

R.I.P. Carlos Ortiz, Former Lightweight Champion and Hall of Fame Inductee

By Arne K. Lang (The Sweet Science, June 14, 2022)

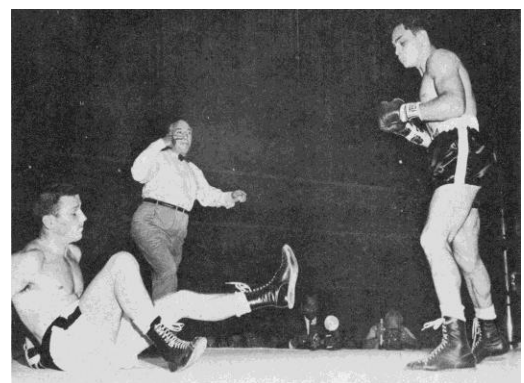
The day after the International Boxing Hall of Fame wrapped up its annual festivities, one of its honored members, Carlos Ortiz, passed away at age 85. Named to the Hall in 1991 with its second class of inductees, Ortiz was a two-division title-holder, winning belts at 140 and 135 in that order.



Ortiz was born in Ponce, Puerto Rico. At the age of nine, he moved with his parents to New York. The Ortiz's found shelter on the Lower East Side before moving uptown to the Bronx. In a conversation with LA times writer Frank Finch, Ortiz reflected on his earliest days in New York: "There were mostly Irish and Italian kids there when we arrived. The Puerto Ricans were just starting to move in. I couldn't go to school or even the corner candy store without getting beat up by the other kids."

Some of those Irish kids that beat him up likely became his comrades when he joined the Army National Guard. He was assigned to the 69th Infantry Regiment. This was New York's famous "Fightin' 69th," an entity whose ranks were historically Irish. Having a Puerto Rican on the squad was rather unusual and his companions made him an honorary Irishman, dubbing him Charlie O'Brien.

Ortiz won five regional amateur tournaments before turning pro at age 18. He developed an avid following at St. Nicholas Arena where he had his first 10-round fight and then expanded his fan base in California he was briefly a headliner at Hollywood Legion Stadium.



Ortiz drops Lane in the 2nd round

Ortiz won his first title on June 12, 1959, when he stopped Muskegon, Michigan cutie Kenny Lane who was forced to retire after two rounds with a severe cut over his left eye. They had met the previous year in Miami Beach with Lane winning a

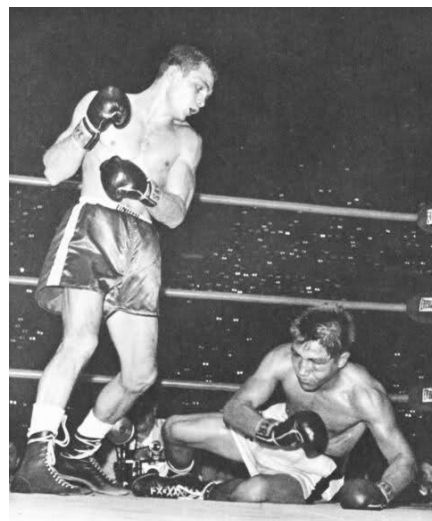
narrow decision.

The Ortiz-Lane fight revived a division that had been dormant since 1946. Ortiz made two successful defenses of the belt before losing it to three-time rival Duilio Loi on Loi's turf in Milan.

His second defense, against Mexico's "Boy Assassin" Jose "Battling" Torres was historic. Staged on Feb. 4, 1960 at the Los Angeles Coliseum where it was paired with a bantamweight title fight between Jose Becerra and Alphonse Halimi, the event set California records for attendance (31,830) and gate receipts.

Battling Torres was 31-0 going in but he was too green for Ortiz who stopped him in the 10th round.

Ortiz stalked lightweight champion Joe "Old Bones" Brown throughout his 140-pound title reign. He finally caught up with him on April 21, 1962 at the Las Vegas Convention Center. Brown was making his 12th title defense, a division record. In a mild upset, Ortiz won a wide 15-round decision. Back in his dressing room, he called it his easiest fight.



Ortiz drops Torres shortly before stoppage

Ortiz had two reigns as the world lightweight champion. The first ended when he lost a narrow decision to Panama's Ismael Laguna in Panama City and the second reign started when he turned the tables on Laguna in the rematch at San Juan. They would meet a third time, that coming on Aug. 16, 1967 at Shea Stadium in Queens, home of the Mets.

An interesting prelude to this fight was a mock sparring session between Ortiz and New York City's mayor, John V. Lindsay. The friendly set-to, held on 112th Street in the heart of Spanish Harlem, was designed to cool tensions. The area had erupted in a full-blown riot earlier that summer following the fatal shooting of a knife-wielding Puerto Rican by an off-duty policeman.

Authorities feared the worst, but the gathering at Shea Stadium was peaceful. It helped that Ortiz dominated Laguna once again, winning a comfortable 15-round decision.

Ortiz lost the belt the following year, succumbing on a split decision to late bloomer Carlos Teo Cruz in Santo Domingo, DR. He had 11 more fights, winning the first ten

before meeting his Waterloo at the hands of the great Scotch fighter Ken Buchanan in Madison Square Garden.

By his own admission, Ortiz didn't train properly, having lost his enthusiasm when his original opponent Roberto Duran took ill and backed out. He retired on his stool after six rounds and announced his retirement before leaving the arena. A man of his word, he never fought again.

According to boxing historian and author Jose Corpas, when Ortiz was flush, he owned the biggest and grandest nightclub in the Bronx. In 1982, he was discovered driving a cab. In the interim he went through a difficult divorce and developed a drinking problem that he eventually conquered.

At the induction ceremony for the 1991 class, Ortiz struck those in attendance as the happiest person to be there and he delivered a heartwarming speech in which he thanked his former opponents – specifically mentioning Duilio Loi, Joe Brown, and Ismael Laguna – for bringing out the best in him. And like many Hall of Famers, he would return in subsequent years. He was there with his second wife in 2011 when his old friend Joe Cortez, the famous referee, was formally enshrined in the non-participant category. Their paths had first crossed many years earlier at Bobby Gleason's gym in the Bronx. Ortiz was already a champion; Cortez (pictured below on the left with Ortiz) was still an amateur.

Carlos Ortiz was the first Puerto Rican boxer elected to the IBHOF. He would be joined in the Canastota shrine by Wilfredo Gomez, Wilfred Benitez, Edwin Rosario, Felix Trinidad, Hector Camacho, Miguel Cotto, and old-timers Sixto Escobar and Pedro Montanez.

Ortiz finished with a 61-7-1 record that included an 11-2 mark in lineal title fights. He was stopped only once, that by Buchanan in his farewell fight. At the time of his death, he was the second-oldest former champion behind only the great Brazilian fighter Eder Jofre who was also born in 1936.

We here at The Sweet Science send our condolences to Carlos Ortiz's friends and loved ones. May he rest in peace.



Arne K. Lang's latest book, titled "George Dixon, Terry McGovern and the Culture of Boxing in America, 1890-1910," will shortly roll off the press at McFarland's. The book may be pre-ordered direct from the publisher or via Amazon.