

# Brawls and Bruises: Gene Fullmer

By Mike Casey



Sugar Ray Robinson, for all his fistic brilliance, could be an insufferable prima donna during pre-fight negotiations. He haggled and demanded right up to the last minute and often pulled out if he couldn't get his own way. Opponents of the great man were united in slating him for his selfishness. It was a trait that particularly enraged Carmen Basilio and Gene Fullmer.

After his fourth and final fight with Robinson in 1961, Fullmer drew a line in the sand and vowed never to fight Ray again. Sure enough, there never was a fifth fight and Gene wasn't shy about letting rip and getting the Robinson bug out of his system. It was very much a case of, 'What's wrong with Robinson? How long have you got?'

"Throughout the training period, Robinson thinks up ways to ruin a good fight," Gene insisted. "When I fought him for the fourth time last March in Las Vegas, his demands were outlandish. Hours before the fight, one national wire servicer sent a story across the country that the fight was called off after Robinson said he would not climb into the ring against me unless it was increased in size from 16 to 18 feet inside the ropes.

"He made this demand when he knew it would be physically impossible to bring a new ring from Los Angeles (the nearest city to Vegas with an 18-foot ring) in time for the fight. Consequently the wire service reporter sent out a story saying that the fight had been called off.

"Previous to his demand for a larger ring, he complained about the referees, the gloves and even the color of the trunks.

"If Robinson is guilty of any sin, it's the sin of selfishness. He appears to have very little time for anybody but himself. He has caused considerable inconvenience to almost everybody he has dealt with in boxing. With him, it's me, me, me. His disregard for the other fellow is notorious in boxing. When a fighter is training to meet Robinson, he sits on a hot coal waiting for the first postponement."

So there you go. Fairly safe to assume that Gene and Ray weren't in the habit of meeting up for a coffee and having a natter about last night's football game.

## Charming

In that charmingly twisted language that only fighters can make sound sensible, Carmen Basilio once said of Gene Fullmer, "He did everything wrong, but he did it right."

Carmen knew what he meant and so did the rest of us. Even though cold logic so often takes a battering in the crazy world of boxing, we tend to stick with it as a measuring tool when confronted by those fighters who puzzle us. We assimilate the facts and figures and try to reach a logical conclusion.

But prizefighters constitute a very special group of men. They cannot be number crunched, packaged and neatly filed. They take pleasure, God bless them, in turning the natural order upside down and twisting it inside out.

Nobody befuddled us more back in the fifties and sixties than Gene Fullmer, the tough and bruising battler from West Jordan, Utah. It was as if Gene had watched the young Rocky Marciano and set his mind on becoming even more awkward, ungainly and downright contrary than Rocky.

In his early days as an unbeaten middleweight, Gene's auditions would make even the worldliest boxing people wince and reel in shock. They didn't come any worldlier than Teddy Brenner, who was the matchmaker at the Eastern Parkway Arena in Brooklyn when he got his first look at Gene in 1954.

Brenner visibly sagged as he watched Fullmer lumbering through his workout with a crudity and a lack of grace that would become all too familiar in the years to follow. To those who witnessed the session, Teddy's horrified expression was something to behold.



Gene Fullmer was 24-0 as a pro at the time with an impressive 19 knockouts on his slate. How could he possibly look so bad? His most threatening opponents seemed to be his own feet. Brenner, fearing that Gene might trip over his plates and break his neck, implored Fullmer's manager Marv Jenson to take the kid back to the comparatively gentle environs of Utah for his own safety.

What had Teddy Brenner seen that had so dismayed him? He had seen a man who couldn't box or punch, whose awkward style would leave the average boxing fan stone cold. He saw a fighter who, for all his impossible awkwardness, could still be hit repeatedly with disturbing ease. Teddy kept watching and blinking, looking for that certain something that he might be missing. He couldn't find it.

Brenner's harsh verdict shocked Marv Jenson but didn't deter him. Marv had believed in his man Fullmer ever since the man was a raw and enthusiastic young boy. At eight years of age, Gene was taken along to the West Jordan Athletic Club by his father, Tuff, who asked Jenson to teach the lad boxing.

Jenson saw at once what nobody else did. "He had it," said Marv. "I knew it the minute I tried him out. He had three things I could work on. Strength, a good mind and fast reflexes. I took advantage of those three things."

## Revelation

Gene Fullmer was a streaking revelation in his first years as a pro, barrelling his way through the middleweight ranks with his peculiar brand of bullish, cyclonic effectiveness. He was an exceptionally awkward revelation to be sure, but nobody could beat him. He bulled, he charged, he hustled and sometimes picked up as many lumps as he dished out. But he just kept winning. The artists and the scientists of the ring must have gone back to their dressing rooms wondering what had just rolled over them.

Starting out in 1951 with a one round knockout of Glen Peck at Logan, Utah, Gene had taken his unbeaten run to 29 fights by 1954, fighting mainly in his native Beehive State. He made his New York debut in November of that year with a unanimous decision over Jackie LaBua and followed up with decisive quality wins over Germany's Peter Muller and future world champ, Paul Pender.



Gene was moving rapidly into world class and his record over the next couple of years is testament to the depth of genuine world class fighters in the middleweight division of that era. It was near impossible to maintain an unbeaten record in such a minefield of golden talent. When Gene lost three of his next six fights, people wondered if the cream of the division had tumbled the secret of the Fullmer style. The first harsh lesson came from Gil Turner at the Eastern

Parkway Arena in April 1955. Sporting a 47-7 record, Gil was a highly capable ring mechanic who matched Gene all the way for toughness and roughness. Turner knocked Fullmer through the ropes for a nine count in the sixth round on the way to posting a convincing points win.

Gene learned from his mistakes and avenged the defeat just two months later by out-hustling Turner in West Jordan. Fullmer seemed to be on a roll again when he notched important wins over Del Flanagan and Al Andrews, but then suffered successive back-to-back defeats for the first time in his career. Both were unanimous decisions and both saw Gene hitting the deck.

The classy Bobby Boyd turned the trick at the Chicago Stadium in a match refereed by former champ, Tony Zale, decking Fullmer in the third. Then came the handsome Argentinian, Eduardo Lausse, a terrific puncher with a 63-6 slate, who downed Gene in the eight round of their Madison Square Garden meeting.

Never usually one to complain, Gene was always niggled by the Boyd knockdown, claiming that it was no more than a slip. Typically, Fullmer ploughed on defiantly, beginning the five-fight run that would carry him to a title shot against the great Sugar Ray Robinson.

There is a valuable lesson to be learned here for the excitable, OTT boxing crowd of the present era. Educational, competitive defeats never did harm a learning fighter and never will. How many times now do we hear of a single loss being described as a 'major reverse' or a 'disaster'? Small wonder that the boxing fans of today, drunk on all the propaganda of the obsessive '0' in a fighter's loss column, should so hastily dismiss the great ringmen of yesteryear. They must look at those 17 or 18 defeats on Dick Tiger's record and wonder what all the fuss was about.

How did Gene Fullmer and his contemporaries cope with adversity? Well, for starters, they didn't take a year off to 'find themselves'. They simply couldn't afford to. They went back to the gym, eradicated the flaws in their make-up as best they could and kept working to improve their technique and their attitude of mind.



Fullmer's losses to Boyd and Lause were just two months apart and both were tough and arduous affairs. Little more than a month after the Lause fight, Gene was back in the ring at the Cleveland Arena in Ohio against no less a tough cookie than Rocky Castellani. Fullmer took a split decision off Rocky and over the following eight months defeated Gil Turner for the second time, Ralph 'Tiger' Jones, Charley Humez and Moses Ward. That's taking care of business!

## **Robinson**

We harbour many misconceptions when we are young. As a young lad in the early sixties, I remember reading my father's boxing magazines and thinking how wonderful it must be to win a world championship. I saw those pictures of Gene Fullmer from 1957 after he had taken the world title from Sugar Ray Robinson at Madison Square Garden and remember thinking what a lucky man Gene was. The fame! The glory! The money! Yes, Robbie was no longer the Robbie of his peerless welterweight days. He was older, slower and getting caught out much more often. But it still struck me as a colossal achievement on Fullmer's part to dethrone the legendary Sugar Man. In my youthful naivety, I wondered what kind of mansion Gene lived in and how many millions he had stashed in the bank.

Well, Gene still lived in his same modest abode in Utah, where he was still going to work as a welder. Such was the lot of the middleweight champion of the world in those not so distant days. After a full day's work, he would train in the evenings, the victim of a boss who didn't believe that a fellow needed extra time off to prepare for Sugar Ray Robinson. One thinks of Charley Burley finishing a long day shift and then making his way to the Legion Stadium in Hollywood for the small business of taking care of Archie Moore.

Fullmer was very confident going into the Robinson fight. Gene and Marv Jenson worked long and hard to secure the match, which only served to fuel Gene's motivation when he got the green light.

The unsung challenger prepared diligently for his greatest hour. Gene recalls that he was very calm throughout his training camp. He didn't agree with the general consensus that Robinson was the greatest thing since popcorn. This view was shared by Fullmer's future opponent, Carmen Basilio, who insisted that Willie Pep was the superior technician of the two 'gods' of that golden age.

Gene would have four fights with the great Robinson before their rivalry was concluded, but would not rate them among the toughest fights of his career. Nevertheless, they were fascinating and significant chapters in the history of the middleweight division, capturing the imagination of the boxing public. They pitted the ageing artisan against the honest agriculturist, the scales deliciously balanced by the slow ebbing of Robbie's old magic and the rise of Fullmer as a dogged and infernally difficult man to beat. Basilio was correct in his later observation of the cyclone from West Jordan. Gene did indeed do everything wrong, but few men could pick the confounding lock of his almost unique safe.

The Fullmer camp hired tall sparring partners who were instructed to fight in Robinson's style. Gene learned to cut the ring off on them, pressure them constantly and not allow them to get their shots off. He knew that Robbie liked to punch from long range and that the way to negate the Sugar Man's wonderful skills was to shut him down. Fullmer practised over and over in the gym, learning how to protect his chin from return fire as he bulled his way inside.



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The great plan worked like a charm on the night of January 2 1957 at Madison Square Garden. Robinson, gashed over the left eye and sent through the ropes for a count in the seventh round, simply couldn't cope with the illogical, unorthodox bundle of energy that kept charging and washing over him. Gene won the championship by a unanimous decision and the purists went home and cried into their beer.

### **That left hook**

Robinson had to get another chance. He always did. Even as his thirty-sixth birthday approached and the last of his silky skills leaked away, people could not believe it when he lost. Defeats were treated as aberrations that had to be put right.

This time, however, those in the know believed that Ray was finally tackling a bridge too far. Going into the return match at the Chicago Stadium four months later, Robinson was a three-to-one underdog. It seemed unbelievable. As someone said, "Nobody was ever three-to-one over Ray Robinson."

Fullmer was convinced that he could take the old man again and move on to even greater achievements. Robinson replied to that with six ominous words that would become famous: "No man ever beat me twice."

For four rounds, it seemed that the 'experts' had called it right and Ray was deluding himself. Fullmer picked up from where he had left off in the first fight, hustling and bullying Robinson out of his stride, attacking and pressuring all the time. Everything appeared rosy in Gene's garden. But one shrewd fellow had his reservations. Trainer Marv Jenson was deeply concerned by his man's sudden recklessness. Jenson saw that Gene was too eager, too confident and holding his hands too low as he came in. Even against the ageing Robinson, these were dangerous invitations to disaster.

Jenson recalled, "When Gene was swinging hard, he was leaving his chin open. I kept telling him to keep one hand up if he was going to swing like that."

Fullmer clubbed away to the body and was marginally ahead after four rounds, but Ray remained patient as he sought to suck Gene into the quicksand. In the fourth round, Robinson halted Gene's forward march temporarily with a combination of precisely placed punches. Fullmer took them well and probably thought that he had soaked up the best that the old champion could offer.



Robinson kept the faith. At his best, he could still read and dictate a fight like no other man alive. The master tactician had seen the encouraging signs and waited for the moment when he could drop the big bomb. The bomb he dropped that night was one of the most precise and devastating left hooks ever thrown in championship boxing.

It left Fullmer writhing in a state of semi-paralysis at 1:27 seconds of the fifth round, the first and only time in Gene's career that he heard the doleful decimal. Two whiplash rights to the body from Ray had shunted Fullmer sideways,

straight into the perfect firing line. End of game!

To his eternal credit, Fullmer was always admirably frank about his one visit to dreamland. "It's a sensation I'd never had before and one I don't necessarily want again.

"Robinson's best punch was any punch he could hit you with. But I felt without doubt that if I could beat him once, I could surely beat him again. I felt that if I put more pressure on him, I could maybe knock him out.

"In the fifth, I moved in with my left hand maybe six inches lower than it should have been, and he slipped that left hook over the top and caught me right on the chin. All at once the lights went out. I had never been knocked out. I had no idea what it felt like and I can't tell you what it feels like even now."

## Forget about it!



A disastrous defeat? A calamitous setback? Forget about it. That was Gene Fullmer's philosophy after the Robinson knockout. Gene went back to the drawing board, worked at plugging the leaks in his game and entered the most successful phase of his career. In the following years, the Cyclone would blow and bull his way to victories over top drawer opposition in Ralph 'Tiger' Jones, Chico Vejar, Neal Rivers, Milo Savage, Joe Miceli, Wilf Greaves, the thunder-punching Florentino Fernandez and Benny 'Kid' Paret.

Gene would twice vanquish that most accomplished ring mechanic, the dangerous Ellsworth 'Spider' Webb, as well as engaging in two memorable brawls with Carmen Basilio.

There was also the matter of taking care of Mr Robinson once and for all. By December 1960, when he met Gene for the third time, Ray was spitting out his last defiant drops of genius, surrounded by a posse of snarling young cats who wanted the great man's illustrious name in their 'win' columns. It had been 20 years and more than 150 fights since the Harlem Flash had begun his astonishing professional journey.



Now he was walking the tightrope between his glorious past and the barren future that he could not bring himself to acknowledge. But there was one incredible effort left in Robinson when he faced Fullmer at the Sports Arena in Los Angeles. By that time, Gene was the NBA champion and Ray had finally found the man who could beat him twice. Boston firefighter Paul Pender had relieved Robinson of the lineal championship earlier that year and then defeated Ray in their return. Both fights were split decisions. Both showed the gaping cracks now splitting Robinson's once pristine armour. Surely Ray couldn't turn back the clock and come again.

He very nearly did. He failed heroically against Fullmer and only by a whisker. The fight was declared a draw, producing a set of the most diverse scorecards ever turned in by three wise men. Referee Tommy Hart had Robbie running away with it by 11-4. Judge Lee Grossman saw it 9-5-1 for Gene, while judge George Latka called it even.

It was Sugar Ray Robinson's last great stand. When he took his final run at Fullmer in March 1961, Gene bulldozed his way to a unanimous points win at the Convention Center

in Las Vegas. The well had run dry for Robbie. So began the final, poignant chapter of his career when he would travel the world chasing ghosts.

### **Brawling with Basilio**



Perhaps the three fights that defined Gene Fullmer during his bruising, stormy reign as NBA champion were his two wars with Carmen Basilio and his ferocious, foul-filled struggle with Joey Giardello.

The Giardello fight, at the Montana State College Fieldhouse in Bozeman in April 1960, continues to reverberate comically to all but the two participants. Both men were guilty of tearing up the rulebook, yet both continued to protest their innocence as the years rolled on.

Gene, as proficient a billy goat as there ever was, claimed that Joey blatantly butted him. Joey, who knew every trick in the book, insisted he only did so because Gene had butted him first.

Fullmer suffered a bad cut to the head, claiming that Giardello rammed him after locking his arm. But none of that was important anyway, said Joey, because he beat Fullmer out of sight and the decision stank. Giardello believed he won nine or ten of the fifteen rounds and wanted to fight on at the finish.

At ringside, the Fullmer and Giardello brothers were threatening to fight each other as a sideshow attraction. It was some night in Bozeman and every man in the house was a good guy who had been wronged.



Fullmer's slugfests with Basilio for Gene's NBA championship were marathon tests of endurance between two of the great tough guys of the ring. Carmen was on the wane after a hard career fighting the best welterweights and middleweights in the world, but the gutsy New York onion farmer from upstate Canastota simply didn't know how to go quietly.

He was locking horns with something of a soul brother in Fullmer, but Gene was bigger, younger and stronger.

Fullmer stopped Basilio in the fourteenth round of their first brutal contest at the Cow Palace in San Francisco in 1959, but it was in the battle of Derk Field in Salt Lake City in the high summer of 1960 that the fireworks went off in earnest – in more ways than one.

Gene produced his most commanding performance in a gruelling battle of physical strength and high emotion. Carmen, an immensely proud man who had traded on his fighting heart and toughness for so long, seemed to fall apart all at once as old Father time caught him by the tail and sent him asunder.

Bulled and battered, slugged and mauled, Basilio was rescued by referee Pete Giacoma in the twelfth round. The act of compassion was not appreciated. His eyes cut and his body covered in ugly welts, Carmen raged at Giacoma and had to be escorted back to his corner by police officers.

“Gene and I are good friends but this Utah Athletic Commission belongs to Marv Jenson,” Basilio stormed in the aftermath. “And that referee – he never should have stopped it. He could see the handwriting on the wall.”



Like every proud warrior in denial, Carmen had seen a different fight to the one that had taken place. The Reno Evening Gazette reported: “The battered ex-champion was obviously hurt by Fullmer lefts to the body and right shots to the face. Bleeding, reeling and holding on in the twelfth, it appeared the end was near one way or the other.

“There were no knockdowns, but in the eighth Fullmer crashed into Basilio as he was going away and Carmen went flat on his back, came up on his shoulder, then back on his feet again like a seasoned tumbler.”

Basilio had found out what it was like to fight Gene Fullmer. Like so many others who had engaged the curiously likeable slugger from Utah, Carmen staggered from the fray disbelieving his cuts and

bruises and his aches and pains. How could such a crude and apparently rudderless barge of a man inflict such damage?

Perhaps even Gene Fullmer himself never quite knew the answer to that one. But six months into a new decade, the cyclone from West Jordan was the monarch of all he surveyed. He was doing it all wrong, but he was doing it gloriously right.

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