace and both combatants were drained by fight's end.

Returning to America, Yaqui had eight fights over the next eight months, going 7 and 1 with all his wins coming early. His lone setback was to Lonnie Bennett on cuts. This resulted in his second opportunity at the big prize versus defending champion Victor Galindez in Rome, Italy. Unlike the Conteh fight, the quick handed Lopez showed an excellent body attack which was overwhelming his opponent.

As for the fight itself, Lopez did everything needed to win the title, except score the bout. Unfortunately for the Stockton native, that was probably the only way he would have won the title. When the verdict was announced, Galindez was awarded an unpopular but close unanimous fifteen round decision. Yaqui controlled the action throughout the fight with an excellent left jab that the champ seemingly had no answer for. He was clearly the crowd favorite as they chanted "Lopez, Lopez" throughout the match. The bull-like Galindez was effective when he threw his heavy handed combinations but appeared to not have done this enough. Throughout the bout, Victor rapidly struck Alvaro with rabbit punches, which the referee apparently didn't see. Amazingly, in the seventh round, he warned Lopez for a low blow. It was nice to see the WBA was giving work to the sight impaired. Interestingly, Jerry Quarry was one of the ringside announcers. Although I didn't always agree with his assessment of the fight, his vocabulary and commentary were excellent.

In typical Lopez fashion, he returned to California and scored three KO's to solidify his ranking as the top challenger in the light heavyweight division. This resulted in a match with hard hitting Mike Rossman in Madison Square Garden Felt Form. On paper, it looked like guaranteed fireworks and the fight was all of that and more. If you could only see one Yaqui Lopez fight, this would be the one.

From the opening bell both boxers were throwing bombs in an attempt to end it early. By the end of the first round the visitor from the West Coast was bleeding over both eyes. The rangy



Lopez had a significant advantage in both height and reach, but seemed content to work on the inside. This worked well for the Jewish Bomber as he was able to unload his own combinations to the body and head of Alvaro. The ringside announcers, Cus D'Amato and Don Dunphy were having their own verbal exchange while calling the fight. Cus felt that Rossman, who was already promised a shot at the title, would gain valuable experience in facing Lopez. Dunphy questioned the wisdom of Rossman's brain trust for taking on such a dangerous opponent.

Although Yaqui was more than holding his own, his corner was unable to stop the cuts from bleeding between rounds. Dunphy was concerned that the fight would be stopped due to the bleeding of the West Coast visitor. In the sixth, Lopez, with his quick hand speed, was landing heavy combination to both the head and body of the New Jersey native. It appeared Rossman was about to test the canvas, when he was given a reprieve by referee Petey Vella. The third man administered an illegal standing eight count over Rossman, stopping Lopez's assault. Saved by the bell, Rossman staggered back to his corner, only to have his father ask the doctor to stop the bout. The elder Rossman's compassion might have saved his son's career. As for Lopez, he was awarded a second shot at Victor Galindez's title.

Except for the location of the fight in Italy, Viareggio Sports Hall instead of Rome, Galindez/Lopez II was much like their first fight. The aggressiveness of Lopez made him a favorite with the fans. It was a question of the heavy combinations of Galindez versus the rapid-fire left jabs of Lopez. The American took the initiative in the first round and never gave up. He was the aggressor, harassing Galindez despite a punishing attack by the champ. By the eleventh round the Argentinean's left eye was closed, to the delight of the partisan challenger's crowd. Once again after fifteen rounds, Galindez was awarded a close but unanimous decision. As in their previous bout in Rome, the verdict was met with a chorus of boos. For the disappointed challenger, the count was now zero for three in title fights.

Returning to the friendly confines of Stockton, California, Yaqui hooked up with familiar adversary Jesse Burnett for the fourth time. Once again, the meeting proved to be one of the best fights of the year. Could their meetings turn out any other way? Lopez forced the match from the opening bell, with Burnett countering his aggressiveness. In trying to cut the ring on Burnett, Alvaro had to deal with his adversary's excellent left jab.

In the third round, Yaqui was stopped in his tracks from a low blow, but finished the round strong. In the sixth, the pride of Stockton landed a left hook than nearly dropped Burnett. In the eighth, Lopez was cut on the bridge of his nose; the bloody split would be a factor in the remainder of the fight. Inspired by the sight of his opponent's blood, Burnett staged a rally and seemingly appeared to be leading at the end of twelve rounds. In the thirteen, the tide shifted once again, with Lopez' furious body attack leaving Burnett hanging on at the bell.

The final two rounds found both boxers bloodied and exhausted but still seeking victory in a brutal fight. Lopez appeared to carry the fourteenth and the final round saw the fans on their feet cheering both combatants' efforts. Left hooks to the head appeared to favor Yaqui in the fifteenth. Scores of 144-142, 145-141, and 146-146 awarded Alvaro a majority decision and evened the series at 2 and 2.

Yaqui's win resulted in a trip across the country to face a rising Philly star, Matthew Franklin at the Philadelphia Spectrum. Once again it would be an amazing performance ending in bitter disappointment. For the record, the match was for the North American Boxing Federation Light Heavyweight Title and scheduled for twelve rounds.

Surprisingly the bout turned out to be more of a tactical chess match, with both fighters operating behind strong left jabs. Yaqui started slowly, allowing Franklin to gain an early lead over the first

three rounds. In the third, the visitor was rocked by powerful left hook. While Alvaro's legs were doing funny things, Matthew failed to follow up his obvious advantage. Instead, he pumped both arms in the air allowing his dangerous adversary time to recover. The hometown boxer paid for his foolish behavior, as Lopez won the 4th. Over the next three rounds the fight became more competitive, but Lopez's left eye started seeping claret in the seventh. In the eighth, Lopez exploded with an overhand right and had a big round. In the ninth Yaqui's right eye started to bleed as well as swell shut. Hampered by poor vision, Lopez lost the tenth as well. At the end of the eleventh Franklin exploded an overhand right, causing Lopez' left eye to pour blood. Referee Frank Capcino immediately waved his arms to signal the end of the bout.

Not easily discouraged, the unsinkable Zacatecas matador won six of his next seven bouts. His only setback was a decision to James Scott at Rahway State Prison in New Jersey. Scott would probably be regarded as the home town boy as he would be residing inside the prison walls for the next 30 to 40 years. Maintaining a furious pace in the nationally televised bout, the prison yard's favorite inmate captured a unanimous decision. Many of boxing's prognosticators were now writing Yaqui off as a shot fighter.

In July of 1980, Alvaro was awarded his fourth shot at the light heavyweight crown against Matthew Saad Muhammad, formerly known as Matthew Franklin. If his career was finished, somebody forgot to show the memo to Lopez. The aggressor from the opening bell, the Stockton banger had a commanding lead after seven rounds. The eighth round would prove to be Ring Magazine's round of the year. Lopez landed over 20 unanswered punches, but somehow Matthew remained upright. In the ninth it appeared that Yaqui had punched himself out. It looked like a replay of DeMarco/Basilio II, with Lopez in the ill fated roll of DeMarco. The dream ended for the exhausted pride of Stockton in the fourteenth round. Like DeMarco/Basilio II, it would be selected as Ring Magazine's fight of the year, an award few would contest.



Three months later, Yaqui was back in the ring against one of boxing's newest stars Michael Spinks. Spinks was one of the stars of the 1976 Olympics, having won a gold medal. Sadly, it looked to be an often played out script of a rising prospect against a fading veteran with name value. As in his last fight, Lopez exploded from his corner surprising the younger Spinks. In spite of his best intentions, the Olympic hero found himself behind in the fight after six action packed rounds. Alvaro's blistering combination to the head and body seemed to be setting the stage for an amazing upset. But it was not to be, a powerful left hook ended Yaqui's dream of an upset in the seventh. The referee stopped the proceedings to protect the Stockton veteran from further punishment.

Lopez would have sixteen more bouts over the next three and a half years including a devastating stoppage of top prospect Tony Mundine in Australia. However twelve years competing against boxing's elite had taken its toll and Yaqui wisely retired after losing a split decision to a fighter he defeated five years earlier.

In interviewing Yaqui, I was impressed with his intelligence. Although his formal schooling was limited, if given the opportunity I have no doubt that he could have been a doctor. In the ring he was a hurricane but outside he's a humble man. He places great importance on loyalty, and his career illustrates it. He started boxing under the guidance of his future father-in-law, Jack Cruz. Along with Benny Casing (trainer/cutman), Danny Dagampat (trainer), Frank and Joe Guzman (equipment/training camps) and Hank Pericle (general fitness) guided Lopez's career both amateur

and pro. Unlike other pros that change their brain trust more often than their underwear, Alvaro remained loyal to these people his entire career. There was no written contract, just a hand shake between friends. It was a relationship based on trust and its sum proved to be greater than its parts.

When his father-in-law's health started to decline, Yaqui refused to have his friend and mentor placed in a nursing home. He made a daily trip to Jack's home to take care of his physical needs; food, clothing, doctor visits and health issues. It was important that his father-in-law not be robbed of his dignity in his final months.

Alvaro's greatest challenge was the birth of his granddaughter Gabriela. Her biological parents were both addicted to crystal meth and the state placed the child in foster care. Devastated, Yaqui and Beatrice petitioned the court to legally adopt their granddaughter. After three months, the court going along with the wishes of his son and his girlfriend, granted the Lopez's request. The state of California, after all this time, finally did an evaluation of the baby; she was diagnosed with Cerebral Palsy.

Starting with massages three times a day, the loving grandparents worked tirelessly to meet the baby's needs. I met soon to be 4 year old Gabriela while doing this interview and her progress is remarkable. She's learned to sign, recognizing over twenty words and can walk without assistance. She's had ear and eye surgery to improve both her hearing and sight. She is scheduled to have a throat operation which may allow her the gift of speech. Yaqui's son and his ex-girlfriend are both in recovery and play a loving role in their child's life.

Today Yaqui runs a successful gym in Stockton, with over fifty amateur boxers participating. In addition, he runs a special program called "The Peace Keepers" for at risk kids who have a history of gang involvement. When they finish their training for the day, they have mandatory classes in life skills. The instructor is Yaqui's son. Who better to teach them that mistakes in life can be corrected, and that the future is in their own hands?

Yaqui and Beatrice are beautiful people who give so much to the community. If there's a heaven then they surely have first class accommodations and a direct flight to the pearly gates.

