The Catastrophist: The Troubled World of Don Jordan

by Carlos Acevedo

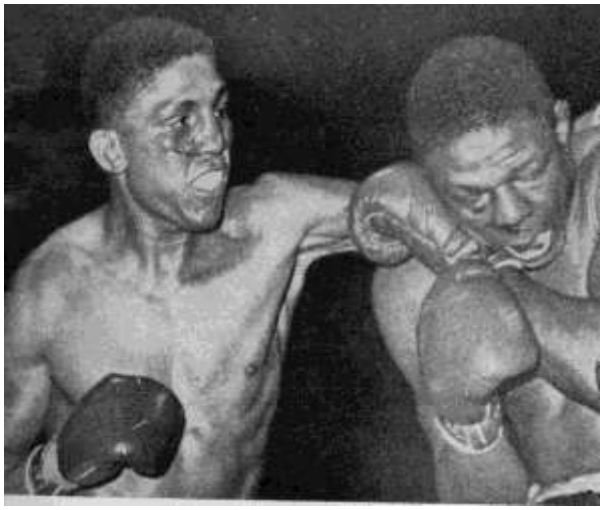
"Chaos" is the only suitable word to describe the career of Don Jordan. Fifty years after he first won the welterweight title, Jordan remains a mystery without a solution. Not only did Jordan bewilder spectators with his desultory performances, he also mystified trainers, sports writers, police officers, mobsters, and historians, few of whom have bothered to trace a career that reads more like a case study than the narrative of a boxer. Welterweight champion only long enough to make two defenses and accidentally TKO nefarious Frankie Carbo, Jordan left behind a legacy as befuddling as that of Iron Eyes Cody or D.B. Cooper. Like many fighters in the 1950s, Jordan was dogged by ties to mobsters, but it was his own instability that ultimately led to his spectacular crash.

Donald Lee Jordan was born on June 22, 1934, in Los Angeles to a sprawling family estimated to have had anywhere from between 18 to 22 children. Son of a former amateur boxer, Jordan revealed his wild side early, running with street gangs as a teenager and spending time in various reformatories. " I wasn't a tough kid," Jordan once told Lee Greene. "I was real quiet. I just had one big fault. I liked to fight." His nickname, "Geronimo," was earned during his stint gang banging in the Russian Flats section of Boyle Heights in East L.A. Jordan dropped out of high school, married at age sixteen, and decided to put his fists to better use.

After a short stint in the amateurs, Jordan turned pro as a lightweight in California in 1953. A converted southpaw with a snappy jab and a busy left hook, Jordan won the State lightweight title less than two years after his debut, defeating Joe Miceli, Art Ramponi and former champion Lauro Salas on his way to a 20-2 record.

In 1955 Jordan lost two decisions to buzzsaw Art Aragon, and subsequently fell into a slump, dropping six of his next twelve fights. Although he managed to beat another ex-champion in faded Paddy Demarco, Jordan lost decisions to Jimmy Carter, Orlando Zulueta, Joey Lopes, LC Morgan, and, for the California State welterweight title, Charley "Tombstone" Smith. A slew of knockover fights in Mexico, where his fluent Spanish and ring finesse made him a popular draw, put Jordan back on track, and when he returned to Los Angeles he hooked up with a used car salesman named Don Nesseth, who turned Jordan over to trainer Eddie Futch and Jackie McCoy for development. An improved Jordan soon ran off a hot streak that included decisions over Isaac Logart and Gaspar Ortega.

Even with his career gathering momentum, Jordan was unable to curb his reckless nature. Bad habits, the kind that sabotage athletic pursuits, were modus vivendi for Jordan. "Not only did Jordan drink but he was a chain cigarette smoker," recalled Jackie McCoy. "Not many fighters do that. This guy never stopped smoking. But somehow he won the welterweight title." Jordan, however, did not draw the line at Martinis and Marlboros. In one of the strangest stories to ever come across police blotters involving a boxer, Jordan was arrested on November 8, 1958, for firing arrows from a 60-inch target bow at two women after a dispute. Jordan was booked for assault with a deadly weapon. A belligerent and obviously blotto Jordan could easily have been charged with resisting arrest as well. "While being questioned by detectives," reported The Los Angeles Times, "Jordan tried to grab the bow and arrow after threatening to shoot the officers and a newspaper reporter-photographer team." Charges were later dropped, but in time other problems, the kind endemic to boxing in the 1950s, would arise.



Jordan (left) batters champion Akins. Photo courtesy of Antiquities of the Prize Ring.

When Nesseth asked Jackie Leonard, matchmaker at the Hollywood Legion, to approach IBC viceroy Truman Gibson for big fight exposure for Jordan, he unknowingly set off a chain of events that would eventually change the course of boxing history. No sooner was Gibson in the mix than Jordan was matched up with rugged Virgil Akins for a shot at the welterweight championship. Akins, who won the vacant title by annihilating Vince Martinez in 1958, would be making his first defense against Jordan. Hard-punching "Honeybear" was considered "inconsistent," one of several euphemisms tossed around boxing in the 1950s, but as a fighter with friends in low places, it is nearly impossible to say how much of his hit-and-miss career was legitimate and how much was not. On December 4, 1958, Jordan plastered the 3-1 favorite over 15 dirty rounds before 7,344 fans at the Olympic Auditorium to win the welterweight championship. His unexpected victory would have dramatic repercussions.

It is hard to imagine someone as erratic as Jordan–who was arrested for possession of marijuana only three weeks after winning the world title–causing the downfall of Frankie Carbo, but truth, as they say, is stranger than fiction. When Nesseth refused to give Carbo a "cut" of Jordan after the Akins match, "Mr. Gray," along with malignant sidekick Blinky Palermo, resorted to threats. Threats gave way to action, and Jackie Leonard, mistakenly thought by Carbo to be a willing go-between for his underworld shenanigans with Jordan, was beaten senseless by unknown assailants for taking his jitters to authorities. Several arrests, indictments, and trials later, Carbo and Palermo were convicted of conspiracy and extortion for their schemes involving Jordan, and were each sentenced to long bids in prison. The mob stranglehold on boxing had been loosened, courtesy of a prizefighter for whom collateral damage was merely second nature. Even as Carbo and Palermo stewed on the witness stand, Jordan was partying with Mickey Cohen, posterboy of L.A. gangster chic, and drawing the enraged scrutiny of the California State Athletic Commission.

In 1959 Jordan defeated Akins in a rematch at the Kiel Auditorium in St. Louis and then made his second–and last–title defense a few months later against former sparring partner Denny Moyer in a dull and sparsely attended bout in Portland. For the Moyer fight Jordan, who often trained like a man with hypersomnia, weighed in at 148 and ½ pounds and had to sweat down to the limit. "We never knew what kind of shape he would be for a fight," Jackie McCoy told Dave Anderson. "Eddie Futch used to train him. When he was getting ready for a fight with Gaspar Ortega he came down with a terrible cold. I thought we should call off the fight, but Futch said, 'No, he might show up in worse shape.' Jordan, amazingly, finished strong and won."

For the next few months Jordan alternated between night crawling through Los Angeles, battling his now ex-wife Stella in court, and testifying to grand juries about racketeers. Finally, the impulsive Jordan decided to make his own career moves. Against the advice of his managers–and with McCoy seeing his cut reduced to training fees only–Jordan went on a short winter tour of South America, where unknown Luis Federico Thompson promptly knocked him out in Argentina. Jordan blamed his first stoppage loss on a mysterious "virus" that might actually have been a combination of mononucleosis and Jake Leg.

Humiliated, Jordan returned to Los Angeles to recover over the holidays. Before long, however, he found himself in one rumpus after another. First, he was suspended by the California State Athletic

Commission after refusing to appear for a physical without explanation; then he was arrested on a DWI charge after crashing into two parked cars; next Jack Urch of the Athletic Commission pointed the finger of suspicion directly at "The Geronimo Kid" by bluntly stating, "We want to know why Jordan persists on palling around with Mickey Cohen;" finally, Jordan incurred the wrath of the NBA when he preposterously agreed to a "tune-up" bout with journeyman Candy McFarland less than two weeks before a scheduled defense against Benny Paret. At odds with his brain trust and full of near-surrealist irrationality, Jordan turned down a $12,500 television date with Don Fullmer to face McFarland at Baltimore Stadium for under $1,400.

Paret (left) and Jordan exchange punches. Photo courtesy of Antiquities of the Prize Ring.

On May 16, 1960, after a rain delay of two days, McFarland, undistinguished but earnest, cuffed Jordan into a stupor over 10 rounds and copped an easy decision. "It was the best kind of work out I could have got," Jordan blithely told the press. Oddsmakers immediately installed him as a 3-1 underdog against Paret.

By this time Jordan was considered not only a "cheese champ," but serious trouble as well. Nevada state boxing commissioner Jim Deskin, vexed by the loose cannon about to step into the Las Vegas Convention Center, assigned a security detail of police detectives to stakeout the Jordan training camp. On May 27, 1960, in the first nationally televised bout from Las Vegas, Paret pounded Jordan over fifteen monotonous rounds. "As early as the fifth round…" reported Sports Illustrated, "it was clear that Don Jordan had lost everything but courage." And courage was not nearly enough for the 4,805 spectators who booed intermittently as Paret churned away at a champion who could have doubled as a Penitente that night.

Never one for damage control, Jordan compounded his troubles by signing over his entire $85,000 purse for the Paret bout to co-managers Jackie McCoy and Don Nesseth in order to hook up with Las Vegas-based hotel impresario Kirk Kerkorian. "I'd fight ten times for nothing to get rid of Nesseth," Jordan snarled. Kerkorian, a former amateur boxer, knew little about the labyrinthine world of prizefighting, and, it could be said, his signing of Jordan proved it. With lawyers hounding him for alimony payments, Jordan decided that he would need a little incentive to step into the ring and held promoters ransom for $2,000 in the dressing room. He got the payoff, but that was the last time Don Jordan had things his own way in the topsy-turvy world of boxing.

Over the next two years Jordan would hit the skids running and would win only 2 of his last 11 fights. The boxer with graceful footwork, snappy combinations, and a precision jab seemed to vanish overnight. Other than Carmen Basilio, Tony DeMarco, and Ludwig Lightburn, Jordan suffered his humiliating freefall at the hands of one middling pug after another. Finally, on October 5, 1962, Jordan hit bedrock after being "stopped" in the first round by Battling Torres at the Olympic Auditorium, where Jordan had won the welterweight title less than four years earlier. The California State Athletic Commission immediately suspected a fix and suspended him for life. Don Jordan, only 28 at the time of the Torres fiasco, never fought again. His final record stands at 51-23-1-1.

Today Don Jordan is all but forgotten. If he is remembered at all it is for the sudden tailspin that sent him crashing from welterweight champion to complete washout in less than two years. Why did such a talented boxer unravel so suddenly? Was it the drinking, the carousing, the smoking? Certainly other fighters—from Abe Attell to Harry Greb—burned candles at both ends without sputtering out so quickly. Did the strange virus he claimed was responsible for his loss to Luis Federico Thompson linger on and effect his performances? Or was it merely hard luck? The kind of luck a rough and tumble man like Jordan might believe was the only kind he could expect?

In 1973, over a decade removed from his short-lived and tumultuous heyday, Jordan earned more notoriety after a bizarre interview with Peter Heller. Akin to some of the jailhouse ramblings of Charles Manson, the former welterweight champion of the world claimed, among other things, to have been a paid assassin as a child in the Dominican Republic and to have been a factotum for the underworld throughout his career. One outlandish claim follows another until, finally, the question of veracity becomes moot. His answers are "true" insofar as they function as dark correlatives to his fractured psyche. "Winning the championship was the most awful experience of my life," Jordan told Heller. "Believe me, it was awful. It was not a thrill to me. I was involved in certain situations, activities not to my advantage, shall we say. I was involved in certain things; to win was not as thrilling as I thought it would be as a fighter. When I lost it I was happy. I was more happy losing it than winning it."

Boxers, like recently paroled felons, often have difficulty adjusting to the "outside" when their careers are over, and, in this respect, Jordan was no different. He struggled with alcoholism, divorced for a second time, and found it difficult to make a living. "I went from job to job," he told The Los Angeles Times, "I was a swamper in a produce market, a machinist in the shipyards and a carpet layer. I found there were more people in public against me than there were when I was fighting."

A few steady years working for Douglas Aircraft in Santa Monica were followed by a stint as a longshoreman in Wilmington. It was there, in the rugged waterfront district of Southern California, that Jordan was savagely beaten during a robbery on September 30, 1996. Two thugs attacked Jordan in broad daylight and left him for dead in a parking lot. Jordan lingered in a coma for nearly five months before dying on February 13, 1997. He was 62 years old. Two men suspected of the murder were later released due to insufficient evidence. His senseless and tragic death was a fitting exclamation point to the unruly life of a boxer who once muttered the bleakest of aphorisms: "But all man knows when he fights he must lose."

Carlos Acevedo has written several historical pieces on fighters over the last couple of years for various websites and magazines. They can be found on his website site The Cruelest Sport in the "Out of the Past" category. His work has appeared in Boxing Digest Magazine, Boxing World Magazine, MaxBoxing, and The Queensberry Rules, and has been featured on Fox Sports. He is a member of the Boxing Writers Association of America.