

Jesse Valdez Honored at 2017 USA Boxing Western Regional Championships

by Austin Killeen

In March USA Boxing held a week long qualifier in Albuquerque, NM for their National Champions to be held at the end of the year. On that occasion USA Boxing honored one of the most accomplished amateur boxers in our countries history; Jesse Valdez, bronze medalist on the 1972 Olympic boxing team. Presenting the award to Jesse were three accomplished amateur boxers in their own right, former IBF junior middleweight champion Raul Marquez of the 1992 Olympic team, BJ Flores one of the top ranked cruiserweights in the world and 2001 and 2002 US amateur champion and former WBC junior middleweight champion Austin Trout an alternate on the 2004 Olympic team.



I interviewed Jesse Valdez at his beautiful home, located in a gated community, in Rio Rancho, NM at the end of April. In his den are a display of photos, trophies, and medals, documenting his accomplishments during a fourteen year amateur career. Jesse was born and raised in an economically challenged part of North Houston, Texas. The area was made up of predominately first generation Mexican Americans and blacks seeking a better life. Commenting on his early life, Jesse said “we were poor but hard working families and crime was not a major problem in our neighborhoods.” Jesse’s philosophy in life is simple, “If

you're willing to work hard in America, you have an opportunity to achieve the American Dream."

Valdez got his first taste of boxing at the local Boy's Club when he was eleven years old and weighed 85 pounds. "My coach was Red Shield and he spent a month teaching me the basics. I learned to keep my hands up, chin down, throw straight punches and move my feet. My coach kept it simple and I was excited about my first fight. At the opening bell my opponent hit me in the nose and it started bleeding. Instead of sticking to the game plan, I started throwing wild punches which mostly hit air. After three rounds I was exhausted and deservedly lost the decision." To quote Mike Tyson, "everybody has a game plan until they get hit." His mother was at ringside, but couldn't stand to see her son get punched. She never watched Jesse fight again. On that afternoon you could have gotten big odds if you bet someone that they had just watched a future Olympian.



I asked Jesse when he first realized he had some talent and was not just a fighter throwing punches like a windmill. He responded, "When I won my first Texas State Welterweight Championship in 1964." It must have been a good feeling because he won the title the next four years. Adding to the therapy case, Jesse won the National AAU welterweight championship in 1964, 1967 and 1970; he won the National Golden Gloves welterweight championship in 1967 and 1972. In 1967 he represented the United States in the Pan-American games winning a bronze medal. From 1970-1972 he was the Armed Forces Champion.



Before I let him go into his story, I pressed him on how he went from getting bloody noses to being an accomplished amateur. If it was that easy everybody would have China cupboards full of awards. It's not unusual for our top pros in the state to tell stories similar to that of Jesse's, but how do they improve. Jesse responded, "you're not going to learn to do something unless you try it over and over again. You try a hook off a jab first during sparring not during competition. As you're learning your sparring partners are not going to try and take your head off. Each time you learn a new move, try it in sparring first. That's how you learn, by doing it in the gym first." This paragraph should be mandatory reading for all boxers, not just novice amateurs.

After making the Olympic team as an alternate in 1964, the State Department sent a group of boxers including Valdez to Nairobi in East Africa. An error in judgment by Jesse put him in the newspapers back home. "We were staying at the dormitory at the Royal College and attended a movie a short distance away. On the trip we were always told to stay in well lighted areas at night. I had seen the movie before and decided to skip the flick and take a short cut back to the dorms. That was a big mistake as the short cut only had lighting provided by the moon and stars above.

"I soon had the feeling that someone was behind me," Jesse recalled. "I turned around and sure enough someone was behind me. I picked up the pace and checked on the person behind me again. He had also picked up his pace and was closing the gap. I started to run and noticed someone hiding in the bushes ahead. Suddenly he jumped out. I hit him with a right hand and dropped him." When Valdez got back to the dorms someone from the college contacted the police. Jesse didn't want to cause any trouble, but was told it was just a formality. It was only a formality until he got a long distance call from his mother in Texas, wanting to know how badly he was hurt. The wire service story said Valdez had been jumped by five hoodlums and had fallen and twisted his knee. The injury wasn't as bad as reported and didn't affect his boxing exhibitions.

Jesse continued boxing all through his school years, graduating from Jefferson Davis High School in 1965. Upon graduation Valdez attended Howard Payne College, located in Brownwood, Texas. By his own admission it wasn't a good fit for him. He commented, "I never paid attention that much in school so college was difficult for me. The college was two hours from Houston and I missed my girlfriend. As a result I dropped out at the end of my first year." But luck smiled on Jesse, as he was hired as a bailiff by the Harris County Sheriff's Department and assigned to the local Civil Court. Jesse worked for Judge Arthur Leshner, which proved to be a blessing, as Leshner was like a second father to him. "I could always approach him for personal guidance and he always seemed to point me in the right direction.

His job as court bailiff allowed him time to attend San Jacinto Jr. College which was near his home and continue his boxing activities. But it was clear that College life wasn't for him. As for his girl friend, she no longer seemed to be part of the story. He continued working as a bailiff and boxing. Winning medals and trophies was nice, but it didn't put food on the table. So in 1969 he enrolled in the Air Force where he could earn a steady income and get the benefits of the GI Bill. Valdez was assigned to the Military Police after completing basic training, but found that he was bored at his job. He never mentioned his background in boxing, as a result for the first time in over ten years was not in the square circle.

That all changed when he responded to an offer to join the base boxing team. Training full time his skills quickly returned and he ran off a string of victories in service competition. In 1970 he was the Air Force champion at 147 pounds, and won the inter service title in competition with the other branches of the service. Inter service champion is a prestigious accomplishment and Jesse would repeat as champion the next two years. The most important event of his life also occurred while he was in the service, he met his future wife who was also in the Air Force. He married his bride Jackie and they are still very happy forty-six years later.

After being an alternate on the Olympic Team in 1964 and 1968 Valdez finally earned a spot on the squad in 1972 and would be going to Munich, Germany. It wasn't easy, as he had to defeat future world light heavyweight champion Eddie Mustafa Muhammad. ABC Wide World of Sports the biggest show on Saturday afternoons in the 70's, had taken an interest in the Olympic qualifiers for boxing. It didn't take long for Howard Cosell, the biggest name in sports broadcasting to discover Valdez. If Cosell liked you, you became a household name; that was the power that the man had. The spotlight was on Valdez and Valdez delivered.



Olympic boxing picks each side of the draw by blind lot; as a result the Russian and Cuban fighters along with Valdez were all in the same group. Jesse's first opponent was Kolman Kalipe of Togo. The powerfully built Kalipe had one style and one style only; come forward, putting pressure on his opponent. With beautiful lateral movement and a piston left Valdez had no difficulty. By the final round he had Kalipe in trouble the result of some power straight rights to the head. It was a unanimous decision with all five judges seeing the US boxer the winner. Howard Cosell concurred with the official verdict.

The coronation of Valdez continued in bouts two and three as he defeated Carlos Burga of Peru and David Jackson of Uganda by identical scores of 4-1. In his contest with Jackson, Valdez must have thought he was fighting his reflection in a mirror. Tall and lean Jackson had a nice left jab, good footwork and a powerful left hook right cross combination. There was only one problem for the fighter from Uganda, he was good but Valdez was better. Paramedics must have been standing at ringside for fear commentator Cosell might swallow his own tongue. It was as if Valdez didn't exist until Cosell discovered him. No one ever accused Cosell of being



encumbered by false modesty.

Sadly the Olympics Games of 1972 are best remember for the deaths of eleven Israeli athletes and coaches taken hostage and tortured and murdered by a Palestinian terrorists group called Black September. At the time an act of violence of that magnitude was unheard of. Sadly it has become commonplace in the world we live in today. It occurred after Jesse's second bout. Commenting on what took place he said "We knew less about what was happening than people watching on television. We were hearing rumors, many of which were very inaccurate. The games were suspended for a day, but then continued as scheduled."

In his fourth bout Valdez faced Anatoly Khohlov of the Soviet Union, with the winner going on to the medal round. Tall and lanky, the southpaw Khohlov was one of the favorites to win Olympic Gold. At the opening bell Valdez's piston left jab was on a mission of its own, destroy the Russian. Unfortunately it was hitting Khohlov's right glove, while the Soviet was scoring with straight lefts to the American's head from long distance. The Russian was taking the American out of his comfort zone and his chances for winning gold were heading south. An expert at stating the obvious, Cosell quickly pointed this out to the viewing audience.

Valdez told me during our interview that he never switched to southpaw during a fight and he didn't on this particular evening either. What he did was start throwing right hand leads from an orthodox stance. It wasn't pretty, but it took the Russian out of his comfort zone. Once he got inside, Valdez starting scoring with nice combinations to the head and body. Try as he might Khohlov failed to regain his early momentum, losing a unanimous decision. Cosell signed off with the closing comment; "With that win, Valdez has guaranteed at least a Bronze medal when he faces the Cuban Emilo Correa in the semi-finals.

With Cosell, it wasn't so much his knowledge as a boxing analyst, but his ability to add drama to any event he covered. When Correa and Valdez entered the ring, Cosell was at his best. He had the viewing audience sitting on the edge of their seats in anticipation of the opening bell. The taller Cuban quickly took charge in the first round behind stinging jabs and scoring with left hooks to the head and body. Clearly Correa won the opening round a feeling shared by the "humble one." In rounds two and three Valdez turned up the heat, scoring with jabs and left hooks. But Correa never let up in an exciting contest that was difficult to score. At the final bell Cosell expressed the view that the match was too close to call. After an exorbitant amount of time the word at ringside was a draw, with Valdez and Correa both getting two votes and the Panamanian judge scoring the bout even? There are no draws in amateur boxing, and the judge

from Panama checked off Correa when given his card back. It was not often that Cosell was at a loss for words, but there were no adjectives left in his quiver.

Honorably discharged from the Air Force that year; Jesse had a decision to make. The name Valdez had recognition in boxing, making it financially beneficial to turn pro. Return to Houston where job offers were waiting for the home town hero. Re-up with the Air Force where he probably would spend the rest of his military career as a boxing coach. Jesse's decision surprised many when he returned to Houston to work for KPRC TV first as a reporter and then as a photo journalist. Four years later he moved to San Diego where he took a job with KGTV, working for them until his retirement. His decision was based on his hard working parents who worked loyally for their employers all their lives only to have no benefits at retirement.



Another event that happened to him when he was a teenager also weighed on his final decision. He told me about being approached at the gym one day by a former champion. "I was working out when a boxing legend approached me and asked if I could buy him a soda. He was one of my heroes, having watched him box on TV many time. He had held his title for several years, defending it successfully many times for large purses. It had to be so sad for him to have to ask me if I could lend him a quarter. Where did his money go? Very few boxers have ever achieved what this man had accomplished in the ring and he was penniless. (Jesse asked me not to use the man's name in the story.)

Jesse is very proud of what he has accomplished in life. He's grateful for his lovely wife Jackie of forty six years and their two children. He's thankful for all the awards he won in boxing, especially his bronze medal which is on display in his beautiful house. And as he expressed at the start of our interview, he's proud to be living the American Dream. It's a dream he feels anybody can achieve if their willing to work hard for it.

