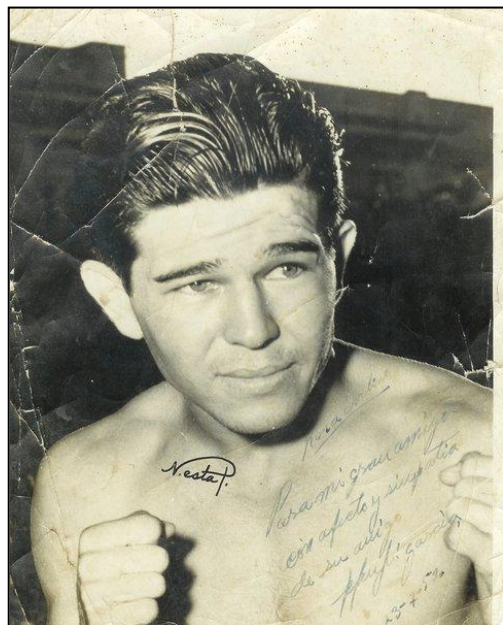


## Puppy Garcia Was Something Special

### By Enrique Encinosa



Antonio Garcia grew up in a poor, blue-collar neighborhood in Havana during the decades that were marked by an international economic depression and a World War.

Nicknamed Puppy -- pronounced "pooh-pee" in Spanish -- he was a shy, soft-spoken child who dropped out of school at the age of eleven to earn a living running errands, hawking newspapers at busy intersections or cleaning and dusting mausoleums at Colon Cemetery in Havana.

Life was tough but there was opportunity and the Garcia family was hungry to improve their lot in life. Older brother Lino tried boxing and began well, scoring a string of impressive wins over local featherweights before moving up to

main events, winning and losing to world class contender Miguel Acevedo.

Puppy decided to follow his brother's path. While smooth boxing Lino was stopped by Sandy Saddler and traded leather with Orlando Zulueta, Lulu Constantino and Diego Sosa, little brother Puppy was making his own name heard in the amateurs, where he reeled off nine wins before losing on points in the final bout of the Cuban national Golden Gloves tournament. As Lino's career eclipsed, Puppy Garcia turned pro. The two brothers who had a strong family bond were as different in the ring as fire and rain. Lino was slick and Puppy explosive; Lino had smooth combinations and Puppy a crunching body attack. Lino was liked and Puppy came to be adored.

Oh, he was shy and would not talk much in interviews; praises embarrassed him and he did favors without publicity, but charisma flowed from him when he climbed through the ropes to work at his trade.

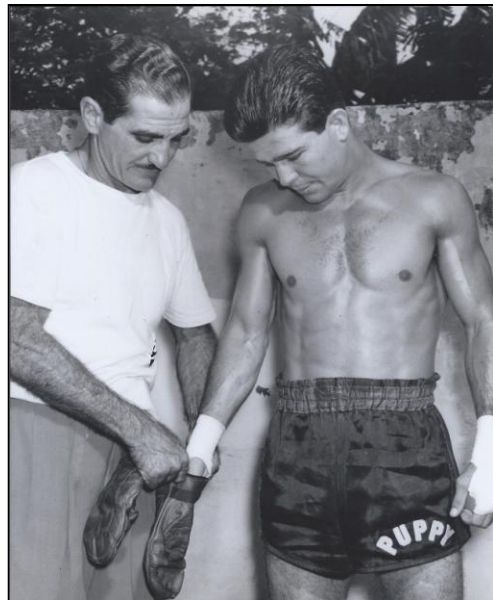
From the very first time he laced on a glove, Puppy Garcia gave his best and then some. He fought fast and hard, tearing hooks into his opponent's ribcage while taking a few shots in return. He had soft white skin, the kind that turns pink in the sun and cuts easy in the ring; he bled often but the warm blood flowing from a busted eyebrow only made him more determined as he brought up the fight a notch, to a higher level of will and pain.

How popular did he become? In the fifties, Cuba had quality fighters: Kid Gavilan, Nino Valdez, Luis Rodriguez, Jose Napoles, Benny Paret, Sugar Ramos, Ciro Morasen, Angel Robinson Garcia, Florentino Fernandez, Orlando Zulueta, Isaac

Logart and dozens of other headliners -- young prospects and old veterans -- made Cuba a boxing hot spot.

With all that talent around, the biggest ticket seller was Puppy Garcia. With the exception of a Kid Gavilan world title fight, Puppy Garcia was the single biggest gate attraction in Cuba, consistently selling out 6,000- or 8,000-seat venues even when the bout was nationally televised.

His career was meteoric. He came out of the amateurs a hungry, sixteen year old featherweight who fought with grim determination and transferred some of his energy to the crowd, electrifying in his performance, magnificent in the face of adversity.

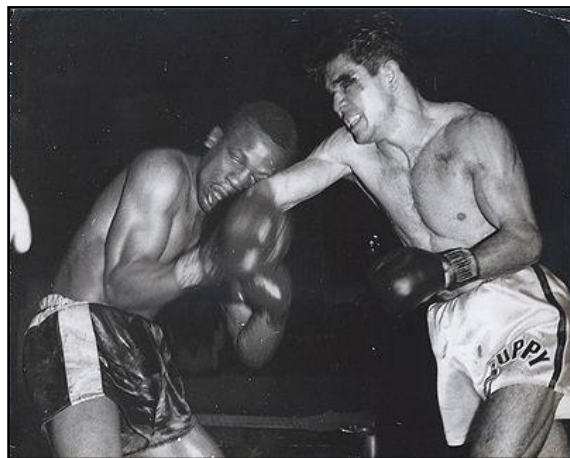


*Higinio Ruiz & Puppy Garcia*

After only fourteen pro fights, Puppy faced top gun Pappy Gault, who had 29 wins in 33 fights. Puppy stopped Gault twice, both times with constant body blows.

More wars followed. A win and a loss to Jimmy Cooper and a loss and a win against Charlie Titone were battles raged in front of sold out stadiums.

"Titone cut me in the first bout," Garcia stated in an interview, "and the blood caused the stoppage at a time when I was getting to him, so I was very anxious for a rematch. I went for him right away and I hit him with a hook to the body that was the hardest I ever hit a man and he made a sound of pain -- a surprised moan -- and dropped to the canvas for the full count."



*Puppy stops Jimmy Cooper in their first battle*

One of Puppy's finest nights took place in 1954, when he faced Luis Galvani, one of Cuba's premier fighters. Galvani had been undefeated in his first seven years as a pro, fighting 43 times. Luis was talented but had a never-ending thirst for booze and a self destructive lifestyle. By the time he fought Puppy, the former world rated Galvani was the shell of a once top fighter. His record only showed six loses in fifty-eight bouts, but his reflexes had faded and he figured to be another notch in the Garcia record.

There are still some old timers from the era that claim Puppy liked Galvani and did not want to humiliate him, so he made the fight exciting enough to give fans their

money's worth, yet allowed the old veteran to go the distance. Puppy won by a shutout but did not stop the fading Galvani.

Puppy was stopped in nine by former world lightweight titleholder Lauro Salas in a grueling war of attrition but drew a standing ovation from the crowd for his gallantry in the fray.

Puppy had three thrillers when he clashed with smooth boxing hero Moro Morasen, a legendary fighter who lost only 13 times in more than 100 pro bouts. The jabbing Moro Morasen beat Puppy twice, the third being a No Contest that ended with a small riot, bottle throwing and a burst of gunfire -- from a soldier's machine gun -- being fired at the roof of the arena.

Puppy won, lost and drew with tough Venezuelan Victor "Sonny" Leon, selling out arenas in Caracas.

In 1958, a mature, seasoned Puppy Garcia squared off against a flashy youngster - with a 30-3 pro record -- named Angel Robinson Garcia. Handsome Angel was destined to become the supreme globe trotter in the history of boxing, but at that time, he was still a young fighter with very clever moves.

Miami sportscaster Sarvelio Del Valle said of the fight: "I am not a betting man but I made a bet on Puppy beating Angel. I had seen them spar each other at the gym and Puppy had a style of infighting and body attack that bothered Robinson. Puppy could impose his will on Angel and Angel could not impose his will on Puppy."

The fight occurred as Del Valle predicted. Angel Robinson Garcia had the speed and the flashy combinations but Puppy cut the ring, moved inside, smothered Angel, hooked and hooked again, brawling for ten rounds and winning on points.

Puppy had it made. Labor union leaders provided him with a good paying job in the Cuban Electric Company, where he acquired technical skills while his boxing income had provided security away from the poverty of his youth. Furthermore, Miami promoter Chris Dundee was negotiating a world championship bout for Puppy to tangle with Hogan Kid Bassey at the Orange Bowl.

In 1959, his life changed forever. After two years of guerrilla warfare against Fulgencio Batista, Fidel Castro came to power in Cuba, greeted by millions as a liberator until he unleashed his own brand of Jacobin Marxism on the island. Almost fourteen hundred Cubans were executed by firing squads in the first year of socialist terror and over four thousand more over the next four years. By 1960, the revolutionary government controlled all media and began the elimination of all private enterprise in the island. By 1961, all professional sports -- including boxing -- were banned and thousands of Catholic priests and nuns were expelled from Cuba, accused of being subversives.

The country became a Cold War battlefield. Thousands of anti-Castro guerrillas were active in all six provinces of Cuba and urban resistance units functioned

covertly in every city and village in the island. Bombs exploded daily, Cubans shot other Cubans everyday and all jails in the island were packed with political prisoners.

At the age of twenty-seven, waiting for a world title fight, Puppy Garcia had to decide between his career and his country. He only fought three times in 1959, winning all three, one of them over Hilton Smith, who followed his loss to Garcia with a win over Jose Napoles.

Puppy did not fight pro again. His final ledger reads 37-8-4 with 17 KO wins and four stoppage defeats. Puppy Garcia retired from the ring, but not from fighting, for by 1960 he was involved in the resistance against Castro, transporting weapons, hiding covert operatives, driving cars in urban guerrilla operations.

Sportscaster Sarvelio Del Valle tells of visiting Garcia at a time when Cubans were being executed for being active in the resistance.

"I told him, Puppy, I have a problem, I have two men on the run that I'm hiding and I have to find a way to get them out of the country- and Puppy looked at me and said: now they are my problem."

"That's the kind of man Puppy Garcia was," Del Valle said, "and he saved those two men."

In 1961, Puppy was arrested by State Security and sent to Isle of Pines Prison, which at the time housed almost fifteen thousand of the hardest core anti-Castro political prisoners.

Castro's guards attempted to break the political prisoner's will by offering two options. If a political prisoner was willing to join a "rehabilitation plan," he could have his sentence reduced and receive a few privileges, such as additional family visits. The "plan" required a prisoner to issue a public apology asking forgiveness for opposing the revolution, attend Marxism classes and if requested to teach the ideology to other prisoners.

Puppy Garcia could not publicly renounce his convictions. It never entered his mind the same way he never considered diving to the canvas to ease his pain inside the ropes. So Puppy went with the second option: he declared himself a prisoner in rebellion -- "plantado" -- and braced himself for a taste of hell on earth.

Francisco Chappi, a prisoner at Isle of Pines, stated: "In order to force us to join The Plan, the guards became more sadistic than ever. We were roused from our beds in the middle of the night, beaten with rifle butts and machetes. Sick 'plantados' were denied medical care, fed bowls of rice crawling with worms, locked up in solitary confinement for disobedience. Men in solitary spent months confined to rooms with little or no light, unable to shower, expected to shit in a small hole in the floor without toilet paper. They slept on the floor without pillows or blankets,

and in their own urine. Rather than submit, many died in attempts to retain the last shreds of human dignity."

The prison guards hated Puppy, hated the fact that a national sports icon had become a resistance fighter and a prisoner in rebellion, willing to live naked and sleep in his own filth rather than accept the new socialist order.

All Cuban political prisoners were beaten and tortured but Puppy Garcia received more than his share of blows over eight years in Castro's prisons. A rubber truncheon pounding to his kidneys caused him to urinate blood for days; eyebrow scar tissue from ring wars ripped open by the kick of a boot during an interrogation, an ankle was fractured during another beating.

Roberto Martin Perez, who spent 28 years in Castro's concentration camps stated that "Puppy received more beatings in prison than he ever did in the ring."

The guards tried to tempt him, telling Puppy that with a nod of the head he could have a uniform to wear instead of filthy undergarments, a plate of food without maggots and an end to the beatings. Puppy refused the offers.

"It was about dignity," he said, "If I surrendered my dignity, renounced my belief in democracy then I had nothing left. I could not live a lie and offer allegiance to a government that was destroying my nation."

Puppy was in rebellion for nine years, coming out of jail in 1970, unbroken. He worked odd jobs in Cuba for a decade, arriving in the United States as a Mariel boat lift refugee in 1980. In Miami he worked as a security guard for a few months until word got around that the little featherweight was in town.

Cuban exiles -- politically powerful in South Florida -- set Puppy up as the sports director of the Parks and Recreation department in Sweetwater, one of the towns in Miami-Dade County.

Puppy lived in Miami for almost two and a half decades, retiring from his job in Sweetwater, attending local club fights where boxing fans shook his hand and old timers pointed him out to the younger fans.

In his seventies, he developed stomach cancer, but did not talk or complain about his illness. A few weeks before he died of a stroke at a local hospital, he attended a local boxing show, where promoter Richard Dobal -- a young Cuban born after Puppy had retired -- had a plaque for the little featherweight with a big heart. The crowd gave him a standing ovation and the old warrior, in the ring for his final bow, smiled with shy embarrassment.

Puppy died October 23, 2005 at the age of 72.