

# Young, Gifted And Italian: Nino Benvenuti

By Mike Casey



There is a certain permanence about the special few. Their appeal to the masses never wanes and their weight in gold is never devalued. Long after they have left the stage, they continue to romance and hypnotize the faithful.

Forty-one years after losing the middleweight championship of the world, and still outrageously handsome and fit, Nino Benvenuti continues to be studied and discreetly followed by fascinated Romans whenever he takes a walk in the Eternal City. Now a highly successful businessman at 73 years of age, this is a man who once gave it all up to go and work for Mother Theresa at her hospice in India. Small wonder that there is a spiritual and almost godly air about Nino. But there is also class and grace and fantastic elegance. A pal of mine who is lucky enough to live in Rome saw Benvenuti a couple of years ago and told me, "There is just something about the guy. You keep looking at him.

You can't help it."

Imagine, then, how Italy celebrated when the young Benvenuti won the big prize in faraway New York back in 1967. The people went delirious with joy. Their dashing handsome son had pulled it off and now they could celebrate. Their Nino, the one they called The Intellectual, had won Italy her first world middleweight boxing championship.

In a passionate land where sporting heroes are either lionised or crucified, Giovanni "Nino" Benvenuti had become an emperor and put himself within reach of the gods. He had beaten the great Emile Griffith at Madison Square Garden.



How the people rejoiced! They cheered and yelled and chanted in Rome, Milan, Turin and in Nino's hometown of Trieste. Thousands of Italians had sat huddled around their radios in the early hours of the morning, high on tension and adrenaline as the story of the 15-round duel in the Big Apple played out until dawn. When the result was announced and the emperor was anointed, Italy went wild as only Italy can.

One fan woke up Marcello Spaccini, the mayor of Trieste, to give him the news. The mayor didn't mind. The political gold dust of sporting achievement meant that he could make a rousing speech without having anything thrown at him.

In the fish market of Trieste, where Nino Benvenuti's father ran a stand, fishermen and businessmen put a hold on their animated dealings to drink champagne and toast their new champion. Newspapers in Trieste and Rome printed extra editions, such was the public demand to read about the heroic Nino and drink in his glory. The National Radio Network of Italy rearranged its schedule to broadcast reruns of the blow-by-blow action from New York.

Even Emile Griffith took his hat off to Benvenuti with typical sportsmanship. "The kid won a beautiful fight," said Emile. "He's a wonderful champion and I hope to fight him again. I enjoyed the fight, I really did. But even Sandy Koufax got knocked out of the box once in a while."

Nino Benvenuti had been knocking them out of the box for quite a while, and in more ways than one. The "kid," as Emile Griffith had affectionately called him, was a dream come true for eager promoters and the ever hungry tigers of marketing. Nino could knock out men with his fists and knock out women with his looks. He was a gifted athlete with the killer looks of a movie star. Nor was he anybody's fool. Behind that perfect face was a lively and intelligent brain.

Benvenuti was a warmer and more engaging Gene Tunney of his generation, a thinking man who appreciated art and literature, took an active interest in a broad range of subjects, yet never came across as aloof or superior. In later life, he would become a successful businessman in many areas, hosting his own television show, running a top restaurant and becoming a hugely popular sports broadcaster.

## Scales

Life always has a way of balancing the scales. To paraphrase golfer Lee Trevino, "God never gives it all to one man, except maybe Jack Nicklaus."

Nino Benvenuti could box beautifully, hit with power and take his punishment when he had to. I don't doubt that he enjoyed his boxing. I do doubt that he loved it. Nino's mind was too lively and too creative to focus exclusively on one aspect of life. Nicklaus, Tunney, Robinson and Ketchel all had extracurricular interests of varying spice and taste, but they were thoroughly committed fighting men within their chosen arena.



After taking Griffith's title, a happy Nino said, "I trained for this like I never trained before. I wanted very much to knock him out, but I'm very happy that I won. I wanted it so much."

As Benvenuti's championship career progressed to its shocking climax, one got the impression that hunger and desire no longer burned within him. The finer things in life held far greater appeal.

There comes that sad but inevitable time for every fighter when ambition dies and the accumulation of hard fights finally take their toll. The deterioration can be quite sudden or a gradual process that can be traced from a certain point in his career. It was in November 1969 that I sensed the first significant signs of decline in Benvenuti. Fighting before his fellow countrymen in Rome, the stylish Nino found himself locked in a desperate battle in a defense of his title against veteran Luis Rodriguez.

Cut and bleeding badly, Benvenuti looked in imminent danger of losing his crown after 10 hard-fought rounds, before releasing a perfect left hook to knock out Rodriguez in the 11th.

That left hook, delivered in a classic make-or-break situation, was hailed in many quarters as the punch of 1969, bringing Benvenuti one of the most spectacular triumphs of his illustrious career. Yet it was clear to the knowledgeable boxing eye that Nino's reflexes were no longer as sharp or his movement as fast and fluid. He was not the same man who had shot to international prominence in 1965 with a dramatic knockout of compatriot Sandro Mazzinghi and then gone on to contest the middleweight championship in three 15-round tussles with the great Griffith.

It was the sensational victory over Mazzinghi that made me sit up and take notice of Nino Benvenuti. Challenging for Mazzinghi's world light-middleweight title, Nino found the going tough for the first five rounds. Mazzinghi was an exceptionally fine fighter and looked confident as he caught Nino with solid jabs and impressive combinations.

Then Benvenuti showed that certain touch of class that separates the great fighters from the rest of the pack. The left hook was his favorite punch, and the story goes that Nino had earlier revealed that his pet blow would be the key to winning the fight.

Mazzinghi watched carefully for the punch—too carefully—and was knocked out after two minutes and 40 seconds of the sixth round by a beautifully delivered right uppercut that Benvenuti had practised during training.

To all but the most enthusiastic of connoisseurs, it seemed that Nino had sprung from nowhere. In a less urgent and informative era, so many fighters from Continental Europe, South America and the Far East would sneak under the radar and apparently fashion impressive records from a magic hat. But there was nothing deceptive or conjured about Benvenuti's sparkling ledger. He had indeed won 56 straight and now he had shown that he could shine just as brightly in world-class company.

## **Amateur**

Nino Benvenuti was born in the Adriatic seaport of Trieste on April 26, 1938, and took up amateur boxing at a young age when he joined a boys' club. He rapidly developed into an outstanding talent, crowning a glittering amateur career by winning the welterweight title at the 1960 Rome Olympics.



*Rodriguez was knocked out by a perfect left hook in the 11<sup>th</sup> round.*



*Mazzinghi was knocked out after two minutes and 40 seconds of the sixth round by a beautifully delivered right uppercut.*

Inspired by the ring success and wealthy lifestyle of his compatriot, Duilio Loi, Nino decided to turn professional and notched his first win in the paid ranks in Jan. 1961, with a points win over Ben Ali Allala in Bologna.

So many fighters, many of them great natural talents, fail to make a successful transition from amateur to professional boxing. The reasons can be numerous and puzzling. For Benvenuti, the bridge was blissfully easy to cross. Even in his debut against Allala, Nino showed the fluent moves of a future champion as he cleverly slipped blows and counterpunched beautifully.

The Italian fight fraternity became increasingly excited as Benvenuti progressed at a fast pace, compiling fourteen wins in his first year as a professional. He opened his 1962 campaign with a sixth round knockout of future British middleweight champion George Aldridge, and by the end of the year Nino had extended his unbeaten run to 29 fights.

In March 1963, Benvenuti won his first professional title when he knocked out Tommaso Truppi in 11 rounds for the Italian middleweight championship, and few doubted that more titles would come Nino's way.

His winning record continued to swell through 1963 and 1964 as he defeated such respected fighters as Gaspar Ortega, Teddy Wright, Sugar Boy Nando, Jimmy Beecham, Denny Moyer and Carlos Duran. But it was in 1965 that Nino truly impressed himself as a bona fide threat to the world's leading talents. A third round stoppage of tough Art Hernandez, a second win over Truppi and victories over Mick Leahy, Dick Knight, Rip Randall and Milo Calhoun led to Benvenuti's chilling destruction of Sandro Mazzinghi.

Nino subsequently annexed the European middleweight title by knocking out Spaniard Luis Folledo in six rounds and then capped a perfect year by making a successful defence of his world light-middleweight crown against Mazzinghi in an eagerly awaited rematch. This time, Sandro gave Nino a hard, closely contested battle over 15 rounds and there were many ringside observers who disputed the decision. But Benvenuti's glittering record was still intact and he took his unbeaten run to 64 fights in 1966 before tasting defeat as a professional for the first time.



After campaigning exclusively in European rings, he travelled all the way to Seoul in South Korea and lost his light-middleweight title on a controversial split decision to the gritty Ki Soo Kim. While the defeat hardly enhanced Benvenuti's prestige, it did enable him to turn his full attention to the task of winning the world middleweight championship.

Six wins and 10 months later, he challenged Emile Griffith for the title at Madison Square Garden, backed by the enthusiastic support of a large contingent of New York Italians.

Despite being the underdog, Nino was a revelation as he quickly took charge of the fight, flooring Griffith in the second round with a right uppercut similar to the blow that had despatched Mazzinghi. Always a fighting champion, Griffith rallied back to deck Benvenuti in

the fourth, but Nino survived the crisis and fought back marvellously to gain a decisive, unanimous decision.

For the next year, Benvenuti and Griffith monopolized the championship as they clashed twice more at the Garden to determine who was the better man. Emile outpointed Nino to regain the crown in Sept. 1967, but it was Benvenuti who won the deciding match in March 1968, outscoring Emile in another keenly contested fight.

Nino should really have charged on thereafter but something seemed to go out of him after the Griffith trilogy. It was as if The Intellectual suddenly stopped, took stock of his situation and wondered if boxing was worth all the sweat and grind. Far from becoming an all-conquering champion, Benvenuti slid into the dangerous groove of being a competent but vulnerable king. He failed to impress in successful defences against Don Fullmer and Fraser Scott, and fared badly in three non-title ventures. Nino laboured to a draw with tough customer Doyle Baird in Akron, Ohio, and was then out-hustled by aging legend Dick Tiger in a New York 10-rounder.



However, Benvenuti's biggest embarrassment came in March 1970, when he journeyed to Melbourne, Australia, for a supposedly easy fight against unsung American, Tom "The Bomb" Bethea, who had lost his last four bouts. The fight was a nightmare for Nino, as a highly motivated Bethea capitalized on his big opportunity to force an eighth round retirement. As an extra spit in the eye, Tom The Bomb handed the champ a rib injury. It was a humiliating defeat for Benvenuti, coming so soon after his epic title triumph over Luis Rodriguez. Although Nino made amends by knocking out Bethea in the eighth round of a title match just two months later, the champion's grip on the middleweight throne was beginning to look increasingly tenuous.

### **Carlos Monzon in Rome**

Now, of course, we know the wonderful fighter that was Carlos Monzon. Then, we didn't. When the lean and mysterious Monzon stepped into the ring at the Pallazo dello Sport in Rome on Nov. 7, 1970, he was thought to be a safe bet for a champion who was skating precariously on thin ice.

Like so many South American fighters who progress quietly away from boxing's mainstream, Carlos sported a lengthy and apparently impressive record. He had lost three bouts early in his career, the only setbacks on his 81-fight ledger. Yet the same question kept ringing out: who exactly was he? Like Clint Eastwood's High Plains Drifter, Monzon had seemed to spirit himself onto the main stage from some shimmering wilderness.

The clues to his ability were few and sparse. Most of the names on his record meant little to boxing fans outside South America. He had drawn with tough guy Bennie Briscoe in 1967 and outpointed Tom Bethea, but few envisaged Monzon upsetting even a fading Benvenuti, as indicated by the odds of 3 to 1 in the champion's favor.

Nino looked very fit and confident as he climbed through the ropes to a deafening roar from 15,000 excited Italian fans. Then the small contingent of Argentinians cheered the arrival of Monzon, who disrobed to reveal an equally impressive physique. Lanky but well muscled, Carlos had a height advantage of one-and-a-half inches over the champion, a rare sight as Benvenuti was taller than most middleweights at 5'11".

Benvenuti came out of his corner fast for the opening round, but it was Monzon who seemed to have the early edge. Both fighters circled and feinted in those early moments, and it wasn't long before they found the range. Monzon blocked a left hook from Benvenuti and scored with his own left to the head, prompting the champion to retaliate with a left-right combination to the jaw.



Carlos quickly earned Nino's respect and appeared to stagger the champion with a right-left response. Those punches were the first of many heavy blows that would strike Benvenuti in the ensuing rounds, an early and golden glimpse of how Monzon would dominate and break opponents in the years ahead.

Nino tried to take the play away from Carlos at the start of the second round, opening fast again and catching the challenger with a solid left hook. But the impassive Monzon was already proving himself an exceptionally hard man who seemed impervious to his opponent's punches. Carlos continued to force the fight in his methodical, quietly stalking style, catching the champion with deceptively hard blows and roughing him up in the clinches with chopping rights to the face. Monzon's long reach was giving Nino problems, and at times the champion looked uncharacteristically ungainly as he leaned back to try to avoid punches.

Like an engine slowly warming up, Carlos continued to gather momentum in the third round, scoring with a left hook and then erupting with both fists in his first sustained attack. Nino succeeded in blocking most of the blows, but he looked unsure of himself as he was continually made to retreat. He found little respite in the clinches, where Monzon was also dominating the action, and suffered further torment in the fourth round as he was repeatedly hit by the challenger's long, powerful jab. When Nino attempted to force his way inside and negate Monzon's height advantage, Carlos would use his superior physical strength to tie up the champion.

Benvenuti was beginning to look anxious, but the fifth round brought a change in his fortunes as he reached deep to recapture some of the golden form of his vintage years. He repelled an early attack by Carlos and then connected with a burst of solid lefts and rights to the body. After a spell of untidy clinching, Nino drove a hard left hook to the head that shook Monzon and sent him back against the ropes. Eager to maintain his hard-won advantage, the champion followed up with two more heavy blows to the jaw and Carlos appeared vulnerable and unsteady for the first time in the fight.

Yet Benvenuti was mistaken if he believed that he finally had the measure of the tough man from Argentina. Nino would be the first of many to discover that Monzon was a fighter of exceptional talent. So many of his special qualities were secreted behind his upright style and almost robotic movement. Strong, powerful and extremely resilient, he was an exasperating man to fight and an impossible one to subdue. As a challenger, he already had the attitude of a champion.

Stung by Benvenuti's impudence, Carlos attacked fiercely in the sixth round. Nino quickly became the hunted man again as he was caught with jarring lefts and came off second during the periods of heated infighting. The frequent clinches were becoming increasingly untidy, and referee Rudolph Durst cautioned both fighters for roughhouse tactics. Monzon drilled in punches at every opportunity and Benvenuti looked flustered as he tried to ward them off. The champion's frustration turned to anger when one of Monzon's powerful blows bounced off his jaw after the bell had sounded, prompting Nino's irate fans to toss oranges into the ring.



Benvenuti was now swimming against a strong current, seemingly unable to turn the tide against his immensely strong and persistent opponent. Carlos kept pressing Nino through the seventh round, landing with thudding punches to the jaw as the troubled champion struggled to get back into the fight.

Monzon was now producing his best work and Benvenuti was in danger of being overwhelmed towards the end of the round, as Carlos backed him against the ropes and rifled hard punches to the head and body. The pace slackened in the eighth round, but still Nino was being struck by Monzon's ramrod jabs and harried and hustled on the inside.

But proud champions don't fall easily, and in the ninth round Benvenuti rallied magnificently as he finally regained the power and accuracy of his renowned left hook. Monzon began the round well, finding the mark with a good right to the jaw, but his grip on the fight was suddenly loosened when he missed with another right and Nino cracked him on the jaw with a big left hook. That one punch seemed to work marvels for the champion's sagging confidence. All at once he began to fire the hook with great authority, carving his openings with equally accurate jabs.

Benvenuti's revival added an unexpected twist to the engrossing, hard-fought contest, and the sight of Monzon under siege brought cheers from the partisan crowd. Three more perfectly delivered left hooks found the challenger's jaw as the round drew to a close, hard and powerful punches that would surely have done for most other opponents. But this man Monzon simply would not fall.

Carlos found himself under fire again in the 10th round, as Benvenuti came out determined to uphold the advantage. Continuing to show his new-found strength and motivation, Nino was superb as he jabbed and hooked with great precision. Monzon hit back determinedly, showing the iron will and doggedness that would make him a legend in the years to follow. Nevertheless, it was Benvenuti's round and now the scales were much more evenly balanced.

### **The Emperor's Last Stand!**

At that stage in the gruelling struggle, Benvenuti's supporters must have felt confident about their man's chances. Their Nino had battled his way right back into the fight, the fruits of his quality punching reflected on Monzon's bloodied mouthpiece. Yet as the 11th round got underway, Benvenuti suddenly took on the appearance of a tired and worn warrior. The gods had ordained a changing of the guard and Father Time wanted his slice of the cake too.

Monzon—irrepressible, inevitable Monzon—quickly reestablished control. A powerful right uppercut jolted Nino, who was then visibly hurt by another hard right to the ribs. The champion tried to counter, but he missed badly with a left hook and was soon clearly in distress as Monzon really went to work. A volley of punches swept Benvenuti into the ropes, and all he could do was grab and hold and wait for the bell as Carlos rained blows to the body.

The emperor's reign was nearing its end and his assassin showed no mercy in the 12th round as he swiftly resumed his two-fisted offensive, driving the weary champion back and bringing down his guard. A right cross from Monzon had Nino in complete disarray, and a following left-right combination to the head paved the way for the final, decisive blows.

Hurt and dazed, Benvenuti was incapable of staving off Carlos. Nino tried to hold, but he was now being cleanly struck by every blow that rained in. When he staggered back into his own corner, his fate was sealed. Benvenuti was defenseless, and his hands came down as Monzon drove home a powerful left hook.

Trapped in his small prison and sapped of all his strength, Nino could only watch helplessly as the final punch of the fight—a perfectly placed right cross—boomed off his jaw.

Like a man cut down by a bullet, the dying champion collapsed to his hands and knees and then toppled forward onto his face. Somehow he struggled to his feet, but not in time to beat the count. He looked a lost and shattered man as he took a couple of uncertain steps and then stumbled into the ropes.



The Pallazo dello Sport reverberated with noise and was awash with emotion as Nino was helped back to his corner. There would be a return match in Monte Carlo six months later, but it was a sad companion to the classic first match. Nino was a shell of his former self as he was overwhelmed by Monzon in three rounds. Benvenuti's days as a boxing champion were over, but there would be many more exciting chapters ahead for this most intelligent and likeable of men.

As a champion of life, it is fairly safe to assume that Nino will wear the crown for the rest of his days.

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