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Primo Carnera

Primo Carnera (Sequals, October 25, 1906 - Sequals, June 29, 1967), was the world heavyweight champion from 29 June 1933 to 14 June 1934. For his physical strength, his personal qualities, his life, he is forever imprinted in the history of the boxing world, and has become a legend internationally.



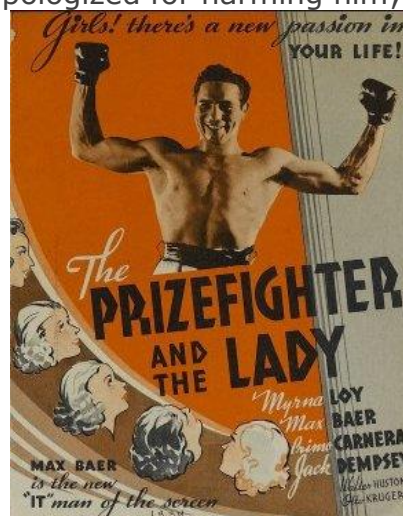
Primo Carnera was born in Sequals, a village in the province of Pordenone, in October 25, 1906, and at birth weighed 8 kg. His family was very poor and only survived thanks to the work of his father, a mosaic artist who emigrated to Germany. In 1915 his father was called to fight in the First World War and therefore

had to leave his job, leaving all the burden of the family on his wife. The mother then sought a job, but was soon forced to sell her wedding ring to survive. Carnera was thus obliged to leave school and to beg with his brothers. Surprisingly, the "strongest man in the world" always maintained a great love for poetry, and knew whole cantos of the Divine Comedy by heart.

He was growing to the point that, at twelve years old, he had the stature of an adult and was also arrested as a deserter, until his relatives came to explain that he was just a kid wearing adult men's clothes. Still a teenager, driven by poverty, Primo emigrated to France to stay with his uncle, finding employment as a carpenter. The uncles introduced him to the world of boxing, organizing a match with a beginner, but Carnera was not yet ready for the big step. His physique, meanwhile, was still growing: 205 cm tall, 125 kg of weight; he was nicknamed "violin's feet" because he needed size-52 shoes. He could adapt clothes, but was accustomed to walk barefoot.

In 1925, a circus stopped right where he living, near Le Mans. One day, during one of the wrestling matches which he was attending, the manager noticed his imposing physique and hired him. Carnera began touring as a wrestler, and his manager offered a prize for anyone who could defeat him, but none succeeded. He became a freak and were saddled with nicknames, including the curious "Juan the Spaniard".

One day the circus made a stop at Arcachon. Here, among the crowd, there was also Paul Journée, a former French heavyweight champion who saw in his exceptional ability the potential of a boxer. But training for Carnera would mean abandoning the circus and return to poverty, and thus at first he chose to drop the proposal. Later on he found a solution: he would go back to his earlier job, and train in Journée's gym. Thanks to his stubbornness, and the teachings of the former champion, soon he reached good levels. Journée insisted on showing Carnera to manager Léon See, who was stunned by the Italian's impressive size, and organized a couple of matches, one against a heavyweight boxer, that the Friulian knocked out; but then, he apologized for harming him, to the anger of his manager.



PROFESSIONAL BOXING

Léon Seedel showed his boxer to organizer Jeff Dickson, and Carnera made his professional debut in Paris on September 12, 1928, winning by knockout in the second round against Leon Sebilo. He won all six following matches, among them the much-discussed one with Epifanio Islas, in Milan. Journalists declared the match was rigged and called Carnera "gorgonzola tower".

Actually his manager, whenever he could, made sure that his boxer could win. Still today it is not known how many matches were fixed. Carnera was not, however, aware, and there were many matches won regularly. Although somewhat lacking in technique, Carnera had in fact an exceptional fist.

Disappointed with the cold reception in his homeland, in 1930 Primo Carnera landed in the United States. Those were the years of prohibition, the economic crisis - which, however, did not affect boxing - and Italian-American mafia invested on Carnera with Leon See. His organizers obviously concealed the way in which they managed his matches. Carnera got 15 wins, 14 by knockout and 1 by disqualification against George Godfrey. To these were added 5 more, but he lost on points against Jim Maloney.

Carnera was becoming more and more popular all over the world, especially after he faced Paulino Uzcudun. Carnera 's manager, while skeptical about his boxer's chances of victory, accepted the match. The Italian press still kept discrediting the Friulan boxer, convinced that if he won, it would have been only for a combine.

The match took place Nov. 30, 1930, and things went differently; there was clearly no trick in favor of the Italian who, indeed, was forced by the organizers to use smaller gloves than those he normally wore; this decision seemed aimed to benefit the Basque Uzcudun. Initially Carnera was not inclined to accept what he considered an injustice but the thought of disappointing the 80,000 paying spectators made him accept.

The match was not easy, in those conditions. Uzcudun was always attacking, but Carnera resisted. The match lasted longer than expected and at the end Carnera won on points. So the position of Italian journalists changed and they began to honor the Friulan boxer. Now everyone had faith in him and, as he had been able to win in those conditions, they wonderer what he could be capable of. The next match was held in London, against Reggie Meen, and here Carnera won by knockout. At the end of 1930 Carnera had scored 25 wins and only one defeat.



Carnera nel 1933, dopo la vittoria su Sharkey

Primo Carnera, gloria italiana e friulana del pugilato, è qui ritratto nel 1933, nel momento più alto della sua carriera, quando a New York conquistò il titolo mondiale dei pesi massimi battendo Sharkey. Questa e altre vecchie foto fanno parte dell' "archivio pubblico" di foto storiche di un agriturismo di Tressa di Perena

THE WORLD TITLE

The next season began from Miami, with a re-match against Jim Maloney. 1931 ended for Carnera with a total 10 matches, 9 won and one lost on points. In 1932, Carnera suffered two questionable defeats against Larry Gains and Stanley Poreda and won the other 23 games. After the defeat by Larry Gains, he became aware of the fact that his manager took possession of most of his money and collaborated with the Mafia. So he left him and came to Italy where he joined the team of Luigi Soresi, less experienced than the previous manager but also he took advantage of Carnera's good heart. Soresi brought him back to the U.S. organizing matches valid for the world title.

On 10 February 1933, Primo Carnera met a turning point in his life, an experience that deeply cut into his heart and showed the world the greatness of the soul of this man so big and powerful in body. He confronted Ernie Schaaf, who, after a difficult match, was knocked out and brought to hospital. On February 14, Ernie Schaaf died of a cerebral hemorrhage, caused by his opponent's powerful blows. In deep anguish, Carnera decided to retire from boxing. The unlikely soul that saved him from permanent renunciation was Lycy Schaaf, Ernie's mother, who wrote a heartfelt letter to clear him of any responsibility. This finally opened doors to the world heavyweight title challenge of 29 June 1933 against 31-year-old Jack Sharkey.

After two months' workouts on June 29, 1933 Primo Carnera climbed into the ring at Madison Square Garden, New York. Since Carnera's fists were devastating, Sharkey's team insisted on controlling Carnera's gloves, convinced that they were full of metal objects, but they had to realize that there was no trick in the giant's power. After six rounds Carnera ko'ed Jack Sharkey with a right uppercut. For Italian immigrants the victory was a great satisfaction and pride: Primo Carnera was the first world heavyweight champion of Italian nationality.

Primo would have liked to defend the title in Italy but that was not allowed since he was under contract with the Madison Square Garden. On October 22, 1933 he fought a re-match against Paulino Uzcudun in Rome; Mussolini was also present at the match. Carnera refused compensation and wore a black shirt on that occasion, to express his closeness to the fascist regime.

Italy noticed him. The institutions paid homage to him, he was a useful model to the regime. The Duce wanted to make Carnera an ideal model of the Italian man, and in following years expressly forbade the press to publish pictures of the boxer to the mat. So Carnera became a national, invincible hero, and his image was exploited in comics, posters, articles. Later on, after the fall of the fascist regime, the partisans accused him of being a collaborator of Mussolini and only after much criticism Carnera was rehabilitated.

On the occasion of the premiere of the film by Renzo Martinelli about her father, Giovanna Maria Carnera said: *"... the fascist regime chose him as an icon, but the truth is that the regime used my father, as they used every sportsman of those times. Dad was never a fascist and did not belong to any political party."*

THE DECLINE IN BOXING

After defending the title against Uzcudun, Carnera returned to the U.S. and on 1 March 1934 entered the ring against Tommy Loughran. After a very hard match, the win was given to Carnera. The next match was against Max Baer, an American weighing 95 kg and smaller than Carnera, but very experienced. Meanwhile on 14 June 1934 Carnera's manager was arrested. General opinion was that the match would be difficult, but within the reach of Carnera, but about a minute into the match Baer struck him repeatedly in the face, sending him to the mat for 2 times.

Carnera suffered a luxated ankle, but did not speak and continued the match, which was devastating. He went to the mat several times but always got up, did not seem to want to give up, until in the 11th round the referee realized that Primo Carnera was not able to continue and decided to suspend the meeting. Max Baer was the new heavyweight champion of the world, while Carnera became since that match "the giant with feet of clay".



1934: Max Baer (left) vs. Primo Carnera (right) boxed for the world title. Max knocked out Primo in the 11th round. Incidentally the referee was the great Jack Dempsey "The Manassa Mauler" (center) who won the heavyweight world title on July 4th, 1919. A good friend of mine, Elvira Cesario met Primo Carnera (right) when she was just a little girl. I'm very proud to call her my friend. She described him as a very gentle person.

After he left the hospital, Carnera returned to fight. He toured almost all of South America, where he was greatly loved. In 1935, after winning against Ray Impellettieri, he decided to fight Joe Louis. Eight years younger than Carnera, one of the best boxers of all time, Louis was an emerging champion. It was a hot match, full of racist chanting, Louis' fans, security officers. Eventually Joe Louis won.

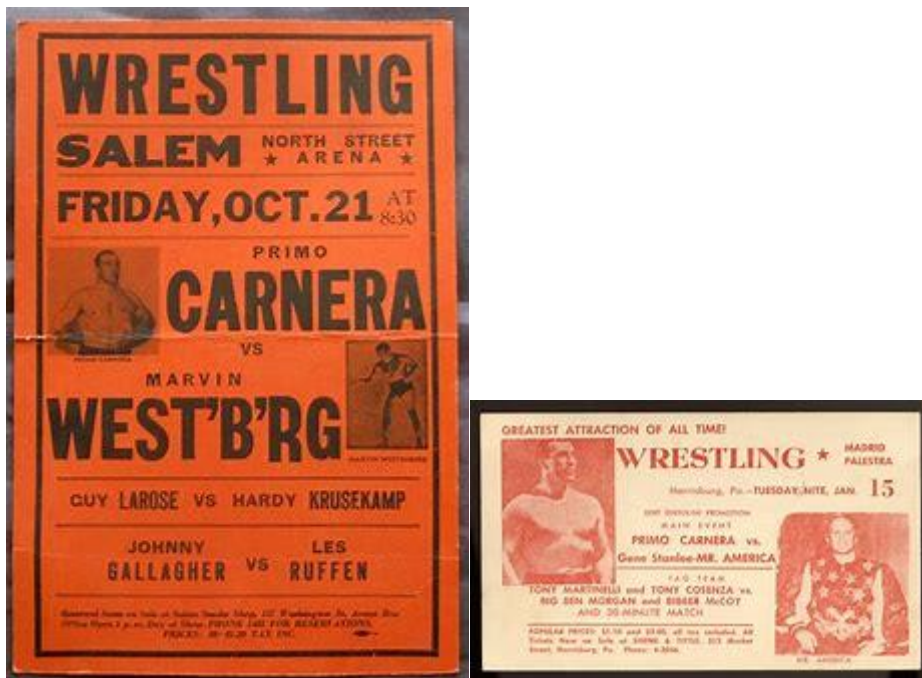
In 1936 Carnera began to fight little-known boxers, then he was confined to bed because of a thrombosis. He began to think that this was the right time to retire permanently, but after seeing the progress that he was making, he decided to prolong his career as a boxer and refused a proposal by Jack Curley to move to wrestling. Against the advice of his doctors, he returned to the ring but lost the subsequent matches. He was diagnosed with diabetes and one of his kidney was removed. On 13 March 1939 he married Pina Kovacic and had two children, Umberto and Maria Giovanna.

THE CAREER IN WRESTLING

After collecting 70 wins by knockout in boxing, in 1946 he went back to wrestling. In October, he made his debut against Chief Saunooke, who was knocked out. After a week, always in the Georgia Wrestling Championship, a promotion of the NWA (National Wrestling Alliance), he fought against Jules Strongbow, prevailing once again. On March 24, 1947 fought George Macricostas, and then against Babe Sharkey, winning both matches.

In the 1940s, he and his family were living in a ranch-style house in the San Fernando Valley, then in the 1950s he owned an Italian restaurant on Pico Blvd in Los Angeles, near the 20th Century - Fox Studios.

Thanks to wrestling, Carnera rose to popularity again, especially after defeating one of the leading wrestlers of the time, Ed "Strangler" Lewis. Even in wrestling Carnera thus became one of the most unbeatable. Only Italian Antonino Rocca, on April 20, 1948, stopped his record 321 victories. On 18 February 1957 he took the title of Claims Heavyweight Wrestling Championship, defeating King Kong, a 182-kg heavy wrestler.



Meanwhile, in 1953 the Carnera family finally became U.S. citizens, and Carnera began to devote himself more to the movies, starring in fifteen films, including *Hercules Unchained* and the *Queen of Lidi*, *Achilles' heel*, and others, plus a tour with Italian comedian Renato Rascel. In the 1960s, he owned a liquor store on South Brand Blvd in Glendale, Ca. He and his wife spent their last American years in Los Angeles, living in an apartment in Culver City, Ca before moving back to Italy in 1966.

FINAL YEARS

His health was deteriorating. He became ill with liver cirrhosis and when he realized that his time was running out, he returned to live in Italy. In May 1967 he was back to Sequals, in his Friuli, and on June 29, 1967 - exactly the 34th anniversary of the conquest of the world heavyweight title - the gong sounded the end for the "gentle giant", who was only fifty-eight years old.

On the occasion of the premiere of Renzo Martinelli's movie on her father's life, daughter Giovanna Maria said: *"...he passed to us his dedication and caring towards others. He taught us that no one stays on top forever, and that the true character of a person is judged by how we face our decline."*

1934: Max Baer (left) vs. Primo Carnera (right) boxed for the world title. Max knocked out Primo in the 11th round. Incidentally the referee was the great Jack Dempsey "The Manassa Mauler" (center) who won the heavyweight world title on July 4th, 1919. A good friend of mine, Elvira Cesario met Primo Carnera (right) when she was just a little girl. I'm very proud to call her my friend. She described him as a very gentle person.