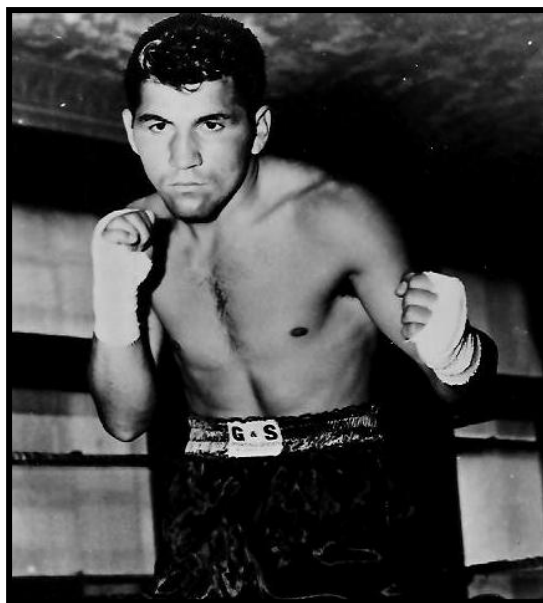


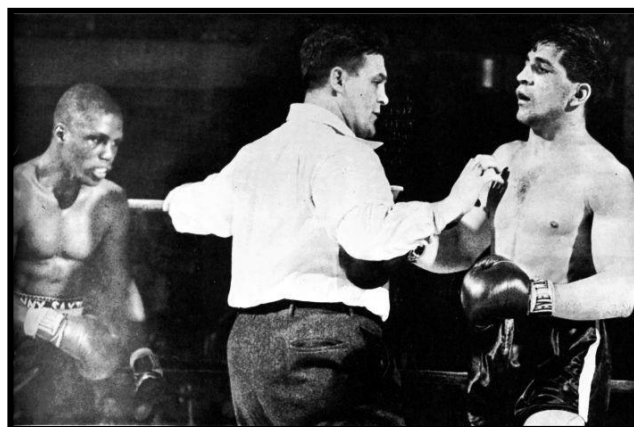
TONY DeMARCO: WAITING FOR THE MAN **BY MIKE CASEY**

It seemed that everyone loved Tony DeMarco, the charismatic fighting man from Boston, the recently dethroned welterweight champion of the world. Everyone except his fellow contenders. Promoter Sam Silverman was working feverishly on the phone to rustle up an opponent for Tony, but there were no takers.

The other guys, it seems were running scared. Perhaps that was no surprise. For while DeMarco was a box office magnet, he was also a relentless terror of a man to fight. His boyhood idol had been Jake LaMotta and there were notable similarities between the two..



Tony was back in the championship mix as the bubbling cauldron of the welterweight division entered a thrilling merry-go-round phase. In under a year, the world title had changed hands three times. In April 1955, DeMarco won the championship by stopping the talented Johnny Saxton in 14 rounds at the Boston Garden. Three months later, Tony lost his crown in 12 brutal rounds to a man possessed in Carmen Basilio at the War Memorial Auditorium in Syracuse.



It was a bitter and painful defeat for DeMarco, who had been confident of winning. "I watched him a couple of times," said Tony in the run-up to the fight. "I'm not kidding myself, he's tough and he punches hard and he'll be the best man I ever fought with the exception of Jimmy Carter. But Basilio comes into his opponent and he can be tagged. That's all I ask, let him walk in and fight. I'll settle for my chances."

Now, that battle between DeMarco and Basilio was a wonderful fight, the kind of fight that people can't stop talking about. Five months later, incredibly, Tony and Carmen topped it with another all out war that was voted the fight of the year. The venue was different but the outcome was the same as Basilio won again in the twelfth round at the Boston Garden.

Then along came Johnny Saxton again to throw a delicious spanner into the works. Fighting before his hometown fans at the Chicago Stadium, Johnny regained the title with a unanimous but disputed decision over Basilio. "He ran like a deer," Carmen said scathingly of Saxton. Carmen knew all about deer. He shot them quite regularly and would no doubt have shot Saxton if the rules had permitted it.

It was a welcome stroke of luck for Tony DeMarco that Johnny from Chicago was back in the driving seat. The door to the world championship was open again and every fight fan wanted to come out and see a DeMarco fight. But where, oh where, was a willing opponent?

Stanley Weston, publisher of that great old boxing magazine, *Boxing & Wrestling*, was witness to a frantic and frustrating day at promoter Sam Silverman's office at the famous address of 253 Friend Street, which also housed a pool hall and Boston's most famous gymnasium, the Callahan Athletic Club. In Silverman's office that day was DeMarco and the columnist who did so much to promote his career, Dave Egan of the *Boston Daily Record*.

Sam Silverman was a glorious stereotype of a boxing promoter, with a meaty physique and a perennial cigar which, in times of stress, often got eaten more than it got smoked. On this hectic day, stubbly Sam had even passed on a shave in his relentless pursuit of any man with two arms and two legs who might care to fight Tony DeMarco.



"Got anybody yet?" Dave Egan asked Silverman. It's the last question a promoter wants to hear when he hasn't got anybody yet.

"I've run up a fifty dollar phone bill this morning and I still got nothing," Silverman replied.

"Who did you try?" Egan persisted. One could almost see the steam coming from Silverman's ears.

"Ask me who I didn't try and you'll get the story quicker. The hottest match in the country right now is DeMarco and Vince Martinez. I've had Bill Daly (Martinez's manager) on the phone but I guess he don't want it. I figure that match would outdraw DeMarco and Saxton, title and all. I had Art Aragon or Jimmy Carter. Verbal agreements, you know? But I read in the paper this morning that Aragon and Carter are boxing each other in Los Angeles. That leaves them out. I've been after Ramon Fuentes, Virgil Akins and Hector Constance since nine o'clock this morning. I'm expecting one of them to call back with an okay."

Frustration

These were days of frustration for Tony DeMarco. On the way into Silverman's office, he had yawned and stretched and looked restless, prompting Dave Egan to ask, "What's the matter, Tony?"

"I don't know," DeMarco said. "Guess I'm getting lazy from being out of work."

There was a cruel irony to the former champion's sudden bout of inactivity, since he was boxing's second biggest draw behind Rocky Marciano. Following the two televised wars with Basilio, the New York offices of NBC were awash with DeMarco fan mail. Win or lose, the fans loved tough Tony from Boston's North End. He was their Boston Bomber.

Dave Egan couldn't help getting a little prosaic when he attempted to assess DeMarco's popularity: "The boy drips courage and determination. Like the Marines at Iwo Jima and the doughboys at Verdun. And it is as American as apple pie to admire one with such attributes. He's so remarkably popular, not because he's the greatest prize fighter in the world, which he isn't, but because he's so damned courageous."

Tony DeMarco was a southpaw who was 'turned' – as in converted to orthodox. It is often forgotten now, and perhaps not even known by many, that southpaws were an anathema to the trainers of yore. Portsiders didn't pull in the crowds in those days and were viewed with disdain by the technical gurus of the age. Lefties came with too much baggage and had too many flaws. Only amateurs were southpaws and only because they were young and didn't know any better.

Being turned was no fun, as DeMarco explained: "I am a natural southpaw, you know, and I guess that gave me the edge. I won about five or six in a row, all kayoes, and then my manager (Bobby Agrippino) converted me. He tied my right hand up here against my jaw and for a whole week in the gym I did nothing but jab and hook with my left. It was the hardest thing I ever had to do."



Bobby Agrippino recalled: "It was very hard to break him from his right hand lead. It took time, but he did it and he deserves a lot of credit."

However, a man can only go so far in denying his nature and the one thing Tony could never do was forsake his love of having a fight. He took the trouble to learn the more technical details of boxing, but he was never going to be a jabber and a mover or a master of fancy footwork.

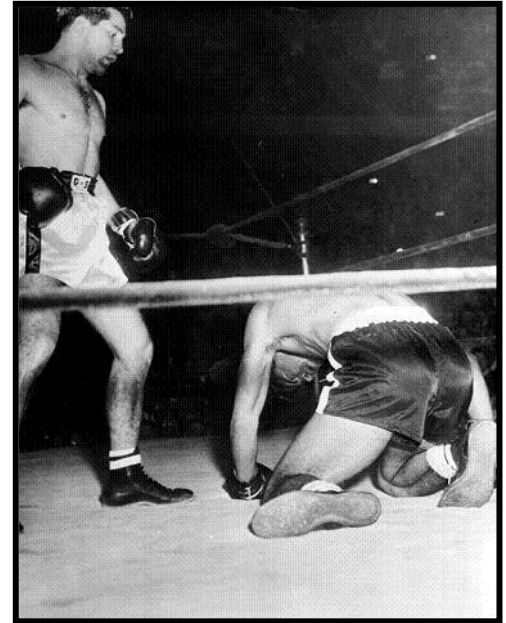
"When I was a kid fighting for the Parks Department, I liked Jake LaMotta and I tried to fight like him, just bulling and crowding. When I got older and smarter I learned about left jabs and right crosses. I figured that LaMotta was doing it wrong. But I still liked his style and he was my idol.

"I have been working hard at it. You know, ducking, moving away and covering up, but I'm not a boxer. Never was and never will be. I just don't feel right jabbing and countering and trying to be fancy. I tried it when I first started and nearly got killed. I like an opponent who will come to me and throw a lot of punches. Saxton started off being cute but he ran out of gas and I made the fight. That's why I won the title.

"I learned how to fight on the streets where you throw punches as hard as you can. When you fight on the streets you don't have time to think about protecting yourself. But Sammy (trainer Sammy Fuller) says I gotta learn and so I'm trying. I'll say this though, Basilio wouldn't knock me out again. I can promise you that, he'll never get to me as easy as he did before."

In fellow Bostonian Sammy Fuller, DeMarco had some trainer. Sammy was a top notch lightweight who fought from 1924 to 1943, defeating the stellar likes of Benny Bass, Bruce Flowers, Tony Canzoneri, Jack (Kid) Berg and Johnny Jadick, as well as drawing with Billy Petrolle and extending Barney Ross to a majority decision in a tilt at Barney's junior welterweight championship.

Fuller spent hours showing DeMarco how to shorten his punches and get more leverage into his left hooks. Fuller knew, just as Charley Goldman knew about Rocky Marciano, that Tony's major advantages were his exceptional strength and powerful punch. "You must try to fight close, on the inside as much as you can," he told DeMarco. "Bang away with both hands and always stay in punching range."



Fuller was impressed by the progress his charge had made. "Tony is a much improved fighter. We knew he was taking too many punches so we trained him to protect his head – to block punches and to counter. He did it against Bud Smith and if he fights Basilio again, Basilio is going to have a lot harder time getting in his hooks."

Circumstances

Tony DeMarco was waiting for the man. He didn't really care whether it was Johnny Saxton or Carmen Basilio. It turned out to be neither. Circumstances dictated that Johnny and Carmen would never again cross swords with Tony.

Basilio was given the chance to regain the crown from Saxton and snatched it with relish in September 1956 when he stopped Johnny in nine rounds at Syracuse. In February 1957, Carmen confirmed his authority as the boss of the welterweights when he crushed Saxton in two rounds with one cracking left hook at the Cleveland Arena. Basilio was in the prime of his life as a fighter and later that year moved up to middleweight to topple the great Ray Robinso

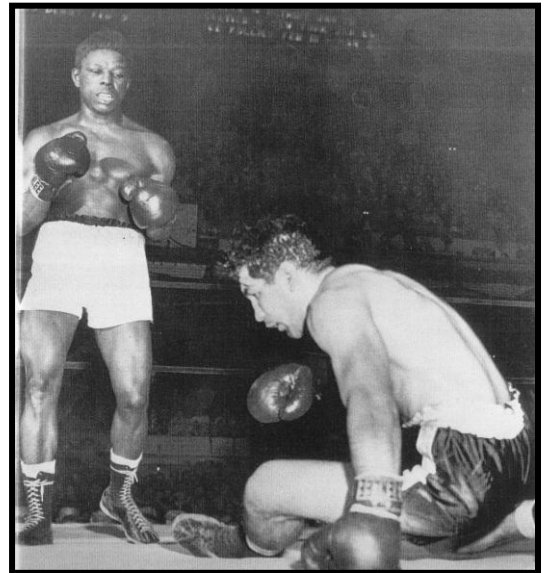
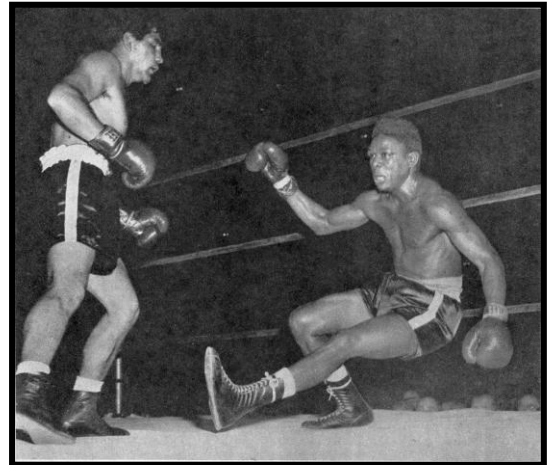
DeMarco, in the meantime, had dropped out of the running to succeed Carmen to the throne. Tony's 1956 campaign was going along very nicely with unanimous points wins over Arthur Persley, Vince Martinez and Kid Gavilan, but at the tail end of the year he lost a pair of successive split decisions to that ever tough warrior, Gaspar Ortega.

Tony bounced back in 1957 to unanimously outpoint Ortega in their third meeting and followed up with victories over Larry Boardman and Walter Byars. But then Tony ran into Virgil Akins, the next world champion in waiting. Missouri's Akins, known as 'Honey Bear', was a lanky and often lazy fighter who could be superb when his mind was on the job. Virgil carried a solid punch in either hand and had established himself as one of the division's major players.

In October 1957, Akins squared off for the first of two fights with DeMarco over 15 rounds for the Massachusetts version of the vacant welterweight championship at the Boston Garden. For Tony, it was the beginning of a three month spell in which he must have felt that he was revisiting his painful saga with Carmen Basilio. Akins won both battles in dramatic, see-saw fashion as he and Tony exchanged multiple knockdowns in wars of attrition.

DeMarco decked Akins in the 12th round of their first encounter but suffered knockdowns himself in the 10th, 13th and deciding 14th when Tony was stopped. "It was a heckuva fight," he would later recall. "I thought I had him in the 12th and 13th but he got me in the 14th."

Virgil got him in the return match too in January 1958. DeMarco probably needed more time to prepare for that one, but, good natured as ever, said he didn't want to keep anyone hanging around. The fight was another rock 'em-sock 'em affair as the Boston Bomber floored Akins in the fourth but then got bowled over himself in the 8th and 11th rounds and once more in the 12th when the bout was halted in Virgil's favor.



(Above) DeMarco-Akins 1

(Below) DeMarco-Akins 11

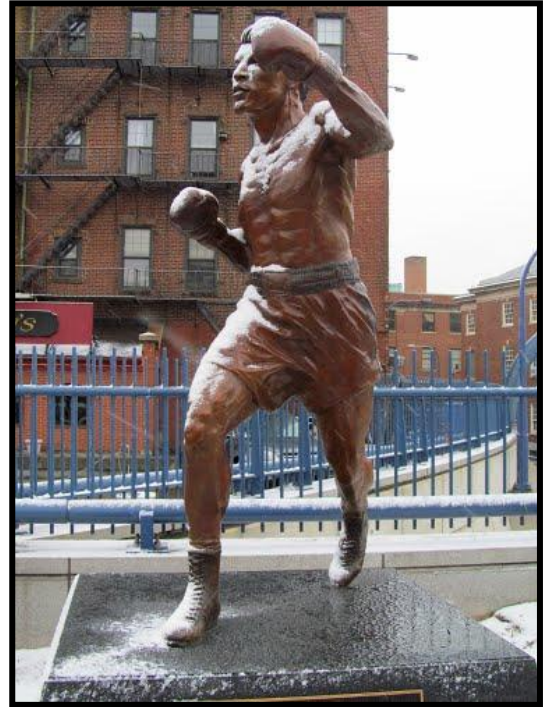
Tough

Such punishing battles take something out of any man, however tough he is, but Tony's honorable career concluded successfully over the next four years even though the world title no longer beckoned. Akins won the official vacant championship by stopping Vince Martinez, while DeMarco rested for a year before coming back to notch points wins over George Monroe and Eddie Connor. A disappointing reverse against Denny Moyer followed, when Tony was ruled out on cuts after a clash of heads in the third round.



Then there was another long layoff before DeMarco came crashing back to knock out Don Jordan in two rounds in a battle of former world champions in late 1961. A final win over Stefan Redl at Tony's beloved Boston Garden concluded his 71-fight career in February 1962. He won 58 of his battles (33 inside schedule), lost 12 and drew one.

Happily, the passing years have not diminished 84-year old DeMarco's popularity in the town that made him. How famous is he? As famous as the great patriot Paul Revere, if you measure a man by his bronze. In 2011, a bronze statue of DeMarco was unveiled on the corner of Hanover Street and Cross Street at the gateway to Boston's North End. Only Mr. Revere shares that honor.



"Never in my wildest dreams did I ever think that all of this would happen to me," DeMarco said. "I am very grateful and have been very blessed. This is the neighborhood that I grew up in. I have always been greatly supported by friends and family in this neighborhood."

Less than a month after the unveiling of the DeMarco bronze, Carmen Basilio died. A lot of memories came flooding back for a lot of people about how two men of remarkable courage and fortitude had bashed and barged each other to the brink of oblivion all those years ago. Life does have a certain way of arranging such things.

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