

NARDICO VS. NORKUS I: CALL IT A CULT CLASSIC

By Roger Zotti

Former Marine Danny Nardico was a good, crowd pleasing light heavyweight, one of those fighters who never seemed to take a backward step, and his battle against equally tough Charley Norkus of Jersey City, on January 20, 1954, at Miami Beach's City Auditorium, is rightly considered a cult classic.

Entering the ring a five-to-one favorite, Nardico was looking forward to fighting heavyweight champion Rocky Marciano. Another former Marine named Charley Norkus was, however, standing in his way.

For the meager crowd of 2,535 in attendance at the City Auditorium in Miami Beach, it was a night to remember, and that's putting it mildly. Nardico was on the canvas six times and Norkus, who outweighed him by eighteen pounds, was decked two times. After Nardico went down in round nine, referee Johnny Peerless stopped the fight.

In Nardico's return bout against Norkus, two months later, he lost a unanimous decision.

During his career from 1949 to 1956, Nardico compiled a 50-13-4 record. Thirty-four of his wins were by KO, and he was halted 4 times.



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Nardico's best punch was a left hook, and it dropped Jake LaMotta in the seventh round of their December 31, 1952, fight at the Coral Gables Coliseum in Florida. It marked the first time in his long career LaMotta had been knocked down.

He battered LaMotta savagely after the knockdown and his handlers refused to allow the former middleweight champion to come out for the eighth round. No mention of the knockdown was made in Martin Scorsese's movie *Raging Bull* (1980), which earned Robert De Niro, playing LaMotta, an Oscar for Best Actor.

As an eighteen-year-old Marine, he was a squad leader and saw action on Okinawa Shima, Ryukyu Island. More important than his boxing career (1949-1956) was being awarded two Purple Hearts and a Silver Star.



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Had Nardico defeated Norkus and gone on to fight Marciano, I'm pretty certain he would've been stopped early, because his strategy of coming forward fearlessly and slugging it out was the only way he knew how to fight. Opponents who fought Marciano that way didn't survive.

Light-heavyweights, even the good ones, usually don't have success against good heavyweights. Consider what happened to one of the best light-heavyweights of the 1950s, Harry "Kid" Matthews, when he fought Rocky Marciano. A genuine light-heavyweight unaccustomed to fighting heavyweights, Matthews, when he fought fighters in his own weight class, was practically unbeatable, compiling an 81-3-5 record, with 61 knockouts. A splendid boxer-puncher, he was a pleasure to watch. Among the fighters he had defeated were Irish Bob Murphy, Lloyd Marshall, and Nardico.

(Matthews's decision over Nardico, in 1951, was his 66th consecutive victory.)

In 1952 Matthews fought Marciano at Yankee Stadium, with the winner in line to fight heavyweight champion Jersey Joe Walcott. Weighing 182 to Marciano's 187, Matthews won the first round with his precise counterpunching.

In round two Marciano, undefeated in 40 fights, found the range. In his book about Marciano, *Unbeaten: Fight for Perfection in a Crooked World*, Mike Stanton writes: "Chasing Matthews across the ring, Rocky hit him with a left jab, then two left hooks that 'damn near took his head off,' [Matthews's trainer George] Chemeres recalled." It was the second hook that landed "flush on the jaw, [and] knocked



[Matthews] down 'like a limp rag,' one writer said." As he struggled to get up, he fell back over the lower ring rope as referee Ray Miller counted him out.

After the loss to Marciano, Matthews fought thirteen times, winning nine, losing three, and fighting one draw. Among his victims were Ted Lowry, Don Cockell, and Ezzard Charles, all well past their best fighting days. Put plainly, after the loss to Marciano, Matthews wasn't nearly the fighter he had been.

A regular contributor to the *IBRO Journal*, Roger Zotti has written two books about boxing, *Friday Night World* and *The Proper Pugilist*. His latest book is titled *Looking for Al: Diverse Writings for the Curious*. Contact him at rogerzotti@aol.com for more information about his writings.