

A Rivalry For The Ages

ROLAND LaSTARZA REMEMBERS THE MARCIANO WARS

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Editor's Note: Some years ago, it was written that a man with the name of Roland LaStarza should be singing opera at La Scala, not slugging it out at Madison Square Garden. After leaving the ring in 1961, LaStarza graduated from college and became a commercial pilot and flying instructor, a TV and movie star, and a cattle rancher—everything but an opera singer. But he'll always be remembered as a fighter, and the fights that will be his legacy were his pair of classic matchups with Rocky Marciano.

Earlier this year, Ring correspondent James Dugate visited with the 63-year-old LaStarza at the former contender's home in Smyrna Beach, Florida. For the past 17 years, a heart condition has prevented LaStarza from working, and his financial resources have dwindled, the result of a flood of medical bills. But LaStarza remains rich with memories, and his recollections of the Marciano fights further illuminate one of the ring's most memorable grudges.

For decades the fight game has exercised a tremendous hold not only over youngsters who fancifully see their own dreams realized by their ring heroes, but also over artists

and intellectuals—Hemingway and Runyan for example. For those with a bent for the classics, there is one glorious chapter in fistic history that has an almost mythological aura to it: the Rocky Marciano-Roland LaStarza confrontations of the early-'50s. In any other age, the deeds of these heroes might have been recorded in an epic poem. Their gargantuan scraps epitomized every element of boxing that we insatiable fans could have asked for, and at the same time offered us that contrast of worlds that is always so irresistible.

About the only thing the two men had in common was their Italian heritage. Even then, the stylish, cultured

LaStarza, who had attended college at the City University of New York, was more reminiscent of the nobility of a member of the Roman patrician class, with Marciano, a former employee of the shoe factories of Brockton, Massachusetts, a mere plebeian. Their bouts typified the age-old struggle between force and reason, strength and intelligence. The contradiction inherent in their contests (LaStarza the classic boxer with the stand-up style, relying on defense and counterpunching; Marciano the primitive gladiator, awkwardly aggressive, with stubby, muscular arms that served simply as clubs) was precisely what made their fights such an attraction for media and fans alike.



The Rock attacks in the second LaStarza fight (top). After being stopped in round 11, the challenger was battered but unbowed (above).

The first Duel of the Titans took place at Madison Square Garden on March 24, 1950. Marciano was unbeaten in 26 outings, with 24 knockouts. LaStarza was also unbeaten: 37 fights, 17 kayos.

Before that first fight, LaStarza was ranked fifth in the world, Rocky sixth. The betting was about even, though most buffs felt that if it went the distance, LaStarza was sure of victory. His detractors reckoned he was too short and too light, a stalking counter-puncher who seemed to have modeled himself after Joe Louis, but without Louis' height, weight, and punching speed.

Marciano's respect for his opponent

was obvious from his unusually cautious approach in the early rounds. LaStarza was somewhat perplexed.

"I wondered what he was up to," he said. "I'd thought that he'd come at me, bombing away. When I saw him jabbing and trying to box, I didn't know whether it was a trap or not. So I just stood back and did what I'd planned to do: jab and move."

LaStarza's longer reach—73 inches to 68—enabled him to jab, hook, and easily counter Rocky. In the fourth, however, Marciano energized the crowd of 13,658. He came out like a bull chasing after the matador's red cape. This is what the fans had come to see, the struggle between the out-

and-out slugger and the sophisticated, disciplined master boxer. LaStarza was cut in the round and went down late from an overhand right, but he was up at four. He was also staggered by a right to the jaw in the eighth, but referee Jack Watson took the round from Marciano because of a low blow. The rest of the fight was very even, and the result could not have been closer. Judge Arthur Schwartz scored 5-4-1, Marciano. Judge Artie Aidala had it 5-4-1, LaStarza. Watson made it a draw, 5-5. After declaring the scores by round, the ring announcer added: "In points, the referee has six for Marciano, four for LaStarza." (The Associated Press had LaStarza ahead by 5-4-1.)

The result spawned a debate that raged until their second meeting; more than a few fans believed that LaStarza had won.

"I knew how close the fight was, everyone did," LaStarza said. "It just depended on what the judges and referee saw as most important, my jabs and counterpunching or his constant attacks. But overall, I'm sure as income taxes that I outscored him. I honestly feel I was the winner. Almost every reporter at the fight gave me the decision. They said that I was robbed.

"There's an old Italian proverb that says, 'There is no thief like a bad book.' Some would say that certain fights come in a close second! You know, in that first fight, Rocky was not invincible, he was just like any other guy and fairly easy for me to hit."

It was to take LaStarza three years to get another shot at the Rock. In the interim, he fought 18 bouts, winning 16 and losing to Dan Bucceroni and Rocky Jones, both of whom he decided in rematches.

"During the interim, I also refused bouts with Joe Louis, Jersey Joe Walcott, Ezzard Charles, and Bob Murphy," LaStarza recalled. "These were offered to me when Marciano's manager, Al Weill, was the matchmaker at the Garden. It is possible that he was trying to get me out of the way. I don't know his feelings in the matter, but everyone knew that Weill was one of the shrewdest manipulators in the fight game. We refused to accept all those alluring offers because we felt deep-down that we were being stepped upon."

As it turned out, the result of the second Marciano fight was clear-cut. It took place before about 44,000 fans at New York City's Polo Grounds on September 24, 1953, 3½ years after the

original. After the first LaStarza showdown, Marciano won 16 more fights, including a kayo of Joe Louis, and then knocked out Jersey Joe Walcott to capture the world title. After stopping Walcott in the first round of their rematch, the Rock signed for the return with LaStarza.

"Before the first fight," LaStarza said, "Al Weill promised us a return immediately if it was a close thing. I guess he meant if Rocky lost and it was close! The next day he said, 'We don't want to go back.' After that he avoided us like the plague, and the thing just sort of died a natural death. I did get frustrated. Here was Marciano making a bundle while I was fighting for peanuts."

In training for the second fight, LaStarza polished his glittering skills and spent many hours working the heavybag to improve his power. However, most of the cognoscenti felt that while the challenger remained an impressive heavyweight, he would eventually succumb to Marciano's awesome power. After all, many reckoned that Rocky was the hardest-hitting heavy-

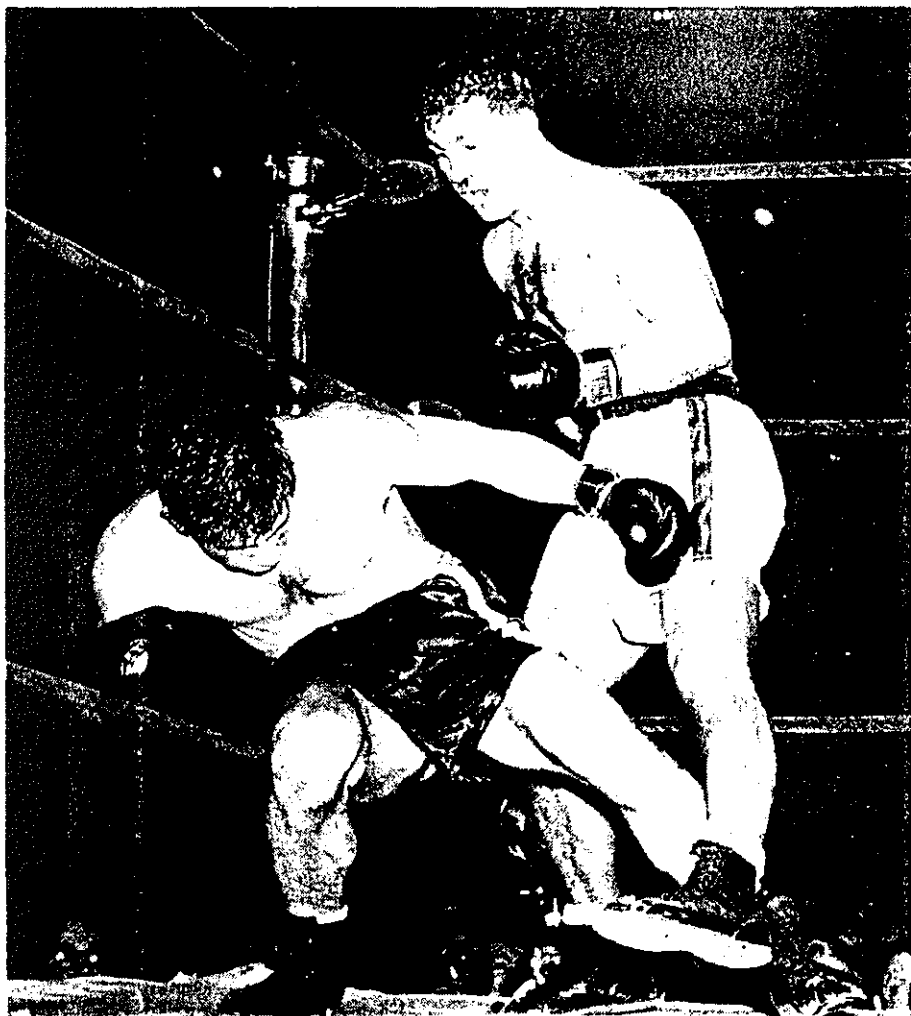
weight champion of all time. Consequently, LaStarza entered the fight as a 6-1 underdog.

The canny Weill trained Marciano to utilize an unorthodox but, as it turned out, highly effective tactic. The Rock was to batter away at LaStarza's arms as much as possible in order to make him eventually drop his defense.

LaStarza, however, doesn't believe that it was that strategy that led to Marciano's victory.

"There was a rumor after the fight that he hurt my shoulders and arms a lot, but the truth was that I had weak elbows from the fight before, and they were giving me trouble," he said. "They really went bad during the training before the Marciano fight. With the state of my elbows, I just couldn't give a good account of myself. During the fight I was under the influence of pain-killers, and I needed them."

The first half of the fight was even, with LaStarza's famous jab proving a highly destructive weapon. But from round six on, his bruised arms began to fall, enabling Marciano to land



Bleeding from the nose, Marciano stands over LaStarza, who had slipped in the final round of their first encounter. Marciano captured a split and disputed 10-round decision at Madison Square Garden.



This seventh-round right to the ribs illustrates the type of punishment Marciano meted out in the second half of his September 1953 title fight vs. LaStarza. Banging LaStarza's arms and body, the Rock wore down his rival. Marciano scored a knockdown in the 11th, and though LaStarza rose, the bout was halted.

punch after punch. During the first five rounds, referee Ruby Goldstein warned the champion five times about low blows, and several times for punching after the bell. In the sixth, he awarded the round to the challenger because of the Rock's low punching. But from there on, Marciano took control and wore down his opponent.

In the 11th, a right to the chin sent LaStarza sprawling through the ropes. Dazed, he rose at the count of five and was permitted to continue. But moments later, Goldstein rescued a defenseless LaStarza and stopped the fight halfway through the 11th. It was Marciano's 45th consecutive victory.

"You know," says LaStarza, "the difference in Rocky between the first fight and the second was fantastic; it was much more difficult to land a punch on him. I would have to say that Marciano was about the toughest fighter I ever met. I've been hit harder but never more often. He had tremendous stamina, that man could keep going all night. He had such a desire to be champion.

"He was also a genuinely nice guy,

and after the first fight we became very good friends, though we did have a little flap at one stage about me saying something. I said, 'He gets hit a lot, and if he gets hit a lot, he'll go punchy.' But Weill had told me to say anything just to stir up interest in the fight. Believe me, I didn't think Marciano got hit too much. In fact, he improved a lot in that respect later on. So I didn't mean to denigrate his fighting or his ability to duck punches, or anything like that . . . it was just something to say. We were just two guys who were going to fight, and we wanted to build up an interest. Some people don't understand this. But Rocky knew what it was all about.

"Even so, there were several articles—even a book has been written—talking about me, saying that because I said Marciano got hit a lot, he punched me around in that second fight, but that's not true. [Weill said after the fight that Marciano "was mad at the guy."] Marciano couldn't hit me on the behind for the first five rounds. Then in the sixth I got a shot on my bad elbow, the strength went

out of me, and I just stood there from then on. I couldn't move. I took it for five more rounds. They claimed he was punishing me instead of kayoing me, but he tried his damndest to knock me out, and he couldn't do it for those last five rounds because I took a good punch. I was still standing when they stopped the fight."

More than 15 years elapsed between Marciano-LaStarza II and the Rock's death.

"We Italians have a saying: 'The best way to get praise is to die,'" said LaStarza. "But you could say that Rocky literally had the best of both worlds—a living legend first and immortal in death.

"It is strange how in sport your life can be so inseparably linked to that of another person. They used to say that once somebody fought Marciano, they were never the same again. That certainly applied to Don Cockell, and though there were extenuating circumstances, it was also true in my case—I was never the same." ■

James Dugate is a Ring correspondent based in Costa Rica.