

## The St Valentine's Day Massacre, 1951 By Patrick Kehoe:



There was no love lost that Valentine's Day. And all the bantering questions were going to be answered in Chicago and on Valentine's Day, 1951 when welterweight champ Sugar Ray Robinson from Detroit moved up to take on his arch enemy Jake LaMotta, the reigning world middleweight kingpin, one last time. Even though the two had slugged it out five times before, with Robinson leading the series 4-1, all the cards were on the table as Robinson took his astounding 122-1 (78) record in against The Bronx Bull. LaMotta was tired of hearing about "the great Sugar Man" promising "that welterweight a night of absolute pain!"

"I've beat him before and I'll finish it up tonight."

Robinson smiled at reporters, dapper and confident, already having brokered a deal - with his eagle eyed manager Big George Gainford - a \$75,000 guarantee by San Francisco's Bill Kyne to meet 175lbs champion Joey Maxim. Though neither fighter knew it, the same deal could have been on the table for LaMotta, were he to dispose of the Harlem Dancing Master. So hatred, envy, crowns and a ton of pre-inflation greenbacks were at stake as Robinson angled his way into the ring, cold blooded and totally focused on getting Jake "outta 'dare" early.

Robinson knew the champ was a painfully slow starter; he knew it better than anyone. The key

to beating LaMotta was establishing a blistering rhythm in the first three rounds. But, of course, the fight would not end early. And over the course of its unfolding savagery LaMotta would astound even Robinson's veteran stoicism, such as the Raging Bull's determination to stay on his feet and get his man. The action began with Robinson using a crisp left lead, moving balletically into hitting positions and launching left hooks and punctuating right uppercuts with thunderous force.

LaMotta obliged him the target of his head in order to mad-rush inside to lay some leather on Robinson's chiseled abdominal region. Then the champ's left hook began to find Robinson on the counter especially in the third and fourth rounds, as it appeared Robinson was shaken by two arching left hooks to the head.

The same thing happened in the fifth, but then the Robinson counter measures kicked into gear especially left uppercuts that were smashing against LaMotta's oversized head. The give and take of LaMotta's crowding, rugged rampage proved a perfect counter-pointing to Robinson's superb combination punching. When he wanted to, Robinson displayed an amazing agility, though more often than not the porous defense of LaMotta was just to inviting a target for Robinson's overhand right and left hook to the body. So Robinson, behind that razor jab, fell into big exchanges with LaMotta knowing his hand speed was incrementally breaking LaMotta down. All LaMotta could do was hope that the fight would come down to conditioning over will.

By the seventh, Robinson's speed and power combinations were painting lumps on canvas of LaMotta's face. As he inflicted retaliatory bodywork, the champion was forced to absorb and try to draw the Sugar Man into an exchange where hopefully one of his left hooks could turn fortune his way. Heroically, LaMotta refused to falter into a haze of punching desperation. For perhaps the last time in his still amazing career, Ray Robinson was in the full flow of his fistic genius. But the punishment LaMotta continued to absorb in front of HIS 14,802 screaming fans was becoming almost intolerable.

"I just ran out of gas in the tenth," LaMotta would growl between blistered lips after the bout.

"I figured he was going in the sixth," Robinson admitted. "But the more I kept punching the more determined he seemed to stay on his feet. Ge wiz, I kept hitting him with shots! I can't understand a guy like that. Pardner, I was leveling! I hit him with some right hand shots that even jarred me!"

By the end of the ninth it was clear LaMotta couldn't rush in any more. And Robinson's antenna never let him down; he knew his left uppercuts had savaged the middleweight champ, along with those

left hooks to the liver. Some of the fans were openly exhorting referee Frank Sykora to stop the fight, as it was clear no one in LaMotta's corner had the courage to even attempt to stop their charge from taking more of a beating.

To begin the 11th, LaMotta summoned all remaining resources to force Robinson to the ropes and opened up to the head and body. "No he wasn't really hurting me then. He'd hit me hard in the fifth and sixth but I was just riding out the storm." But it certainly seemed as if LaMotta had hurt Robinson. And as if trying to pull a miracle out from a crack in death's door, LaMotta somehow managed to rain punches on a winded Robinson, his back to the ropes, his head swiveling from the tidal beating. The throngs could hardly believe the fight's reverse in course.

Then, almost inevitably, on the counter Robinson opened up with his full arsenal and had LaMotta ready to go at the bell. LaMotta staggered back to his corner almost unable to see; Robinson stared at the champ in utter disbelief. LaMotta's wife Vicki had the round before turned away from the action, unable to watch her husband being carved up. Robinson moved in on LaMotta who's only vindication remained in absorbing what he knew was going to come from his mortal ring enemy. And the combinations showered down on LaMotta in the nearly fatal 12th, in those three minutes securing the adoration and more importantly the life memory of a generation of fight fans watching spellbound. Somehow, defying gravity and attrition, LaMotta was still standing at the end of the 12th.

At 2:04 of the 13th even the hardened veteran referee Sykora had seen enough foolish bravery from the dizzy and bleeding LaMotta and he raised the hand of the new middleweight champion of the world. Exhausted himself Ray Robinson could barely raise his arms to hug LaMotta as he was guided about the ring via his all but spent reserves of sheer will.

For his terrible troubles, LaMotta received 45% of the television revenues plus his cut of the live gate estimated to be worth \$186,866.05, for a purse of \$62,611 against Robinson's final take estimated at \$21,873. Besides talk of a showdown with Maxim at light heavyweight in the summer of 1951, Gainford said Robinson would agree to give Jake a return title shot, but only with their side getting 45% of the TV money, as Robinson had only taken in 15% for this fight!

LaMotta was in his dressing room for more than an hour and a half, with no press allowed, at first receiving oxygen after the bout. His face was a mask in honour of Robinson's genius and his guts. Robinson sat in a chair in his small dressing room,

spent and yet smiling for the press that buzzed around him. Even with a swollen left hand and left eye, there was no repressing his sense of triumph and that he was fully loving the fact he had become only the fourth man ever to win both the welterweight and middleweight world crowns. "Yes, I am enjoying that right this moment," he laughed.

Two days after the fight, Robinson told reporters that he was all set to take on the challenge of winning the light heavyweight crown. "You all say I'm a middleweight but I'm not sure about that. But I have to try for that big belt." Robinson had after all bulked up to hit the scales at only 155.5lbs for the LaMotta ordeal. La Motta himself admitted after the fight that making 160lbs hadn't been any fun for him this time.

Views differ when boxing reaches that threshold of controlled human violence that Robinson and LaMotta brought to bare upon the sporting world. The Indianapolis News said in seeing Robinson demolish LaMotta as he did, boxing was "a crime in the name of sport... a sickening tribute to brutality!" But millions of others watched that incredible Valentine's Day encounter of supreme capability vs. total resolution as just one of life's brutal theatres, that boxing is and remains. It's just that when a Robinson and a LaMotta meet everything good and bad, admirable and contentious become part of the brilliant, everlasting imagery.

