

A Look Back At Carmen Basilio's Greatest Victory

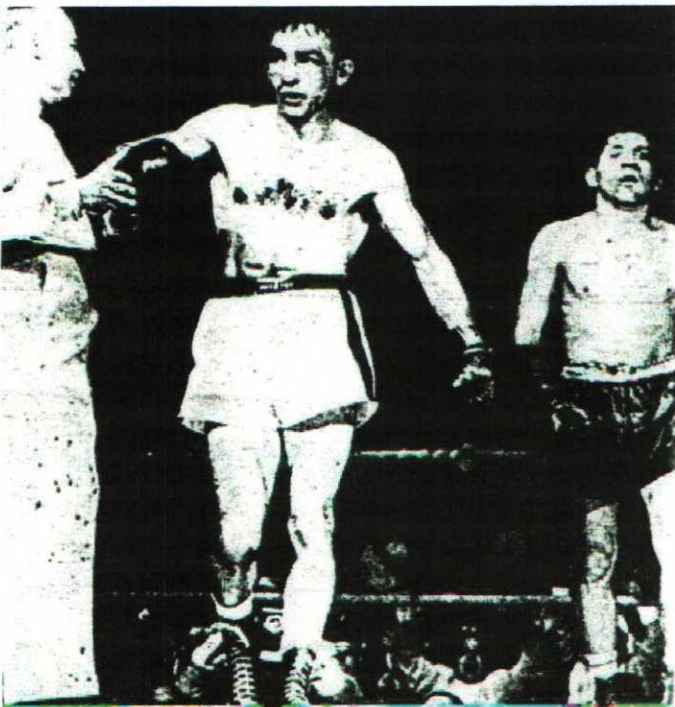
By Dan Cuoco

From his professional debut on November 24, 1948, until his match with Chuck Davey on May 29, 1952, Carmen Basilio was never considered more than a useful undercard fighter. In 1951 he had gone 3-3-0 and his record stood at an unimpressive 25-8-3, with 14 kayos. With no money coming in he took a job in a factory and might have stayed there except for his burning desire to make it big in boxing.

While working out at a local gym in Syracuse his dogged determination attracted the attention of Johnny DeJohn and Joe Netro. Johnny and Joe managed and trained Johnny's brother Joey, a vicious punching but fragile middleweight. Joey was a big box office attraction in Syracuse. Carmen's exposure with the DeJohn's brought him to the attention of Norman Rothschild a young promoter who saw potential in the rugged 25-year-old Basilio. Rothschild launched Basilio as a main event fighter against Detroit's unbeaten Chuck Davey. Even though the fight ended in a draw, Carmen proved he was a drawing card.

Carmen now had a recognizable name and started getting major fights. After victories over Ike Williams, Vic Cardell, Carmen Fiore and Billy Graham (for the New York State welterweight title) he earned a title shot at welterweight champion Kid Gavilan. Carmen, a 4-1 underdog, dropped the champion in the second round and had him badly hurt and was ahead on all scorecards after six rounds. But Gavilan took six of the next nine rounds to come away with a split decision. The referee and one of the judges gave Gavilan the fight 8-6-1 and 7-6-2, while the other judge had Basilio ahead 7-5-3.

In Gavilan's next title defense he lost the title to Johnny Saxton, who in turn lost it to Tony DeMarco.



Twenty months later Carmen earned another crack at the title when he faced champion Tony DeMarco in Syracuse. Carmen survived an all-out war to stop Tony in the 12th round to win the title. Then he went to Boston and again stopped Tony in the 12th round of another all-out war. Both fights are considered classics.

In his next defense Basilio lost a highly disputed decision to a retreating Johnny Saxton in Chicago. The furor from the public over the decision was so great that they were rematched six months later in Syracuse. This time Saxton fought aggressively, but Basilio took him apart and stopped him in 9 rounds to regain

the title. They fought again early the next year and Carmen ended all doubts of his superiority by destroying Saxton in two rounds.

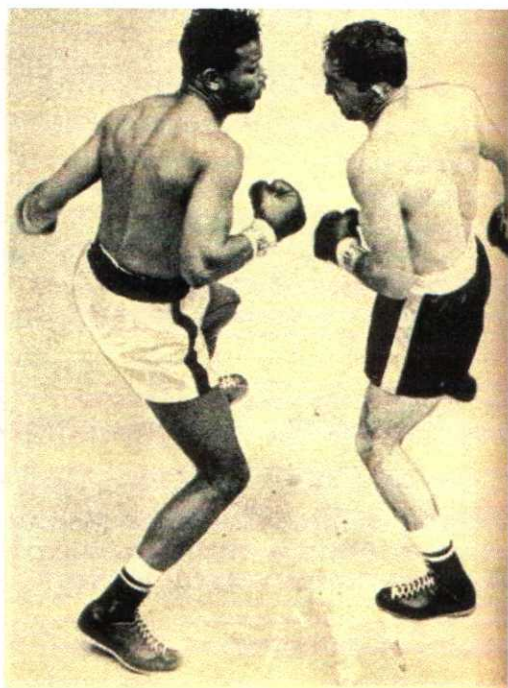
Carmen now eyed the biggest prize of his career - a shot at Sugar Ray Robinson for the middleweight championship. A victory over the legendary Robinson would make him only the second reigning welterweight champion to win the middleweight crown while still in possession of the first title. Only Robinson had done it before when he stepped up to stop Jake LaMotta for the title in 1951.

The night of the fight the odds were 6-5 pick 'em. Many bettors thought that Robinson was slipping and that Basilio was getting better. Others were concerned about Basilio's weight, which was 153 1/2, the heaviest of his career. Those concerned about Basilio's weight said he had looked slow in one of his non-title fights when he weighed 152 pounds. Now he was 1 1/2 pounds heavier.

The 38,000 in attendance couldn't help but make comparisons about the physical difference between the two fighters. The 5' 11 1/2" tall champion looked like a sleek greyhound while the 5' 6 1/2" craggy faced muscular challenger with short arms and legs looked like a pit bull. The 36-year-old champion entered the ring with a ring record of 144-4-2-1 (91) while the 30-year-old challenger entered the ring with a ring record of 51-11-7 (25).

Robinson came out for the first round in his picture book classical style. He used the ring superbly, stabbing Carmen with his long jab. Basilio tried to crowd Robinson and get underneath his jab and work his body with his left hook. Through the first six rounds Robinson was full of energy and controlled most of the action.

In the seventh Carmen started to make his move. He stepped up the pace and finally broke through Robinson's guard with a strong left hook to the jaw. He followed up with a hard right to the body and another right to the head. The distance between them was now gone. Robinson was fighting Basilio at Basilio's range.



The momentum of the fight had clearly switched in favor of Basilio and he controlled most of the action in the eighth, ninth and tenth rounds.

After 10 hectic rounds most observers had the fight dead even going into the championship rounds.

But, Ray Robinson wasn't a legend for nothing. In the 11th round Robinson caught his second wind and again gained control of the fight by snapping vicious left jabs into the scar tissue over Basilio's left eye. Then reminiscent to the Robinson of old he tore into Basilio with an all-out attack, landing thunderous punches with both hands to Carmen's head. It was attacks like this that had broken the spirit of many of his opponents in the past. Basilio showed he had the heart of a champion as well

as a rock hard chin, by answering Robinson's barrage with a barrage of his own. Carmen charged into Ray driving him to the ropes where he rained a dozen blows by actual count on Ray before the round ended.

Many have called the 11th round one of the greatest rounds in championship history - ranking with the first round of Hagler-Hearns. Anyway you want to call it - Basilio's heart refused to bow to Robinson's devastating attack. His tough bouts with DeMarco and Saxton had prepared him for this.

In the 12th round Robinson again pressed forward, shooting combinations to Basilio's head bringing blood to both his nose and his left eye. Impossible as it may seem, Robinson picked up the pace in the 13th and both combatants refused to give quarter. In the 14th Robinson doubled up Carmen with a right to the body. Again Basilio refused to give in.

The fight appeared up for grabs heading into the 15th and final round. The determined Basilio came out for the last round and brushed past Robinson's jab and landed a hard right to the body that stopped Ray in his tracks. Robinson held after taking a left and right to the jaw. Ray continued to shoot hard left jabs, but Basilio was able to slip the jabs and batter Robinson's body. Ray tried to open up with one final desperate charge, but there was no stopping Basilio now. Carmen's strength was just too great for Ray this late in the fight. He bombarded Ray with blistering head and body shots until the final bell.

Judge Artie Aidala had Basilio ahead 9-5-1, eliciting approval; referee Al Berl had Robinson ahead 9-6, which clearly wasn't popular. But the boos quickly faded when famed announcer Johnny Addie announced judge Bill Recht's score in favor of Basilio, 8-6-1.

This was Carmen's finest hour. He proved in winning the title from Robinson that his dogged determination, his will to win and his great heart could overcome all the hardships he had to endure to get to the top. Carmen's victory was also the culmination of his five-year transformation from a useful club fighter to the height of greatness.