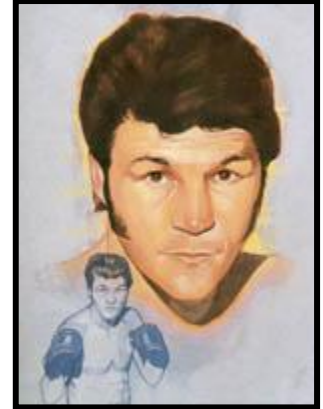


BILLY BACKUS: FIGHTING IN THE SHADOW OF GREATNESS

By Austin Killeen

When Howard William Backus drew his first breath on March 5, 1943 no one knew that someday he would be related to boxing royalty. It wouldn't be until June 10, 1955 that his famous uncle Carmen Basilio would capture the world welterweight title. By then little William had gotten the boxing bug, having participating in two amateur bouts. He would follow his favorite uncle around from gym to gym taking part in any three rounders he could get. "My uncle Jo-Jo had his driver's license and I would get him to take me everywhere. Jo-Jo was a good boxer in his own right, but lacked the passion to train and diet like my more famous uncle, Carmen."



When I asked Billy about his exposure to boxing he replied, "My introduction to the sport was the result of my family background. My mother's younger brother Carmen was already a good boxer when I was a little boy. His younger brother Joseph, I called him Jo-Jo, was my hero. I always looked up to him. He was only six years older than me as opposed to Carmen's sixteen years." Jo-Jo had been a good high school wrestler and was very strong. But he didn't like all the sacrifice that was necessary to be a good boxer; he liked to have a drink with his friends, chase the girls and didn't like being in the gym. In spite of having a very good record, Joey retired after 26 pro bouts spanning an off and on thirteen year career.

I was curious about Billy's amateur background and asked him for some details. What he told me you couldn't make up. "We had amateur fight cards at Sylvan Beach in Canastota. The fighters would change in the Marion Manor and fight outside in the parking lot. There were no ring posts or ropes, Bales of hay were used for the ring. The ring was two bales high, so the fans could see the boxers." Obviously if fighters were skillful at fighting off the ropes, they didn't learn it at the Marion Manor. "We fought in sneakers and the asphalt served as the ring canvas." It must have been painful if a boxer had to take a knee.

"Tony Graziano was my trainer my entire career, from my first amateur fight as a twelve year old until I retired from the pros in 1978. I would train in the back of his Italian-American restaurant called Casa Mira (English translation: My House) which was located in downtown Canastota." Based on his "fight for trophies" days, Billy indicated he might have some of his uncle Carmen's DNA. He captured the 1960 novice title of the Adirondack A.A.U. featherweight division and won the open division in 1961. This resulted in a trip to the National Golden Gloves in

Pocatello, Idaho where he lost in the semi-finals. Not bad for a boxer who was used to fighting in a ring made out of hay.

In September of 1961 Billy joined his two uncles in the punch for pay ranks. To say that his early professional career was less than auspicious would be an understatement. Fighting for three and a half years against considerably less than world class opposition, he compiled a record of eight wins (four by KO) seven loses and three draws in eighteen bouts. There were a few bouts that indicated some potential: a KO of Dave Hilton, Canadian featherweight champ, two wins over prospect Colin Fraser and a draw with Marcel Bizien, a tough club fighter out of New Jersey.



Unfortunately these successes proved to be little more than fool's gold, as he would usually fail when he stepped up in competition. In March of 1965, lanky Rudy Richardson (nine wins and twelve losses) gave Backus a one sided boxing lesson in Johnstown, Pennsylvania. Richardson's punches were like magnets sticking to a refrigerator, the way they landed on Billy's face and body. Commenting on the fight Billy stated, "He was looking good and I made him look better."

I asked why he underachieved in the pros and he replied, "I fought for the extra money to bring home to my family. My construction job came first and I'd jump in the car and drive to a fight after work. I was in rugged shape because of my job but I wasn't in gym shape. When the bell rang I'd wait on my opponent because I had no plan." Retiring after the Richardson fight there was little risk that the Canastota boxer would ever hurt his hand signing autographs; their value would have been worth less than the paper they were signed on.

During Billy's two and a half year retirement, the general consensus among Canastota residents was that Carmen's nephew had made a wise decision. Well, almost everyone - his trainer Tony Graziano, ever the optimist, saw light where others saw darkness. He felt that Backus had undeveloped talents that could be nurtured until he was a world champion. Needless to say it was a short line trying to get Billy back into the ring. "Tony approached me about taking a fight in Worcester, Massachusetts. The construction business was slow because of the early snow and seemingly never ending rain and I could use the money. So I said okay."

With time to properly train in the gym, Billy's comeback was a huge success; four consecutive stoppages in six weeks rewarded Graziano's optimism and gave his

young charge some pocket money to take home. Although his four wins hadn't exactly come against hall of famers, they would result in Billy fighting three consecutive main events in Syracuse. And who could blame Tony Graziano if he pointed his finger at boxing skeptics and shouted "S-E-E, I told ya so!"

His step up in competition against solid journeymen, resulted in three more wins. In stopping Dick French in six rounds, Backus avenged a loss to the Providence belter that happened five years earlier. This resulted in an offer to face leading welterweight contender Percy Pugh in New Orleans. Promoter Lou Messina was trying to force welterweight champ Curtis Cokes to defend his title against Pugh, and was keeping the challenger busy. For Backus it was the biggest fight of his career so far. He was working on a seven fight win streak, while Pugh had won nine in a row.

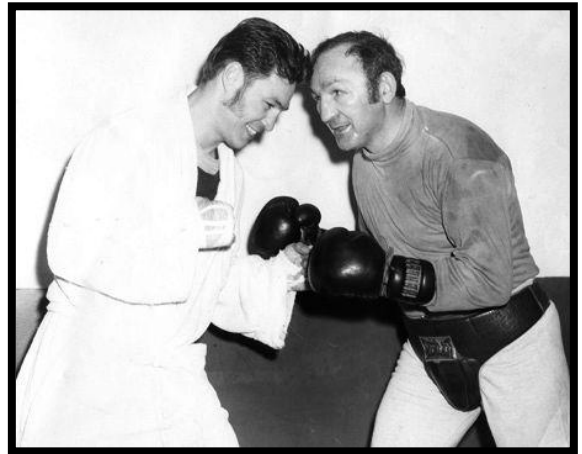
The ten rounder took place at the Municipal Auditorium, with Uncle Carmen and Graziano in Billy's corner. The prefight write-ups were more about Basilio than his nephew, making one wonder if the former champ was fighting that night. Entering the ring on June 3, 1968, Backus was in excellent shape. From the opening bell he pressured Pugh, using a solid left to force the action. But the leading contender from "The Big Easy" had faced much better competition, and it showed. Despite a fine effort by the New York import who contested every round, Percy was able to win a unanimous decision by a comfortable margin. Billy commented "Pugh was a runner, but with no power. I just couldn't get to him, he was too quick."

Impressed with his effort in the Pugh fight, promoter Messina invited Billy back to face welterweight Jerry Pellegrini. He was another New Orleans hotshot, and few gave Billy much of a chance of winning. However the Canastota banger was a quick study and left the ring after the Pugh fight, a better boxer than the one who had entered it. From the opening round Pellegrini fought a cautious fight. This was a bad strategy against the new and improved version of Billy Backus. Jerry's partisan fans went crazy every time he landed a punch, but it was difficult against the aggressive New York import. "Jerry was a stand up guy and made a good target for my combinations" Billy stated. Returning to Syracuse, the hometown boy used a relentless body attack to stop Carlos Philips in seven. The Puerto Rican was absorbing a terrific beating when the referee intervened.

On October 7, 1968, Backus returned to New Orleans for his third fight in four months. His opponent Johnny Brooks was overwhelmed by Billy, being dropped twice in losing a unanimous ten round decision. In addition to the win, Ring Magazine ranked the Canastota slugger ninth in their welterweight rankings. Probably the only person not surprised by Backus's boxing turnaround was his trainer Tony Graziano. Returning to Syracuse, Billy scored two more stoppages;

including an eighth round TKO of former New York amateur sensation Vince Shomo.

Boxing in upper New York State was back on the map, not seen since the days of Uncle Carmen. With his status as a ranked contender in the welterweight division, Billy was able to lure Percy Pugh to Syracuse for a twelve round rematch. This time Backus ignored the punching power of his rival and waded into the New Orleans cutie. It was an action packed fight from start to finish, with neither advisory able to seriously hurt his rival. This time the verdict favored the Canastota banger by split decision. Ring magazine jumped boxing's most famous nephew to fourth in their March 1969 ratings. Two months later Backus returned to Syracuse to face lanky C.L. Lewis of Philadelphia. From the opening bell both fighters traded bombs in a battle of attrition. In the sixth Billy trapped C.L. in the corner, dropping him with a hard right. A left hook to the jaw dropped his rival again in the seventh. The referee saved Lewis from further punishment.



On April 5, Pugh and Backus met for the third time in Syracuse with Backus capturing a twelve round unanimous decision in their rubber match. Backus had the heavier hands, but Pugh the quicker ones. Billy had his rival in trouble on several occasions, but the Louisiana smoothie was always able to get out of danger. Billy was now ranked third in the latest Ring ratings. Two months later Pugh and Backus were at it again, this time in New Orleans. In a fifteen rounder, yes a fifteen rounder, Pugh captured a unanimous decision behind a solid left jab. One month later Backus suffered a second defeat, this time at the hands of Jerry Pellegrini. Pellegrini, working behind a punishing right hand dropped the granite chinned New Yorker twice in capturing a unanimous verdict. In thirty five days Backus had dropped from third to tenth in the August 1969 Ring ratings. Backus had made a nice run in gaining world recognition but it appeared the dream of a world title was over.

Amazingly Pellegrini agreed to face Backus in a rubber match in Syracuse. Switching his attack from body to head and back again, Billy smothered his opponent's assault in capturing a unanimous ten round decision. Like a cork that refuses to sink, the Canastota slugger was now ranked seventh by Ring magazine. I asked Billy if his seven fights with Pellegrini and Pugh were the catalyst for transferring him from a club fighter to a world class contender. He responded, "with every fighter you approach, you acquire a little more knowledge. You have an idea what they are going to do and I tried to set up a different program each

time to screw them up a little bit." Backus was proof that if you could survive against tougher competition, win or lose you become a better fighter.

His next two fights against tough journeyman Ricky Ortiz resulted in a ten round draw and an eight round TKO victory for Billy resulting from cuts. Backus acknowledged Ortiz was a difficult opponent; "I would imagine because of the sparring he did in New York City gyms, the more he did the better he got." Following the Ortiz fights, Billy ran off four more wins including a unanimous decision over number one contender Manuel Gonzalez. The usually slow starting Backus surprised the Texas import with a left hook to the head, dropping him for a mandatory eight count in the second round. Gonzalez closed the gap in the middle rounds behind right hands to the head of his southpaw rival. But the Canastota banger was in excellent shape, closing strong with a brutal body attack to regain control of the fight. Ring magazine's December 1970 ratings had Billy ranked number two in the world behind his old rival Percy Pugh.

World champion Jose Napoles was looking for someone to defend his title against and it came down to risk versus reward. In consideration were the ubiquitous Percy Pugh, Chicago junior welterweight hotshot Eddie Perkins and Backus. The Canastota Boxing Club offered Jose Napoles an attractive \$62,000 guarantee plus expenses to defend against Backus in Syracuse. In addition West Coast promoter George Parnassus would set up a close-circuit TV network to beam the fight to Los Angeles, Mexico City, and four other West Coast sites. There appeared to be little risk and a nice payday for the champ, so the fight was signed, sealed and delivered. This would be the first title bout in Syracuse since September 1956, when Billy's uncle, Carmen Basilio stopped Johnny Saxton in nine rounds.

I asked Backus if he had any fear of facing Napoles, as people were already calling him one of the greatest welterweights of all time. His response; "Respect is one thing and fear is another. I never had fear for the guys that I fought, I didn't care who it was. I respected Jose for what he had done, but is he going to be able to hit as hard as I am?"

After all the negotiations leading up to the bout, Napoles, 144 1/4 and Backus, 145 1/2 finally faced each other on December 12, 1970. In the opening round both boxers worked behind their jabs without gaining any noticeable advantage. As Backus was a southpaw their jabs often bounced off each other's gloves. Jose kept the fight at long range for most of the round. The champ at times was able to land his left jab and followed it up with overhand rights to the head; advantage Napoles. Both boxers picked up the pace in the second with Billy landing a few right hooks and straight lefts to the head and body. But Napoles once again kept the fight at a distance and carried the round. For the purest reading this story it was interesting how both boxers tried to keep their lead foot outside that of their

opponent. Most observers gave the second round to the champ but the challenger was composed and in the fight.

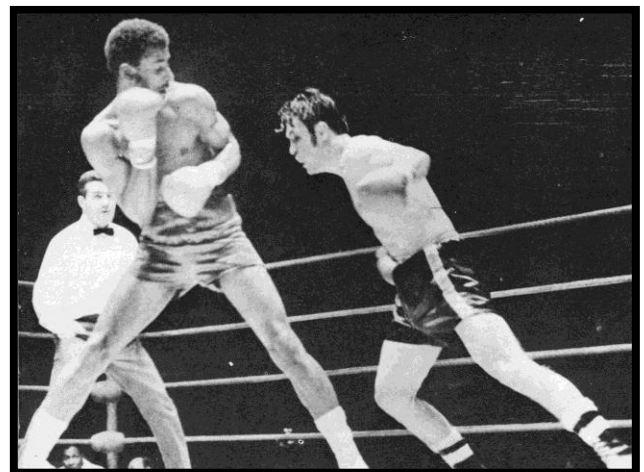
The first minute of the third round Jose continued to control the action from long range. Suddenly Billy exploded two hard lefts to the face of "Mantequilla" and the fight was on. Napoles abandoned his long range attack, electing instead to trade toe-to-toe with the challenger. Backus showed some ability at slipping punches, while landing right hooks, left uppercuts, and overhand lefts to the head. The champ responded in kind, but was taking punishment unlike the previous two rounds. At the bell both boxers were leaking claret from deep facial cuts around the eyes.

Both corners got the bleeding under control between rounds and the fight continued. Backus quickly reopened the cut over Napoles left eye, prompting referee Jack Malevich to halt the contest at the one minute mark of the fourth. Malevich stated "It was the worst cut I've ever seen, I could see his eyeball." The new champ stated the stoppage was the result of a punch, while the ex champ claimed it was the result of a butt. Viewing the video of the final round, I saw no clash of heads.



For the new champ, the evening proved to be an artistic success, but a financial disaster. The net receipts of a little over \$48,000 didn't even cover Napoles guarantee. I suppose Billy could take comfort in the knowledge that he didn't have to pay any taxes on his purse that evening. (Just kidding Mr. Backus) For the ex champ, in addition to his guarantee the west coast close-circuit broadcast netted him an additional \$30,000. The promoters reportedly made \$6,000 from a radio broadcast along the east coast. Unfortunately for Backus, cheers from the fans can't be used on a bank deposit slip.

As a result of his not newly improved finances, Backus squeezed a pair of non-title fights onto his ledger before his rematch with Napoles. Returning to Syracuse he captured a decision over Bobby Williams. Six weeks later the new champ traveled to Paris, France to take a ten round verdict over Robert Gallois. His purses didn't make him a millionaire, but they did put a few coins in the family coffer, unlike his historic title win.



On June 4, 1971, 16,000 fans poured into the Inglewood forum, to witness Backus/Napoles II. For Backus it turned out to be a financial success but a pugilistic disaster. With that many fans pushing through the turnstiles, Billy would earn a check for \$90,000 dollars. But once the bell rang, the Canastota banger resembled a flamenco dancer performing at the La Brea Tar Pits. It might have still been a winnable fight if Jose had been dancing along side of him, but he wasn't. Napoles was putting on a classic performance, a performance which showed how he had acquired the moniker "Mantequilla."

Seconds into the opening round Napoles was cut over the right eye, but sizzling right hands by the former champ appeared to rock Backus. The fast pace continued in the second, but the Canastota fighter was eating right hands to the face. Now both boxers were suffering facial cuts. Each round was a repeat of the one before it, with Napoles controlling the action from the outside. Although the champ had his moments on offense and showed nice head movement, slipping punches from time to time, he just couldn't get out of the way of the challenger's rights to the head.

By the eighth round, Backus' right eye was virtually closed and only his cast iron chin was keeping him upright. Suddenly, a left- right combination to the head dropped Backus, but pride wouldn't let him stay down. Forcing his way inside he tried to turn the tide of battle. But multiple punches by Napoles dropped Billy for a second time. Referee Dick Young conferred with the ring physician and stopped the bout at 1:53 of the eighth round. Backus had come a long way since his loss in Johnstown, Pennsylvania in 1965, but his title tenure was over.

Backus would continue to box for six more years against some pretty good competition. After the second Napoles fight Billy would go seven and eight over his next fifteen bouts. It was obvious to everyone but the ex champ it was time to retire. But after four years of one step forward and two steps back, boxing's most famous nephew caught fire again; winning ten straight and boxing to one draw. It was back to the Inglewood forum on May 20, 1978 to face Pipino Cuevas for the WBA welterweight title. But the magic was gone and Canastota's native son retired for good.

For the next twelve years Billy worked as a distributor for Pabst Blue Ribbon Beer and Carling's Black Label Beer. Later he made a career change working for the New York State Correctional Facilities as a physical education instructor for nineteen years.

Billy married his childhood sweetheart Peggy, who he first met in second grade. They had three beautiful children together; John, Sandra and Jeffrey. Peggy was by her husband's side through the good and bad times of his boxing career. Sadly she lost a twelve year battle to cancer, with Billy at her side in 1991.

Backus got a second chance at the brass ring in 2006; friends introduced him to a girl visiting her family in Canastota. Billy and Marie married in 2008 and moved to Pageland, SC where he still resides today. Marie suffered from an unusual allergic reaction, which doesn't allow a person to expel carbon-dioxide when they breathe. This sometimes results in the individual needing to have their blood cells washed with a dialysis machine. Sadly in the spring of this year, Marie suffered an attack and medical procedures failed to remove the carbon dioxide from her blood. Once again this powerful man could only sit by his wife's side helplessly, as she lost her battle to this rare breathing disorder.

If you happen to be in Canastota on the first weekend of June, you will find 93 year old Tony Graziano still working at his restaurant across the street from the International Boxing hall of fame. As for Billy's favorite uncle Joey Jo-Jo Basilio, he still lives in Canastota.

In writing this story I realized I had greatly underestimated the talents of this former champion. A southpaw, Billy had many qualities that made him a champion; solid right hook, excellent straight left, granite chin, good foot placement, nice head movement and above average strength. I'm not saying he would have beaten a prime Sugar Ray Robinson at 147 pounds, but his ascent to the crown was legit. Billy Backus is a champion both inside and outside of a boxing ring!

