

Violence in sports: Two more boxers die from head injuries

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Mexican featherweight boxer Oscar Gonzalez died February 3 from brain injuries sustained during a match with Jesus Galicia in Mexico City. Gonzalez was knocked unconscious during the 10th round, and medical staff immediately sought to get him on an oxygen ventilator. Within 36 hours, the boxer was pulled off a respirator at his wife's request, after doctors had declared that parts of his brain had died. Apparently Gonzalez had previous discussions with wife about such a scenario and requested that he not be kept alive. He was 23 years old.

Gonzalez' death comes three months after junior featherweight boxer Francisco "Frankie" Leal of Mexico died from severe head trauma incurred while being knocked out by opponent Raul Hiraes. Leal had already nearly died in the ring 18 months earlier, when he had to be rushed to a hospital for head injuries after a knockout loss to Russian boxer Evgeny Gradovich. This did not prevent boxing authorities from allowing Leal to get back into the ring. He was 26 and left behind a wife and son.

The media has not reported many details about the lives and backgrounds of either Gonzalez or Leal. If their situations were typical of those who try to make a living in the ring, they most likely came from poverty-stricken backgrounds and were obliged to disregard the well-known physical hazards of the sport, both short-term and long-term, in their effort to earn a decent income for themselves and their families.

The deaths of Gonzalez and Leal are only the latest in a long series of ring fatalities. Various reports provide a general portrait of the sport in terms of deaths caused by trauma to the head, neck or body. The *Velazquez Fatality Collection of Boxing Injuries* estimates that 1,358 professional boxers officially died from injuries in the ring during the 20th century, and

that 112 fighters have died between 2000 and 2011. A report in the journal *Neuroscience* estimated that since the year 1900, on average, 10 boxers died from ring injuries each year.

The actual number of boxing-related fatalities is likely much higher, as there are no official reports on amateur boxing deaths, and none of the major boxing organizations bother much, for obvious reasons, about keeping track of such things. Neither have there been any significant studies about the lives and conditions of boxers after they leave boxing.

Various reports, however, indicate these athletes frequently suffer from dementia pugilistica ("punch-drunk syndrome"), a neurological variant of chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE), which afflicts many boxers at an early age. Degenerative diseases are also increasing among athletes in other sports who suffer repeated concussions and head traumas, such as hockey and football players.

The effects of CTE-related disorders are known to cause a wide variety of degenerative cognitive problems, ranging from dementia and loss of motor function to severe depression and pathological anger. In recent years, numerous boxers, including Arturo Gatti, Alexis Arguello and Edwin Valero, have died violent deaths outside the ring, likely bound up with "side-effects" of long-term trauma to the head and neurological disorder.

Boxing is a sport notoriously associated with gangsters and financial hustlers. Little attention has ever been paid to the fate of boxers, in the ring or out of it, by the sport's ruling bodies. The fighters lack proper protection for the body, particularly the head and the internal organs under the rib cage, making boxing a brutal combat sport that often resembles the barbaric gladiatorial contests of the Roman Empire. Very few

countries even have a centralized body to supervise the sport, much less to discuss health and safety, payment scales, retirement benefits, corruption laws and so forth.

Boxing, like other professional sports, produces hundreds of millions of dollars in profits for the vultures who own or operate promotion companies and casinos, while the vast majority of its athletes risk their lives for a pittance. Some of the best-known boxing promoters, such as Top Rank's Bob Arum (net worth approximately \$200 million) and Don King (net worth approximately \$290 million), have gotten rich while fighters in their stable met early deaths, or suffered significant long-term illness, with no medical or retirement benefits.

It is inevitable that more boxing ring deaths will follow those of Oscar Gonzalez and Frankie Leal.

Under such tragic circumstances, one is reminded of the words of the great socialist James P. Cannon, commenting on the death of boxer Georgie Flores in 1951:

“It is a commentary on the times and the social environment out of which the boxing business rises like a poisonous flower from a dunghill, that nobody came forward with the simple demand to outlaw prize fighting, as it was outlawed in most of the states of this country up till the turn of the century. Cock-fighting is illegal; it is considered inhumane to put a couple of roosters into a pit and incite them to spur each other until one of them keels over. It is also against the law to put bulldogs into the pit to fight for a side bet. But our civilization—which is on the march, to be sure—has not yet advanced to the point where the law and public opinion forbid men, who have nothing against each other, to fight for money and the amusement of paying spectators...

“Blows to the head never did anybody any good. And if anybody ever got any fun out of it, he hasn't been heard from yet. The ‘sport’ in prize fighting is strictly for the spectators and the managers and promoters.”



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