

Ron Richards: What Might Have Been by Dan Attias

Respect that is often given to a man of Aboriginal stock is generally taken back with more than a measure of harshness...

He once had many a patron of the fight game in awe at his unbelievable talent. The crowds would marvel at his boxing ability and punching prowess, but respect that is often given to a man of Aboriginal stock is generally taken back with more than a measure of harshness.

Ron Richards was a virtuoso of the sweet science when he was at his best. The year was 1938 and Richards had piled up some substantial wins in the prize ring. Visiting fighters such as Atilio Sabatino and Ray Actis saw the best of Richards that year, as did Claude Nichol, a man who outweighed Ron by more than twenty pounds, but it was his dismantling of future light heavyweight champion and hall of famer Gus Lesnevich that impressed most.

Richards was superb in defeating a man of Lesnevich's class, and the savagery of his fists was none more apparent than in the third round of the bout. Sydney's leading boxing publication of the time, *The Referee*, detailed the ferocity and speed with which the Australian delivered the blows that led to Lesnevich's trip to the canvas.

Early in the third, stark, sensational drama swept into the scene.

Driven to the ropes by Gus' stabbing left and short, jolting right deliveries, Richards body-swayed and he shot home a stiff right uppercut.

The invaders knees stuttered, and his body jerked.

Quick as a flash, Richards ripped his left glove downstairs, and crossed a right to the jaw.

Lesnevich crashed to the canvas. As he went down the crowd came up.

Lesnevich would finish the twelve-round clash on his feet but it was clear just who his superior was that night. The man to whom Richards would fight next, "The Alabama Kid," was there to witness the display and came away suitably impressed. "That guy Richards is the best fighter I've seen for many a long day. He sure has everything."



*Richards was a virtuoso of the sweet science when he was at his best.
(Miriam Cabello)*



Gus Lesnevich

"The Kid" would find out himself, some two months later, just how good Richards was. Ron would take out a twelve-round decision victory in a bout that was nothing short of vicious, but those good times were to be but a mere speck in the grand scheme of things for the Aussie great.

The beginning of Richards' troubles was to occur some two years prior in 1936, when a young Sydney fighter named Lance May was being deceptively billed as American light heavyweight Al Norwood. Unbeknownst to the public, May was merely a petrol bowser boy from Sydney who had changed his name to Norwood. The subsequent publicity was being hyped as if Richards was fighting one of America's greats but little did the public know, Al Norwood never even existed.

Richards tried to carry Norwood but with just five fights to his name, the gap in class was immediately apparent.

"I'd told the kid that I'd carry him along for six or seven rounds and that he could let go at me without fear of getting hit on the chin. He was so scared that the job of holding him up was harder than that of knocking him down," Richards said in an article in Truth newspaper some years after the fact. The crowd knew they were being taken for a ride and Richards lost a great deal of respect that night.

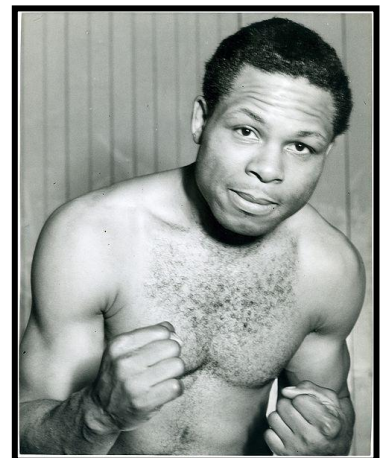
Despite the setback Richards was to win a great deal of admirers back between the years of 1936 and '38. He took apart the Australian fight scene and held the Australian middleweight, light heavyweight and heavyweight titles all at once, despite weighing in around the 160-pound mark the whole time.

Australian titles aside, Richards career was always a case of what could have been. Poor management was undoubtedly the precursor to many of his problems. He was often forced to fight many of the same opponents repeatedly and was often at a disadvantage when it came to the weights.

He fought in some 142 recorded bouts during his career but only faced 76 different opponents. So many big plans for Richards to fight overseas against quality opposition fell through and his management had a lot to do with that. It was easy to see why Richards' dedication to fistic endeavors dwindled.

Outside of the ring things were even worse, an Aboriginal man with a white wife, living in Sydney in the 1930s was more than many white Australians could handle. Richards was ostracized and racial taunts were the norm, despite his pugilistic achievements.

By the time 1940 had rolled around, Richards' life was in total chaos, his financial situation was dire, and he drank too much, distrusted his management and trained with little vigor. An overall feeling of bitterness enveloped his life.



Archie Moore

He continued to fight though, winning against inferior opposition and losing to many of the finer fighters he faced. Archie Moore gained two victories over Richards in 1940, the first was a cut eye stoppage win, and the second a closer affair, with the young Moore taking a

points decision after Richards had led at the half way mark. As good a fighter as Moore was, its hard to know just how much better a motivated Richards would have done against the youthful "Mongoose."

By 1947, Richards was destitute, homeless and poor and was often beaten on by lesser men on the streets of Sydney, men who wanted to say they had knocked out the great Ron Richards, albeit a much inferior version of the once great fighter.

He was charged for drunkenness and vagrancy that very same year and was incarcerated at Woorabinda Aboriginal Settlement, where he spent three years. He was released to look for work in Brisbane but on a subsequent trip to Sydney was arrested, once again for drunkenness, and was shipped off to the Palm Island Aboriginal Reserve in North Queensland.

He would spend the next 17 years there, a prisoner of sorts in a system that gave no heed to its racial atrocities. Richards was in a class of own in the ring and it seemed he was also in a class of his own outside of it, a class that always would come second.

Richards was finally allowed to return to Sydney when news of his estranged wife's illness came about. He died not long after, on January 14, 1967, of a heart attack in his home in Dulwich Hill, Sydney. The Sydney Morning Herald quoted some of the many mourners on the day of his funeral. "The best since Darcy," they said. "The best counter puncher we've ever had." "Calm, always balanced, quick and as hard as a bullock." "One of nature's gentlemen. Never did a dirty thing in the ring."

Ron Richards was without doubt a great fighter, and whilst his failings were so often forgotten, there will always remain the unanswered question, just how good could he have been...



Ron Richards was inducted into the Australian National Boxing Hall of Fame in 2003