The Turbulent Flight Of The Cuban Hawk

GAVILAN

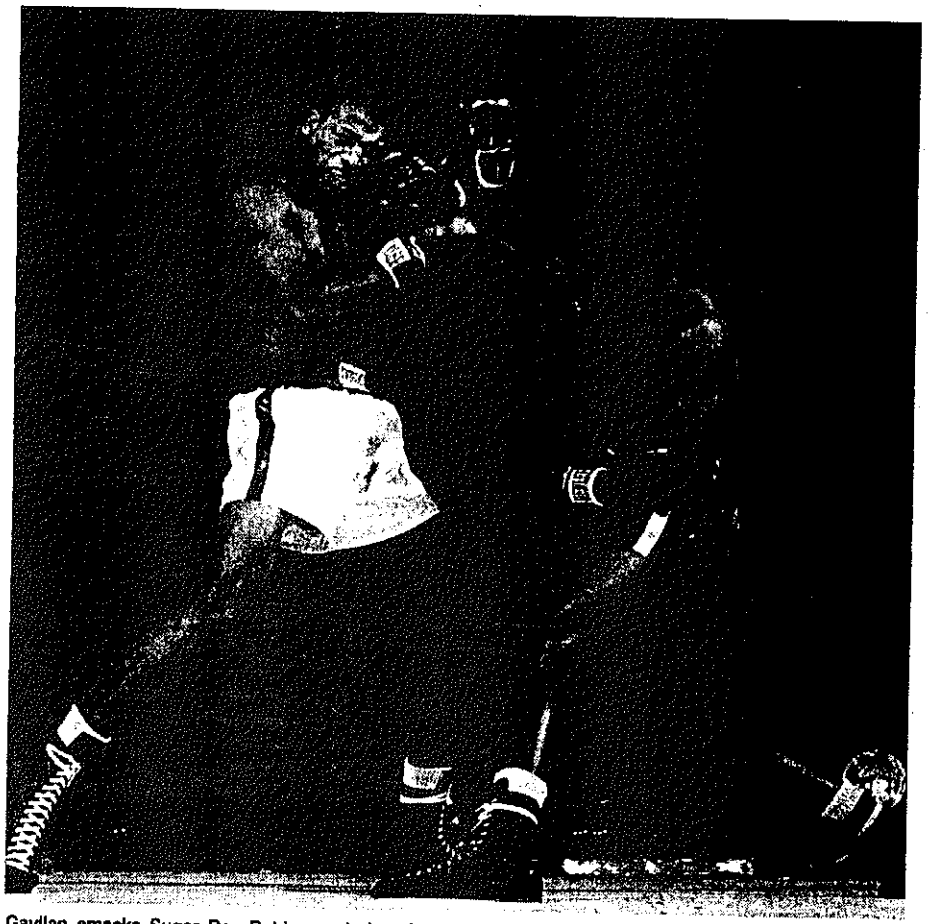
By James Dusgate

Ask any genuine fight fan his opinion of Gerardo Gonzalez and all you'll get is a blank expression; the name, the Spanish equivalent of John Smith, conveys nothing. On the other hand, mention his nickname, Kid Gavilan, and, whatever the fan's age, his eyes will widen in wonderment. Thirty years after his retirement, the Cuban still commands such respect. In the opinion of many, he rates among the best top 10 fighters ever.

Gavilan, Spanish for "sparrowhawk," had few equals in the annals of fistiana. He was a great welterweight champion, and he also tried unsuccessfully for the middleweight championship in 1954 against Bobo Olson. Gavilan compiled an overall mark of 107-30-6. (Most of the losses came toward the tail-end of his career that spanned from 1943-1958, when he was fighting only for the money.) The flashy fighter in white boots, famed for his stylish bolo punch and irrepressible energy in the ring, was never kayoed, though he fought all the best during a career that embraced the period generally recognized as boxing's Golden Age.

Gavilan took on, among others, Sugar Ray Robinson (twice), Laurent Dauthuille, Paddy Young, Billy Graham, Johnny Bratton, Carmen Basilio, Beau Jack, Gil Turner, Tiger Jones, Chico Vejar, Tony DeMarco, and Bobby Dykes (who, like Gavilan, lives in Miami, and describes his neighbor as a "double-tough son of a bitch").

Gavilan's two close encounters with Sugar Ray Robinson set the seal on his greatness. Robinson stated years later that these were the toughest tussles of his life.



Gavilan smacks Sugar Ray Robinson during the first of their two welterweight showdowns. Robinson won both bouts on points. He later said that Gavilan was the toughest opponent of his career.

At one time in Cuba, the Kid was as near to being a god as a man could get. But three years ago, Gavilan was living at the Waves Hotel on South Beach, Miami, a cheap but clean residential hotel where the ex-champ was surrounded by an unlikely collage of retired, gray-haired couples from New York and a lot of younger single Latin men. It was a reasonably respectable setting for an average old gladiator, but not someone of Gavilan's class. Gavilan's rent, for a small room with two single beds looking out over an alley, was actually being picked up by Ernesto Duran, a well-known manager/promoter in Miami, and a Cuban exile like the Kid himself.

The Waves represented the traditional face of Miami. It was in contrast to the glossy image the city has acquired in recent years as the modern capital of the Caribbean, gorging itself on the

Gavilan was once a member of the entourage of Muhammad Ali. The Kid has depended on the generosity of friends and fight figures for several years. Now 64, he lives in poverty in Miami Beach.

billions of dollars flowing into its banks from Latin America, much of it from the drug trade. As Gavilan would sit in the lobby of the hotel, everyone seemed to know him and to want to say hello or touch him. To the residents, it was as if the physical contact allowed them to make contact with a precious moment in their own history.

The champ didn't say much. His responses were mostly limited to nods. But he did do a lot of smiling.

In his heyday in the '50s, Gavilan lived in New York City, on the southern edge of Harlem, near Central Park. New York was still the Mecca of boxing, and he became a crowd favorite at Madison Square Garden. But, perhaps even more importantly as far as his place in history is concerned, he was one of boxing's first big TV stars, with 34 televised fights. This accounts, in part at least, for the degree of recognition he still enjoys today.

Gavilan retired more than 30 years ago and has been broke for the last 25. Yet, it is easy to see that he remains special to hundreds of ordinary people, especially in Miami, a city that is fast becoming a living Hall of Fame for ex-world champions, many of whom find themselves in the same dire financial straits as Gavilan.

One can gauge the significance of the man from the fact that he still receives so many letters asking for his autograph. Young would-be champions sit at his feet, absorbing the wisdom of the master. Many people connected with the fight game still want to help him.

During his days at the Waves, Gavilan was ostensibly helping out Ernesto Duran (no relation to Roberto) at the Caron Gym as a trainer, though his greatest value appeared to be what he represented to the boxers he was involved with. He spent his mornings relaxing in the lobby of the hotel, waiting to be picked up by someone from the gym, where he was to be found hanging around during the afternoons and early evenings like a battered but highly prized ornament, or perhaps a talisman for the young hopefuls sweating it out around him. Many are apparently of the opinion that if you surround yourself with the famous or successful, some of their glitter and good luck is bound to rub off.

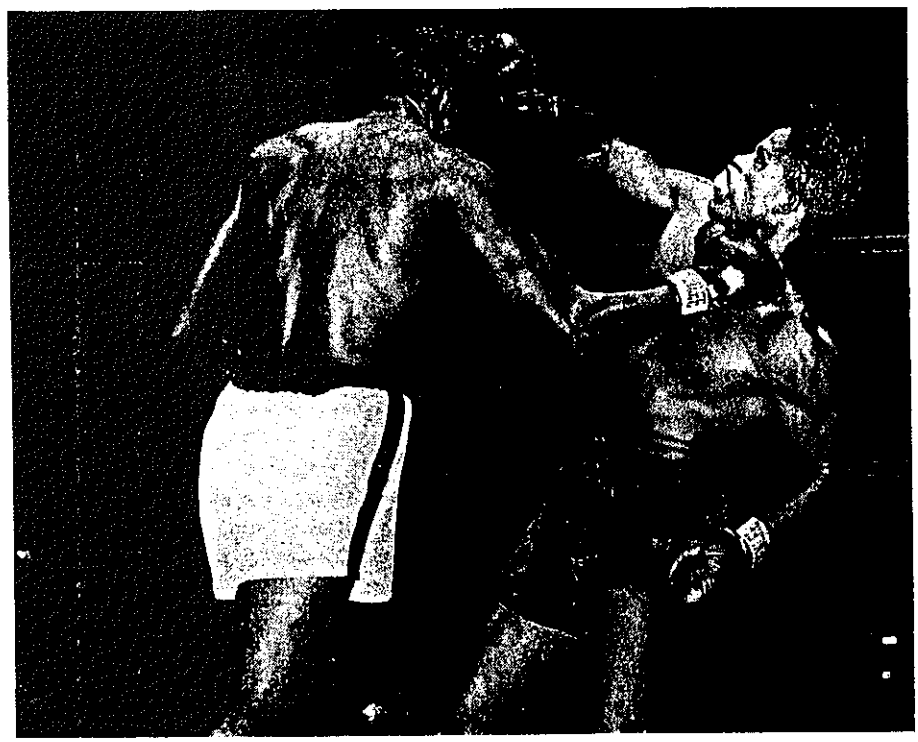
The Kid was born on January 6, 1926, in Camaguey, Cuba. As a child, his favorite and best sport was baseball. He claims to have played every position. The champ says he nurtured the hope of playing pro baseball in America, but that it was not until he was a teenager that someone told him that blacks were not allowed to play Major League baseball in the United States. He had seen films of Joe Louis, "so I changed my mind [about pursuing baseball]."

Gavilan's pro career started at age 17, when he began to fight for Fernando Balido, the owner of a cafe called *El Gavilan,* which later provided the Kid's nickname. In 1945, Gavilan moved to Mexico City, and, after a successful one-year stint there, headed north to New York.

The Kid and the Big Apple were made for each other.

"One day I stood on a streetcorner and looked up past the tall buildings at the sky," Gavilan said. "*I want to own New York,* I thought."

The big names among the lighter men in those days were Ike Williams, Johnny Bratton, and Beau Jack. But the king was Sugar Ray Robinson. Gavilan lost a close 10-round, non-title fight to Robinson in September of 1948. Ten months later, he lost a second bout with Robinson, this time, in a 15-round challenge for the welter-



In Gavilan's third defense of the welterweight title, he stopped Gil Turner in 11 rounds. Gavilan kept the crown for more than three years. He also tried for the middleweight crown, but lost to Bobo Olson.

weight championship.

"Robinson hit me more times than everyone else together," Gavilan said, "and I felt it every time . . . he was the best . . . how many guys you know fight 25 rounds with Sugar Ray?"

Gavilan had to wait until the Sugar Man moved up to middleweight before getting another crack at the 147-pound title. In 1950, he fought 15 times, and earned another title try on pure merit. His opportunity came on May 18, 1951, and he won a 15-round decision over Johnny Bratton for the vacant title. The Kid made six title defenses over the next three years, most of which were shown on TV.

Gavilan's striking appearance (white shoes and slicked back hair) and style (he seemed to rumba his way round the ring) made him a highly prized attraction. His trademark bolo punch was a looping, underhand right delivered with the same follow-through used by Cuban peasants to cut sugar cane with a machete. It lacked power but impressed the public. The reason for developing the punch may have had more to do with Gavilan's height than anything else. At 5'10½", he was taller than most of the opponents, who would burrow into his midsection. The bolo was the perfect answer against those who tried to duck under his guard. The Kid did indeed lack punching power, but was a fine boxer with an iron chin and superior ring generalship.

During his glory years, Gavilan earned $2-million, a colossal sum in those days. He loved Manhattan, and bought a Cadillac to ride around town all day. He also loved to spend money. One old crony recalled the occasion when Gavilan mistakenly left a paper bag filled with $35,000 in a girlfriend's apartment. The next day he went back to find the money still there.

"Oh," Gavilan recalled, "those were great days . . . "

Upon winning the welterweight crown, Gavilan declared he would be a fighting champion. He was as good as his word. But he eventually lost his welterweight title to an unknown, Johnny Saxton, in a fight in Philadelphia that afterward was suspected of being fixed.

"The Mafia controlled a lot of boxing then," the Kid recalled. "No way I win in Philadelphia if it goes the distance."

After the loss to Saxton on October 20, 1954, Gavilan continued to fight for another four years, but it was downhill all the way. His right hand, broken in a fight a few years before, got weaker and weaker. Gavilan would inject his hand with novocaine until it got to the point where the drug no longer had any effect. But Gavilan was worn out by the partying as well as the boxing. The "Cuban Hawk" was definitely one of boxing's many high rollers, which led to debts with the taxman and divorce from his first wife.

"I spend money until the bank tells me I have none left," Gavilan recalled. "Then I go out and get another fight."

Finally, after losing to Yama Bahama in June 1958, Gavilan decided to return to Havana, where he had a farm. His Cadillac went with him. His wife and three children stayed in America, where he also left a tax debt of $68,000.

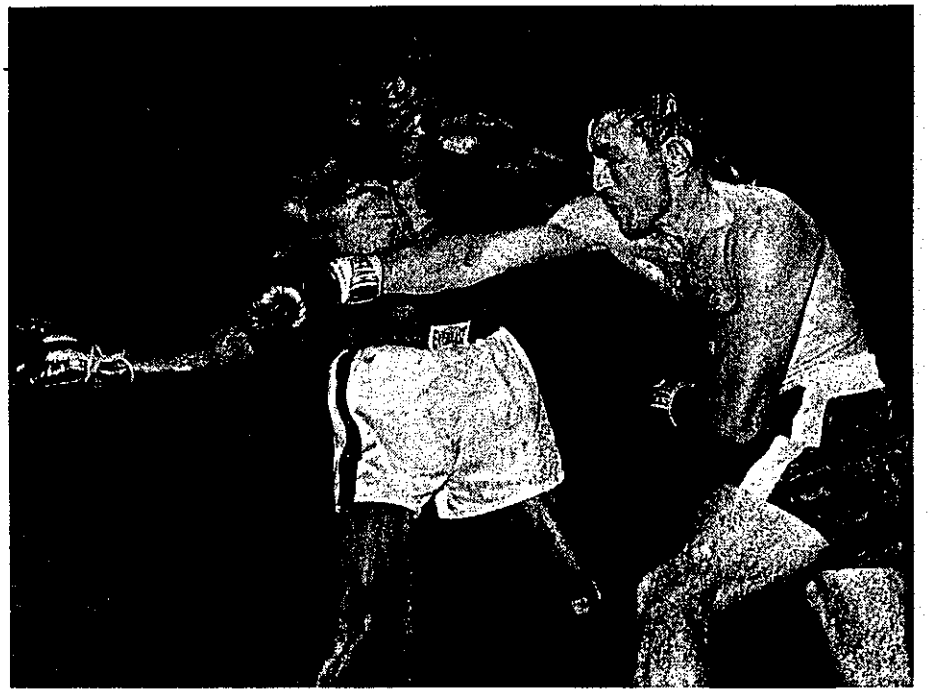
Though he had spent nearly all his fortune, he was still able to look forward to a comfortable retirement on his 40-acre ranch in the Cuban countryside. At that time, Havana was the largest, loveliest, and most sumptuous city in the Caribbean. It was a tropical paradise for those with the cash to enjoy it.

Of course, if you were one of the millions eking out an existence in the rum-soaked backstreets of Havana, or sweltering like slaves on the sugar plantations of the rich, you might have seen things differently.

"People say, 'Before the Revolution,' but there was no Cuba before the Revolution," legendary Cuban champion Kid Chocolate once said. "Unless you were a boxer or a dancer in the nightclubs, it wasn't so good."

But in 1958, boxing and cigars were still the uncrowned kings of Havana; even Sugar Ray Robinson headed south for the fun. Only six months after Gavilan's return, however, the dream began to turn into a nightmare. The first hint of what lay ahead was when the Hawk was awakened by guerrillas searching his property. By January 1959, Fidel Castro had taken power. The immediate reaction was one of universal euphoria. Even *The New York Times* voiced its approval of the new regime. Few remember now that Joe Louis was guest of honor at the *Plaza de la Revolucion* on Christmas day in 1960. But boxers make bad politicians, and, as many were soon to find out, communist politics does not exactly jive with professional sports.

After Robinson returned to the United States, he was followed by a trickle of the big-name Cuban boxers of the time—a young Luis Rodriguez, the ill-fated Benny Paret, Jose Napoles, and, later, Sugar Ramos. The aging Kid Chocolate stayed put, apparently out of choice, and so did Gavilan, but *not* by choice. When his money ran out, the Kid applied for an exit visa to return to America. But the Cuban authorities took away his passport and conveniently lost it for the next seven years. Gavilan changed his car



Among the most celebrated blows in boxing history is Gavilan's bolo punch, which is about to land against Carmen Basilio. The Kid successfully defended the 147-pound title against Basilio in 1953.

for a more modest Ford, but even this was confiscated. The cataracts that had developed in his eyes grew worse, and the government wouldn't let him farm what he wanted.

"I was up, then I came down," he said. "If it wasn't for God, I could have just as easy died when I was on top."

Shortly before he left America, Gavilan had become a Jehova's Witness after attending one of their meetings. The religion attracted him.

"They really talked about the Bible," he said.

The Kid had always believed in God, but Roman Catholicism had only offered him its ritualism. For Gavilan, there was no personal spiritual experience involved.

Once back in Havana, he was a member of the church and preaching on the streets by the time the Revolution arrived. During the nine years he was to remain in Cuba, he was arrested 10 times for handing out tracts and talking about God in public. Each time he spent a few days in jail, where he would try to convert prisoners and guards. Then he'd be released—virtually out of exasperation—by the authorities.

Perhaps the main reason Gavilan was not locked up for good, or simply stood up against a wall and executed, was his immense popularity with his compatriots. In fact, in 1959, he was introduced at one of Castro's first big rallies in Havana, where all of Cuba's sporting heroes that could be found were put on display.

Gavilan is flanked by Chico Vejar (left) and former middleweight champion Joey Giardello at Muhammad Ali's training camp in August 1974. The Kid is most comfortable when reliving his days at the top.

"I got big applause . . . if that don't happen, later he kill me," Gavilan said.

By the mid-'60s, Gavilan had remarried but was nearly blind and housebound. The Cuban Sports Ministry finally awarded him a pension of $200 a month and provided a place for him to live in Havana. But his real desire was to return to America. In 1967, he was voted into the U.S. National Boxing Hall of Fame, and, on the Voice of America radio network, President Lyndon Johnson invited him to personally accept the honor. Friends and relatives began to discreetly lobby the American authorities on Gavilan's behalf, and, miraculously, after Cuban authorities suddenly discovered his lost passport, he was allowed to leave on the Refugee Airlift. On September 16, 1968, Gavilan finally arrived back in the United States.

The former champion was able to get a job, and after a benefit dinner and newspaper appeals to the Cuban community, he was able to afford two cataract operations. He was later roped into Muhammad Ali's circus for about four years, where he worked as a trainer and cornerman, more for the sake of his prestige than anything else. After he left Ali's entourage, he was forced to sue the heavyweight for arrears in salary and was awarded $40,000 by the courts. Despite the conflict, Gavilan rates Ali on a par with Joe Louis.

Subsequently, three strokes left him partially paralyzed. In 1978, he moved to Miami to try to find a job. There followed five years of living in hotel rooms and cockroach-infested apartments, barely eking out an existence. An old friend from the days of wine and roses, Bernie Gaston, eventually invited him to live with his family. Gavilan, always a polite and quiet man, was a model house guest. It was after a spell at Gaston's that, at Miami promoter Chris Dundee's suggestion, Ernesto Duran took the Kid on board to help with his fighters and promotions.

Three years ago, Duran organized an evening of exhibition bouts as a benefit for Gavilan. A pudgy and somewhat embarrassed Roberto Du-

ran, starting out on the comeback trail, even put in an appearance. Ernesto Duran hoped to raise $5,000 for the Kid with a big turnout by the local Cuban community. But barely 500 guests showed up, and Ernesto lost about $15,000. The tremendous affection for Gavilan obviously did not reach down into people's pockets.

To be fair, though, should any man who enjoyed as much fame and wasted as much money as Gavilan really expect the general public to keep him when he falls upon hard times? The Kid himself was not upset. He said politely, "Ernesto gave me a party. It was not successful."

Since 1987, Gavilan's situation has changed for the worse. The Cuban now lives alone on the sixth floor of a depressing, crowded tenement erected by the government to help those who cannot help themselves. For his visitors, the Kid is always home. The former champ doesn't hesitate to show his guests into his miniature apartment and seems genuinely glad to have company. Possessing neither a phone nor a car, his social life today is virtually non-existent.

The Kid's last title-fight victory came against Johnny Bratton in November 1953. After topping Bratton, Gavilan compiled a record of 12-17-1. He retired after losing to Yama Bahama in 1958.

Besides being half-blind, Gavilan has difficulty breathing, and speaks with a slur. Seeing the plight of this once-brilliant fighter who had the world at his feet fills one with an immense sadness. Gavilan has no income, no regular job, and little prospect of getting one.

The sands of time seem to be finally running out for this giant of the ring, who 35 years ago looked to be immortal. Three years ago Ernesto Duran said, "As a Cuban myself, I believe Gavilan deserves to be helped. As long as I can, I will see he lacks for nothing."

Today it seems Gavilan is in need of another benefactor, as his physical condition deteriorates and his options narrow even further.

Despite his troubles, the Kid has retained his serenity and dignity, and continues to be a perfect gentleman. When entertaining visitors, the Kid recalls great moments from his career, and that of others. But mostly, the ex-champ listens, sitting sphinx-like with eyes heavy-lidded and hands cupped in his lap. He seems to enjoy the exuberance of his guests. Perhaps the smiles remind him of the sweet days, when he reigned supreme in Havana and was adored by its women. He gladly produces photos of himself in his youth that show just what a handsome man he had been.

As the conversation turns to religion, he recalls that one of Joe Louis' favorite sayings, "Humility comes before honor," had always stayed with him.

With so many great boxers of the past reduced to misery, the Bible verse, "Pride cometh before a fall," might be more appropriate.

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