

Aboriginal boxer Lionel Rose dies, aged 62

Richard Phillips
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The death of Lionel Rose, 62, the first indigenous Australian to win a world boxing title, has seen an outpouring of tributes over the past fortnight. On May 17, more than 2,000 people attended his state funeral at Melbourne's Festival Hall, the site of the popular boxer's first major victory.

While millions of ordinary people identified with Rose's rise to international fame, the Australian political establishment used his passing to restate, ad nauseam, the claim that individual talent can transcend poverty and oppression.

An editorial in Melbourne's *Age* newspaper was typical. It declared on May 9 that the "lone efforts" of Rose and other talented Aboriginal sportsmen and women who had lifted themselves "out of a world of social and cultural oppression", represented "the best hope for indigenous Australia's future." Rose's early death demonstrated the opposite. He spent the final years of his life in poor health, the victim of two major strokes, and in far from prosperous circumstances.

The eldest of nine children, Rose was born and raised in Jackson's Track, a small Aboriginal community near Warragul in Victoria. While he used to speak fondly of his childhood, poverty was endemic—an expression of the ongoing oppression of the country's indigenous population.

Aborigines were officially deemed a "dying race" and government authorities routinely practised the infamous "assimilation" or "breeding out" programs, under which mixed-race children were forcibly removed from their parents and placed in "care". These policies, which were continued until 1970, represented a particularly brutal chapter in the dispersal and dispossession of the country's native population.

By the time Rose reached the age of 14, the so-called Aboriginal Protection Board had begun breaking up the Jackson's Track community and sending its residents to

nearby towns.

Roy Rose, Lionel's father, turned to boxing as a means of escaping poverty. He was well-known on the rural boxing tent circuit, in which semi-professional boxers—mainly indigenous youth organised by various carnival entrepreneurs—challenged "all comers" at agricultural shows. Anyone prepared to fight the "professionals" was offered a cash prize—a small percentage of the door money paid by those who came to watch the inevitable bloodbath.

While the young Lionel attended these events and learnt some boxing basics from his father, his real training began after he was taken under the wing of Frank Oakes, a local boxing coach.

At 15, Rose won the Australian amateur flyweight championship and in 1964, after failing selection for the Australian Olympic team, decided to become a professional fighter to help support his family. The teenager, who married Oakes's daughter Jenny several years later, rapidly climbed to the top of his class—winning the Australian bantamweight title in late 1966. About 18 months later, in February 1968, he challenged the world title holder, Masahiko "Fighting" Harada, in Tokyo.

The 19-year-old Rose defeated Harada in a unanimous points decision after 15 rounds and returned to Australia where he was given a hero's welcome. More than 100,000 people crammed Melbourne's city streets to greet him. Later that year, he became the first Aboriginal "Australian of the Year", and then a Member of the Order of the British Empire, or MBE.

Rose held the world title until August 1969 when he was knocked out by the Mexican fighter Ruben Olivares. After losing to Olivares, he moved into the lightweight division. He also turned to music, going on to record two country music style hits: "I Thank You" and "Please Remember Me". In the early 1970s, he rejected a major offer to box in apartheid South Africa, because it would have required him

to be classified as an honorary “white”.

Despite some losses to lesser-known lightweight boxers during this time, Rose still displayed flashes of sporting brilliance and in May 1971, he fought world junior lightweight champion Yoshiaki Numata. He lost that bout, however, and announced his retirement. In 1975, he attempted a comeback. But after losing four of his next six fights, he quit boxing for good.

Rose’s world championship victory in 1968 occurred under conditions of increasing political militancy among indigenous Australians and growing opposition in the working class as a whole to the social horrors inflicted on Aborigines. But this inchoate movement was diverted by the Stalinist Communist Party, along with various Labor “lefts”, who cultivated a privileged petty-bourgeois Aboriginal layer on the basis of the reactionary politics of black nationalism, aimed at splitting indigenous workers from their non-indigenous brothers and sisters. They promoted the claim that recognition of land rights and “native title” would overcome the decades of oppression and government neglect. These processes simply enriched a narrow layer of Aboriginal leaders and perpetuated the source of the suffering--class society and the capitalist profit system itself.

Rose’s financial status at the height of his boxing fame was modest by today’s standards. He was paid \$7,500 for his “Fighting” Harada victory and \$100,000 for the Numata duel, but this was more money than he had ever seen. He generously gave away most of it to relatives, friends and countless others in need, hoping that his winnings might somehow overcome their problems.

Rose was deeply concerned about the worsening social position of Aborigines—a fact that weighed heavily on him in the last decades of his life. His financial assistance and moral support to indigenous sportspeople and communities was legendary, even as he struggled with his own personal difficulties, including drug and alcohol abuse.

Rose’s death has seen hundreds of genuinely heart-felt comments from ordinary people, praising his warmth and unaffected manner—characteristics largely absent from much of contemporary sport. These tributes stand in stark contrast to the empty and self-serving statements by various parliamentary politicians, who praised his sporting prowess but carefully avoided any mention of the problems Rose faced before he died.

Prime Minister Julia Gillard took time out from the

parliamentary debate on her government’s welfare slashing budget to “pay her respects” to Rose and his family. The boxer, she disingenuously declared, was “an inspiration to all of us” and “the heart and soul of the whole of Australia”. Liberal opposition leader Tony Abbott reciprocated, stating that the boxer was “a model Australian” who fought for “true reconciliation”.

The only purpose of these cynical, stomach-churning proclamations is to cover up the embarrassing reality that the 200-year oppression of indigenous Australians continues unabated. Rose died at just 62, the usual life expectancy for Aboriginal men in twenty-first century Australia, and some 20 years younger than the average age for non-indigenous Australian males.

Meanwhile the Labor government continues its Northern Territory “intervention”, initiated by the former Howard government, and the most serious assault on the democratic and social rights of indigenous people in more than 40 years. In its budget, just one week before Rose’s death, the Gillard government announced that one of the intervention’s main features, “welfare quarantining”, would be expanded to more impoverished working class communities nationwide—both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal (see: “Australian government budget cuts welfare”).

While Rose was not an openly political figure, politics shaped and moulded his life. His achievements were callously exploited by the corporate media and official establishment to promote the illusion that Australian capitalism had overcome its dark history. The much-loved boxer, like countless other talented indigenous sporting figures, dancers, musicians and artists, was picked up and celebrated, but only until his “news value” was exhausted.

Lionel Rose will nevertheless be remembered by his many, many thousands of fans and supporters as an extraordinarily talented and warm-hearted human being.

The author recommends:

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[9 May 2011]



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