

## Vito Antuofermo: The Italian Import

By Austin Killeen

If I was looking for a stark contrast to the barren waste lands of southern Utah, I got it driving to my interview with Vito Antuofermo in New York City. The smartest of lab rats would be challenged by the labyrinth of streets in the densely populated jungle of asphalt and concrete which makes up Howard Beach. Fortunately, I was armed with my new Gemlin GPS navigational system and Jack Monroe a follow boxing historian. Jack, who did the driving, knows New York City like the back of his hand. As a result, we had no difficulty finding Vito's beautiful home in an upscale neighborhood of fashionable and expensive real estate.



Life began for Vito in a little village west of Bari, Italy near the Adriatic Sea on February 9, 1952. He was the second child of Gaetano and Lauretta Antuofermo, poor but hard working tenant farmers. They would rent lands to grow grapes, olive oil and almonds in the often dry and barren lands of southern Italy. This would require daily travel of up to 2 hours from their home in Palo del Colle. This was a family affair, with children expected to help in any way as soon as they were able to contribute. As early as 7 years of age young Vito remembers trudging behind a plow pulled by a mule, turning over the dry dusty soil so crops could be planted. This harsh early existence was probably the seed for Vito's endurance, determination and strength which he displayed throughout his boxing career.

In the mid 60's, southern Italy found itself in a severe drought, which had a harsh impact on the farming community. The Antuofermo's like the farmers around them soon found it difficult to earn a living from the arid soil. This resulted in Lauretta taking her two oldest boys and traveling to Brooklyn, NY to live with an uncle. Seeking opportunities in the new world would mean splitting up the family for several years. But change, even from desperation, can sometimes lead to opportunity. And opportunity for Vito would come in an unusual way.

Vito's introduction to boxing was unexpected, the result of being arrested by the police for his involvement in a street altercation. He was handcuffed and placed in the back seat of a cruiser with the other 2 combatants. When the police unloaded their cargo in front of the station house, they were lead to the building next door. Confused by the sudden change in travel plans, they quickly found out this building housed the gym for the Police Athletic League (P.A.L.). The "men in blue", turned their captive audience over to the person in charge of the gym, Joe LaGardia, with the instructions "see if you can do something with them!"

The kindly Mr. LaGardia offered the youngsters the use of his ring so they might finish their physical debate regarding the use of the streets of East Flatbush. Realizing they weren't having much success dealing with Vito before the Police arrived, the other 2 combatants politely declined. They were dismissed on the spot, leaving the bewildered Antuofermo the only one left in the gym. Asked what he knew about boxing, Vito answered "very little." While living in Italy, he stated, he had followed the career of Nino Benvenuti who was a national hero. Curiosity got the better of Vito and he told Joe LaGardia he would like to learn more. He was instructed to return to the gym the next day and be prepared to work out.

Arriving the next day, Vito was told to loosen up and get in the ring. That's when he noticed another boy about the same age and size, wearing boxing equipment and loosening up in the ring. When he realized that he would be sparring with the other youngster, Vito felt very confident. He had a well earned reputation in the streets as one not to be messed with. When the bell rang, Vito quickly found himself in a strange new universe, where his street skills had little value!! His introduction to boxing was a painful one because his opponent had previous amateur experience. Over the course of the next 3 minutes Vito was taken to school and the lesson was a

painful one. His crude offense was answered with punishing counter punches. While Vito's porous defense was overwhelmed by an assortment of combinations to the head and body. Watching from ringside, Joe LaGardia saw little of value from the Italian street brawler except that he refused to quit.

In spite of the humiliating beating, Vito was impressed with the skills involved in boxing and was eager to learn. Over the next few weeks he was like a sponge, absorbing everything that Mr. LaGardia showed him. Impressed with how quickly his young charge was learning and his willingness to train hard, he entered him into his first amateur competition. Climbing into the ring, Vito was surprised to see the boxer in the other corner was the very same pugilist who had humiliated him the previous month. When the bell rang it was an exact replay of their previous encounter with one difference; now it was Vito who played the role of the maestro. Mr. LaGardia was impressed with how quickly Antuofermo was learning; displaying excellent skills for one so young.

Vito's amateur career was compressed into only 30 fights, with 28 on the winning side. His trainer was impressed with his young charge's quick learning curve. His brain was like Velcro as every lesson seemed to stick. In 1970 Antuofermo defeated Tom Chestnut to win the NYC Golden Gloves Sub Novice Division. Chestnut himself would go on to become an outstanding amateur, winning 3 open titles. Additionally Vito split 2 bouts with future light-heavyweight champion Eddie Gregory, winning in a local competition and losing in the 1971 open finals of the NYC Golden Gloves. His only other loss was on a cut to future pro Chris Black. Cuts would prove to be the "achilles heel" of Vito's pro career. Vito repeatedly credited Joe LaGardia for his success in the amateur ranks.

Turning pro was the result of a misunderstanding on the part of young Vito. Hearing he could get paid for boxing, Antuofermo entered the punch of pay ranks with a decision over veteran Ivelaw Eastman. When he tried to enter the Golden Gloves in 1972, Vito found out pros could not fight again as amateurs. Realizing his mistake, he forged ahead full time in the pro ranks. His manager was Tony Carione, whose parents also immigrated from the same part of Italy as Vito. He quickly caught the eye of the NY fight crowd, going 17-0-1 with 8 ending early. This included being selected as the ring prospect of the month in August of 1972. Although this list of victims included the usually collections of want-a-bees, has-beens and never-was, hard punching Ray Villanueva and wily veteran Art Kettles were strong tests. The "Italian Express" was finally derailed when Vito was stopped on cuts by world ranked Harold Weston.

Antuofermo got back on track with a hard fought 10 round decision over veteran Danny McAloon. The biggest surprise came after the fight when a man charged past the police and jumped into the ring. Vito was shocked to see it was his father Gaetano, who had never approved of him being a boxer. Before the stunned Vito could react, he was being hugged and kissed by his proud dad. Gaetano had never seen his son in the ring, and only attended the bout at the insistence of a friend of the family. Vito ran off three more wins before facing the biggest test of his early career.

John L. Sullivan undefeated prospect of Olympia, Washington was Vito's opponent in a main event at Madison Square Garden. Any confusion between Vito's opponent and the original John L. Sullivan was quickly dispelled by the Italian. Using every punch in his arsenal, Vito had Sullivan backing up the entire fight. Only in the 5<sup>th</sup> round did the southpaw Sullivan take charge, scoring with overhand lefts and quick right jabs. In our interview, Antuofermo expressed the opinion that this bout convinced him that he could make a living and be an important player in boxing. Vito backed this statement up by scoring 2 more wins before facing the first big name of his career.



Vito Antuofermo, right, connecting against John L. Sullivan in 1974 at Madison Square Garden. Antuofermo won.

Former Junior Middleweight Champion, Denny Moyer of Portland, Oregon was brought to the Garden in New York to test the Italian upstart. A veteran of over 130 fights, Denny had to pull out all the tricks he had learned just to survive the 10 rounds. Watching the video I was impressed by Vito's hand speed, balance and boxing skills. Although possessing tremendous strength, Antuofermo was not a mauler, instead looking for openings to land quick combinations. At times I was reminded of Henry Armstrong, watching the perpetual motion of Vito on the inside. For Moyer it was the sad story of boxing, of a onetime outstanding pugilist staying around long after he should have retired. As a result of his performance; Ring Magazine placed Vito in their top 10 middleweight division for the first time in December of 1974. One caveat; Vito had suffered bad cuts over both eyes.

Vito closed out 1974 with a main event against former Champ Emile Griffith at the garden. In an action packed bout, the quick handed Italian was able to successfully force the action for much of the fight. Boxing on the inside, Antuofermo was able to smother Griffith's offense, and take away the Virgin Islander's edge in experience and ring generalship. When he could put space between himself and Vito, Emile showed why he was considered an all-time great! Although Griffith and his brain trust felt they won, the three officials had Vito the clear winner by a unanimous decision.

Due to his success states side, Vito soon found himself a popular draw back in Italy. In our interview Vito stated that he was always the fan favorite, even though he lived in the United States. This included a bout in Naples against sometime IBRO member, Reinaldo Oliveira. Getting into the ring, Vito stated he felt very confident. He figured Oliverira was looking for a free vacation in Europe in exchange for a few minutes of boxing. When the bell rang he quickly realized his mistake. Reinaldo came to fight and it took him 6 hard rounds before Oliveira lost on a TKO.

In his next bout, he faced Antonio Castellini in Milan. Entering the ring, Vito found for the first time he was not the fan favorite in Italy. Castellini was from Palermo in Sicilia but had fought in Milan over a half dozen times. As a result he was worshiped by the locals. When the referee stopped the bout in the 5<sup>th</sup> round, awarding Antuofermo a TKO stoppage, the arena erupted into a full scale riot. Vito and his father had to be escorted by police back to his dressing room. Fearing for his safety, police took him and his dad through an underground tunnel to a waiting van. Still needing a shower, Vito was rushed to his hotel to change and quickly get out of town.

Returning to the states, Vito meet Vinnie Curto in Las Vegas. This was of special interest to me as I had sparred with Vinnie in the New Garden Gym in Boston. If truth be told, I was a heavy bag for Curto the morning we climbed in the ring. Rumor has it that Vinnie, a concert pianist, could never play piano again. This was caused by chronic swollen hands, resulting from our time in the ring. As for the fight itself, the quick handed Vito won the early rounds against Vinnie's counter punching. The middle rounds saw Curto do much better when he stopped backing up. At the end of 10 hard fought rounds, Antuofermo won a very close but unanimous decision. Vito picked up two more wins, in small club venues, before returning to Europe.

Fighting in West Berlin before a large crowd in Deutschland Hall, Antuofermo won the European Light Middleweight Title over Eckhard Dage. The German had no answer for the Italian's two fisted attack to the head and body. The vicious exchanges left Dage with several cuts at the end of the 15 rounds. Returning to Italy, Vito defended his EBU title in Milan against Frenchman Jean-Claude Warusfel. After a slow start, Brooklyn's adapted son stepped up the attack, winning by a TKO when Warusfel failed to answer the bell for the 14<sup>th</sup> round.

Returning to Deutschland Hall in Germany, the Antuofermo Express unexpectedly jumped the tracks. Facing southpaw Frank Wissenbach in a non-title fight over 8 rounds, Vito never seemed to get started. The 3<sup>rd</sup> man, Rudolp Drust, never let the Italian work on the inside. At long range, the German's unorthodox style caused the

EBU champ to miss often. Although a close affair, Wissenbach was awarded a narrow decision. Vito failed to understand why his management took the bout scheduled for 8 rounds. He felt he was much stronger and would have won over a longer distance.

His European trip continued to be a bumpy ride, when he lost his EBU title in Malan to Maurice Hope. In a close bout, Vito had to fight from the opening round with a cut over his right eye. Early in the 13<sup>th</sup> Hope was in serious trouble but Antuofermo failed to capitalize. Early in the 15<sup>th</sup> a tired champ was dropped twice. With 15 seconds remaining in the bout, Spanish referee Juan Perotti stopped the match. Amazingly the Brooklyn import was ahead on the score cards at the time of the stoppage. Disappointed, Vito returned to the states to try and resurrect his suddenly sagging career.

A quick win in Queens, NY was followed up with a match against used up Eugene Cyclone Hart in Philadelphia. If Hart was a shot fighter someone forgot to tell him. Watching film of the fight, I was amazed by Hart's energy and hitting power. In toe to toe exchanges, Cyclone was living up to his nickname. Switching from a body attack in the 2<sup>nd</sup> round, Hart surprised Vito with an overhand right to the head. Antuofermo appeared to be caught in an earth quake. Hart continued his attack in the 3<sup>rd</sup> and appeared to be getting the better of Vito, who was also hampered by bad cuts. With a little more than a minute left in the 3<sup>rd</sup> round Antuofermo started using his left jab effectively. Eugene had no answer to Vito's sudden change in style. Working behind his left, the Brooklyn fighter started landing brutal combinations the next round. It ended in the 5<sup>th</sup>, when Antuofermo scored a spectacular KO after dropping the Philadelphia boxer earlier in the stanza.

After a couple of more wins, Antuofermo found himself back in Madison Square Garden against Bad Bennie Briscoe. This proved to be a 10 round war, with the New Yorker closing strong in the final two rounds against his tired foe. The official verdict was a unanimous decision by a wide margin for Vito. The TV announcer felt otherwise, having Briscoe the winner. It appeared that both fighters were able to land terrific combinations throughout the match. It looked to me that Vito won but not by the scores turned in by the officials. After another win, Antuofermo was back in the Garden against Willie Classen.

This was a classic matchup between an up and comer Classen and an established contender Antuofermo, for a higher place on the food chain of boxing. Willie, taller and athletic, jumped out to an early lead. Though dropping the early rounds, the quick handed Vito was applying pressure on the inside. Watching a video of the match, you could see him closing the gap as his relentless attack started to pay off. In the late rounds, a tired Classen tried to stem the tide with some impressive flurries. Antuofermo continued to apply pressure for 3 minutes of each round. The official verdict was a unanimous decision by a comfortable margin for the Italian. This caused a small riot by the Classen fans in the crowd. Watching the film, you could see Vito make a quick retreat to the safety of his dressing room. With his next win Antuofermo had a winning streak of 8 straight and a title bout in Monte Carlo, Monaco.

The matchup against defending champion Hugo Corro of Argentina was scheduled for April 8, 1979. However due to training injuries to the title holder the match was postponed twice. On June 30 of that year, the bout finally came off. Although the underdog due to his propensity to cut, Vito was happy the match was taking place, after years of waiting. Freddy Brown known as the "sixty second surgeon" and one of the best cut men in boxing was flown in to work Vito's corner. Since hiring Brown, to stop the flow of claret, Vito had not lost a fight. Interestingly the undercard included a bout between Marvin Hagler and Norberto Cabrera, with the winner promised the next title fight.



As for the match itself, Antuofermo won the title on a split decision in a foul filled contest. Vito was penalized a point in the 6<sup>th</sup> round, while both combatants were guilty of low blows and head butting. The clever boxing

South American appeared to have a commanding lead after 10 rounds, but tired badly over the last 3<sup>rd</sup> of the bout. The well conditioned Italian was able to finally pin his elusive foe on the ropes starting in the 11<sup>th</sup> round. With his offense smothered, the champ had no answer for the quick handed combinations to his head and body. As for Freddy Brown, he earned his pay by stopping two cuts in the early part of the fight. On the undercard Hagler scored an 8<sup>th</sup> round stoppage to gain a mandatory title match with Vito.

In the weeks before the bout, Hagler carried around a fly swatter and said into every camera he saw; “Vito, the Mosquito, I’ll swat him like a fly!” Considering that Vito was giving him a shot at the biggest prize in boxing, Marvin wasn’t showing much respect to the most famous resident of the Mill Basin section of Brooklyn. In the interview, Vito stated he didn’t appreciate Hagler’s attitude but respected him as a fighter. Apparently Marvin’s fly swatter impressed the odds makers, because he was installed a 4 to 1 favorite entering the ring. New York beat writer Michael Katz commented before the fight that there were “scars on the scars over Antuofermo’s eyebrows.” In spite of all the negative publicity prior to the fight, Vito stated he was very confident he would prevail.

As for the title match itself, fans at Caesar’s Palace got more than their money’s worth. The “Marvelous One” took a commanding lead in the first half of the 15 round bout due to his superior boxing. Antuofermo’s pressure started to pay off by the middle rounds. Somehow he was getting through the longer reach of Marvin, landing nice combinations to the head and body. Mills Lane, the 3<sup>rd</sup> man in the ring, was letting them fight with little interference on his part. This should be mandatory viewing by all referees, so they might learn the proper method of handling a fight. Although Vito had several cuts, cut man Freddy Brown did an excellent job of stemming the flow of blood.



Amazingly, it was Marvin who had a bad cut over his right eye entering the 15<sup>th</sup> round. At the final bell both boxers felt they had done enough to win the verdict. The audience at Caesars was on their feet giving both combatants a standing ovation. When the draw verdict was rendered, Marvin took it hard. Vito on the other hand had stunned the odds makers and most of the viewing audience. Antuofermo appeared satisfied and was probably at the height of his popularity. At the press conference, the WBC was ok with a rematch, but the WBA demanded Alan Minter of England be the next challenger. One can only wonder what would have happened if Antuofermo’s brain trust had defied both organizations and picked their own future matches. Vito was the only undisputed champ, the WBC and WBA having splintered all the other divisions. Fighting in Madison Square Garden, Vito would have been a huge draw due to his popularity and name recognition. The alphabet organizations would have had to convince the viewing public their political champs had better claims to the title than he did. Not easy to accomplish.

Sadly the Minter fight seemed to end the magical ride for Vito. The Englishman was awarded a split decision after 15 rounds in Las Vegas. It appeared the referee, Carlos Padilla of the Philippines, would not let Antuofermo work on the inside. Either Minter would grab Vito when he got close or Padilla would tell him to break. Amazingly Judge Roland Dakin of England awarded Vito only one round, the 14<sup>th</sup> when he knocked the Brit down. The New York Times scored the bout for Vito. The English press, though it thought Minter had won, characterized Darkin’s scorecard as “disgraceful” and “embarrassing.” Promoter Bob Arum accused Darkin of giving the English corner the thumbs up sign after each round. Darkin, who attended Minter’s victory party, said Arum’s charges were “nonsense.” He further stated; “A lot of the rounds were close but I had to give them to someone.”

The rematch was held three months later in Wembley, England before a capacity crowd at Empire Pool. Minter fought a much smarter fight this time, employing lateral movement to offset Antuofermo’s rushes. In the very

1<sup>st</sup> round Vito was cut over the right eye. By the 4<sup>th</sup> round he could only see out of his left. After his corner stopped the bout in the 8<sup>th</sup>, Vito needed 15 stitches to sew up 3 cuts. Dejected by the loss, Antuofermo's only chance for a title fight would be if Hagler could defeat Minter in their upcoming title bout. Hagler did, scoring a 3<sup>rd</sup> round TKO in Minter's very next defense at Empire Pool.

On June 13<sup>th</sup>, 1981 he got his second chance to regain the title in the Boston Garden. He had had a tune-up, two months earlier in Chicago, winning a 10 round decision. Within a minute of the opening bell, the top of Hagler's head collided with Vito's face. This resulted in a bloody gash over the left eye of Antuofermo, which bleed profusely the remainder of the round. During the 60 seconds between rounds, cut man Freddy Brown argued with referee Davey Pearl to stop the fight and declare a no contest. After Pearl conferred with commissioner Walter Byars, Brown's request was denied and the bout continued. With limited vision Vito fought on, suffering a flash knockdown in the 3<sup>rd</sup>. The fight was stopped at the end of the 4<sup>th</sup>, when Antuofermo's corner could not stop the bleeding.

For all intents and purposes, this was the end of Antuofermo's career. He did launch a brief 5 bout comeback in 1984, ending in a TKO loss to Matthew Hilton in Montreal. In viewing many of Vito's fights I feel his style is often misrepresented, calling him a brawler with a good chin and big heart, who was a bleeder. The boxing landscape is populated with prelim boxers who could be described this way, but fail to go anywhere. In reality he was a decent boxer with quick hands and a good left jab. He didn't just throw punches but looked for openings to land quick combinations. He had good balance and head movement, slipping punches while cutting off the ring. Add to this, that he had a big heart, great chin and incredible stamina and you're looking at one of the last undisputed former world champions. Why his management team never took advantage of his status as champion is unclear. Both his title defenses were staged at neutral sites, depriving him the opportunity to fight in front of a hometown crowd.

As I stated at the start of this article, Vito lives in an upscale home in Howard Beach, Queens, NY. He married his childhood sweetheart Joan, which produced four beautiful children; Lauren, Vito Jr., Pasquale and Anthony. In addition, Joan and Vito are proud grandparents with the count currently at two. In our interview, Vito stated his parents felt people who failed to work every day were bums. Apparently this permeated his self-conscious. Throughout his boxing career Vito always worked and has continued working in retirement because of his parents feelings. His employment has come a long way from stuffing sausages for Landry's on Avenue N in Brooklyn as a teenager. His list of employment includes working in public relations for Coca-Cola, acting in the movies (Godfather III) and on Broadway. Today Vito works for the International Longshoreman's Association, Local 1235 in Newark, New Jersey. This resulted when the Local 1235's President, Tommy Leonarvis, offered him a job.

The interview had one surprise, when Vito told me his chief sparring partner during most of his career was Manuel Melon. Manuel Melon used me for a Piñata in a match outside of Boston in the late 70's. Smiling, Vito hoped he wasn't culpable in the bouts outcome. Vito possesses "old world charm" and just as easily could have been the maître d' of an exclusive 5 star Italian Restaurant if he had never seen a boxing ring. The Vito Antuofermo I interviewed displayed a personality the exact opposite of the savage warrior fight fans remember from the ring!! His hospitality towards Jack Monroe and me on the day of the interview made it a memorial experience.