



A Panamanian Devil

“Oh, he really *hurt* him that time!”

“I don’t think that Buchanan has ever been in this much trouble in his whole career!”

“Buchanan’s mouthpiece goes out ... he’s in *real trouble*.”

Several of us from the old neighborhood, now three years out of high school, had taken quite a shine to this Tartan-clad little scrapper out of Edinburgh when he won the lightweight championship a ways back. Now, round upon round, we watched, surprise giving way to alarm, then to mortification, as we listened to the venerable Don Dunphy call the action that 1972 summer evening at Madison Square Garden. A small dark hurricane out of Panama, hitherto unknown, was fighting like he wanted not only to beat our guy, but to devour him. Round by round, Kenny Buchanan was getting dismantled.

Early Years

“I am a child of the streets. My neighbors were thieves, whores and murderers.”

So begins (*I am Duran*) Roberto’s own recollection. Raised in *Casa de Piedra* – the House of Stone section of Chorillo – he did not make it past the third grade, often getting shipped out to relatives or sleeping on the streets. He did not know his own father, a Mexican-Cherokee who had drifted briefly into the life of Roberto’s native Indian mother, not to be seen again for a couple of decades.

They were lean years, those formative ones, testing young Roberto for his gameness and imagination. To make coins he would sing, dance, and tumble, and occasionally shine shoes, for what little would get thrown his way. He cut ice and hauled it, and committed small theft when nothing else availed. He also wrestled, inspired by Mexican films that featured Latin heroes who thrived in that timeless *good guy, bad guy* arena. And he learned, by heaven, that he could punch the first time he flattened a belligerent kid in grade school – and got handed his walking papers.

One of eight children, he was right now like a million others in urban Central America, and his story might well have played out the same way. But one day, when older brother Domingo (Toti) brought Roberto along with him to a boxing gym, the world opened.

He fought several times as an amateur, blasting away his competitors before missing out on a trip to the Pan American Games that he was sure he had earned. Enraged, he swore that he was done with boxing. Toti had a better idea. Why not do it for money?

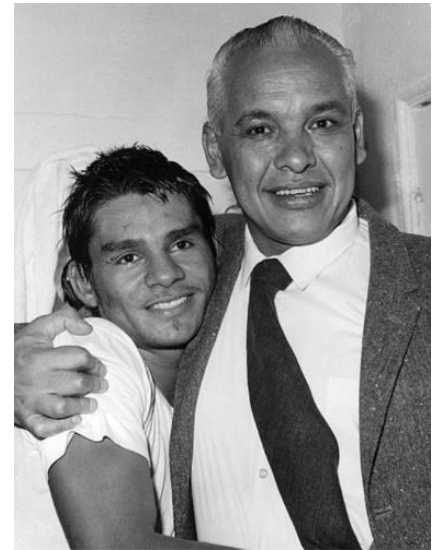
His first test, against a more seasoned fighter named Carlos Mendoza, was nearly canceled when he injured his right hand – he ended up begging to be included on the show to put food on the family table. Several months shy of 17, he got his chance and came away with a four-round decision.

Carlos Eleta

Multimillionaire sportsman and entrepreneur Carlos Eleta had got his first look at Roberto a few years back, when he found the young wayfarer purloining coconuts at the foot of one of his trees. Thoroughly taken with the youngster despite his mischief, Eleta invited him into the estate and gave him money before sending him home.

A few years later, he recognized Roberto when taking in a local amateur card and saw in an instant the raw makings of a star. When Duran's novice manager, knowing his own limits, came to him with an offer, he picked up the contract for three hundred dollars shortly after the Mendoza fight. Not since Manhattan Island had there been a buy to match it.

In coming months, with two healthy hands, Duran seared through local competition like a hot knife through an *empanada*, nine knockouts with seven in the first round. Eleta knew that he had a 5'7 stick of dynamite in his stable – he also knew that he had a child at heart who could use a guiding hand in the ring and out.



* * *

To cite one instance, there was the time, in November of 1969, when Duran had just stopped a fighter named Luis Patino in his first scheduled ten-rounder. He headed off to Guarare, a family-rooted area, for food, drink, and festivity.

“Around midnight,” Duran would recall, “I noticed a bunch of horses belonging to other guests tied up outside the bar.” A stranger walked up and asked if he was the fighter Duran. *Si?* He bet Roberto that he could not knock out the specimen to which he pointed.

“*Vamos, papi,*” enjoined the young lass on Roberto’s arm. His uncle said the same. Warmed by now with a fair dose of *aguardiente*, Duran mulled it for a second.

“Tio,” he said to Uncle, “where am I going to *hit* this animal?”

“Easy. Hit him behind the ear and he’ll go down like a sack of spuds.”

Roberto set himself and let fly. Down went the horse – if not a knockout, it was at least a knockdown that had an impromptu audience convulsing with laughter. Numbled by his evening intake, Roberto did not feel the pain that instant, but his hand was a mess. Stitches were taken at a local clinic, which he got without an anaesthetic.

Fortunately, the hand healed without complication. “The next day,” said Roberto, “people kept asking me to tell them the whole story, which was pretty cool, and that’s when I knew that the legend of Roberto Duran had been born.”

And Eleta had a young wild-card on his hands.

Ken Buchanan

A few years earlier, in 1965, Scotland had seen the emergence of its next ring idol when 20-year old Ken Buchanan won the British amateur featherweight championship. He ran up 16 straight as a pro around London before winning the Scottish UK regional crown in Glasgow.

In 1968 he won the British lightweight title, then dropped a 15-round decision to Spain's Miguel Velasquez in Madrid for the vacant European championship. Three wins later he faced Panama's Ismael Laguna in September of 1970 at an outdoor stadium in San Juan, Puerto Rico, figuring as a long shot to succeed in that venue. Down on points, Kenny launched an amazing drive in the late rounds under a pitiless Caribbean sun to nick it with the judges by a split decision at the end of fifteen. Crestfallen when hearing of it, Duran wanted right then to fight the man who had beaten his hero.

Kenny managed an encore with Ismael at Madison Square Garden the following year, cut badly over the left eye yet rallying again down the stretch. This time it was unanimous, by a decent margin.

Affable, game, and razor sharp, the tan-blond little Scot now charmed New Yorkers by outslipping tough young Donato Paduano in a ten-round bout at Madison Square Garden. Months later, when he ventured to Los Angeles to hand a lesson to local sensation Ruben Navarro, America was under his spell.

Exploding onto the Scene

It was time meanwhile for Duran to test his own depths. In March of 1970 he scored a ten-round decision over Felipe Torres in Mexico City. Then came a ten-round bout with red-hot Ernesto Marcel, 24 – 2 – 1, at the open-air *Gimnasio Nuevo Panama* in Panama City. Marcel of late had won 14 in a row, most of them by knockout. He was favored to win this one, and he let Duran know it.

A new mishap now complicated matters – Eleta, whose interests included a vitamin company, wanted Roberto to take a supplement to guard against deficiencies. The problem was that Roberto figured if one a day was good, more was better. He ended up running a fever and sporting a lesion on his tail that took him out of training several days. When Marcel found out, he taunted him, saying that he didn't want excuses after he knocked Roberto out.

Thanks to rough-hewn surgery administered by a friend, Roberto got the infection drained and lost the fever. He entered the ring, if not in prime shape, ready still to settle accounts with Ernesto, pounding him bloody by the time it was stopped in the tenth round.

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Even so, Duran was not on the national radar in the states when he signed to fight at Madison Square Garden on the undercard of Buchanan and Ismael, in a rematch of that fight in San Juan. Journeyman Benny "Bang Bang" Huertas, after an up and down run in his career, was riding a three-fight win streak and looking like he was headed somewhere.

For Roberto the trip was magical. Getting his first look at skyscrapers as the plane descended, he was wide-eyed. The downtown streets were a carnival of blaring horns, vendors dealing hotdogs, and best of all, he would say later, ice cream arrayed in every dazzling color. Around noon he wandered out to explore those streets. By the time he returned at 5:00, Eleta was at wit's end. He assured Carlos that all was well, and that he would knock out Huertas, then devote himself to "steak and ice cream."

If Eleta had his doubts, proof was not long in coming. Duran answered the bell in his easy, rocking style, hips and shoulders ready to apply concussive force into what he threw. Inside the two-minute mark, he connected with a right hand, stretching Benny out cold. Though the wider world might not have seen it, boxing *cognoscenti* around the Big Apple were on notice.

It was around this time that Panamanian scribe Alfonso Castillo, taken with Duran's two-fisted power, and with a nod maybe to his old Chorillo neighborhood, christened the fighter with a name he would have forever. ***Manos de Piedra*** – Hands of Stone.

Roberto lived up to it five weeks later when he faced Japanese hero Hiroshi "Royal" Kobayashi in a ten-round fight at *Gimnasio Nuevo*. Kobayashi, until recently a WBA world titlist at 130 pounds, was a veteran of more than 70 fights and a step up from Huertas. Though it didn't end in blitz fashion like the last one, it was a demolition just as impressive, gaining momentum with each round. In the seventh, two wrecking ball shots, left and right, put Hiroshi flat on his face. He did not fight again.

Fula

Another life-shaping event had taken place not long after the Huertas fight. Arriving back in Panama, Eleta decided to get his athlete away from the welter of gangs, bad habits, and cantinas that surrounded them. He set Roberto up in the less torrid neighborhood of Caledonia, though underestimating the night life that it offered. Plenty of people in Panama wanted a drink at day's end, and here was no exception.

But there was one thing more alluring than the gin joints along that thoroughfare. It was a 14-year old schoolgirl named Felicidad, who departed class at 4:00 each afternoon, picked up money her mother had earned selling lottery tickets, and went for the family groceries. Duran's interest was obvious, but up to now he had impressed only Fula's cousin Ana. Fula saw him as a womanizer.



"Whoa," Roberto called to her one day, "slow down, blondie – you're walking way too fast!" Minutes later, they had a date for an eatery the next day. Roberto wanted to see a movie afterward, and Fula was up for two. At this point, it was approaching her curfew, but Roberto persuaded her to go dancing at a bar called the Morocco. Then there was some time spent at a hotel, which had them back at eleven, by which time Fula believed her mother would kill her.

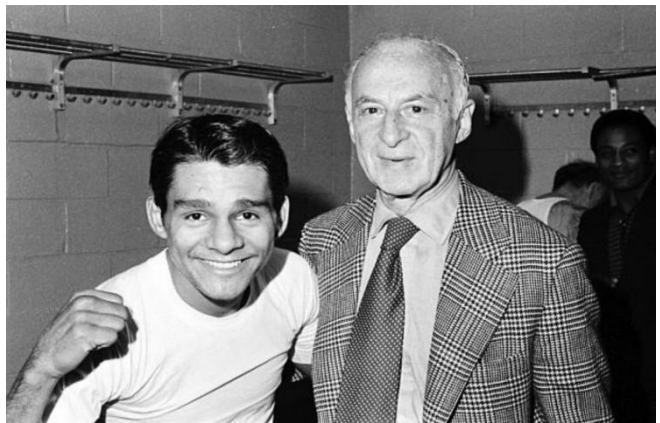
They decided to hole up instead at his place for a time, a choice that sent Fula's mother searching high and low to know she was alive and well. When one of Roberto's gym-mates spotted her two days later, she was on the street frantic and sobbing.

Long story short, Roberto, Fula, and her parents ended up at a police station, where it was decided that she should go home with them. But over the next three months, she and Roberto managed to carry on a quiet affair. In time, once getting up close, he won over his prospective in-laws with his innate likeability and his royal treatment of their daughter. Though it would be some years before they became officially wedded, and Roberto, by his own admission, would never be immune to the charms of young women crossing his path, it was a relationship that endured and would produce five children.

Ray Arcel

In February of 1972 Carlos made a call to old friend Ray Arcel, who had made his acquaintance when lending a hand with a couple of his fighters during the Second World War. Eleta wanted him to have a look at his man Alfonso "Peppermint" Frazer, who would soon challenge Argentine veteran Nicolino Locche for the 140-pound title in Panama City.

As for boxing insight, Carlos knew well, he could not do better. Born in 1899, Ramil Arcel had grown up in East Harlem, in a Jewish household practically alone in a sea of Italian-American culture. While not aggressive by nature, he knew early, as Donald Dewey notes in his *Ray Arcel: A Boxing Biography*, what it was to be labelled *kike* and *mazzachristo* (Christ killer), and to fight if he was going to survive.



He did some amateur fighting himself but gravitated soon to training fighters with two of the best in the business. Frank “Doc” Bagley was a boxing sage with a bag of tricks that included cauterizing a cut with a fresh-chewed wad of char; Dai Dollings, a sternly continent little Welsh immigrant, imparted to him not only boxing wisdom, but lessons of tact, patience, and human observation that would stand him in good stead, in boxing and in his long life, over the next 75 years.

Through the decades, Ray would see talent of every kind, starting with men like Benny Valgar, Mickey Walker, and Benny Leonard, and by now he had worked with 16 world champions (four more were on the way). A student of both boxing and the boxer psyche, he was quite possibly the game’s master strategist.

He had also seen the game’s dark side, brushing up against figures in organized crime and managing a passable friendship with fight buff and Irish boss Owney Madden. But these were dangerous waters. Years later, during the rise of televised boxing, he became involved in matchmaking for a Saturday night show that tread on the toes, said some, of a *de facto* monopoly currently enjoyed by Jim Norris and the mob-infiltrated International Boxing Club. In time, Arcel got an anonymous threatening phone call. Awhile later, standing outside a Boston hotel near a fight venue, he was waylaid with a water pipe and was rushed to an intensive care unit.

Some said that the *lead-in-newswrap* MO was a calling card of Lucchese soldier and Norris associate Frankie Carbo. The assailant himself, however, had faded into the surroundings never to be identified, and no one who knew anything was talking. After his recovery, Ray stayed on with the television enterprise awhile, but by 1956 he’d had enough. He took the offer of his friend Harry Kessler, a veteran referee and enterprising tycoon, and became a purchasing agent for Keller’s alloy company in New York.

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Now, 16 years later, Eleta’s request coming on short notice, it took some coaxing to get him back in the game, but 71-year old Ray said yes. He and his wife Steve (Stephanie) landed in Panama City a couple of weeks before the fight, which gave Ray little time to observe Frazer.

That part, though, was easy. Alfonso, he could see, was peaking, and needed to cut back on his sparring sessions. But what about the other guy? Getting near Locche was no simple task. By a stroke of luck Ray secured a ride, and dressed to blend with the scene, he got into the mix long enough to see what he wanted – which was essentially bad news for the Frazer camp. Locche, who had lost but twice in more than 120 fights, had his game down pat.

Yet Arcel had a way to turn the bad news around. True, Locche was world class, but Ray’s old eyes detected one other thing – over time the much-weathered champion had let down into a comfortable pattern, backing away time and again and manoeuvring sparring partners after they followed him to the ropes.

Arcel now imparted a simple strategy to Frazer’s camp: “You walk out there in the center of the ring when the bell rings and you throw the biggest right hand you ever threw in your life. I don’t even care if it lands, just so he knows you got one.”

Locche would react as he had in the gym, and Frazer now would have to remember that he had a stadium full of fans on his side. At which point, said Arcel, they would know he had come to fight. He did not need to

traipse after Locche when he slid back and waited. “Make him come off the ropes,” said Ray. “If he doesn’t, 20,000 Panamanians will do it for you.”

Alfonso did as told and ended up winning. Arcel knew his stuff. And Eleta knew, even if he didn’t play his hand right then, that this was the man he wanted for Duran.

When Carlos opened his checkbook to compensate him for the Frazer job, Ray told him to put it away – it was enough, he said, to know that he “still had it” where the fight business was concerned. But soon after (maybe this was the main thing on his mind all along), Eleta was calling again. His boy Roberto, he explained, was now signed to fight Ken Buchanan for the lightweight title in June at the Garden. Carlos wanted Ray to work with him in the Catskills.

Arcel agreed to a compromise involving old associate Freddie Brown, a kindred product of Lower East Side life from early in the century. A grizzled little vet with gnarled hands and a face like a crunched fender, Brown would see to most of the day-to-day action. Eleta now had, in these two frosted Jewish deacons, maybe the two best minds in the business in Roberto’s corner.

Taking Aim at the Lightweight Crown

Arcel, as keen a judge of fighting flesh as God had made, was amazed by what he saw in Duran. So was Freddie, who would continue as Roberto’s trainer through the greatest stretch of his career. Roberto understood innately what he needed to do in the ring – so wonderfully, in fact, that Arcel one day would admit that Duran might be the only man alive who might know more about fighting than he did.

But each of these men also saw what he lacked. There was no way he was going to get close enough to Buchanan with the tools he had at this moment. And it was hard to make him see that point, when his natural talent had been enough with 28 men up to now.

Duran’s stubbornness was trying Freddie’s patience, until one afternoon Ray told Brown, then 65 years old, to get into the ring with Roberto. He instructed Duran to close the distance on Freddie as he imagined he would do it on fight night. Duran obliged, making a move at his trainer and getting slapped back and forth on the face before he could succeed.

After a couple of tries, Duran left in rage and embarrassment. “If he doesn’t come back tomorrow,” said Ray to Freddie, “we haven’t got much. If he does, we have a fighter.”



Duran came back. He began to reorder his game, starting with the punch that Arcel called (*a la* Euclid, it was one of his axioms) the cornerstone of any fighter’s battle plan – a jab.

Still, Arcel knew that there would be no winning this fight unless they could mount an offensive like Buchanan had never seen. The task, as he saw it, was to pack 20 rounds worth of fighting into 15. That idea became the driving force in their camp.

June 26, 1972

“He’s a Tasmanian devil,” groaned one of my high school comrades when we were getting our first look at Roberto on that live telecast.

The onslaught started seconds into the fight when a darting asp of a right hand caught Kenny upstairs and his fists hit the canvas. It was a knockdown, and it was one of those moments that makes of the fistic world something very different from what it was just before.

The chase was on, a mad dog after a hare, and just as fast. “Duran,” said Dunphy a minute later, “is certainly trying to improve on his nine one-round knockouts here – he’s throwing *everything!*”

The coming rounds yielded more of everything. In the fifth, Duran hit him with right hands that threatened to fracture vertebrae, and still Kenny was trying to counter. The champion ducked and dodged, sliding and trading with such dexterity that Duran would call Buchanan years later the cleverest man he ever faced.

Two forces, declared Jack London, in attendance for the *San Francisco Examiner*, were at war when Battling Nelson went after Jimmy Britt in their September 1905 bout: It was, said Jack, “a fighting animal” pitted against a merely intelligent animal with “fighting proclivities,” the former animated by something illimitable and deeper than reason. (Every man, thought Jack, had in him this abysmal force, but some more than others)

So it seemed now in Madison Square Garden – a contest of style *versus* primal hunger, an epee artist trying to fend off a Neanderthal with two clubs. In the ninth and tenth rounds Buchanan had his moments, a tribute to fighting spirit if ever it was witnessed. Yet Duran was coming at him as if possessed. In the eleventh he got home again with shots that had Kenny in a fog, shoving him derisively at the bell. At end of the twelfth, he snarled gruesomely, announcing his ownership of the ring and the title, after bombing the champion with blows that might have dropped a heavyweight.



Buchanan, in seeming defiance of the laws of nature, answered for round 13. So went another brutal session, Duran mauling his target, his head continually pressing on Kenny’s jaw or under his chin as he went after his gut.

Late in the round Duran drove a right hand to Buchanan’s mouth and a sharp trade of punches followed. Seconds later came a dreadful end to a great fight. The fighters failed to hear the bell and amid an exchange, Duran landed (it is hard to tell from the camera angle) a blow that strayed low, or probably did. It did not seem to have the leverage of his earlier shots, but Buchanan fell, clutching his foul-protector.

Opinion was all over the place, some saying it was a legitimate shot to the body, some saying not, and Buchanan’s trainer Gil Glancy alleging that Duran had snuck in a knee. But referee Johnny LoBianco, refusing to believe that Buchanan had been debilitated by the blow, declared Roberto the winner by a technical knockout. A new era of the lightweight championship had begun.

Esteban DeJesus

In the fall, Duran scored two fast knockouts in fights intended to keep him active. Not long after, however, he suffered injuries to his mouth and elbow in a car accident. And soon after that he found out, to his alarm, that Eleta had signed him for a ten-round non-title fight with Esteban DeJesus, a *hell to pay* boxer-puncher out of Puerto Rico with 33 victories in 34 fights.

Roberto honored the deal but soon regretted it. Hampered in training, he came in five pounds more than he had for Buchanan, and to add to his stress, he found himself now in a packed Garden house of Esteban’s



kinsmen who were raising the roof. Within a minute of the first round, a hellacious left hand on the chin let him know, for the first time, the impact of his backside on the floor.

At the end of ten, it was Esteban winning the decision and Duran retreating to the hotel where he sat in a bathtub, weeping, hitting his fist on the wall and swearing it would not happen again. Although 15 months would pass before he got hold of DeJesus again, he would be ready.

DeJesus Again, and Ray Lampkin

Had it not been for Duran, Esteban by now might have ruled the division. Ten wins later, Duran got his second chance. This time it was in Panama City at the *Gimnasio*, under a blazing sun in front of a home crowd where Duran was in his element.

“I don’t like him,” he would confess in the days leading up, “mostly because he is the only man ever to beat me.” Not only that, but Esteban, he added, was the only man to have put him on the floor.

Versed himself in the talk, Esteban upped the *ante*: “If he don’t like me because I knock him down, let him wait until after this fight. This time I’m going to destroy him. When I knock him down this time, if he gets up, I will kill him. I tell him that I will fight him in the street anytime for nothing. He ignored me. (“For this,” he admitted on a calmer note, “I am glad, because I need the money.”)

It was obvious now, at the opening bell, that each man was out for blood, each winging with all he had, when suddenly came *déjà vu* recalling New York. DeJesus caught him with a sharp left hand, then blasted him again, in an exchange, with a duplicate of the punch that had upended Roberto at Madison Square Garden.

For the second time in his life, Roberto felt the rude hit of rump on canvas. Yet this time it was a different Duran who got up. Esteban had just seen the best moment he would have in the fight.

A native of San Juan, DeJesus was no stranger to heat, but no one thrived in it like the champion. Time and again, in that three-digit furnace, Duran was on him, getting inside with body blows and rocking him with an overhand right.

Floyd Patterson remarked years ago, in his memoir *Victory Over Myself*, that a fighter who gets hit and smiles is either hurt or silly. By and large it may be true, but there is a third possibility. Now and again there is one who smiles, amid hard exchanges, in sheer elation. When Esteban nailed him, Roberto he seemed enlivened.

On it went without let-up, Esteban trudging back wearier with each closing bell, his corner dousing him with water until that part of the ring was a swamp. And through it all came Duran, working that body, crossing his right and coming back, every so often, with a rending hook to the rib cage, lupine joy showing in each trade. In the seventh round, he nailed Esteban with both hands, then caught him with a jab and a torrid right behind the ear that sent the challenger to the floor.

Somehow Esteban made it up, his wiles getting him through three more frames before another Duran fusillade in the 11th, culminating in a right hand to the head that spelled the finish.

So ended the second matchup of Duran and DeJesus, one of the greatest fights of the decade – a contest of strength and will and ring savvy that bristled in every minute to the end. The one constant in the fight was Duran, invincible, unfazed by the heat, the pace, or anything that Esteban landed.



The open air of the Panama City stadium was again the scene for a title defense in March of 1975. Ray Lampkin, coming up early through the Pacific Northwest amateur ranks, now stood 29-3-1 as a pro. Even so, he did not figure to last any longer than had Duran's last four opponents, each getting dispatched hard and fast.

The champion came into the ring sporting a few days' black growth on his chin, something that seemed apt when he came out wild-eyed as the devil, rocking Lampkin in the opening frame. Yet Ray was not going anywhere yet. Shaken again by a right hand late in the second, he was fighting back at the bell.

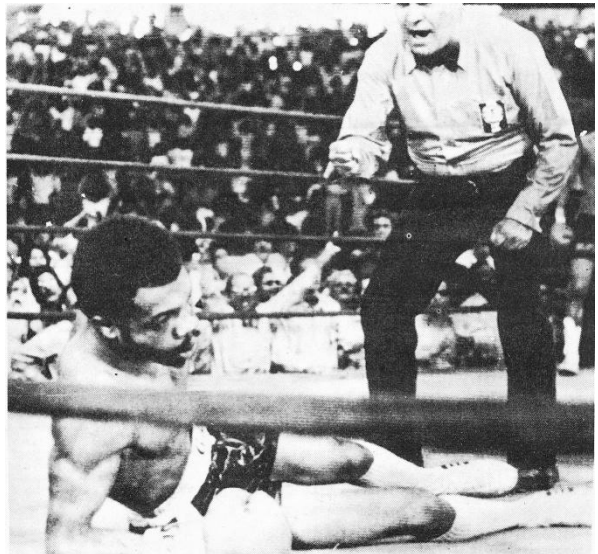
It shaped into a fight far better expected, though as rounds passed Roberto was muscling Ray as he had Esteban. In the ninth, tenth, and eleventh he hit him with shots that should have ended it. but the unassuming kid from Portland, Oregon, bone-tired with blood running from his nose, was still there.

There is a certain gift, Freddie Brown liked to point out, that some men have and some never will. Years earlier, he had been brought on board for fifty dollars to work the corner of Rocky Marciano when he challenged Jersey Joe Walcott for the heavyweight title in Philadelphia. Looking back, he would say of the man he revered, "He'd go along and hit ya, and nothing would happen, and all of a sudden he'd hit ya that good one and that was it." It could come in the first round or in the last. Duran, he said, had the same thing.

And now, after each man looked spent in the 13th, come it did – at the bell for the next round, rising like the Phoenix, Duran came out punching as he had in the first. He knocked Ray askew with a left hand and followed it with another, then started a right and came back with a wracking left on the chin that sent him plummeting, stretched flat on that burning white canvas as if he had been crucified upon it. By sheer instinct Lampkin raised himself on one elbow before lapsing into unconsciousness.

Ray was carried from the ring and rushed to a hospital. Told of this, Duran replied that next time he would be going to the morgue.

While this remark would feed his dark image for a long while, there was another postscript to the fight that never made it into the mainstream – once learning that Lampkin was in critical condition, Roberto made repeated visits to Ray's bedside, shedding tears and sharing prayers for his recovery. Ray, in time, made it back enough to resume his career, though he was never again in contention for a title shot.



Rubber Match

There was now one fight left that made sense at lightweight, and that was Duran and DeJesus a third time to break the 1 – 1 tie.

Not to mention, it was getting harder to contain Duran's appetite between fights. Each time, to keep him at 135, there came an up-and-down ordeal on the scales that was growing tedious. In truth, Roberto was a lightweight in constitution, but his intake of beef, booze, and Coca-Cola (even in training, he would get Coke and bread rolls smuggled past Freddie at every chance) made it always a close call. This time Freddie resorted to telling him that a tune-up fight was in the making, just to get gym work started a month early.

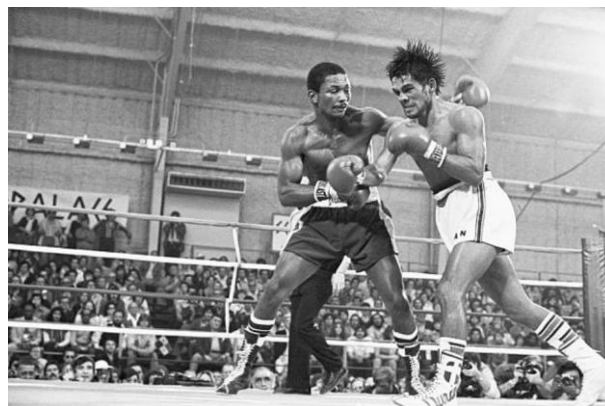
The ruse paid off. When the day came, Roberto was just over 134, not an ounce wasted. DeJesus, on to weight struggle in that camp, seized on it to renew their war of words. "Keep your mouth shut," he warned Duran. "you're too weak to even talk. You are skinny. I kill you." Roberto answered, his finger wagging in

Esteban's face, that he would be the one doing the killing, whereupon DeJesus smacked him with a glancing right hand. A frantic scene followed, one that threatened to give promoter Don King heart failure and made him ask how many hours remained (about six) before the fighters would answer the opening bell.

Yet Arcel and Freddie by now had got it through Duran's head that he needed to avoid a full-on frontal assault at the opening bell. He needed patience if he wanted to avoid what had happened each time before.

And so, "The infuriated street fighter", said Pat Putnam, covering the action at Caesar's Palace for **Sports Illustrated**, "was suddenly an artist."

He gauged Esteban, prodding him, prying him, ramming him with a left hand that had him bloody before the first round was done. On it went, Roberto, placing his shots, jolting him to head and body and dominating the trade at every turn. In the twelfth, he delivered the full package, and how – a *blur*-fast right hand sent DeJesus down for the first time in the fight. Up groggily at *five*, he took a right to the head that drove him against the ropes, then went to the canvas under a volley that had him looking like the Palace ceiling had fallen on his head.



It had been, despite that pre-fight eruption, a different contest from the one prior, lacking the surreal heat and blood-crazed intensity. Yet all told, it might have been the highlight of Duran's career. It was also the last serious challenge that remained at lightweight. Now, with 63 wins in 64 professional fights, and boredom taking its toll, he was casting an eye toward bigger money at 147 pounds.

In Search of Bigger Game

One thing that would emerge from this climb, even if it took Duran above his ideal weight, was his amazing ringmanship, which enabled him to handle even highly talented men who enjoyed multiple advantages over him. Matched with Monroe Brooks, a sharp-punching 41 – 4 – 2 contender out of Los Angeles, he figured to be put through his paces.

Looking a little soft, entering the ring maybe five pounds over the welterweight limit, he was raising doubt when he climbed the ring steps. But at the bell he took charge, pushing Monroe to the ropes and gaining the upper hand with scarcely an argument. A right hand to the head had Brooks loopy in the fourth round; a hook to the short ribs folded him like a knife in the eighth.

After a ten-round win over veteran Jimmy Hear, there came an acid test in former welterweight champion Carlos Palomino. Just off a split decision loss of his WBC title to Wilfred Benitez, Carlos had hopes of a return go.

Now an interesting thing happened, one that showed another aspect of Duran's savvy. On his own, he had taught himself certain skills, such as cutting off the ring and the fundamentals of infighting. "I also learned," he would say, "at any early age, to sense fear in my opponents. I could smell it." Yet rough as he could be, in a pre-fight encounter with an opponent, he also knew how to work it in the other direction.

In recent days, Carlos had braced himself for what he imagined would be a *mano-a-mano* contest of staredown and *machismo*, only to find Duran, when they were face to face, amiable as a new brother-in-law.

“I feared the worst,” he would say later. “I figured he’d start his usual name-calling act, but he walks up to me, shakes my hand, and tells me that he respects me as a fighter. He caught me off guard, and that took the fire out of me.”

There was no fire lacking in Duran, however, when the bell rang. In with a bigger man, and one of the best tacticians in the world, he conducted a veritable clinic, feinting, jabbing, owning the action in close, and shaking the rock-chinned Palomino now and then with an overhand right that fairly sizzled. In the sixth round, one of those right hands dropped the Californian for only the second time in his career. At the end it was Duran on all three cards by a near shutout.



Three more wins followed, during which time Ray Leonard won the welterweight title late in the year with a technical knockout of Wilfred Benitez in the 15th round. He defended it in March of 1980 with a resounding KO of England’s Davey Boy Green. Roberto now signed to face Leonard in a June 20th showdown in Montreal that the world awaited.

Ray

Named after his mother’s favorite musician, Ray Charles Leonard got his first national attention at 18 on an ABC telecast of the US National Golden Gloves finals in 1974. A couple of years later, as part of the greatest boxing team that America ever sent to the Olympics, he won gold at 139 pounds with a 5-0 decision of a dreaded Cuban opponent whom many had figured as the front runner in that division.

He was, in some ways, the antithesis of Duran in background and image – sunny, fluent, and engaging, Sugar Ray had been groomed for stardom from his first pro fight, before an American television audience, as the sport’s favorite son. Time and again featured on ABC, a personal favorite of commentator Howard Cosell, he was matched in increments that had the precision of a jet engine.

Cosell despised Duran, who in turn saw Leonard as a media-nurtured Golden Boy with blessings he had never enjoyed. His resentment began to simmer, soon flowing over in ways loud and vulgar. Leonard soon saw him as a bona fide maniac, and day by day it unsettled him.

The Vegas betting line favored Ray, a younger, less weathered fighter, bigger than the challenger and gifted with phenomenal speed. The stage, it seemed, was set for a Leonard triumph – and by no coincidence, in the place he had won gold against that Cuban four years earlier.

Yet those close to the action had their doubts.

As Vic Ziegel noted, covering Duran for *Inside Sports* in the days leading up to the clash in Montreal, after the contracts were signed Leonard talked primarily about the money he would get, estimated at eight to ten million dollars. Duran talked about *winning*.

After a press conference, Arcel’s eyes and his gut told him that Leonard was afraid. Taking hold of Duran in a corridor just after, he impressed it upon him. “You won the fight *right there*,” he said. “The other guy was full of crap. He’s scared. As soon as he goes back to his room he’s going in the bathroom.”

Duran, elated at what he already had sensed himself, exchanged hand slaps with one of his handlers. In the parlance of a staredown, the other guy had just “blinked.”

Said Arcel of boxing shortly before the clash, “It’s the highest form of individualism there is. You’re in there all alone. You take a punch to the belly, you can’t say ‘*Time out!*’ You’ve got to be able to weather the

storm.” Would Leonard, even with his advantages in size and youth, be able to stand up under the body shots that were coming his way?

* * *

Tension preceding the bell was indescribable. Duran’s ill will toward Ray, still burning as that bell approached, was on display again when live satellite fans caught sight of the welterweight champion blowing a kiss to Felicidad, and Roberto, turn, extending a middle-finger salute to Mrs. Leonard.

Hard feeling radiated through the first round, Duran crazy in his effort to rip and bang and claw Ray’s sleek brown hide with everything he had. In the second round he had his first real success, when he reached Leonard with a right hand and then clocked him flush with a left on the chin, splaying his legs and sending him like a shoed cat into the ropes.

For the rest of that round and the next two, it was Duran after the suddenly gun-shy champion, mauling him on the ropes and dominating nearly every trade. In close, as it would be for much of the fight, each man was moving his hands, but Duran was landing the cleaner shots.

On it went, Ray regathering himself and scoring well in the fifth and sixth rounds, Duran accelerating in the next few. Down the stretch it continued to be close, Duran’s intensity never waning. In the 13th each man landed hard, and at the bell for the 14th Ray gestured as if to say that he had the upper hand, prompting Duran to beckon him to bring it on.



At the fight’s close, Leonard offered a sporting gesture, getting back a mean smack of Duran’s glove in return. Leonard looked relieved, Duran looked as if he had won. The scoring was initially announced as a majority win for Roberto, with a correction later to read unanimous. The challenger had scaled the mountain. He was also 72 – 1, having compiled much of it at an elite world level over the past eight years.

A Debacle in New Orleans, and a Slide Toward Oblivion

Early Greek drama sometimes gives us a central character, possessed on balance of good traits, yet brought down in the end by some fatal flaw. It might be a vulnerability, like the heel by which the infant Achilles was held when dipped (all the rest of him) in magical waters; or it might be a quality of character, such as a pride that has made him forget his mortal status.

Leonard’s camp, headed by Angelo Dundee, was aware of a key Duran weakness, namely his appetites. Stemming maybe from his own poverty as a child, they waxed wildly each time he was paid and let off the leash. Angelo now wanted the rematch within the year and got it, to his satisfaction, for November, five months after Montreal. It was enough time, he figured, for Roberto to eat and drink himself well over the 147-pound limit, and not a great deal more. He did not disappoint him.

The second fight, staged in New Orleans, bore a superficial resemblance to the first, but without the fire, especially from Duran, who rallied on occasion though he was getting edged on the cards. By the end of six rounds, he was shutting down. In the seventh, seemingly paralyzed on his feet, he became a straight man for Leonard, who at one point jabbed him twice, then wound up his right hand and popped him, in cartoon fashion, a third time with his left.

In the eighth, faring no better, he suddenly declared that he'd had enough. Roberto's exact words are a matter of debate – he apparently said that he would fight no more with this *pasayo* – clown – and refused to go further.

The phrase that took hold with the media was “*no mas*” – no more – two words that would dog him for decades after. Whatever exactly had happened – whether it was the stomach cramps he said had afflicted him in pre-fight hours or mere frustration at his inability to handle Ray – the fight was over. (Seeing the bee-line that Roberto made afterward, Freddie wondered if he had just needed to relieve himself.)



Eleta was outraged, leaving town without bothering to give Roberto and Felicidad plane tickets back to Panama. Arcel was heartbroken. Worst of all, Panama ceased to regard Duran as its own.

Refusing to go out on this note, Roberto trod on, scoring a couple of ten-round wins in the following year before getting a shot at Wilfred Benitez for a piece of the 154-pound title. This time it was thought he might benefit from a new regime, one that had been suggested by Duran's friend, Panamanian General Torrijos, shortly before Torrijos perished in a plane crash. Duran would train on the island of Coiba, off the Panama coast, where there existed little except a prison area for 350 inmates and enough sharks off-shore to discourage their escape.

Perhaps had the national leader still been around, the plan would have been better executed. But Roberto ended up living little better than the prisoners, being denied phone access and (owing to theft by the guards) eating like one of them as well.

He went the distance with Wilfred, faring well in spots but outworked most of the way. While it was not a shutout, Benitez had it on all three cards. After Roberto dropped a decision in September to veteran Kirkland Laing, scarcely a writer alive gave him a chance of doing anything meaningful in the ring again.

Uno Mas

In January of 1983, he faced veteran Mexican knockout artist Jose “Pipino” Cuevas in Los Angeles, in a fight that seemed to match two well-beaten rigs in a demolition that would spell the end for one or both.

Cuevas, like Duran, could hit with both hands and had a left hook that could knock down a wall. But he needed room to throw his shots, and Roberto, working with long-time friend and trainer Nestor Quinones, had an answer. From the opening bell, he worked in straight-up, orthodox fashion, sporting a left jab that took Cuevas out of his rhythm.

Nailing the Mexican fighter with jabs and straight right hands up the middle, working smartly on the inside, Duran was looking better than he had since the first fight with Leonard. In the fourth round he caught Pipino with a blazing right, and seconds later sent him sagging against the turn-buckle for an eight-count. Driving him again to the ropes, Duran hammered him down, and he was back on the winning track.



It was a first-rate performance, and good enough to get Roberto a shot at 154-pound champion Davey Moore.

A multi-year star of the New York Golden Gloves, Moore was now undefeated in twelve professional fights. Bold as brass, citing his numerical advantages – height, weight, age, ring mileage – he jumped at the chance to have his turn with a legend. What neither Davey nor many scribes factored into this estimate was motivation: When Duran wanted something bad enough, he generally got it. He wanted this.

Again it was June, and Roberto was challenging for a world title. They met on the 16th, Roberto's 32nd birthday, at the Garden, a fitting venue for each man, with Moore a 5 – 2 betting favorite.

From the opening bell, however, it was Duran's night. Visibly outsized, he turned the ring into a brutal classroom, slipping Moore's jab, riding neatly with his right hands, turning Davey, beating him to the punch, and placing shots downstairs that jolted the champion until his knees jerked.



Bleeding and open-mouthed by the end of the fourth round, his right eye closing, Moore became target practice. A one-two late in the seventh sent him backward and down against the ropes. With neither the referee nor Davey's corner willing to stop it, Duran pounded him again in the eighth, seemingly anxious to put an end to the fight, until several spectators were standing at ringside yelling for it to be stopped. Seconds later Duran was awash in the cheers of the Garden, weeping for joy, and soon to be welcomed back to his homeland.

Later Years

Another fight was now in the offing, one that would have been unthinkable a few years earlier. Marvin Hagler was the middleweight champion, a blue-collar specimen unlike Ray Leonard and more intimidating. Trained and managed by Pat and Goody Petronelli, he was not one to taunt a beaten fighter, as Leonard had done on his way up, and against Duran in New Orleans. His preference, as he worded it, was to “destruct and destroy” whatever lay in his path.

A righthander converted to southpaw, he had been avoided plenty on his way to the title. (The great Joe Frazier, when seeing young Marvin in a gym, once said to him, “Son, you’ve got three strikes against you – you’re *black*, you can *fight*, and you’re *left-handed*.”) After stopping Britain's Alan Minter to win the title, he tore through a string of hapless challengers. Still, he'd had moments of difficulty now and again. He dropped a couple of decisions to ring-wise fighters on his way up. An iron-tough Italian emigrant named Vito Antuofermo, who would not have backed off from Godzilla, had taken Marvin 15 rounds to a draw in their title fight four years earlier. He and Roberto signed for November.



Duran, Ray Arcel would say, was the one utterly *fearless* fighter he had ever seen. Despite the natural weight difference, Roberto was unintimidated by Hagler. He made a decent effort in the fight, rocking the champion with right hands (he would later say he had broken the hand hitting Marvin in the fifth round) in the early going and staying close on the cards even as Marvin began to gain control.

Thus Duran salvaged his dignity in this effort, but he met with disaster seven months later when he was persuaded to take a fight with WBC junior middleweight champion Thomas Hearns. While Hearns was not, all told, a better fighter than Hagler – the two of them would have a rousing go the following year – he was well over six feet tall and possessed of speed and terrific one-punch power. Now was his time.

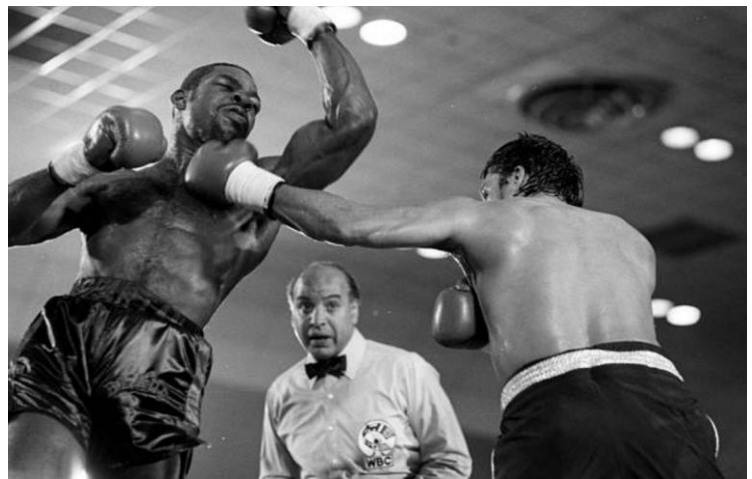


Several years earlier he had won a portion of the welterweight title when he put Pipino Cuevas face-down on the canvas with a crashing right hand. Duran now went down in the first round, and despite his effort to mount a rally in the second, took a shuddering right hand that dropped him, face-down likewise under a Las Vegas night sky.

* * *

And still he was not done. In June of 1988, a bull-strong, lumbering middleweight named Iran Barkley challenged Hearns for a portion of the middleweight title. Lacking finesse, prone to cut, Barkley got a boxing lesson for two rounds, then came out in the third going for broke. Hurt by repeated left hooks to the body, looking close to defeat, he unloaded from nowhere a haymaker on Hearns' jaw. Down went Thomas. Up and dazed, he took another right hand and sank through the ropes. The fight was over.

Once more, a new arrival on the throne wanted the name of Duran on his ledger. And again the pundits were selling Roberto short. Though he had met with disaster against Thomas, he figured to have a better chance with Iran, a slower and more accessible target even if it was at face value a mismatch.



If he had been outsized by Davey Moore, more so now, in February of 1989 by Barkley, a six-foot raw-boned Hercules who would fight as a heavyweight before he was done. Yet amazingly Duran plied the old magic, holding his own in the exchanges and providing a climactic moment in the 11th round with a thundering overhand right that sent Iran to the canvas. At the end of twelve, by a split decision, he had pulled an upset, and with it a piece of the middleweight title. Panama once more went wild.

* * *

One feature of Duran's makeup largely neglected by the press, as noted earlier, was his deep emotional capacity. He could be brought to tears, for example, at the sight of young folk, many of whom had been the object of his generosity, waving to him as he passed by in a ceremonial ride down the main avenues of his native city. In April he paid a visit to an old rival.

Despite his great promise, and his epic fights with Duran, Esteban DeJesus had fallen into heavy drug use after the 1978 bout – in time he had ended up being sentenced to life imprisonment for murder. Contracting drug-related AIDS in prison, he was now lying bedridden in a makeshift drug treatment facility as his life waned. When seeing his visitor, though barely able to speak, DeJesus looked happily upon him. The two shared heartfelt words of respect before Roberto departed, Esteban lasting only a few days after.



As to his career, the upset over Barkley had made him, for the second time, *The Ring* magazine's Comeback Fighter of the Year. It was also the last big win Roberto would see – in December, he and Leonard went 12 rounds, Ray winning it on points though cut nastily over each eye at the end. If the hard feeling of each man for the other was not extinguished, it seemed to be fading.

By now Duran had made tremendous money, yet it had never stayed with him, his own wants and his enormous generosity to friends, and even to strangers, turning him into a sieve where finance was concerned. As a result, he did not turn down a payday. In 1996, shortly after turning 45, he got himself into remarkably good shape and schooled fellow veteran Hector Camacho through twelve rounds though getting the short end of a decision. In the following year he split two fights with Argentine veteran Jorge Castro, and the year after, he suffered a three-round beating at the hands of upcoming middleweight William Joppy.

Roberto's one last shred of glory came in 2000 when he won a nominal title with a twelve-round decision of journeyman Pat Lawlor, against whom he had bowed out after six rounds with a sprained shoulder ten years earlier. They fought in Panama on June 16th, thus making it another birthday win, this time his 49th.

In August he won a ten-rounder against young prospect Patrick Goosen. A year later he and Camacho slogged through twelve rounds in a rematch, Hector winning.

* * *

Maybe Roberto would have gone on, however little his family wanted it, but on October 4, 2001, fate took a hand. Happy and comfortable at home, Duran was entreated by his son Chavo to fly to Buenos Aires to attend a musical promotion in which the younger Duran was involved. While the elder Duran had a bad feeling about it, they made the trip. Enjoying dinner and drinks after their flight landed, they were watching a nearby *futbol* game on the bar screen. Chavo now wanted to take in the second half at the stadium.

Another argument ensued, Roberto's son begging him to meet star player Ariel Ortega, and finally Roberto obliged. On the way, in the dark and in a hard rain, they were hit from behind by another car – each vehicle went skidding, with the relative good fortune to hit a barrier rather than oncoming traffic. The impact, however, was terrific, Roberto suffering a collapsed lung and multiple broken ribs. Early newscasts reported his death, giving him slight amusement as he watched, heavily medicated, from a hospital bed. In time, he would regain mobility, but he was done with the ring.

Manos de Piedra

In 2007, Roberto was inducted into the International Boxing Hall of Fame in Canastota, New York. In time, one more old rivalry softened when Sugar Ray inducted him in 2014 into the Hall of Fame in Nevada.

Duran has figured on numerous "all-time" lists in recent decades, reviewing the best lightweights, best fighters, best punchers, and so forth. By my own estimate, he ranks "pound for pound" (figuring him at 135 pounds) at or near the top of fighters I have seen in my lifetime, and as good as any of the men he met in the ring.

As to the motivation for his career, Duran would say shortly before the first fight with Leonard, “I got into boxing to learn it ... I didn’t enter the ring to get out of the gutter. Those are stories. I got into it because I liked it.” Now, with the odds favouring a younger champion, he wanted to show that he could do it.

* * *

“Andale!”

So much for debates, mind’s eye century ratings, and quantified punching estimates.

When I think of Duran, I think more than anything of June 20th, 1980.

There are advantages to seeing a fight live; advantages likewise, to seeing it in your home. The old closed-circuit telecasts, carried in theaters and colosseums around the country, had their own peculiar thrill.

Richard and I had been housemates a few years earlier, two guys with humble origins sharing a comically crowded basement in a three-storey structure a few blocks north of the University of Washington. Now, this June evening, we were on the edge of our seats in a downtown Seattle movie house to see a Panamanian madman challenge Sugar Ray Leonard.

Roberto, by now, in some unvarnished way, had grown on me. Maybe it was the haphazard way he had come up, ducking no one, and now his long-shot status, moving north a whole division to take on the prettiest fighter in the world.

There is a scene in the movie *61**, celebrating that bright summer when veteran Mickey Mantle and comparative upstart Roger Maris were chasing a home run record set 34 years earlier by Babe Ruth. Late in the season, a cynical writer wonders why Mantle, long scorned by New York fans, suddenly has all of Yankee Stadium on its feet and cheering when he steps to the plate.

Replies his colleague, “He’s never been the underdog before.”

Here on the screen, the fighters soon to make their walk, sat Roberto and Felicidad. It was the first time, someone said, she had been with him just before a fight. Something in this man now seemed to me heroic.

Richard, an acutely perceptive, cheerily good-natured Chicano from Albuquerque, was not a huge fight fan, but in recent days he had absorbed Duran contagion from me. Added to which, he felt some kinship with a Latino who was bucking the odds on a media-crafted stage that seemed designed for his downfall. True, as Americans, maybe we should have favored the elegant kid from Palmer Park, Maryland. But as the two fighters collided in that ring, we found ourselves pulling for the one who was forcing the action.

There was a special feel to those great dark caverns, where action exploded off a big screen in a revelation that was thundering and terrible. When Duran caught Ray with that left hand in the second round, we yelled ourselves hoarse. As he continued his assault we yelled more, Richard delivering war cries in each language. By the fifth round we scarcely had voices left, but this invader who had appalled me eight years ago was now my favorite fighter in all the world.

He wanted to win this fight more than he had ever wanted anything in his career. He wanted to win it to show that he was the best. At the end of 15 rounds, in Montreal and in Seattle, he had done it.

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