

FLORENTINO FERNANDEZ : THE OX

By Enrique Encinosa



His friends remember Florentino Fernandez as a good humored easy going man who loved his family and enjoyed playing dominoes or hanging out at the dog track with friends. His foes remember him as a man whose good nature disappeared between the ropes, killer instinct unleashed into an attack that neither gave nor asked for quarter, his left hook breaking bones and dropping opponents to the canvas.

Florentino Fernandez – Floro to his friends and fans - was born in Santiago de Cuba, on the southeastern tip of the island, on the sixth of March 1936.

“As a kid I dreamed of being a baseball player,” Floro stated, “but I was a skinny little kid and kids being kids, there was always a bully around looking to harass me. I did not pick fights but I did not run away either. When I was ten, eleven years old I was street fighting kids who were

older and bigger than me and almost all fights ended with a single punch from my end. I would hit them once and they would be stretched out on the sidewalk. All my friends started telling me that I should take up boxing and by the time I was a teenager I was training seriously to become a fighter.”

As a thin, wiry lightweight he travelled to Havana, where he was trained by Higinio Ruiz, a legendary trainer. Ruiz had been a club fighter in the thirties, but in the fifties –when Floro arrived in Havana- Ruiz was a gym owner with an impressive record as a corner and trainer for Cuba’s best fighters, including the popular brothers Lino and Pupi Garcia.

“My most important amateur fight was against Luis Manuel Rodriguez,” Floro stated, “and I caught him early in the fight and dropped him, but he had an iron chin and picked himself up from the canvas and put up a tremendous fight. I beat him on points and we never fought again. We became very good friends, sparred together, trained together and for years, when one of us fought, the other one was usually at ringside cheering him on. Luis was a great world champion, a very skilled, smooth boxer and a good guy. He was a true friend.”

“Floro and Luis were both very competitive,” former lightweight contender Frankie Otero said, “Although they never fought as pros they did –over the years- spar hundreds of rounds at the Fifth Street Gym and it was a thrill to watch them....they would talk to each other. Luis would move, slip and hit Floro with a combination and say something like –you did not see that coming- and Floro would later tap Luis with a short hook and answer –you felt that one didn’t you?...and they liked each other and were good friends but even in the sparring there was that competitive edge....”

Fernandez turned pro at the age of twenty –in 1956- at Cuba’s biggest boxing venue, Palacio de los Deportes (Sports Palace), demolishing Pastor Burke, a club fighter from Cienfuegos. Luis Manuel Rodriguez fought on the same undercard, also stopping his foe.

The Cuban press loved Floro’s raw brutal power, nicknaming him “The Ox.”

Promoter Cuco Conde loved Fernandez. The Ox did not care who his opponent would be, for he was willing to fight anyone as long as the pesos justified the contract. In his seventh pro bout Fernandez faced Marino Gonzalez, a seasoned club fighter with 25 pro fights, experienced in main events and owner of a winning record. Floro took him out in three.

The Ox became sports front page in Cuba as he continued blitzing all who faced him. Ray Estepa, who had a good record in almost thirty fights, went out in two. Veteran journeyman Rocky Randell –with 70 wins in over 100 pro fights- managed to last until the fifth round. Wilfredo Hurst, a slick boxing young prospect, fell in three, as did Alberto Bisbe, a former Cuban national light welter champion.

One of Fernandez most impressive performances took place when in January of 1959, the Ox - undefeated in 17 fights with 14 KO wins - faced Baby Diogenes Sagarra, who had a record of 20-2 with 11 KO wins and held the national light welter championship. The clever Sagarra eluded Floro in the first round, peppering him with quick combinations, opening a deep cut that threatened to end the Ox's unbeaten streak.

In the second round a desperate Fernandez rushed Sagarra, landing an explosive hook to the throat that dropped the fighter for the ten count.

“They could have counted to fifty,” stated sportswriter Andres Pascual, “Florentino damaged Sagarra’s vocal cords and from then on, Sagarra sounded hoarse every time he talked.”

Floro continued banging, stopping former world champion Paddy De Marco in four, Stefan Redl in seven and wining two back to back fights on points over tough welterweight contender Gaspar Ortega.

“De Marco had been a world champion when I was still an amateur,” Floro said about the fight, “and the win meant a lot to me because it proved to all that I belonged at the top. It was not a hard fight because I came out fast and did not give him time to set up a rhythm and my punches were hurting him from the first round.”

Life was good. Floro drove a convertible, ate well and had pesos to spend. His televised fights in Cuba had made him into a national celebrity, recognized in the street by even those that did not follow boxing. With his easy going attitude, Fernandez endeared himself to his fans by always talking to all strangers as though they were friends.



L-R: Florentino Fernandez, Doug Vaillant, Sugar Ramos and Luis Manuel Rodriguez



Fernandez outpoints Gaspar Ortega

Then Floro faced his first defeat. A Manila slugger named Rocky Kalingo stopped him in the first round and Floro got his revenge stopping Kalingo in two in a rematch. After the Kalingo victory, Floro beat Ralph Dupas in Florida before returning to Cuba to dispatch Gerald Gray in four.

“He was a promoter’s dream,” sports editor Sarvelio Del Valle said of Fernandez, “In the ring he was a savage beast with a ton of courage and a brutal punch. He scored sixteen straight knockouts which became a national record for straight knockouts and most of those fights were against some pretty tough fighters. Outside the ropes he was a gentleman and gave very good interviews and was liked by all.”

The Gray fight was his last fight in Cuba. By April of 1960, when this bout took place, Fidel Castro was well into converting Cuba into a satellite state of the Soviet Union and a hot spot of Cold War conflict. Almost fifteen hundred Cubans had faced the firing squads by then and civil war was raging in the island, with guerrilla uprisings and urban resistance groups fighting the new communist government.

Although Fidel and Raul Castro and Che Guevara had attended his fights, proclaiming that they were his fans, Fernandez was soon convinced that the new system was tearing apart his beloved country.

“Leaving Cuba hurt a lot,” Florentino stated in several interviews, “It was not because I knew that pro boxing was going to disappear in Cuba that I left my country...the executions, murders, the destruction of the whole country. I left and it was one of the saddest days of my life. I have never returned and will not return until Cuba is free.”

By the time he settled in Miami he was almost a full fledged middleweight. He lost on points to welterweight great Emile Griffith weighing 149, then became a top middleweight contender scoring three knockouts in a row over top competition. Phil Moyer, Rory Calhoun and Marcel Pigou all became victims of the Fernandez hook and the Ox signed a contract to fight Gene Fullmer for the middleweight championship and a fifteen thousand dollar paycheck, the biggest purse of his career.



Fernandez kayoes Phil Moyer

Fullmer was a very tough champion who had only lost four of his fifty nine pro fights. He had split three – winning, losing and fighting a draw- with Sugar Ray Robinson and had stopped the formidable Carmen Basilio twice. A hard man to beat under normal circumstances he had the edge of defending his title in his hometown of Ogden, Utah.

“We knew it was a bad situation,” Ferdie -The Fight Doctor- Pacheco stated, “but we also figured that Florentino could –over fifteen rounds- rip apart Fullmer. Florentino had a puncher’s chance and it was a world title fight.”

Angelo Dundee said “Nobody could punch like Fernandez. He was a converted southpaw so his left hook was murder. He broke Gene Fullmer’s elbow with a left hook during that middleweight title fight. Florentino could hurt anyone with any kind of punch no matter where it landed. I have seen him rock heavyweights in the gym with training gloves on.”

At the end of fifteen hard, brawling rounds, one judge voted for Floro and the other two gave the victory to Fullmer.

“I have seen the video of that fight many times,” Florentino has said, “And there’s no way I lost that fight. I fractured his elbow and I landed all the harder blows. I was denied the title belt but I know I beat him. I know it. I don’t have anything against Fullmer and I respect him because he was very tough, a real hard bone. In my heart I know I really won the championship that night.”

In an interview years later, Fullmer said: “I have fought some very hard punchers in my day but no one hit like Fernandez. Every punch he hit me, I felt it vibrate up and down my spine.”

Fernandez lost two more in a row. Tough Nigerian Dick Tiger fractured his nose, winning by a TKO and Joey Giambra also won on a cut. Floro snapped the losing streak by repeating a win over Phil Moyer and signed to fight top contender Hurricane Carter.

Carter was like Fernandez, a left hook artist. They clashed and Carter won by a fulminating one round knockout in a bout that many experts predicted would be the final chapter in Fernandez’ career. Floro sailed through the ropes and landed on a concrete floor, the fight concluding with a knockout victory for the Hurricane from New Jersey.

“Carter won because he landed first,” Ferdie Pacheco said, “Carter started fast and Florentino always started a little slower. Everyone thought that was the end of Florentino’s career but they were wrong.”

The Ox won two fights over fair competition and in his third comeback bout faced Jose “Chegui” Torres, an unbeaten Puerto Rican destined for greatness, a future world light heavyweight titleholder. Chegui had been an Olympic silver medalist and was unbeaten in 27 pro fights, with 21 KO wins.

The fight took place in Puerto Rico, Torres’ backyard. In front of a large crowd at Hiram Bithorn Stadium, Florentino stopped Chegui by TKO in the fifth round.

In an interview –years later- Torres reflected on the fight: “Cubans were my jinx. I drew with Benny Paret and Fernandez was the only one that ever stopped me... I hit him very good, clean shots and he was right there in front of me and hitting back very hard. My punches did not seem to bother him. He knocked me down twice and I remember the first time but I don’t think I remember the second one. The referee stopped the fight and I argued but he was right. At the time he stopped the fight I was hurt...He was a very good fighter. I have seen him when I visit Florida and I like him very much and joke with Florentino and ask him for a rematch.”

“It was one of my best fights ever,” Floro said in an interview years later, “I was sharp and in great condition and I could feel that I was hurting him with my punches. I could feel him getting weaker but Torres could take a very good shot. It was a real good win for me.”



Fernandez drops heart breaking decision to Gene Fullmer in title fight

The win –the biggest of his career- made Fernandez an idol in Puerto Rico and set off a four fight series with a tough Argentine slugger named Juan “Rocky” Rivero.

Rivero, -a brutal slugger- and Fernandez fought twice in Puerto Rico and twice at Madison Square Garden. Fernandez won one on points and one by KO and Rivero did the same.

“They were wars,” promoter Tuto Zabala said, “Of hundreds of fights I promoted those stand out as the most thrilling real wars. They hit each other from bell to bell.”

In the early sixties Frankie Otero was a teenager who dreamed of being a boxer.

“Boxing was everything to me,” Otero said, “I ate and slept boxing and Florentino was one of my heroes that I saw on television. Every Cuban in Miami knew Floro by sight. One day I was with my father in downtown Miami and we see Florentino walking towards us. My father stopped him and I was embarrassed because I was a shy kid. So my father says to him –My son admires you and wants to be a boxer but I tell him he should forget about boxing and study in college. What do you think? – and Florentino smiled and answered –My father said the same thing to me but I have done very well in boxing.”



Fernandez and Rocky Rivero mix it up

Otero –who did go to college- also did well in boxing winning an NABF title and being a top ranked fighter for three years in a sixty bout career.

By the mid sixties Fernandez was past his peak. He continued knocking out fighters but began losing more frequently. Jose “Monon” Gonzalez beat him twice, cutting him badly in one of those fights. Andy Heilman outpointed him and Jimmy Lester broke his jaw.

After a loss to Nicaraguan Lou Gutierrez, Fernandez was now ending his career as a light heavyweight. Matched carefully he scored seven wins and a draw before facing Vernon McIntosh, his last ring opponent.

McIntosh was a twenty three year old journeyman club fighter who had fought and lost to quality fighters including Bob Foster and Gregorio Peralta. A few years before, McIntosh would have been considered cannon fodder for Fernandez but in 1972 he was a very tough opponent for the thirty six year old Ox.

World rated junior lightweight and former NABF champion Frankie Otero was sitting ringside for Fernandez last bout.

“McIntosh was very young, had a lot of heart and Florentino was an old veteran by then,” Otero said, “Florentino knocked McIntosh down and was winning almost every round but McIntosh was hanging in there, giving him a hard fight and making him work, until by the tenth round Florentino had nothing left and was wobbling around the ring when Eddie Eckert stopped the fight, awarding McIntosh a TKO win.”

“Dad fractured a hand early in the fight,” Virginia Pascual, Florentino’s daughter said of her father’s last fight, “and he fought most of the fight with a broken hand.”

Florentino Fernandez final ledger reads 50-16-1 with 43 KO wins. He was stopped on ten occasions, most of them on cuts.

After retiring from the ring Fernandez lived happily married and content in raising his family, becoming a tender grandfather and occasionally training fighters.

In retirement his face bore the marks of his former trade, with some scar tissue and a nose thickened by hundreds of blows, but Floro was not addled, talking clearly, his conversation spiked with a solid sense of humor. His body was still hard, carrying only a dozen pounds more than it did decades ago, when he was the most feared puncher in the middleweight division.

He often showed up at the local club shows in Miami where his introduction was followed by warm applause. An icon among Cuban exiles in Little Havana, Floro was stopped by fans on the street thirty years after hanging up the gloves and he always chatted with the fans in his amicable way.

At a local show in Miami, when Fernandez was close to seventy years of age, he sat at ringside talking to a reporter as he watched two local middleweights brawling in the ring.

“I could take those guys,” Floro said to the journalist.

“Oh, sure,” the sports scribe answered, “In your time it would have been easy.”

Fernandez shook his head.

“Not in my time,” Florentino said, “I mean now. All I need is one round each.”

The journalist nodded in agreement.

In 2009 Florentino Fernandez was inducted into the Florida Boxing Hall of Fame.

The clean living Florentino, whose splendid health seemed to make him immune to even common colds, died from a stroke on the morning of the 28th of January, 2013 at the age of seventy-six.

“The only regret my father had,” his daughter said, “was that he was never able to return to a free Cuba. He mentioned it every week. It was the only thorn in his heart.”



Floro with Enrique Encinosa

Enrique Encinosa is a Cuban American journalist who fought as an amateur light heavyweight trained by Johnny Coulon. He is the author of “Azucar y Chocolate, Historia del Boxeo Cubano” (Sugar and Chocolate: A History of Cuban Boxing) and co-author with Hank Kaplan of “Boxing: This is It!” Encinosa is also a former matchmaker, manager and TV color commentator and was inducted to both the Florida Boxing Hall of Fame and the Cuban Sports Hall of Fame in 2010.