MAURO MINA: THE CHAMPION WITHOUT A CROWN

by James Dusgate

I HAD BEEN PLANNING MY TRIP TO PERU for several months. It was to be a mixture of business and pleasure, part of the "pleasure" being to look up old acquaintance Mauro Mina, world famous 25 years ago and the best boxer ever to have come out of that part of the world.

As we stepped off the plane, the familiar dry, salty air hit us full in the face. Lima is a unique place: a port city of five million where it never rains, surrounded on three sides by desert. It's always dusty and there are almost no trees or greenery, and, consequently, few birds or visible animal life.

I had first visited Peru in 1978, before the start of the terrible wave of violence which grips the country today. Besides Lima I visited Iquitos in the Amazonian jungle, where after a week's stay I all but melted in the heat and humidity. I soon flew south to Pucalpa and hitchhiked on to Tingo María in the desert. Then little more than a village, it has since become a modern — and expensive — town built on cocaine money. I continued hitchhiking — on to Huanuco and back to Lima — not so much to save money as to meet people. I then installed myself in a comfortable apartment in Miraflores, the Knightsbridge of Lima, with its plush stores, a world away from the horrific poverty of the slums. (As it never rains, the houses don't even have roofs). At the sidewalk cafés I spent hours watching the well-built exotic-looking girls parading up and down. One told me she had twice broken her

Peru's Mauro Mina as he looked during his days as the leading contender for the light heavyweight title.

ankle, and I sympathized — it was clearly a problem of logistical support.

But to return to the present: after a few hours' kip I made my jetlagged way to Mauro Mina's gym in the smart San Isidro district, one of Lima's most elegant. I had met the Chincha bomber during that first visit and have spent many an hour since jawing with him about boxing. My wife and I even named our Peruvian-born daughter Sofía after Mauro's wife.

The former Latin American light heavyweight champion is still an idol in his native country and considered the "campeón sincorona," or "champion without a crown." This was the man who beat No. 1 contender Eddie Cotton twice and subsequent champion Bob Foster, but also the man the champions of the time shied away from. Then, at the peak of his powers, an eye injury caused (deliberately, many would say) by a non-ranking opponent put a premature end to his career and any hope of a world title. To his credit, Mauro is the same unpretentious, almost shy, country boy he was when he started out 30 years ago.

As my taxi cut through the city's heart, I noticed the place looking as drab — and as dangerous — as ever. Pairs of heavily armed policemen were to be seen everywhere. The night-time curfew had been suspended, but could be reimposed at any time. Peru is a country which has lived for years with the kind of upheavals similar to those which are now tearing Panama and Colombia apart. The general populace are always sad-faced and the rich live paralyzed by fear of being kidnapped.

It was a relief to find the friendly, but unassuming, Mauro working out with some young hopefuls in his gym, Los Paujiles. He owns the building which houses the gym, the rent from the 20 or so apartments giving him a financial stability he could only have dreamed of as a poor black orphan from the provinces.

On the wall near the entrance I read over a recent newspaper clipping. It described how Freddy Chumpitaz, one of Mauro's boys, had left the gym for a jog and, spotting something resembling a radio, he had bent down to pick it up. His curiosity was almost the end of him as the artifact blew up in his face, making a hole in his hand that will keep him out of boxing for six months. Such is life in South America's Belfast.

I invited Mauro out for lunch and our meal turned into an interview. He started out by telling me about his early life: "I come from Chincha, a province near the coast, about 200 kilometers south of Lima. It's a friendly, lively place with lots of 'chacres' (small family subsistence farms). My mother died when I was a baby and my father when I was eight, so my grandmother took care of me. I started school at nine and later worked at the slaughterhouse killing cows. I automatically got to eat meat, which helped make my body strong."

Chincha is a colorful place. The mostly black population must take the credit for that, giving it an atmosphere quite different from most of Peru. Famed for its music (the exuberant "valse"), fine horses and fighting cocks, I would add the luscious dark-skinned girls whose sensuous bodies seem to have mastered the art of perpetual motion.

"I always liked boxing," continued Mauro, "and at 16 came to Lima as an amateur. (His grandfather pined away and died shortly after). Starting in 1951, I had more than 300 amateur fights, winning most by KO. That was how I got to know Terán (Peru's Mr. Boxing who became Mauro's mentor). There was a tremendous amount of good boxing in Peru then. Many Panamanians came here regularly." (Including Joe de León, who later trained Mina. Now 80, de León still lives in Lima, but is seriously ill.)

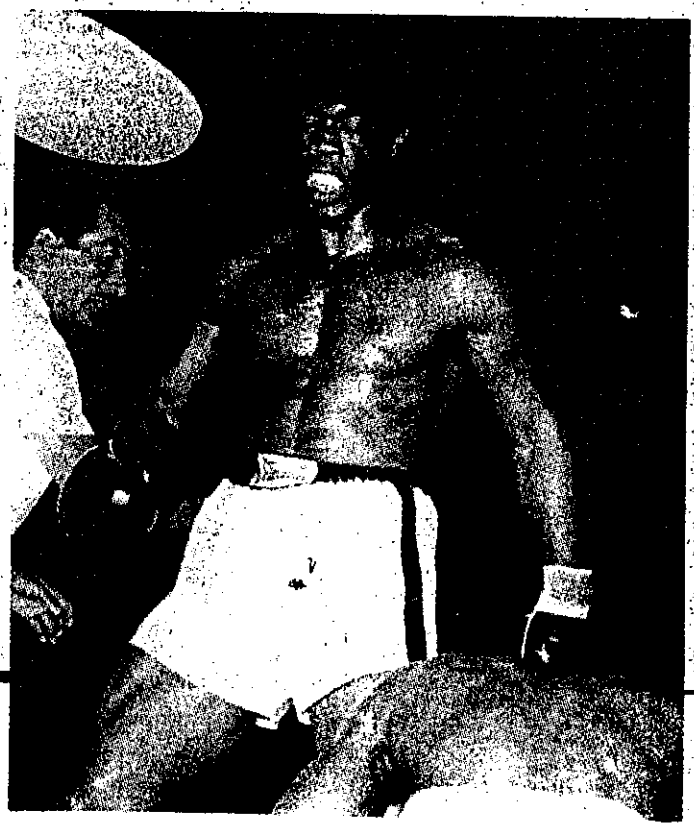
Terán wasn't alone in seeing the potential in Mina. Top local promoter Max Aguirre also got involved in grooming him for world-class fights and an American ITT executive stationed in Peru, Sosthenes Behn II, fixed him up with a job with the phone company. Once he became famous, Mauro was employed as a public relations representative of the company and continued to be close friends with Behn before the latter was transferred to Portugal.

Turning pro in 1955 the taciturn Chinchano let his fists do the talking for him. He swiftly rose through the ranks to earn a big reputation on merit alone.

In 1958 an inexperienced Mauro went to Montevideo, Uruguay and was beaten on points by local boy Dagomar Martínez for the South American light heavyweight title. Prior to this, Dagomar had had a tough duel with Archie Moore at Luna Park, Buenos Aires, South America's equivalent of Madison Square Garden.

In spite of this loss, Mauro was fast becoming news in the U.S. and top fight agent Dewey Fragetta began sending a string of Americans down to Lima to tangle with the Peruvian. Some were ordinary, others very good, but Mina stopped the lot.

We returned to the gym where Mauro showed me his scrapbooks with the cuttings of all his great fights, and also the moment when his career was



Mina drops American Floyd McCoy en route to an eight-round kayo in Lima, Peru, May 19, 1964.

brought to a tragically premature conclusion. He also possesses films of some of his greatest triumphs which I have watched with him on previous visits, such as the two sensational encounters with Eddie Cotton.

I made a comment to Mauro about the Carlos Monzón scandal which, around the time of my visit, was still hot news. (Back in Panama I had attended the first national boxing convention at which over an hour was wasted lamenting the fate of the former champion).

My mind had connected the story with a current Peruvian scandal involving one Dr. Poggi. I had read the gory details over breakfast (the Lima tabloids are as gross as any in the world). Some time before Lima had witnessed a spate of brutal murders in the mold of London's Jack the Ripper. Eventually the killer was apprehended and Peru's equivalent of Scotland Yard (known by its initials the PIP) hired the renowned Dr. Poggi to treat the psychopath. After a couple of visits the expert physician emerged from his patient's cell declaring to the guards that his work was finished. When the guards entered the cell they found the murderer dead — strangled with the doctor's belt. Now in custody, the doctor insists that his victim was beyond redemption and that he (Poggi) has rid society of a great evil. Reading over the story I wondered whether Poggi could be the man to take on Monzón.

Mina working with young prospects at his gym in Lima.

Mina as he looks today, 23 years after his last bout.

But back to Mauro Mina: In 1960 — on March 15, to be precise — Mauro took on Latin American light heavyweight champion Sugar Boy Nando — and beat him. On June 16 he fought the "Bull from San Juan," Argentine heavyweight champ Gregorio Peralta, whom he stopped in eight. It is worth remembering that Peralta later conquered future world light heavyweight champion Willie Pastrano, whom Mauro *should* have fought for the title had his tragic injury not prevented him.

The next two years saw Mauro's greatest victories and paydays, though these were quite modest by modern standards. Probably the best remembered by Latin fight fans were the two run-ins with Cotton. Seattle's "Black Panther" was No. 1 contender at the time, but Mina won both fights convincingly on points. Thirty thousand at-

ended the first and 40,000 the second
it Lima's National Stadium, such was
he passion for Peru's supreme sport-
ng idol. The local hero received only
bout $1,000, while Cotton, as the
foreigner," was paid $5,000. The first
luel was over 10 rounds, the second
ver 12.

"Eddie was a beautiful technician, a
recise, if not hard puncher," Mauro
old me. "He placed punches meticul-
usly." One expert has said that Cotton
who might himself have been champ)
oiled in the shadows of two great
hampions: Moore and Harold
ohnson. Mina went one better and had
o toil (unsuccessfully) under three —
loore and Johnson plus Pastrano —
ith the fatal disadvantage of being a
atin from outside the U.S.

Apart from Cotton, the Peruvian's
est performances were against the ex-
raordinary Foster, who Mina put
own for a disputed eight-count and
eat on points, Leslie Smith (who had
efeated Cassius Clay as an amateur),
ie awesome Von Clay (KO'd in six),
esse Bowdry and Henry Hank.

Hank, the top-rated middle from De-
oit, had never lost to a light heavy-
eight until he met Mauro. The fight
as one of the highlights of Mauro's
areer and he had the promise of a
not at the world title if he could get
ast Hank. So he had every incentive
s he stepped into the ring at Madison
quare Garden, November 4, 1962.

"Against Hank I earned $8,000, my
ighest purse," remembered Mauro.

That night he took New York by
orm and hardly had he left the ring
efore Terán and Aguirre were
egotiating a possible confrontation
ith Johnson. But it was hard —
not impossible — for Latin Amer-
an boxers to get a world title chance
i those days. The sport was totally
ontrolled by Americans who weren't
nterested in seeing non-Americans be-
ome world champions. To keep in
hape, Mina next took on Cuban Lino
ondón, the man who was to almost
ob him of an eye and — worse still
r the Chincha Bomber — of a shot
the world crown.

There are people who still insist they
aw Rondón poke his thumb into
auro's eye before he was eventually
O'd. The damage was hushed up and
ina underwent surgery for a detached
tina of the left eye in February 1963.
our months later he traveled to the
.S. where he passed a medical inspec-
tion but also attended the fight in Las Vegas where Johnson lost his crown to Pastrano. The new champ showed no enthusiasm for a defense against Mina. In an outing to test himself in February, 1964, Mauro drew with Allan Thomas in Lima, but his title chances were ebbing away.

On February 9, 1965, Mauro tangled with Bobby Stinninato, a black American with an Italian name. Stinninato hoped to repeat his great performance against South Africa's Mike Holt. In a tough bout Mauro won a unanimous points verdict. His last fight was against Italian Pietro del Papa that same year. Early in 1966 Mauro finally accepted the inevitable and retired. He was universally acclaimed by his countrymen as the "world champion who never wore the crown."

Many Peruvian fight fans believe the champions of the day deliberately avoided Mina, and when at last it did seem that Johnson would give him a chance (he was almost obliged to by Mauro's record), fate cruelly intervened with the eye injury. It is my own humble opinion that Mina could have beaten Moore (nearing 40), Johnson or Pastrano. Worth mentioning are *The Ring*'s recent ratings which made Moore easily the best-ever light heavy. Johnson was the sixth, with Pastrano in the No. 23 spot — and of course the great Bob Foster, himself a Mina victim, is rated No. 4!

But Mauro himself will never be heard to utter a word of criticism against anyone. He is too much of a gentleman and a supreme ambassador for the sport in his own country. Young hopefuls flock to his gym (he is a registered trainer with the Peruvian Boxing Federation), where he works full-time. They all shake his hand before leaving at the end of the day.

"I not only teach them boxing, but also how to behave — that's very important," Mauro told me. In all the years I've known him I've never heard a bad word said against him, nor has he ever uttered a word of bitterness about the quirk of fate (or twist of a thumb) which put an end to his career and his aspirations of a world crown.

The next day Mina offered to give me a tour of the Lima slums — as bad as any in the world. These are to be found on a series of hills which circle the city. The hills are in fact more like humps rising steeply from the eastern perimeter of the capital. The "houses" are small rectangular boxes built of brick with no roofs. It is, in my experience, quite a unique concept in design. These neighborhoods are the breeding grounds for the young hoodlums who now plague Lima — and also for fighters with class. Many children and teens are drug addicts, their only way to "escape" the misery around them being to chew or smoke coca leaves. A local South American amateur champion, Mario Broncano, is currently in jail (not for the first time) where he continues to train. There was even talk of allowing him to fight opponents inside the jail!

Mauro drove me around the slums in his new car apparently without fear of being assaulted (even taxi drivers carry weapons for self-protection). But there again, people recognize him and still consider him one of them — a poor boy made good. In fact, by the end of the tour I wasn't sure if it had been for my benefit or his — to keep in touch with his roots. As we crawled along in the downtown traffic, an Indian boy offered us two bright green lizards. Others dressed in jeans hovered around the cars, hoping for the chance to grab a watch from the arm of a careless driver.

Though the neighborhoods Mauro and I passed through were appalling to the European or American eye, they were not, in fact, the worst. Los Barracones in Callao, the port city which is little more than an extension of Lima, has earned the dubious honor of the most dangerous district. For the police it is a no-go area and the scene of frequent shootouts between rival gangs of drug peddlers (the basic cocaine paste is traded there in large quantities). Other similarly "lively" neighborhoods include La Victoria, El Agustino, Rimac and Barrios Altos. Mauro has plucked potential young fighters from these areas and given them a chance at his gym, which must have earned the respect of most of the residents. In this way Mina has put back into boxing — and society — much more than he ever got out of it. The cards were always stacked against him, from his orphaned childhood to his eye injury and the raw deal he got from those who controlled the fight game. But if he has shown the world one thing, it is that his qualities as a man match his great talents as a boxer — and I don't know many other fighters you could say that about. □