

Tony Canzoneri Forgotten Great From The Golden Age Of Boxing

by Bobby Franklin



Tony (left) squares off with Barney Ross

I recently did a search on the internet to see what I could learn about the great three title holder Tony Canzoneri. I was quite amazed to see that very little has been written about this man who ranks among the greatest fighters of all time. There is some footage of him on YouTube and quite a few photographs but not much more.

In 2012 boxing historian Mike Casey wrote a fine tribute about Canzoneri that gave a lot of insight into this interesting man who died at the age of 51. Mike's well researched piece is definitely worth reading.

Tony Canzoneri, who looked like a cross between Babe Ruth and Edward G. Robinson, was born in Slidell, Louisiana on November 6, 1908. From an early age he wanted to be a boxer and began an amateur career while living there. As a kid he met the great bantamweight champ Kid Herman, and was fascinated by the old boxer. When he was 14 he and his family moved to New York. It was there that Tony really got down to the business of perfecting his craft.

Canzoneri was a great observer and would watch other fighters and learn from them. He developed his own unique style. Benny Leonard said of Tony that he had a style that could not be copied as it only worked for him, but it made him a great fighter.

Tony went on to win world titles in the lightweight and junior welterweight divisions. He was the NBA featherweight champion. During his career he fought 18 world champions and 6 hall of famers. He fought some of the greatest fighters of

all time including Kid Chocolate, Barney Ross, Lou Ambers, Jimmy McLarnin, Billy Petrolle, Jackie Kid Berg, Benny Bass, Al Singer, and Bud Taylor.

In a career spanning 175 fights he was only stopped once, and that was in his last fight when he took on Al Bummy Davis. Considering the opposition he faced, that was a remarkable feat. In fact, his record is awe inspiring. He had 137 wins against just 24 losses with 10 draws.

Tony was a tremendous puncher and a great counter puncher. He carried his left hand low in a usually successful ploy to set up his right hand. His jab was powerful. He was a very hard puncher. One example of his power was when he kayoed Kid Chocolate in the 2nd round in 1933. It was the first time the Kid had been kayoed in 100 fights, and only one of two times the great Cuban champion had been stopped in 152 bouts.



Canzoneri kayoes Kid Chocolate

Today's fight fans would probably look at Tony's record and say he couldn't have been much of a puncher because knock-outs only accounted for 44 of his 137 wins. What they don't understand is the opposition he was up against. The great fighters of that day were next to impossible to kayo.



Canzoneri vs Lou Ambers

You had opponents of Canzoneri such as Kid Chocolate who was only stopped twice in 152 fights, Jimmy McLarnin lost only one fight by stoppage out of 69. There was Lou Ambers, stopped only twice out of 104 fights, and Barney Ross who never lost by stoppage in 79 fights. Benny Bass went through a career consisting of 195 fights and was only stopped twice.

In that era having a big punch wasn't enough. You had to know how to box. The great fighters all had great defensive skills, were extremely experienced, and knew how to survive when hurt. In fact, many of them were more dangerous when they were hurt.

I am a great admirer of Roberto Duran and have called him the last of the old school fighters, but I would argue that Tony Canzoneri was as hard, if not a harder puncher than the great Panamanian. If Duran had faced similar opposition his knock out percentage would be much lower.

Canzoneri is exciting to watch in action. His fights against Jimmy McLarnin and Lou Ambers which are on YouTube are amazing to watch. Studying these great fighters really forces you to put things into perspective when comparing boxers from the different eras. The subtle moves, the ring savviness, the footwork they exhibit is something to behold.



Tony lands a left hook on Jimmy McLarnin

As Benny Leonard observed, Canzoneri had a very unique style. He could do it all in there.

In 1939, after fighting for 14 years, Tony hung up the gloves. A string of bad investments and high living left him broke after a few years, but he remained popular with the public and loved talking boxing with his fans.

Did he have any regrets? In Mike Casey's article he quotes the Champ as saying, "I often wonder whether it was worth it. But I don't have to wait long for the answer. Every day strangers stop me in the street and say, 'Aren't you Tony Canzoneri?' Lots of times, little kids who weren't even a gleam in their father's eye when I was fighting, ask for autographs or just to shake my hand. It's a wonderful feeling to be remembered after all these years. Sure it was worth it, every drop of blood and every stitch of it. I wouldn't have it any other way."

It's sad to think how few people recognize his name today.

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