

Spirit of a champ

Gabe Terronez rose from a playground fighter to a state welterweight champion.

By Bruce Farris

The Fresno Bee

(Published October 30, 2000)

Gabe Terronez was walking across the Fresno City College campus in the early 1960s when he overheard a couple of students talking: "That guy looks like he's been in a wreck." "Funny part was I had won the fight the night before, but I was cut over both eyes," said Terronez, smiling while thinking about the memory. "It was my first 10-round fight." It was on the same campus that he met and married the love of his life, the late Elizabeth Huerta, who died in 1992 after a five-year fight with cancer. They were married in December of 1968 and had five children.

Terronez will be inducted into the Fresno Athletic Hall of Fame tonight during the 42nd awards dinner. During a seven-year professional boxing career, Terronez carried the nicknames "The Little Professor" and the "Choir Boy." They were legitimate. "I was going to school the whole time I was boxing, and I did sing in the City College choir, even sang some solos," said Terronez, who retired from his 4-H program job with the University of California Cooperative Extension after his wife died.

Terronez fought for two years as an amateur while in the Marines, then 7 1/2 professionally. Trained by Fresno Pat DiFuria, Terronez compiled a 32-8 record, earned a No. 5 world welterweight ranking and recorded 19 knockouts. His top achievement was a 45-second knockout of Charley "Tiger" Smith for the state welterweight title. He also split with ranked Puerto Rican Jose Stable, losing in New York and winning in Fresno's Kearney Bowl. In 1965, welterweight champion Emil Griffith came to Fresno for a non-title 10-rounder against Terronez in Kearney. Griffith won with a fourth-round knockout. Terronez's amateur record was 31-3 with 27 knockouts.

DiFuria, now in the insurance business in Fresno, recalls Terronez with the fondness of a father. "Gabe Terronez was an exceptional talent, a great athlete, an exciting fighter and pound one the hardest punchers in the history of boxing," DiFuria said. "I have no doubt that today he, Dean Bogany, Mac Foster, Benny Medina and Wayne Thornton would have been world champions in one or another of the categories they have. Today they hand out championships like cigars to announce a baby. "Then there was only one champion for each weight.

Gabe had things you can't teach. A puncher is born, as is the ability to take a punch. His fights were always exciting. I took Gabe to Las Vegas early in his career to spar with Griffith. Emil said he was the strongest kid he had ever met. He wanted to hire him as a sparring partner, but I told him 'Some day you'll fight this kid.' He did, but Emil had too much experience. "One thing for sure, my boxers had more character than 95% of those today.

Gabe was and is a neat person, fun to be around. His brother Roger killed in a freak accident was always helping people. A wonderful guy." Terronez, 60, was born in Mexico, moved to Cameron, Texas, and then to Corcoran all in his first year of life. Terronez was a talented athlete. He was a sprinter on the track team, played football and was a Valley champion in wrestling.

At age 17, he did something against his parents wishes. He dropped out of school and joined the Marines. "My wrestling coach Al Cadena at Corcoran was a former San Jose State wrestler, and his school was interested in me," Terronez said. "But, I thought the Marines looked exciting. As it turned out, it was a good experience. "I was stationed in Hawaii and made the Marine Corps boxing team. I tried for the Olympics in 1960, won a fight, then lost to the eventual winner. My boxing coach in the Marines was Jerry Plunkett, a good friend of Carmen Basillio." When Terronez was getting ready for discharge, Plunkett called Basillio, who had a stable of boxers, and set up a call with Terronez. Basillio invited him to come to Syracuse, N.Y..

"I considered it, almost went, but I was from California and the truth is, I didn't want to leave California," Terronez said. "I had met Pat DiFuria when my brother Roger boxed for him. In 1961, I signed with Pat, and it was the best thing I did. "He was like a father figure for me and any success I had, I attribute to him. He did a good job of handling personalities and arranging for fights. Not a lot of frills. We trained in an old converted garage on Merced and G streets." Terronez said the people who gave him the most trouble were fancy boxers with different styles and experience.

He liked it best when the opponent fought him straight up. He didn't mind taking a hit to get in one of his own. He packed a left hook that was his knockout punch.

Terronez saw Elizabeth Huerta for the first time when he accompanied a friend to an Edison High graduation. "She was such a beautiful girl, I couldn't help but be impressed," he said. "After I got out of the Marines, I am at Fresno City going to the library and she came out the door. It was love at first sight. "After our first date, I told her she was going to marry me. I just felt that way. It took awhile, but she finally said yes. She was an extremely bright student. She's the main reason I went to Fresno State and got my degree." Elizabeth Terronez was a school teacher and administrator for 21 years, her last five years spent as principal of Bullard High. "I loved my marriage so much. Elizabeth was so good, a security blanket," Terronez said. "There was no way she'd let me go through life without graduating from college. She was too good for me. At times it seems like yesterday, then a million years without her."

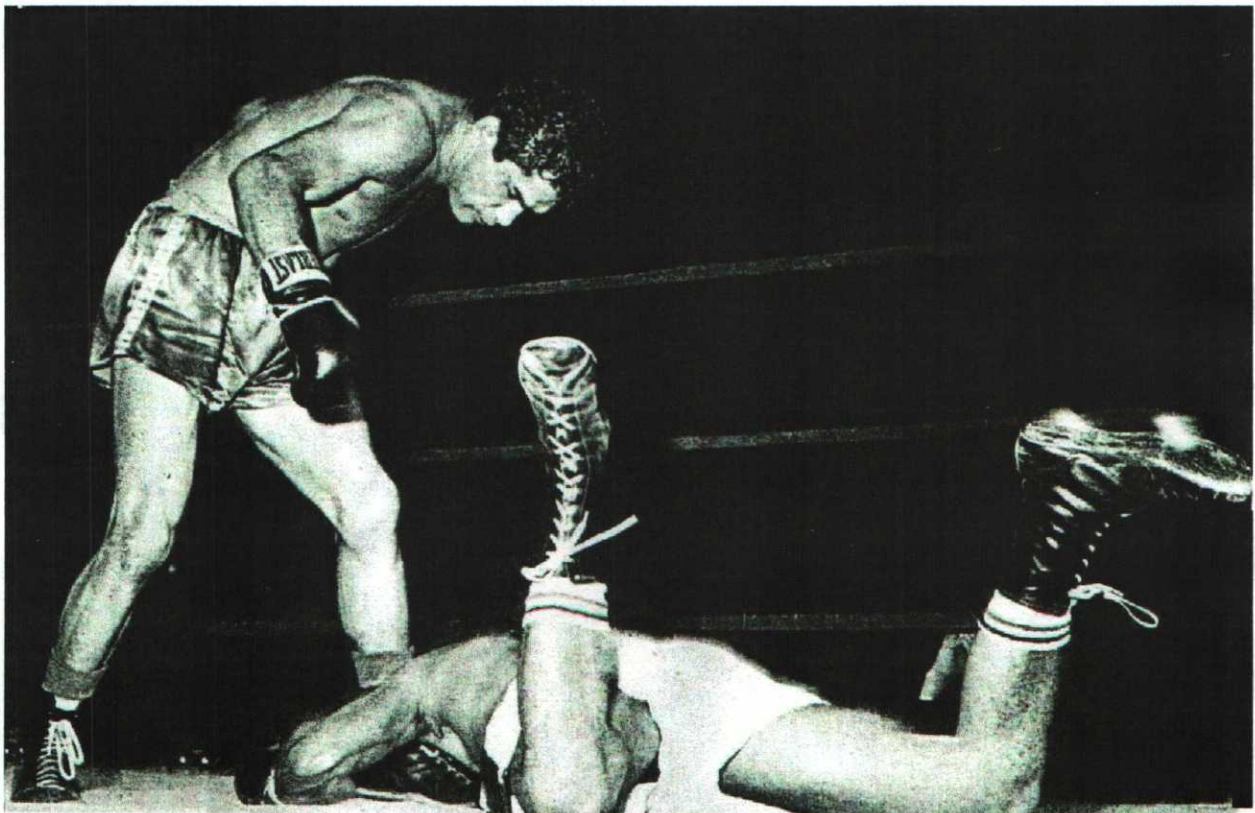
Submitted by Johnny Bos

Last week, Terronez flew to Missouri's Fort Leonardwood for the Army boot camp graduation of his youngest daughter, Nicole Dominique. She will serve in intelligence in Arizona. "Nicole was probably hit the hardest by the death of her mother. I cried when I saw her on stage, and afterwards when we hugged we both cried. I'm so proud of her." Stefanie Urwell, his oldest child, is working on her master's degree in Redondo Beach. Dante Roman (named for Roman Gabriel) is a helicopter pilot operating off a Navy aircraft carrier. Desiree Darla was married recently in Holland and will attend the Santa Clara law school. She is a graduate of University of San Diego. Damien Gabriel is still home and a junior at Fresno State.

Terronez comes from humble beginnings. His father drove tractors and hay bailers in the fields. Terronez recalls with some fondness chopping cotton and picking grapes. "My father Jesse was from Mexico, my mother Paula was from Texas.

They taught me good work ethics, honesty and integrity." Terronez said in high school, fighting was a way to establish a pecking order. Some of the boys he beat became his best friends. "I was short and stocky and very strong, so not many people challenged me," he said. He received \$33 for his first fight and his top paycheck was less than \$10,000. Wrong timing? "I have no regrets. I always felt boxing was an honorable profession. I'm not so sure about some of the things that are going on today, but in my day, boxers were looked up to."

The reporter can be reached at bfarris@fresnobee.com or 441-6347.



Gabe shown standing over one of his knockout victims. Gabe was a potent puncher.