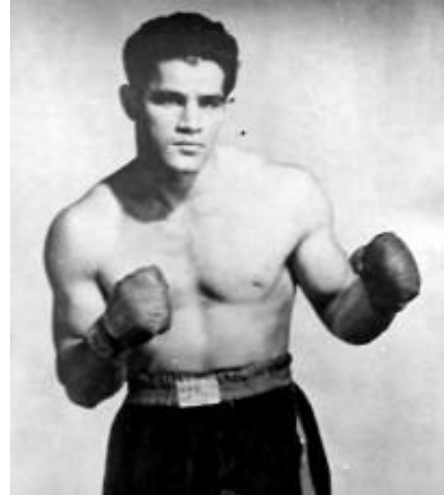


The Story of “Tampa” Tommy Gomez

One of the hardest hitters to grace the division

By Buddy Gibbs

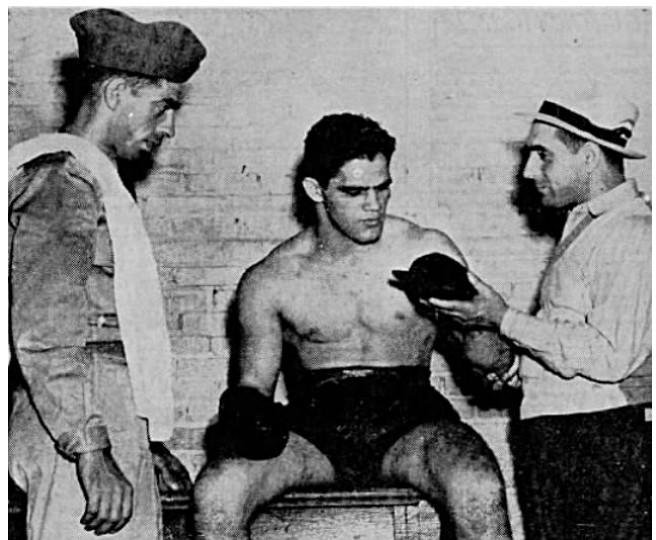
“My daddy was a one-generation immigrant. Most of them had been here two or three generations — they acted like they owned the place. It made me feel so inferior, I wanted to be somebody. I wanted to be something outstanding.” - Tommy Gomez



When Tommy Gomez made the statement above he was 67-years-old, grey-headed, and had long been divorced from the boxing business, but his mind was as sharp as ever. He would never forget the obstacles he had to overcome or the different things that had motivated him to turn to boxing in the first place. Gomez had to come up the hard way and his childhood was blanketed in cruelty. His father immigrated to the U.S. from Spain in 1916 at Port Tampa, Florida. At that time his father was working as a ship’s steward and seen the possibility of a better life in Florida. Once he was financially able, he sent for his wife to join him on their new journey in the U.S. Little Tommy Gomez was born on Christmas day in 1919, shortly after his parents had settled down. But, it was a fight for the Gomez family from the start, especially for Tommy Jr. Tommy had to deal with daily taunts and racial slurs, as well as finding himself constantly in fist fights in his youth. Spaniards were treated about as poorly as African-Americans were when Gomez was growing up and he couldn’t seem to avoid taking a daily beating.

Fighting was how he survived, it was a part of the constant struggle he faced and nowhere was safe for Gomez — not even at home. Gomez remembered every one of these beatings: “I always wanted to be a fighter because I got beat up three or four times a week for being a Latin in an all-white school. Then the principal would beat me about three times a week, then I got a beating from my father after I got home. That’s about nine beatings a week.”

But Gomez would not be broken, he was a fighter at heart and he was going to let the world know it. He decided to drop out of Hillsborough High School where he attended and went to work as a bellhop at the Floridian



Gomez with handlers before Griggs' bout in Dec. 1941.

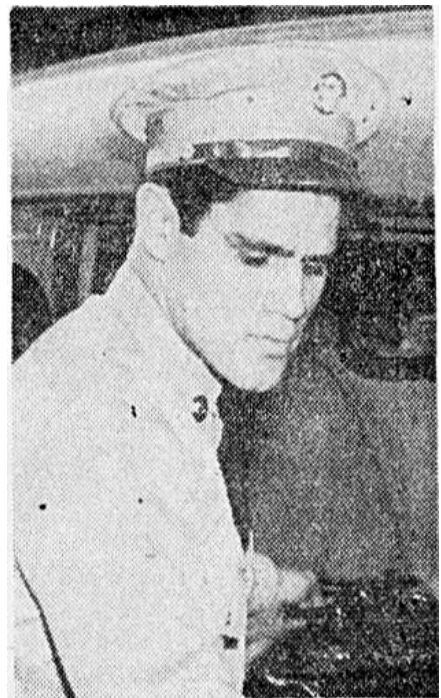
Hotel. He also figured it was in his best interest that he found someone who could show him how to give out beatings instead of taking them.

At 19-years-old he wandered into a gym in Tampa, Florida. There he met a man by the name of Joe Leto. Leto took one look at the handsome kid, who was wearing swimming trunks and tennis shoes, and rolled his eyes. He didn't see a fighter in Gomez. After a few wild, but hard shots at a heavy bag, Leto was even less interested in training the Tampa boy. The kid's inexperience had shown in full force and Leto had better things to do. Gomez had to plead and argue with Leto until persistence finally paid off and he agreed to train him. And it didn't take Leto long to see something in Tommy. He had him fighting professional shortly after the two met.

Gomez took his first pro fight against Jack Wallace in Tampa, Florida. Gomez only weighed 164 lbs. at the time and got the decision when the scheduled 4-round bout was over. It was what Gomez had needed more than anything – a win. The success in his debut was a huge confidence booster for a kid that was used to taking the beatings. Gomez started fighting longer round fights very quickly and won nine of his next eleven fights by stoppage. Gomez's manager had worked with other fighters like Joey Raymond and Chino Alvarez, so he slipped Gomez on the undercard of some of their fights in these earlier bouts in Gomez's career. However, it didn't take long for Gomez to rise to the status as a main event fighter. In fact, the ascent was so quick that Leto never forgot it: "Gomez came up faster than any fighter I have ever seen. With all my other boys, I spent years teaching them how to box – without getting a thing out of them. But Gomez became a main event fighter in his 10th fight." It was actually Gomez's 11th fight before he headlined a card, but an impressive nonetheless.

From 1939 through 1944 he won most of his fights. Any fighter that he lost to or drew with he made sure that he also collected a win over them, except for Johnny Flynn, who he beat in a return fight in 1947. Gomez's revenge over Flynn had to wait because there were more pressing matters to focus on. On the same day he was scheduled to fight Flynn the first time, he got the message that he was going overseas for the war. Gomez had signed up with the National Guard's 116th Field Artillery regiment under the advice of his Godfather, Col. Hesterly, who would later make Gomez a sergeant. Gomez was sent to Camp Blanding for invasion training, but during this time no one bothered to warn the young man of just how much his life was about to change.

Like the other traumatizing events that Gomez faced and conquered in his life, his time in the foxhole was forever burned into his memory. Gomez would always remember in detail how he managed to escape the grip of the Grim Reaper during his time in the war: "We were sent to Europe. I was in the infantry then, a squad leader. We landed in France seven days after D-Day and were quickly in combat. I wasn't scared then. I am now when I think about it. I remember the big day. It was cold. Ten degrees. We were in the Battle of the Bulge near Bastogne, Belgium, when one of



SGT. TOMMY GOMEZ.

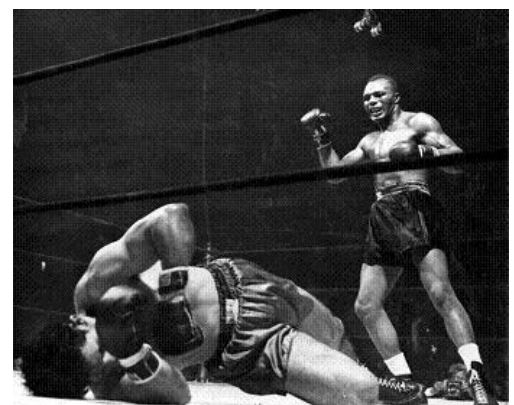
the men in my squad started to light a cigarette. I knocked it out of his hands, but the Germans saw the flicker. They let us have it with mortars. Eight of my men were killed around me and I was hit in 16 places by machine gun and shrapnel. We lost our weapons. I had a radio and called for help. It came and, all bloody, I was taken by Jeep to a field hospital, then shipped to Paris, then to England. They patched me up pretty good."

Gomez spent the remainder of his time in the military recovering in hospitals and fighting exhibitions in Europe when he was able. For his bravery, Gomez was awarded the Purple Heart, but his body would forever show the quarter sized wounds that nearly lead to his termination. Although Gomez survived the war, many in the boxing community were sure that his ring career would not survive. Gomez and his father, however, assured the boxing world that this wasn't the end of the road and he was going to fight on. It seemed that Gomez's team didn't want him to waste any time getting back into action either, especially with their fighter's career being written off by fans and experts alike. Gomez started his comeback on December 4th, 1945 by stopping Johnny Denson in seven rounds and didn't slow down. He would continue racking up wins over the next six months, which included wins over "Big" Ben Moroz, who stood 6'8" tall and weighed nearly 300 lbs. Two more of Gomez's big wins at this time included first round knockouts over Freddie Schott and Phil Muscato.



After scoring some impressive victories, Gomez's team decided to give their fighter a serious acid test by matching him with ring veteran Jersey Joe Walcott. Walcott knew every trick in the book and had even wrote in some of his own. Along with his traps, feints, and clever footwork, Walcott could knock you senseless with either glove. If Gomez was to win it would place him one step closer to Joe Louis' heavyweight title and on to bigger paydays. The two met on August 16th, 1946 at the mecca of boxing — Madison Square Garden. Gomez was never a ring wizard and knew he better not sit down for a chess match with Walcott. Gomez was a vicious puncher and his best chance was to try and slug it out with Walcott and come out of his corner as if he was escaping a fire. He had survived the brutal weather and mortar bombardments in Belgium during his time in the war, but Walcott proved too much for him in the Garden.

Walcott simply outclassed Gomez when they met and made short work of the war veteran. Referee Frank Fullam stopped the bout in the third round to protect Gomez from further punishment. Gomez, gamely, was willing to fight on, but his night was over. So were his hopes for a title shot for the time being. Gomez would lose his next fight by stoppage to Joe Matisi before picking up nine more wins, including his revenge over Matisi on February 5th, 1948, stopping him in the seventh round. Gomez continued battling, picking up a



couple of losses, a draw, and a string of wins.

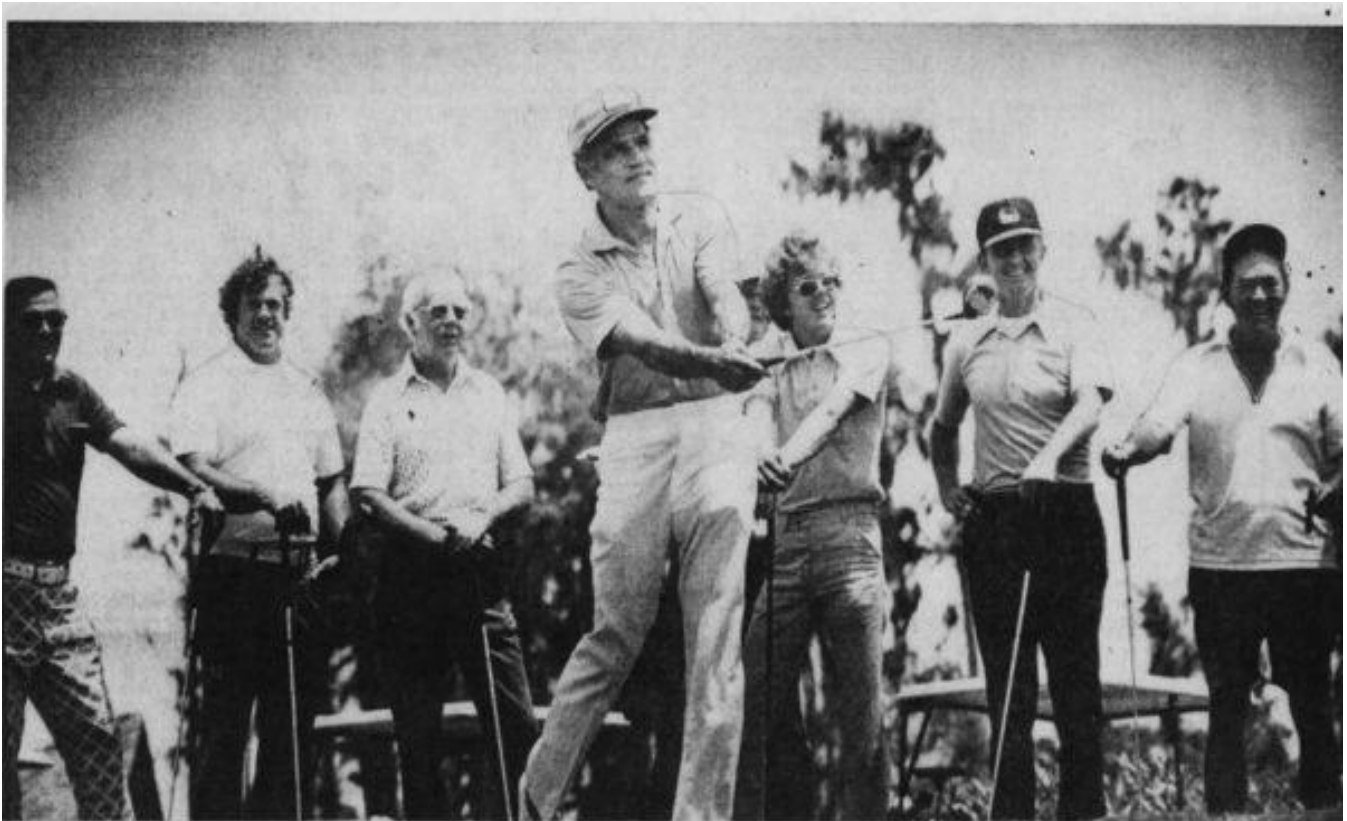
It was on March 22nd, 1950 at Chicago Stadium where Gomez's career finally ended. Gomez was matched with the heavy-hitting Bob Satterfield in a fight that was expected to go no more than a few rounds. Satterfield, like Gomez, was a former military veteran who could knockout about anyone he hit. This was Gomez's last chance for a big win and possible title shot in the future. The two sluggers didn't disappoint when the bell rang. Satterfield landed his Sunday punch first in the opening round. A left hook crashed into Gomez's chin, sending him to the canvas. Gomez rose at the count of 5. The small crowd (of 5,133) roared with approval and it would seem it was the beginning of the end for Tampa Tommy. Tommy's chin and pride may have been bruised with the early knockdown, but the real damage was mentioned when Gomez went to his corner after the round had ended. Gomez complained of severe pain in his ribs, causing a delay for the second round. Dr. Mitchell Corbett examined Gomez and allowed him to continue. Gomez had suffered two broken ribs from one of Satterfield's heavy right hands in the opening stanza, which was the source of his pain. The second round was no better for Gomez, other than him landing a couple of solid left hooks. Satterfield took control of the round with his brutal barrage of punches.

The second round was even more devastating for Gomez than the fans could see. During the round the Tampa Thumper bounced a heavy blow off Satterfield's head, breaking his right hand in the process. Gomez fought on with only one good hand for the rest of the fight, all while trying to protect his smashed in ribs. Despite the injuries, Gomez still managed to stagger Satterfield in the third round. But Satterfield took control again and it wasn't until the sixth round that Gomez had success again. In the seventh round Satterfield slammed a vicious left-handed blow to Gomez's chin, dropping him to the canvas — hurt and in danger of being stopped. Gomez managed to get to his feet, but his legs were barely supporting him when a series of vicious shots from Satterfield sent him crashing back to floor. Gomez was hurt bad but as the referee got to the count of 8, the bell rang, and the round ended. Gomez came out for the eighth round as if he had never been on the brink of a knockout just a minute before. He took control of the round and managed to split one of Satterfield's eyes. In the 9th round the two titans traded heavy leather. Then, suddenly, a savage right-hand of Satterfield's bounced off Gomez's chin, sending him back to the canvas yet again. But, to the surprise of everyone watching, at the count of 9, Gomez was once again on his feet shortly before the round ended. There were no more knockdowns in the remaining round but had there been I'm sure Gomez would have found a way to get back up and fight on. When it was over, Satterfield got the decision, but Gomez had won over the crowd and no one could doubt the Tampa Thumper's heart and gameness.

Gomez's war with Satterfield would never be forgotten by the fans that watched it live in Chicago Stadium, and Gomez would never forget it either. In retirement, Gomez recalled his war with Satterfield saying: "When it was over I didn't know who had won. I walked to the hospital. I was an amnesia victim and didn't learn the outcome until a couple of days later." He would go on to say, "That Satterfield was my toughest. In fact, I got my belly full of the fight game the night I fought him in Chicago Stadium."

It would be Gomez's last fight. He never did become a world champion, but success was on the horizon for him, even if not in boxing. For many boxers, the end of their boxing careers usually means financial hardships and a grim future to look forward to. Thankfully for

Gomez, this was not what life had in mind for him. After working in the commercial sign business for a short time and spending many years as a liquor salesman for Carbo Liquors, Gomez finally got his break. Gomez recalled when things started looking up for him saying: "The good Lord said to me one day, 'Son you've worked hard long enough that it is time you get on easy street'." Gomez's lifelong friend Frank Lorenzo introduced him to Bill Steen at Bankers Insurance who made Tommy an insurance salesman. The insurance business was very good to Tommy and the best decision he ever made according to him.



Big swinger in boxing ring, Tommy Gomez shows his pals another kind in daily golf round

Tampa insurance man's golfing pals in background, from left, Bill Marston, Tom Watts, John Crooks, Randy Crooks, Don Smith and Frank Smith—(Times photo by Fred Fox).

Gomez lived out the rest of his life comfortably and got to enjoy it how he saw fit. His leisure time included smoking his own personal brand of cigars that were called 'Champs', bass fishing, playing golf regularly, and enjoying his time with his friends and family. A happy ending that was well-deserved for one of boxing's hardest punchers and an American war hero.

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