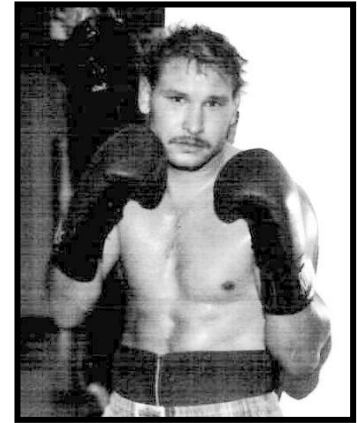


DANNY “PITBULL” PEREZ: HIDING IN THE SPOTLIGHT OF THE DUKE CITY

By Austin Killeen

When little Danny Perez drew his first breath on Aug 27, 1970 it was at summer camp. No, not the summer camp we went to when we were little boys and girls. This camp was for big boys and girls and it was called Camp Lejuene, North Carolina. It's safe to say young mister Perez knew the words “a-ten-H-U-T”, “right-f-A-C-E” and “forward m-A-R-C-H” before he could say ma-ma and da-da. There is no truth to the urban legend that he took his first taste of milk from a marine issued canteen. When his father was discharged from the marines, the Perez family relocated to Albuquerque, New Mexico. Christine, Danny's mother, would tell him that he was the cheapest investment they ever made. It only cost the family \$45 when he was born at Camp Lejuene.



I asked Danny about his first exposure to the sport and his reply was only a slightly different version from boxers who came from boxing families. Like Tony Zale, the Fulmer brothers and Billy Backus, his earliest memories were of the sport of pugilism. “I was just a few years old when my dad Joe bought me my first pair of boxing gloves for my birthday. He taught me from day one to keep my guard up, keep my eyes open, don't blink and throw your shots straight out and bring them straight back.” Little Danny wasn't quite clear what he was learning but loved the attention his father was giving him.

Now I was curious about Danny's amateur background and asked him for some details. “I was ten years old and we had just finished practice for the Young American Football League. My dad took me down to the San Jose Boxing Club to check out the guys and I was cool with it. The next day after practice he took me down to the boxing club again and I started tapping the bags and I liked it.” After that Danny's father would take him down to the San Jose Boxing Club every day after practice. “About eight days later, they entered me in the State Junior Olympics Tournament in Santa Fe. I fought on Friday night, twice on Saturday and won the under 11 Junior Olympics title on Sunday. After that I just wanted to box.”



Danny and younger sister Jolene celebrate another amateur title win.

On his way to building an amateur record of 89 wins and only 12 losses, Daniel entered the 1986 10th annual Gene Lewis Mesa Invitational Tournament in Arizona when he was fifteen. “We drove ten hours to get there only to find out I had no one to box in the 132 pound division. They gave me the title and a trophy but I wasn't satisfied. So I weighed in again with my clothes on and entered the 139 pound division.” The local paper referred to Perez as being a feisty and as it turned out, greedy boxer from Albuquerque. Facing the top P4P boxer in the tournament, Donnie Russell, Perez employed a swarming attack to win his second title of the evening. Perez not only had two titles and two trophies but was involved in the fight of the tournament in scoring the upset win.

In March of 1987 Danny got the opportunity to fight in the state golden gloves championship. Unfortunately he was entered in the 147 pound weight class. This was the wrong division to be in if you were aspiring to move onto the nationals. Defending two-time state champ Robert Tanuz would be looking for title number three. Everyone else would be competing for the honor of being Tanuz's opponent in the title match.

Breezing through the competition sixteen year old Perez found himself in the opposite corner from the aforementioned Mr. Tanuz. As well conditioned as he was, Perez lacked the man's strength of Tanuz. From the opening bell Tanuz's strategy was to force Danny to back up while throwing combinations. When he tried to implement this game plan, Perez would shoot out a straight left jab followed by an

overhand right. Often landing with success, he would then move laterally to deprive the defending champ of any target.

Watching video of the fight I could see Tanuz was no fool and had his moments. When he could force Danny straight back or trap him on the ropes Tanuz was very effective. Unfortunately for the defending champ there just weren't enough of those moments and Perez was deservedly crowned the New Mexico State Golden Gloves champion of 1987. Tanuz showed a lot of class after the verdict was rendered, by picking Perez up and carrying him around the ring.

The "Duke City" pugilistic savant traveled to Knoxville, Tennessee for the nationals. He must have been too young to realize where he was, because the videos I watched showed a very composed young man. He won his first two matches and looked smooth in the process. In his third bout Derrick Rolon of New Jersey was waiting in the opposite corner. To say Rolon had some amateur experience would make you "king of the understatement." He had previously won the State, Regional and U.S. Junior Olympics Championship, two New Jersey State Golden Gloves titles and the National Golden Gloves Title. Additionally Rolon had six victories in international competition, a level that Perez had no experience at.

At the opening bell Daniel must have thought he was standing in front of a mirror because Rolon's style appeared just like his; good judge of distance, nice jab and excellent lateral movement. But the New Jersey boxer had greater experience and maturity. After three hard fought rounds Perez had fought well but Rolon had fought better. Rolon went on to capture a second national title that year and turn pro, compiling a 23-2-0 record with 17 KO's. A detached retina would end Rolon's career prematurely.

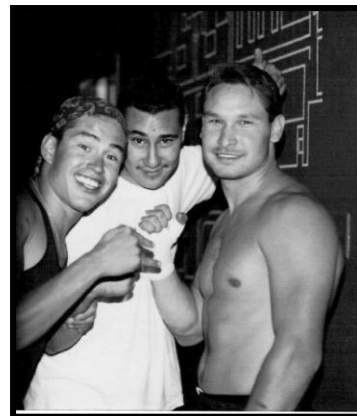
Returning to Albuquerque, Danny was invited to try out for the Pan/Am games but an injury in high school shop class prevented him from going. Perez cut one of his fingers to the bone and was inactive for much of the year. Instead of defending his GG's title Danny announced he would be turning pro. When I asked him why he abandoned the amateurs where he would obviously get the opportunity to fight internationally as well as be a favorite at the national level he just shrugged. "I had good coaching up to that point with Joe Turrietta and along with my parents decided to follow the money.

In February of 1989 Perez turned pro scoring a first round TKO. Four months later Danny scored a third round KO, making him two and zero with both wins by knockout. It was nice to flash some power but in reality his stoppages probably had more to do to superior skills than new found muscle. Three more wins all by decision started to attract some attention in the boxing community. More importantly his record wasn't limited to the confines of his hometown, as two of his bouts took place in Texas and Colorado.

Continuing to show a willingness to fight on the road, Perez agreed to fight undefeated Russian middleweight Viktor Egorov. Scheduled for six rounds the fight took place in Butte, Montana on July 17, 1990. The hard hitting Muscovite was five and zero with all his wins coming by knockout. From the opening bell it was obvious that the Russian planned to make Perez knockout victim number six. It was a hard fought bout with Danny showing no intimidation against his hard hitting rival. After six exciting rounds Perez suffered his first defeat losing a split decision to Egorov.

Shaking off the disappointment of his loss in Montana, Perez scored an easy six round decision win over Jose Cataneo two months later in Denver. Returning to the "Duke City" five weeks after the Denver bout, Danny was matched with southpaw Chris Sande. Sande had won the bronze medal for Kenya at the 1988 Olympics in Seoul, South Korea in the middleweight division. Pumped up by the hometown crowd, Perez upset Sande by six round unanimous decision. Elated by his victory Perez stated "This is the biggest win of my life. I assure you, there will be more." But promoters never came running and the Albuquerque middleweight would find himself on the sidelines for the next eight months with nobody to fight. Boxing is about risk vs reward and Perez represented high risk and little reward. Translation: Perez was having a lot of down time and it had nothing to do with injuries.

Finally the phone rang and Perez was offered a fight with veteran Alberto Gonzalez in Shelby, Montana. The bout was on the undercard of the Todd Foster/Scotty Olson co-feature main event. Perez was promised exposure on TV if either of the co-main events ended in an early knockout. If it wasn't for bad luck Perez would have no luck at all. There were no early stoppages, and Danny had to grind out a tough eight round decision over Gonzalez. It was a win but who saw it? Five months later Perez won a unanimous six round decision over Berry Basler in Thornton, Colorado. Apparently Perez had poison ivy because nobody seemed to want to get in the ring with him.



Danny celebrates with friends after one of his victories.

Another five months of inactivity followed the Basler fight when Perez faced six ranked middleweight Thomas Tate in Bakersfield, CA. In a spirited 10 round battle before a packed Strongbow Stadium crowd Tate won a close unanimous decision. Tate had 18 KO's in his twenty two wins but couldn't stop the aggressive Albuquerque import. But entering the ninth round Perez had a closed left eye testimony of Tate's hitting power. Going all out for the knockout in the final two rounds, Tate would rock Perez with combinations only to have him fire back. Perez nailed Tate with an overhand right in the final minute of the tenth round bringing the crowd to its feet. But fighting in his first ten rounder had left Perez exhausted and opportunity vanished with the final seconds of the round. Both boxers had been pros for just over three years; this was Tate's twenty fourth bout and Perez's eleventh. Both boxers had talent but only one boxer was connected.

At this point in his career Perez was in competition with Johnny Tapia and Danny Romero for ink in the sports pages of the "Duke City." It was not uncommon to find Tapia and Romero in the headlines while news of Perez would appear near the end of the same article. After three years of boxing Perez had only eleven pro bouts while Tapia and Romero had twenty two bouts each over the same period. Three talented boxers but only two seemed to be attracting noteworthy attention. Boxing scribe Rick Wright seemed to sum it up best in one of his columns; Danny Perez is young. He's talented. He's dedicated. What more does a professional boxer need? Fights, that's what.

Desperate to get back in the ring, Perez agreed to face light heavyweight Earl Butler. Like Perez, Butler was avoided and was often forced to fight above the 175 pound limit. With few options for either boxer they agreed to meet in Albuquerque on October 30, 1992. Interestingly they both had a record of ten wins and two losses. Butler had a height and reach advantage and fought behind a beautiful left jab. A left jab is only effective if a boxer can create openings with it; Butler could do all of that and more. Surprisingly he was also effective fighting on the inside. For a boxer who usually conceded height and reach to his opponent Perez also possessed an excellent left jab of his own.

At the opening bell both boxers exploded from their corners and immediately started trading jabs. Surprisingly Butler elected to fight on the inside, where much of the fight took place over the next ten rounds. Forced to the ropes Perez was very comfortable fighting there. In a grueling struggle both men fought hard with little clinching, making the referee's job easy. The fans were going crazy at the conclusion of this outstanding contest. At the final bell two very tired men embraced in mutual respect for each other. When the verdict was read, Perez was declared the winner of a very close unanimous decision. Needless to say the verdict was not well received by the visiting boxer and his entourage. Although the win failed to put Danny in the national spotlight the experience clearly made him a more accomplished boxer.

Five months later Perez was back in the ring with fifty two bout veteran Randy Smith. Smith had fought the who's who of the middleweight and super middleweight divisions for the past five years. Facing the likes of Bernard Hopkins, Chris Eubank, Mike McCallum, Michael Nunn, Frank Tate and Iran Barkley, Smith had never been stopped. When he retired from the sport that claim was still intact. Fighting in

Albuquerque meant nothing to the globetrotting Smith. Fighting in front of a friendly home town crowd, Perez captured a unanimous decision by a wide margin but never came close to dropping the smooth boxer from Chicago.

Over the next two plus years Danny would have seven more fights losing only to Warren Williams in Cancun, Mexico on a twelve round split decision for the NABF Super Middleweight Title. If remaining invisible to the boxing public was one of Perez's goals, than he was having an amazingly successful career. Suddenly, out of nowhere, fate intervened giving Danny his fifteen minutes of fame.

"I was on the roof of my house doing some repairs, when my friend yelled up to me. Somebody named Don King wants to talk to you. Should I get his number? I was on the ground so fast I don't remember using the ladder." WBC World Super Middleweight Champion Nigel Benn was supposed to defend his title against Steve Little on Saturday. Little withdrew over a contract dispute. Desperate to keep the TV date on Showtime from Wembley Stadium in England, King was looking for a live body.

"I called King back and he wanted to know how fast I could be in England. I hadn't been in a gym since my last fight a month ago and had packed on a few pounds. How could I pass up an opportunity like this? I got to England on Wednesday and spent the next few days sucking on ice cubes. I didn't eat a solid meal until after the weight-in. The fact that Benn was a beast making his ninth defense of the title didn't matter." The fight would be broadcast live to the United States; Danny Perez was invisible no more.

Announcers Dr. Ferdie Pacheco and Steve Albert gave the American little chance in the prefight buildup against the "Dark Destroyer" as Benn was called. The champ had thirty four KO's in his forty one victories including some of the best fighters in the world. When Perez walked down the aisle to enter the ring, it was to the sounds of 70,000 screaming fans. If he was looking for a Hispanic fan base, he'd have to be happy with the people working his corner. When Benn made his five minute walk to the ring it was to a smoke and light show worthy of a rock star, which he was in the United Kingdom.

At the opening bell Benn tore into Perez with a brutal body attack. For his part, Perez fought back as best as could be expected for a last minute substitute. The substitute hadn't sparred a single round in preparation for the bout. Announcers Dr. Ferdie Pacheco and Steve Albert where both giving the American some respect for his stubborn resistance. Commenting on the punching power of Benn for this story Perez stated, "I've been kicked by horses and cattle on my father's farm and Benn hits just as hard."



After being dropped in the fifth round, Danny drives Nigel Benn into the ropes with combinations to the head and body.

In the fifth round the exhausted American was dropped for the first time in his career by a powerful right hand to the head. Rising on unsteady legs, Perez shocked everyone by driving Benn across the ring with combinations to the head and body. The announcers Pacheco and Albert where shocked by what was taking place but praised Perez for his best offense of the night. This proved to be the challenger's last hurrah as Benn would recover and drop Perez for a ten count in the seventh round. In a terrific effort Perez had won over the crowd and earned the respect of Pacheco and Albert.

Danny would have one more fight winning a unanimous eight round decision over Robert Britt. In a shocking surprise Perez announced that he was done, "I was tired chasing after fights and not getting anywhere. Unlike Albuquerque's Johnny Tapia and Danny Romero who trained full time, I had to work full time to support myself." Boxers always come back after they retire but not Perez. True to his word he stayed retired and works for the New Mexico State Department of Transportation.

Once again fate would intervene, drawing Danny back into the fight game. Josh “Pitbull” Torres one of the top fighters in the state was in search of a new trainer. Originally trained by Johnny Tapia until his death, Tapia’s replacement was Chris Chavez. Torres was lucky as both Tapia and Chavez had done a nice job, but Chavez moved to Las Vegas and once again Torres was without a trainer.

Early this year when I heard Perez was Torres’ new trainer, I wondered who he was. Adding to the drama Torres would be in the biggest fight of his career facing Ramee Ganoy for the vacant 140 lb WBC United States National Boxing Championship. I soon learned that the elder “Pitbull” had been a decent boxer, but being good at something and teaching it to others are two different things. Visiting the two “Pitbulls” early in February I could see they clearly got along, but that didn’t guarantee they would be successful.



Josh "Pitbull" Torres and Danny "Pitbull" Perez

I was puzzled that day at the gym because Torres was sparring for a fight that was over two months away. Still more puzzling he was sparring with 280 pound heavyweight Ron Baca. Apparently a lot of other people were thinking the same thing because most fight people felt Ganoy would destroy the younger “Pitbull”; most likely by knockout. Watching Videos of Ganoy’s earlier fights, I saw a puncher with vicious explosive energy. I learned the other day in writing this story that Torres was helping Baca prepare for his own fight and the sparring had nothing to do with preparation for Ganoy.

When the fight finally took place on April 11th, Torres appeared to be lucky to still be standing at the end of the third round. The veteran Ganoy was unloading bombs on his younger foe with little return fire. Suddenly the fight started to change course in the fourth round as Torres’s jab started finding a home and he began moving laterally instead of backing straight up. With each succeeding round Torres seemed to be gaining confidence while Ganoy was unable to regain his lost momentum. In the ninth Ganoy staged a big rally, landing some heavy artillery but his opponent’s chin held up. The final round was close, with the fans going crazy. When the decision was rendered Torres was declared the winner by a close majority decision. “Pitbull” and “Pitbull” were now a winning team.

Daniel has two sons Joshua and Tommy he is very proud of. “They aren’t boxers but they like to work out with me from time to time. I never tried to push them into the sport, I’m just proud there part of my life.” In watching Danny’s early videos there was this young female voice always yelling for him to “fight Danny fight?” “That was my little sister Jolene, she was my biggest fan.

Daniel Perez may never have won a belt, but he’s a champion in my eyes. His life is all about his family. He attributes his success to having been blessed with great parents; Christine and Joe. He always talks proudly about his two sons Joshua and Tommy. And he can’t imagine his life without his little sister Jolene.

How would I rank Danny Perez in today’s boxing landscape of New Mexico? P4P he would be living in the same exclusive neighborhood as Austin Trout of Las Cruces and Fidel Maldonado Jr. of Albuquerque.

Finally, may the team of “Pitbull” and “Pitbull” win a world title? That would be a fitting close to the Danny Perez story.



Danny Perez and Austin Killeen