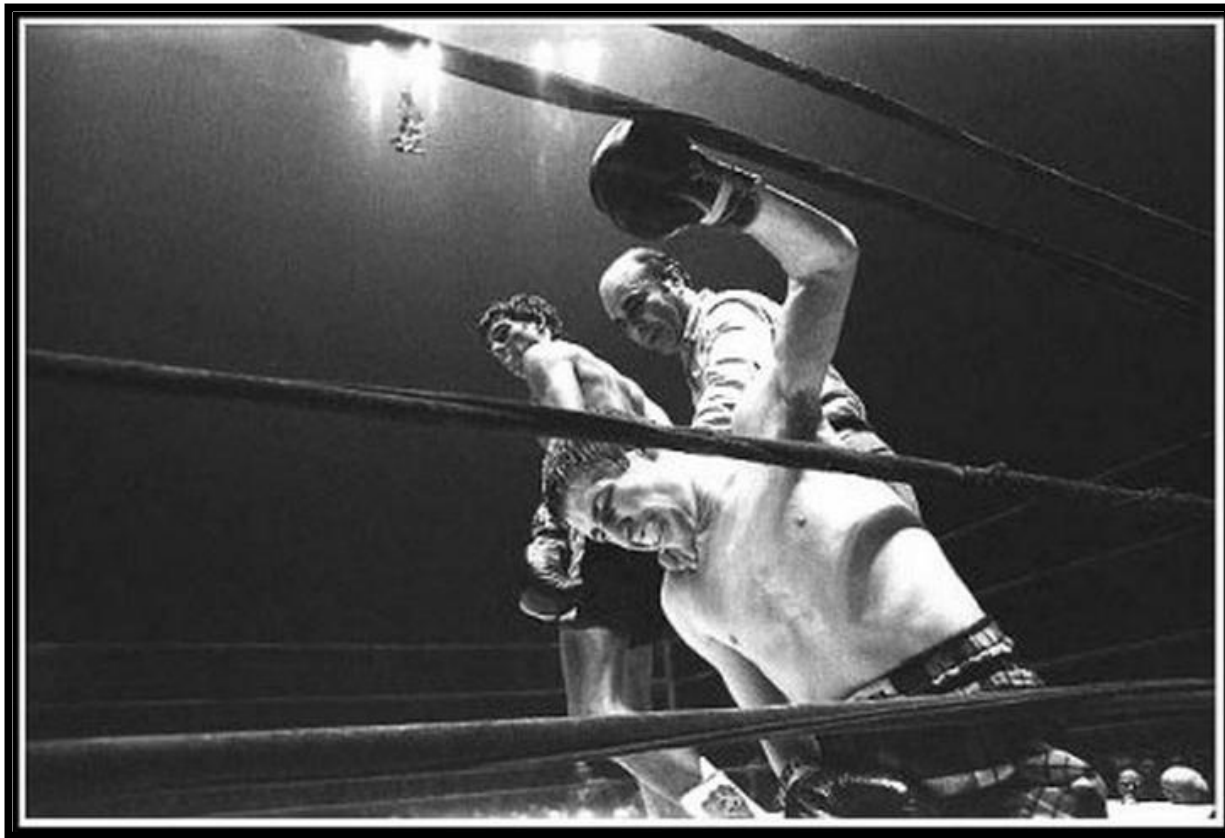


Summer Hurricane: The First Roar of Roberto Duran

By Mike Casey



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When "El Cholo" first came to visit us in earnest, it was with a glorious rush of youth and fire that burned the blood and made the spine tingle. Given his charisma and volcanic presence, it seems hard to believe now that Roberto Duran had slipped in under the radar when he climbed through the ropes to challenge Ken Buchanan for the lightweight championship on the night of June 26, 1972.

Most of us knew that Duran was a wild kid from Panama with a big right hand punch who had been knocking a lot of guys out in the first round. Trouble was, we hadn't heard of most of the guys.

They were calling Duran "Rocky" in those days, not "El Cholo" or "Manos de Piedra." The nickname, like the fighter, was still in transition as the formula for greatness bubbled and gelled tantalizingly into the final product.

Only as his greatness matured and the years rolled by with gathering momentum and gathering moss would the stories about Duran multiply and grow to near mythical proportions. In the beginning, we had very little background flesh to hang on the bones of the lean young killer's body. But oh, did he look like a fighter!

Lean and sinewy, all springs and coils, powerful and sleek, Duran was the nearest human equivalent I have seen to a predatory animal. The lion's mane of jet-black hair was perfectly apt, but it was the almost satanic twinkle in the eye that set Roberto apart from the rest. Such a look can never be cultivated or faked. A man either has it or he doesn't. It represents the chilling invitation to come into his domain and try and beat him at the ultimate game of life and death.

We would learn, not greatly to our surprise, that little in Duran's life was regimented or even basically structured. Small wonder that the Internal Revenue Service eventually homed in on his finances, since one could never quite imagine Roberto poring over his balance sheets and keeping tabs on his spending. He spent money when he was a rich man because he never had it when he was a poor boy. He fought his fights, held celebratory parties on the beach with his family and friends and spoke his mind to anyone who asked him his opinion.

An airline pilot discovered the prickly side of Duran's nature when he asked him how he thought he would fare against Sugar Ray Leonard. "I'll kill Leonard," Duran replied, "and if you don't stop bugging me, I'll kill you."

After battering Ray Lampkin in a lightweight title defense and sending him to hospital, Duran allegedly barked, "Next time I'll put him in the morgue." The social graces were never among Roberto's greatest attributes.

Only in later life did the fiery Panamanian mellow and show his softer side. He wept as he embraced former opponent Esteban DeJesus in a prison hospital, when AIDS was sucking Esteban's life away from him. Duran also became more open and encouraging to a new generation of young fighters who regarded him as their idol, while he and Ken Buchanan finally reunited after more than 30 years to bury the bad feelings that had lingered after their epic fight at the Garden.

Perhaps Duran, as a gnarled and retired old warrior, has finally come to terms with the more mundane and less challenging aspects of life. For years, life without boxing and its unique excitement was an impossible pill for him to swallow. When he was still slugging away in his late thirties, losing more fights than he should have done, he famously said, "I was born to fight. I do not know what else to do."

Greatest

In my lifetime (58 years) I have never seen a more thrilling and fluid pound-for-pound fighter among my contemporaries than Roberto Duran. Carlos Monzon was wonderful, but a slow burner who steadily hammered his opponents into submission. Ray Leonard had great speed and skills but always seemed to be looking ahead at the bigger career picture in the way of Tunney. Marvin Hagler was often awesome but always workmanlike. Thomas Hearns crackled with excitement but was also fragile and came up short in the two biggest fights of his career.

Duran was a firestarter, an explosion of energy, a natural. He possessed the talent, the skill, the versatility and the arrogance that the greatest trainers can never instill into manufactured fighters. He was indeed a wild one, but the wildness came with the cunning and inherent discipline of a chess master. Few fighters have those instincts built into them.

Such was Duran's ferocity in his glorious prime that many observers were blind to his more subtle skills, such as his ability to slip and block punches and counter with unerring accuracy. His punching power in his peak years as a lightweight was tremendous.

As a youth, he survived the often ferocious streets of his native Panama, where deaths from teenage knife fights were common. As a young man, he served his professional apprenticeship in the cauldrons of suffocating little fight arenas throughout Panama and Mexico. In taking the lightweight championship from Ken Buchanan at Madison Square Garden, Duran beat a master boxer out of sight. In winning the welterweight title from Sugar Ray Leonard eight years later, he outfought and out-thought a master strategist in producing his greatest performance.

As he moved into the sunset of his magnificent career, the slower but wiser Duran still managed to win versions of the junior middleweight and middleweight titles in fights he was expected to lose against tough young guns in Davey Moore and Iran Barkley.

Challenging the great Marvin Hagler proved a step too far in 1983, but it was noticeably Hagler who looked the more intimidated as he cautiously punched out a unanimous points victory.

What added to Duran's charisma was his fiery temperament and inner demons, which he didn't always manage to keep in check. In his second fight with Leonard, he suddenly stopped dead in the eighth round and walked away uttering his now famous cry of "No mas" (No more).

Duran was accused of quitting, which he surely did, but not for some of the fanciful reasons offered at the time. He had come to fight while Leonard had come to play mind games. Taunting Duran and winding up punches in theatrical style, Leonard got into the mind of the machismo warrior and completely tore it apart. It was too much for such an intensely proud man to bear, and Duran's most likely thought as he waved himself out of action was a simple, "The hell with this, I'm going home."

That was eight years after Roberto had ripped the lightweight championship from Ken Buchanan and cleaned out the division with twelve defenses over six electrifying years. For Buchanan, the coming of Duran was a rude and violent awakening. The brilliantly skillful, gritty Scot had endeared himself to American fans with his ringcraft and his ability to tough it out in the trenches. Ken had already encountered one great Panamanian and seen him off twice. In the blazing heat of day in San Juan, Buchanan had taken the title from Ismael Laguna in a grueling fifteen-rounder. The decision was split, but Ken confirmed his superiority in the return match at Madison Square Garden, where he rallied down the stretch superbly to capture a unanimous verdict.

Buchanan was hailed by none other than Ring editor Nat Fleischer (who had died a day before the Duran fight) as a boxing wizard of the old school, and it seemed that Ken would reign over the lightweights for a good few years. Then he met Duran: a wild child, an underdog, just a big banger with a string of knockouts over lower grade competition. How good could the kid be? Over the course of thirteen brutal rounds, Buchanan would learn that Roberto Duran was the best of his generation, one of those greats who come along to raise the bar and damn the very good.

Knockdown!

It is near impossible to read a fighter's mind and ascertain when the seeds of doubt are first planted on those nights when it all goes wrong. For Buchanan, it went wrong shortly after the opening bell. One incident, not shattering in its immediate impact but certainly destructive in its long term significance, threw the champion and everyone else into disarray. Referee Johnny LoBianco called a knockdown as Duran clipped Buchanan and sent him half down with a grazing left to the head.

Even Don Dunphy, that most excellent of commentators, was caught out. Measured and sensible in just about everything he ever said, Don wasn't given to loud outbursts or unnecessary melodrama. But as Buchanan scrambled up, Dunphy cried, "That is not scored a knockdown – yes it is! Johnny scores it as a knockdown!"

Duran's early success was not an aberration. Buchanan knew at once that he was sharing the ring with a man on fire, a very special talent. In the hurly burly of those opening seconds, Ken fired back and knocked Roberto off balance with a solid left hook, but quickly discovered that his tormentor was not one to be deterred.

Duran was unleashing punches with both hands and showing terrific hand speed. His well publicized right, in particular, was lightning fast and effective in its delivery. Don Dunphy had already recognized the scale of Buchanan's task: "He's in there with no cream puff. Duran's just dynamite with his right hand."

Legendary trainer Ray Arcel had come out of retirement to coach Duran and was obviously pleased with the start made by his hungry young lion. The Garden was buzzing and a cacophony of noise as the bagpipes of Buchanan's supporters competed with a Panamanian band.

Ken began the second round like a man determined to restore order. He was the champion and a big favorite. Maybe this fiery kid before him would have his moment in the sun and quickly blow out. Ken got his jab working but simply couldn't find a way to avoid Roberto's punches. Not only were they fast, they were fired off with constant variety and came raining in from all angles. Everything about Duran moved and jiggled and bounced, yet in perfect harmony. His head movement was superb, as was his timing and balance. He judged distance beautifully, never lunging or looking awkward. "Win or lose this one, I have a feeling Duran will be back," Don Dunphy prophetically announced.

Roberto offered Ken no rest inside, banging to the ribs and pounding short punches to the stomach. Buchanan tried to discourage his challenger with one or two effective uppercuts and certainly seemed to be finding his rhythm in a calmer fourth round, but the champion's few successes were being swamped by the greater volume of return fire.

In the fifth round, Buchanan ran into a firestorm. A left and two smashing rights to the chin drove him to the ropes and his mouthpiece came out as Duran swarmed over him. Even though he was still raw, the young Panamanian ace was already showing the instinct of the greats. Nothing he did seemed robotic or consciously planned. His movement was fast and fluid, his punches flowed naturally.

The fight was charging along, fast and bumpy like a train going over the points, as Duran the engine driver sucked up Buchanan and the crowd in his slipstream and raced for the terminus. In the sixth round, commentator Dunphy compared the pace of the bout to that of the Beau Jack-Bob Montgomery thriller of years gone by. Somewhere within the general maelstrom, Buchanan found a rail to cling to as he re-discovered his boxing skills and began to more effectively evade Duran's sweeping rushes. It was a better round for Ken, but that was his problem. His moments of joy were too short-lived and were inevitably wiped out by another torrent.

However, the expected backlash from Roberto didn't follow in the seventh. He unveiled a jolting jab from long range and continued to ruffle Buchanan with vicious, chopping shots to the jaw in close, but it was Ken who won the plaudits of the crowd as he began to jab brilliantly and tagged the challenger with a hurtful right to the body.

Duran appeared irritated with himself at having failed to make further progress and flew from his corner at the beginning of the eighth. A swelling was coming up above Ken's left eye and he began to trade with Roberto in an attempt to slow the runaway train. Don Dunphy proved a wise old sage again in the ninth as he commented, "Buchanan's looking a little better, but every time I say that he runs into one."

Boy oh boy, did Ken run into one. He was nailed by a cracking right to the chin in his corner, but showed tremendous heart and fighting spirit as he took the play away from Duran with a beautifully timed countering left hook. Following up with an array of jabs and hooks, Buchanan incredibly turned the tide to post his best round of the fight.

Heartened by his success, the champion increased the power of his punches in the tenth round, winging solid left and right hooks to Roberto's body. Both men teed off with good shots to the chin, but the difference between them was now graphically clear. Buchanan looked like a man who was in the fight of his life, who had to dig and scarp and claw for every small piece of turf he gained. Duran looked the same as he had done from the outset, an implacable and relentless animal of a man who could not seem to be significantly hurt or deflected from his purpose.

Tide

Buchanan was charting his way through the choppy waters with further success in the eleventh round when the storm began to rage again. Some of Ken's skillfully placed punches were almost too fast to be seen in real time and he was now blocking many of Duran's body shots. Then came the sudden rush of power and fury that would break the hearts of so many men in the years to follow, as Roberto erupted. He found the boxing master's chin with a vicious salvo, bulling him halfway through the ropes in the big surge that followed.

Buchanan was now looking noticeably tired. He had played his best cards and found nothing with which to extinguish the raging inferno. Duran sensed his time was coming. He was still full of life and full of fire, reveling gloriously in the one arena of life that he completely loved and understood. Out fast for the twelfth, he caught Buchanan with a big left-right combination and punished the champion with head-jerking uppercuts up close. Ken just couldn't get out of the way of the flying leather and teetered closer to the cliff edge when he was hammered by a tremendous right to the chin. Incredibly, the blow did not even stagger Buchanan, whose heart and ability to take a punch was exemplary.

But the champion was now spiraling ever downwards. He needed the respite that natural ring killers never allow, and he needed a lot more points to save his crown. The last crucial rounds were slipping from his grasp and Duran just kept punching, switching his blows from the head to the body.

As the thirteenth round opened, each fighter's agenda was perfectly simple. Duran wanted the knockout. Buchanan needed it. Right away, the omens were not good for Ken. He grimaced in pain as Roberto went low with a right, a portent of things to come. Buchanan broke free of his tireless pursuer and bounced up and down as he tried vainly to shake fresh life into his arms and legs Duran was hunting him down all the time, but Ken was firing back defiantly when the two fighters moved to the ropes at the sound of the bell. But that wasn't the end of the action.

Bang! A sweeping right from Duran caught Buchanan below the belt and sent him tumbling to the canvas, writhing in pain. Uproar and confusion followed as Ken's handlers helped him back to his corner. The champion was still in apparent distress when the warning whistle sounded for the fourteenth, as trainer Gil Clancy and father Tommy Buchanan made their protests.

The complaints cut no ice with referee Johnny LoBianco, who ruled the blow irrelevant since it came after the bell. The fight was stopped and Duran was declared the new champion. For years afterwards, well over two decades in fact, Buchanan would feel bitter about the circumstances of Duran's coronation and never miss a chance to remind his old foe of that burning, violent night in New York.

Was the punch low? Very definitely. Could Buchanan have won the fight if he had continued? Not in the opinion of this writer. The circumstances were unfortunate for all concerned, but Roberto Duran was a force apart, a man of destiny who was always going to tear down the barricades of the church and claim the crown.

It happened suddenly that summer. It would have happened anyway.

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