

THE CUBAN BOMBER

By Enrique Encinosa

In boxing, which is a business based on bullshit excuses, Frankie Otero has carved a reputation as an honest man. Frankie always tells the truth, which is one of the endearing qualities that made him a local hero in Miami during the late sixties and early seventies.

There was an interview after the first bout against Ken Buchanan, which Frankie lost on points, when a reporter thrust a microphone in front of the Cuban lightweight.

"Do you think you were robbed?" the reporter asked.

"No, He beat me fair and square. He's a terrific fighter."

"How about the knockdown?" the reporter insisted, "It looked like a slip to me..."

"Oh, no," Frankie interjected, "it was a clean shot. He hurt me. It took some effort to get up. As a matter of fact, I usually fight better after I get knocked down. Maybe I should be knocked down early every time I fight."



Photo courtesy of BoxRec

The Otero honesty and humor, combined with a mop of curly dark hair, a pleasant smile and an elegant, flashy style, made the Cuban exile a popular drawing card in Miami Beach arenas.

The record books will tell you Otero had sixty pro fights. His 49-9-2 record includes 31 knockout victories and 4 defeats by the quick route. He was ranked number one in the world in his division, was an NABF junior lightweight titleholder, fought on network television, and scored wins over Love Allotey, Kenny Weldon, Bill Whittenburg, Felix Figueroa and Jimmy Trosclair. He lost to Ken Buchanan, Alfredo Escalera, Vilomar Fernandez, and Jose Petersen.

In his sixth pro fight he faced Willie Sands in Key West. There was no Florida boxing commission at the time and the local appointed officials were inept. In the dressing room, a corner man started wrapping Frankie's hands with a roll of electrical tape.

"What are you doing?" Frankie asked.

"No inspector here to supervise this," the corner man answered, "so with this, you will hit like you have bricks in your hands."

"Wow," Frankie answered with his usual wit, "You better run to Sand's dressing room. I wonder what they are taping him with..."

Otero was one of Chris Dundee's most popular fighters, packing small arenas in South Florida. When he broke into the ratings, back in the days when the world had less than a dozen champions, Chris Dundee rushed into the gym to tell his fighter the good news.

"So," Frankie answered, "Does that mean I have to fight really tough guys from now on?"

Hank Kaplan, the world's top boxing historian, saw almost every one of Otero's fights, from prelims to the top crust.

"Frankie was a tiger," Hank recalls, "When they knocked him down he got up and fought back hard. He had a lot of talent, boxed well, was quick, avoided punches, could fight inside and he had heart. Frankie fought some real tough guys, like Buchanan, Escalera, Jose Luis Lopez, Kenny Weldon and Victor Ortiz. The fans loved Frankie."

In his first year fighting main events, Otero twice beat a tough New Orleans lightweight named Jimmy Trosclair, a former Southern US Golden Gloves champion.

"The first time I saw Trosclair, I was impressed," Otero remembers, "The guy had a rosary tattooed around his neck. He looked tough. I remember thinking -what the hell are you doing in this ring, Frankie? You are a middle class college kid from a good family and you are going to fight this guy with a rosary tattooed on his neck? You should be playing golf. I beat Trosclair twice, outpointing him both times."

"Bill Whittenburg was another very tough guy. He had been a pretty good amateur winning a bunch of regional titles but as a pro he had a lousy record because he had fought a lot of tough guys and champions in their hometowns on short notice... He had lost to world champions Pedro Carrasco and Bruno Arcari and to top contenders like Sammy Goss and Edwin Viruet and to Bruno Arcari in Italy... Whittenburg was strong as a bull. If he had been properly managed and promoted he would have done very well....He knocked me down but I got up and won the fight. Sometimes I fought better after I was tagged. It woke me up. I hit him a lot of good shots and I won but it was one of my hardest fights."

"My biggest win was over Kenny Weldon who had won 24 of his 28 fights and I beat him for the NABF title. He was a good fighter but I had more speed and power than he did and I won on all three scorecards...Kenny is a very nice guy and has become a good boxing trainer..."

"Another huge win for me was my victory over Love Allotey. He was a strong, muscular African who had held the British Commonwealth Lightweight title and had fought for the world title. He had been in the rankings for nine years and had fought everyone. I caught him at the end of his career but he was still strong and dangerous."

"Ken Buchanan was very strong and a great champion. I was a junior lightweight and he was a lightweight with lots of upper body strength. The first fight was close. I made him miss a lot and tagged him some nice shots in the first five rounds, but he won it on the second half. In the rematch he stopped me in six. I just didn't have it that night."

Dr. Ferdie Pacheco who was in Frankie's corner from beginning to end, remembers an incident from the first Buchanan fight.

"Going into the last round," the fight doctor stated, "I emptied the ice bag inside Frankie's cup, to cool him down. He went rigid, his eyes opened in surprise and he said- Now, Doc, was that absolutely necessary?"

"I had a great team," Frankie remembers, "Richie Riesgo was my trainer, and Pacheco and Luis Sarria worked my corners. Chris Dundee was my promoter. I trained at the Fifth Street Gym and I sparred with champions like Luis Rodriguez."

One afternoon a young fighter from Panama named Roberto Duran showed up at the Fifth Street Gym. Chris Dundee attempted to match Duran and Otero in a main event.

"Chris and I were watching Duran spar with Vinnie Curto who was a top middleweight with an iron chin. Chris was telling me -I'll make this match. You can take this Duran guy- Just as Chris finishes saying this, Duran drops Curto. Now understand this, no one dropped Curto, not even top ten middleweights. He had a chin like reinforced concrete. And Duran, who was a lean, little lightweight put him down with one shot, with sparring gloves. I looked at Chris and he shrugged.-You fight him, Chris.-I said. Roberto and I became friends, but we never fought."

After retiring from boxing, Otero earned a living as a real estate broker and residential appraiser. He owns a three bedroom townhouse and a couple of investment properties. Nancy, his lovely wife, works at Miami International Airport. He did return to the ring, winning a couple of prelims before realizing that age had dimmed his reflexes ending his career with a 49-9-2 record that included 31 KO wins.

The boxing bug remained in Frankie's blood. Besides his real estate, Otero became a matchmaker for promoter Walter Alvarez, trainer and part manager of a couple of fighters and occasional road traveling corner man. Frankie has worked corners in Brazil, the Bahamas and Europe. He has even bumped into fans who remember his glory days.

"I was in London, at the Thomas A'Beckett pub and gym and the promoter tells me - Hey, we have a celebrity here today, a movie star-... and suddenly this guy enters the room, looks at me and says -Hey, it's Frankie Otero, how are you doing?... I look and I don't know who the hell he is, but he's happy to see me... -Frankie-he says -it's me, Phil, from the Fifth Street Gym. Don't you remember me?.. I look at him and I remember this young amateur that was one of my biggest fans, used to follow me around the gym...I say hello to Phil, and I'm wondering what he's doing in London, and the promoter turns

to me and says -I didn't know you are a friend of Mickey Rourke.... I just stood there, nodding my head. So Phil became a movie star. Go figure."

Otero's only regret is not having fought for a world title, although he was ranked number one in his division for a year.

"Negotiations fell through," he says, shaking his head, "Back then there was only one world champion. Today with all the alphabet soup groups, I would have been a champion. Still, there's something to be said. I did very well at a time when there were some good fighters punching around."

Amen.

Epitaph

Frankie Otero passed away on December 18, 2020, from bone cancer at the age of 72. After hanging up the boxing gloves, he was a matchmaker for promoter Walter Alvarez and was also involved in the training of several local Miami fighters, being inducted into the Florida Boxing Hall of Fame. He had a career as a real estate appraiser and broker, was happily married, father of one son and had three grandchildren.

May he rest in Peace!

Enrique Encinosa,
December 19, 2020



Photo courtesy of DS Cogswell

Article courtesy of Enrique Encinosa from his book Hard Leather: A History of Cuban Boxing available from Amazon.Com.