

Who Hit Robinson The Hardest?

“Artie Levine,” Says Sugar Ray

By Mike Silver

“CHAMP, who hit you the hardest punch of your career?” That question, as every fight fan knows is inevitable when a ring great is interviewed. This time the question took on added significance, as it was posed to perhaps the greatest ringmen of all time---Sugar Ray Robinson.

On a recent T.V. show, aired by the National Educational Television Network and hosted by Curt Gowdy. Sugar Ray and Rocky Graziano were brought together to view the film of their 1952 battle won by Robinson on a third round KO.

At the end of the show Gowdy asked the inevitable question. Before Robinson’s answer is given, a brief recapping of his incredible career is necessary to fully appreciate the significance of his answer.

Robinson, after a brilliant amateur career, fought 202 professional fights from 1940 to 1965. During that time he defeated the toughest fighters three decades could offer, including 13 world champions. Among his opponents were some of the most fearsome punchers of the day.

It should also be noted that during his long career Robinson was never really knocked out. The lone KO defeat on his record – the loss to Joey Maxim—was due to heat prostration, and not the light hitting Maxim’s punches.

Robinson’s reply must have come as a surprise to the general public viewing the show.

“I’d have to say Artie Levine hit me with the hardest punch of my career,” said Robinson.

Artie Levine? Who, you may ask, is Artie Levine? Chances are, if you were not a fight fan during the 1940’s the name Artie Levine would not provoke any stirring memories. However, to knowledgeable fight



Ex-welterweight Artie Levine relaxes in the backyard of his Hollis Hills, New York, home with his pet, Ocho.

buffs the reply came as no great surprise. It was a well known fact that Artie Levine was one of the most feared punchers operating in the mid to late 1940’s—an era when U.S. boxing was filled with hundreds of tough competent professionals.

And now the career of Artie Levine took on added significance, and perhaps a bit of immortality, for he was paid the ultimate tribute of being the man who Sugar Ray himself said hit him the hardest.

Further investigation shows that this was not the first time Robby had paid homage to Levine’s power. In his 1970 autobiography “Sugar Ray,” Robinson mentions Levine....”I knew about Artie Levine. Six weeks before I outpointed Tommy Bell for the title, I boxed Levine in Cleveland. He clipped me with a left hook to the jaw that flopped me like a fish in the fifth round, or so I’ve been told. I really have no recollection of what round it was—all I remember is George (George Gainford, Robinson’s manager) talking to me in the corner.

‘Robinson,’ he was growling, ‘you got to come on to beat this guy.’

‘Plenty of time,’ I told him. ‘I’ll get him. There’s plenty of time.’

‘Plenty of time,’ yelled George. ‘The eighth round is next Robinson.’

‘The eighth?’ I said, squinting at him. “I thought it was the fourth.’

“That’s how Artie Levine could scramble your brains. I got through the eighth round, but in the ninth he staggered me again with another left hook. After that round George lectured me.

“Watch his left hook, Robinson,” he advised. ‘Stay away from his left hook.’

“The ten second warning buzzer for the final round...old Soldier Jones, who was working in my corner that night, leaned between the ropes. ‘Gamble son’ he whispered. ‘Now’s the time to take a gamble.’

“With less than a minute to go in the final round, I dug a left hook into Levine’s midsection and he sagged against the ropes. I had him now and I battered him. He was counted out while sitting on the lower rope, with 19 seconds to go.”ⁱ

Very interesting, but this story, of course cannot end here. The writer’s curiosity had been aroused. What had become of Artie Levine; where was he now? Had he suffered the unfortunate fate of many ex-pugs, and fallen on hard times?

A check of the 1950 Ring Record Book shows that Levine, from Brooklyn, New York, fought professionally from 1942 to 1949 winning 50 battles, including 36 via the kayo route. He lost 15 and had six draws.

Included in those 50 wins were victories over topnotchers Sonny Horne, Jimmy Doyle, Vic Dellicurti, Billy Walker and Herbie Kronowitz. All except Kronowitz were kayo victims.

The Robinson fight took place in Cleveland on November 6, 1946, when Ray was 26 years old and at the peak of his form.

Two months after the Levine fight he would defeat Tommy Bell for the welterweight championship of the world. Levine, on the other hand, was 21 years old, and at that young age was already a highly regarded contender.

Actually it turned out not to be that difficult to locate the present day Artie Levine. He is a popular ex-ringman around New York, and the grapevine quickly told where he could be found.

For the past five years Artie Levine has been the top salesman for Queensboro

Volkswagen, a dealership (the largest in the United States) located in Queens, New York.

The writer had the pleasure of meeting Levine, and found him to be not only a first rate businessman, but a first rate gentleman as well. Gracious and articulate, Artie was more than happy to discuss his colorful career and what he had been doing since his ring retirement 25 years ago.

First off, he was aware of Sugar Ray’s statement, and as a matter of fact, since it became widely known, he had been receiving letters and inquiries from boxing fans all over the world. Even some of his old Marine Corps buddies, whom he hadn’t heard from in years, were contacting him.



Artie Levine drops Ray Robinson in the fifth round. Courtesy of Tony Triem.

The first question, of course, had to be about the Robinson fight. What was it like fighting the great man?

“I can describe it best in one word—awesome. I respected Robinson. I knew he was a great fighter but I was out to win the fight. I was in great shape—Ray Arcel, a perfectionist as far as conditioning was concerned, trained me

for the fight. In the ring with Robinson, it was like fighting a machine. He was ahead of you all of the way, very sharp. And you don't get any openings with Ray. He's moving away from you, and as you were getting off a punch, he would touch you on the shoulder knocking you off balance and killing the punch.

"There were many things I learned in my fight with Ray. In the last round he hit me in the Adam's apple and I lost my voice for a week.

"Even so, it was a very close fight. In the fifth round I caught him a good left hook and he drops. The ref walks me to the neutral corner, walks back to Robinson and picks up the count at one! Robinson was actually down for 19 seconds and I've got the newspapers to prove it. There was almost a riot at ringside.

Levine did, in fact, show the author the old newspaper clippings indicating that Robinson did indeed get a break that night in Cleveland.

"In the tenth." Artie continued "Ray got lucky and knocked me out. But the fight was close all the way. I gave him a beating and cut him up pretty bad."

Levine was asked about his punching ability. "I could always hit, I was a naturally hard puncher. But the man who taught me how to really punch was Charley Goldman, the man who trained and developed Rocky Marciano. Charley trained me for about a year, early in my career. He slowed me down, and taught me how to maneuver and position myself for the most devastating effect.

"My only regret is that I didn't fight Robinson a year before, at about the time I fought Jimmy Doyle. I was at my best then. Doyle was one hell of a good fighter—trained by Jack Johnson."

Levine knocked out Doyle on March 11, 1946, in the ninth round of a brutal fight. Doyle was carried unconscious from the ring. He recovered in a few days only to be fatally injured two years later in a fight against Robinson for the welter title.

"After Jimmy Doyle I was never the same fighter. If I didn't knock them out with one punch, I couldn't finish them off. I would tense up. In other words, the killer instinct

wasn't there anymore. All because I hurt Doyle. I was never the same when I had a man hurt.

"By the time I fought Robinson I was on my way down."

Levine boxed for three more years after the Robinson fight before calling it quits in 1949, at the age of 24, following defeats by Chuck Hunter and Dick Wagner.

"I was offered tremendous amounts of money to come back, but I'd lost my desire.

"I had a nose job done right away, but it collapsed on me and I just never bothered to fix it again.

"I made a good living out of boxing (Levine received \$24,000 for the Robinson fight) and I have no complaints or regrets.

"Life is different today, and there are many opportunities to make a good living without boxing. But if I had to do it over again I would probably be a fighter, it was in me."

After his ring retirement, Levine went into business for himself and for many years operated a successful meat purveyor business, supplying the hotel and restaurant trade.

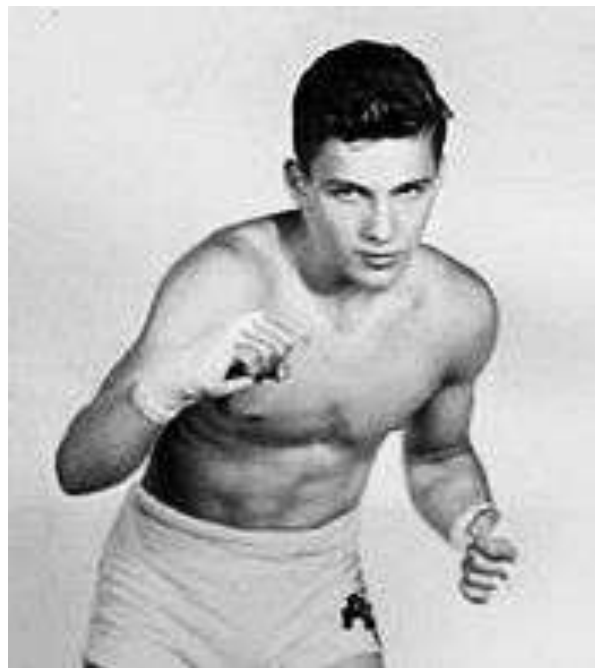
It is interesting to note that in 1955 Artie Levine attempted to get a pension started for professional prize fighters that was similar to the one used by Jai Alai players, in that a certain percentage is taken out of the gross of every promotion and is contributed to the pension. A proposal was drawn up and presented before the New York State Athletic Commission.

However, that is as far as it got. "We met a lot of opposition from the boxing managers, they were afraid of losing control of their fighters, and the fighters themselves didn't express enough interest at the time."

Asked about the current middleweight champs, Carlos Monzon and Rodrigo Valdez, Levine offered this analysis: "I've seen them on T.V. a few times and they're both very good. They would have risen to the top in any era. The only difference is that in my day they would have been even better. They would have had to be. The competition was much stiffer 25-30 years ago. You had so many top fighters around, guys like Charley Burley, Bert Lytell, LaMotta, Fritzie Zivic, Archie Moore and many more. New York at one time had 20 active fight clubs."

Today, Artie Levine, former contender and the man who came closest to flattening the great Robinson, lives in Hollis Hills, New York, where he resides with his lovely wife Miriam and their children, Gary 20 and Deena 12. The Levine's other daughter, Didi, is married to Dr. Jeffrey Rosen, M.D.

Levine is one of many former fighters who quietly and successfully made the adjustment to a post ring career. Boxing can be proud of Artie Levine.



ⁱ Sugar Ray by Robinson & Dave Anderson, Pages 139-140.

Left photo: Artie Levine as he looked during the second week of boot camp for the Marine Corps.

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Tony Triem and Harry Shaffer)**

**RIP Artie Levine
January 25, 1925 – January 13, 2012**