

Who Was Abd El Kebir?

By Enrique Encinosa



To a boxing historian all small details are important. The historian searches through yellowed clippings, archives and now through the internet all details of the boxing world, assembling lost or forgotten records, putting together the puzzles that form a finished mosaic profile of a long forgotten career.

The historian doesn't do tedious research in order to gain fame or recognition for many a third rate sports writer is more recognized than a preeminent historian. No, the historian does his research because he is obsessed with truth and delighted at playing historical detective. There is a thrill involved in discovering small details.

I have experienced such thrills often in these years, as I found previously unrecorded Ad Wolgast, Black Bill and Jose Napoles fights, or that an early Nino Valdes bout was not a knockout win, but a no contest or as I reconstructed hundreds of records of champions and pugs looking through microfilms at the University of Miami Library. The thrill I refer to is something that only another historian can understand.

Sometimes what seems an unimportant historical footnote triggers the historian to become involved in hours or days of constant research; such a footnote –one written many years before my birth- sent me recently on a quest to set a record straight, that of a tough journeyman globe trotter named Abd El Kebir.

The Ring edition of April 1932, page 61 ("Maryland, Virginia and District of Columbia," by Patsy Donovan) states that: "A real colored fighter, Billy Edwards, 160 pounds, is idle in these parts and would like a representative in New England...Billy can hold his own with any middleweight in the country...Billy boxed around Philadelphia under the name of El Kadair (sic) and was very successful."

The comment puzzled me. Historians have their own niche; mine has been Cuba –where I was born- Florida –where I live in exile- and Spain, the land of my ancestors. Because of this particular niche I was better acquainted with Abd El Kebir than most boxing aficionados, as the middleweight slugger had fought most of his career in Spain, Cuba and the United States and I had never heard that he was an American but rather from Spanish Morocco.

After several days of avoiding the obsession I pulled out boxes of clippings and began my new quest to ascertain whether El Kebir was an American named Edwards.

The incomplete record of Abd El Kebir shows his first recorded fight to have been in Argentina in 1918, but whether it is the same fighter that we investigated is open to question for no more Argentina bouts show in his record and the many articles published in Cuban and Spanish press of the era do not mention him as having ever fought in Argentina.

Aside from that Argentina fight, the first solid block of verified bouts for El Kebir show him fighting in Spain, France and Morocco between 1923 and 1925.

During those years, Abd El Kebir, residing in Barcelona, became one of Spain's most popular fighters at a time when the Iberian Peninsula had some good quality performers. El Kebir lost on points but gave solid performances against Spanish Welterweight king Ricardo Alis and Cuban national

welterweight champion Enrique Ponce de Leon. He fought two draws and picked up a DQ win over Spanish middleweight titleholder Tomas Thomas. He also defeated Karoly Mathe –billed as champion of Hungary- outscored some fair club fighters –like Pedro Saez- and scored a knockout in a bout in Casablanca as well as being credited with two wins in Egypt against unknown opponents.

Many of El Kebir’s bouts were reported in “Mundo Deportivo,” Spain’s top sports publications whose archives are available on line. There are thirty three listed articles between 1923 and 1925 that mention or feature El Kebir and cite the middleweight as being from Morocco, including the following samples:

“..sensational combat between our excellent middleweight Tomas Thomas and the African Abd El Kebir...” (Mundo Deportivo, September 7, 1924, page 2).

“...Juan Alberich will face Abd-El-Kebir, the Moroccan pugilist that has gained the sympathy of the public with his valiant performances in the ring..” (Mundo Deportivo, September 19, 1924, page 4).

“Few fans will forget the brilliant performance of the African battler against the formidable puncher Ponce de Leon and Ricardo Alis...” (Mundo Deportivo, March 4, 1925, page 1).

“Thomas, middleweight champion of Spain will face Abd El Kebir, hard Moroccan pugilist...” (Mundo Deportivo, May 1, 1925, page 1).

Not one of the thirty three articles of “Mundo Deportivo” as well as others in “La Vanguardia” –a Barcelona newspaper- makes any allusion of El Kebir being American, nor are there any references of him speaking with a foreign accent of any kind and no one expressed any doubt as to him being from anyplace other than Spanish Morocco.

By the summer of 1925, Spanish lightweight Hilario Martinez was planning a tour of the American hemisphere, starting in Cuba and proceeding to the United States. Martinez was a busy world class fighter who in a career expanding over 130 bouts would hold the Spanish lightweight and welterweight crowns, challenge for a European crown and score wins over Jack Britton, Johnny Dundee, Manuel Quintero and Sid Terris.

The Martinez management team also took two more fighters on the tour: Abd El Kebir and Frank Hoche, a Frenchman residing in Barcelona who was considered a top fighter in European rings. Hoche –nicknamed “The Wolf”- had fought two draws with Dixie Kid and another fifteen round draw with Gus Rhodes, Jack Johnson’s nephew and sparring partner.

The three fighters arrived in Havana on the vapor “Cuba” on August 1, 1925, receiving good copy in the local press, particularly “Diario de la Marina.” Many Spaniards resided in Cuba and expected big results from the three arrivals. In the case of Hilario Martinez they were justified but Hoche disappointed being blasted out in one round by hard punching Cuban light heavyweight Santiago Esparraguera, after which the Wolf decided to return to his lair in Barcelona.

El Kebir lost more than he won in Cuba, yet became very popular and left a lasting impression with his aggressive, crowd pleasing style. He was stopped in four rounds by Kid Charol, an excellent, first rate boxer with solid power. El Kebir also fought several wars with Martin Perez, a crowd pleasing slugger nicknamed “The Terrible Cook,” a moniker that could be interpreted as belonging to a fierce fighting chef or perhaps as a warning of his culinary abilities.

Cuba's "Diario de La Marina" stated on different articles and fight reports that Abdl el Kebir was from Spanish Morocco, referring to him as "El Moro" (The Moor). His interviews on Cuban press were done in Spanish and the newspapers did not make any references as to the fighter having an American accent.

El Kebir began travelling to the United States for club fights, eventually becoming a resident from 1928 to 1936. Besides fighting club fights in the Maryland, Pennsylvania and DC region, he became in 1930 a sparring partner for his old foe, Ricardo Alis, who was on a US tour.

Ricardo Alis is a name not well known among historians but in Spain he is revered even today, when old timers bemoan past generations that produced world quality fighters like Ignacio Ara, Jose Girones, Fillo Echevarria and Alis.

Alis –known as "Ricardet" to his friends- turned pro while still in his teens and by the time he was eighteen he had won the Spanish welter crown and had lost a twenty round bid for the European crown held by Piet Hobin. At nineteen he won the national middleweight title in Spain and in 1929 –at age 23- made his US debut at Madison Square Garden stopping Joe Judge in four rounds.

El Kebir had sparred with Alis getting him ready for a fight with Vince Forgionne which Alis won, but when an opponent fell out on a card in March of 1930, the sparring partner became the opponent. El Kebir and Alis who had fought their first bout in Barcelona found themselves fighting a rematch in Philadelphia almost six years later.

Early in the bout they clashed heads with Alis bleeding profusely from a nasty cut, the ref stopping the fight in the sixth round awarding El Kebir a TKO win, no doubt the highlight win of his career.

The Billy Edwards claim of being "El Kadair," has only –as far as I know- been mentioned in The Ring and seems to hold no substance. In all Spanish and Cuban publications stretching over a half dozen years of activity, there is not one comment that would substantiate the Edwards claim. Abd El Kebir was a tough journeyman from Spanish Morocco, not a Philadelphia fighter.

By the end of 1936 Abd El Kebir disappeared from boxing history with his last recorded bout and whether he decided to stay in the US or return to Morocco is not known. It is highly unlikely he returned to Spain as the Spanish Civil War had already begun as a prelude to the big war that enveloped the world for the second time.

Enrique Encinosa is a Miami political radio analyst and the author of nine books, two of them on boxing. A former amateur boxer, trainer, manager and matchmaker, he has authored hundreds of articles on boxing, is a member of IBRO and a voting member of the IBHOF. In 2010 he was inducted as a historian in the Florida Boxing Hall of Fame.
