



CHRISTIAN GIUDICE

A FIRE BURNS WITHIN

*The Miraculous Journey of
Wilfredo 'Bazooka' Gomez*

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Introduction

THERE'S something unexplainable about Wilfredo Gomez, from the unpretentious way he carries himself outside the ring to the assertiveness that made him who he was inside it. Seventeen times he walked into that ring to defend his super bantamweight belt and 17 knockouts later he had set a precedent of such dominance that it may never be broken. As the greatest 122-pounder ever, Gomez blended cool with precision, an offensive dynamo who rarely got hit cleanly. Blessed with good looks and an easy demeanour, Gomez shined like no other in the spotlight as his professional and public worlds collided. He comfortably navigated his public life often with a celebrity actress on his arm – and, when he wanted to in his professional life, was as businesslike in the ring as any other fighter in the world. Later, those two worlds collided again to create chaos and disorder, but when Gomez could manage them, it was the perfect elixir.

I have written the biographies of all three Latin kings – Roberto Duran, Alexis Arguello, and now Gomez – and many similarities surfaced. If Duran symbolised a voracious and at times uncontrollable entity in the ring, Arguello served as the thoughtful gentleman who truly did care about his opponent. As for Gomez, he was always existing somewhere in between, straddling both worlds as he could be both ruthless in his intimidation tactics and genuine in his concern for his opponents.

Outside the ring Gomez trusted the people around him like family until they crossed him – and even then he was quick to pull the trigger on the relationship. Inside the ring he trusted his skills and they rarely let him down. For the first part of his career he relied on a fierce appetite to train. But the routine and training ritual eventually succumbed to excessive weight gain between fights and led to immense struggles to make that 122lb weight class. In those respects, Gomez and Duran lived similar lifestyles, but were so physically gifted that they compensated for the flaws with natural ability. Conversely, Arguello followed a spartan training regimen until his first fight with Pryor.

But in their prime, there was no one like them. When Gomez stepped in against Carlos Zarate, the bantam king with 54 victories and 53 knockouts, people severely criticised the move. Gomez was too green and this was too soon. Pundits said the same thing when Arguello fought Ernesto Marcel and then Ruben Olivares for the 126lb title in 1974. But Gomez didn't just beat Zarate; he took him apart piece by piece. It was Gomez's *pièce de résistance*, the fight that people should always judge him by. But then came Salvador Sanchez and everything changed. Sanchez was to Gomez what Pryor was to Arguello and Leonard was to Duran (in the second fight).

Nearly a year after Gomez lost to Sanchez, the Mexican icon died in a car accident. So many emotions tore through Gomez. He questioned his place in the sport, tried to accept the realisation that he would never get a rematch, while also accepting that the boxing world lost a good man.

Blinded by Sanchez's death, Gomez looked within. Instead of sitting back and sending condolences to Sanchez's family, Wilfredo flew to Mexico in the middle of training for his next fight to visit Salvador's grave. That was the real Wilfredo Gomez. Strip away everything else, and that was the genuine article. Then, he moved on. This is his story.

Round I

A Champ is Born

'I was born to be a fighter'
Wilfredo 'Bazooka' Gomez

BORN on 29 October 1956 in Barrio Las Monjas (Santurce), Wilfredo Gomez Rivera was one of two siblings. His mother and father, Paula and Jacobo, were good, hard-working parents who instilled a sense of pride and worth within their children. Despite the difficulties of growing up in an impoverished district of San Juan, young Wilfredo never felt that he was poor. The love he received from his parents taught him that he would never feel that sorrow or a resentment toward them despite the suffering that he would get used to as a child. Gomez, who was known as 'Papo', helped take care of his deaf and mute sister Isabel, whom he loved and would later help immensely when he became a champion.

'It was a rough neighbourhood and I had to look out for her,' said Gomez.

According to those who knew young Wilfredo intimately, he was an active young boy who played all sports,

but eventually would realise his ability as a boxer. He sold little coconut candies on the streets to help himself, but that was not always profitable. 'I would end up eating them all,' he would admit years later. 'I liked all kinds of music and television shows. I played baseball, basketball, and I even played shortstop. But I was too short and I decided to go for boxing.'

His aunt, who still lives in Las Monjas, recalled a mischievous child, who always was getting into something. What Gomez could not avoid was fighting in the streets of Las Monjas. Everything that he did revolved around boxing. Jacobo didn't question his son's newfound passion. Surviving in Las Monjas was not easy as Gomez slept on a mattress on the floor, and by the age of nine he started going to the local boxing gym – the Sixto Escobar Gym – more regularly and never stopped.

It was not uncommon back in the early 1960s to have a little store and sell candies and other sundry items to the neighbours. In Santurce, Jacobo ran one out of his home. Although he was not home often because of his hours as a taxi driver, Jacobo always found time to be around family and friends.

'The way Papo had to grow up was hard,' said Nitsa Marquez Gomez, Wilfredo's cousin. 'I remember this store that Jacobo had and he would sell little things out of it. He would buy things, keep them at home, and then sell them to the neighbours. You know, candies and other things out of a room in the house.'

There was nothing pretentious about Jacobo and family members fondly remember that the party didn't truly start until he arrived.

'He was always, always the life of the party,' said Nitsa. 'Nothing started until he showed up. He was such a good guy, a lot of fun, always laughing.'

Jacobo wanted what was best for his family and never strayed from that goal. It was a tight-knit family where familiar faces and a cup of coffee or a piece of cake were minutes away. Young Wilfredo looked to his father for guidance, but did not always make the best decisions.

‘My dad tried to give me a lot of advice,’ said Wilfredo. ‘At times it was tough. Boxing helped me stay out of trouble.’

Nitsa, who is eight years younger than Wilfredo, fondly remembers the days when her cousin used to drive up the street in his fancy white Chevy Monte Carlo. However, Nitsa also recalls the time they spent together at the home of Mafela, Nitsa’s grandmother, which was two minutes from her own house, just passing the time drinking coffee or eating snacks. Back then, Wilfredo would joke about how big Nitsa’s nose was or pick on her about something else.

‘Mafela, my grandmother on my father’s side, used to joke with us and say, “I am Gomez!” She was very proud about that,’ said Nitsa. ‘We used to like to play jokes all the time. Wilfredo and I spent our youth together. We used to live two minutes’ walking distance from each other. And on our way home we would stop at Mafela’s to drink coffee and make jokes.’

Wilfredo concurred, ‘She was my great aunt on my father’s side. We would go to her house to gather to talk and laugh. We talked about life and our experiences. I used to joke around with Nitsa a lot.’

If Jacobo was the outgoing father who worked hard to make ends meet and was rarely home, Paula stayed home and took excellent care of Isabel and Wilfredo. The neighbours also helped take care of the children and would often help Paula and Jacobo. Anything that her children needed, Paula went out of her way to provide. When Wilfredo became champion of the world, he never forgot the sacrifices that his mother made.

‘Paula was a really hard-working woman,’ said Nitsa. ‘She gave everything to her boy and girl. Papo’s sister did not speak or hear and Paula was very dedicated to taking care of both of them.’

Nitsa’s recollection about Paula rang true for everyone in the Gomez family. While Wilfredo was forced to grow up quickly, he still looked to his rock-solid mother for guidance. As much as they struggled, the children never felt as if they were mired in poverty. Paula’s first marriage ended in divorce and the children stayed with their father. Wilfredo’s half-sister, Julia, grew up hours away from Las Monjas with her father in the northern part of the island.

‘I was still a child when they got separated,’ said Julia. ‘When they got separated, Wilfredo lived on the south-eastern part of the island, and I lived in the north. It took three years for her to find someone and get remarried. My father kept me away. So I grew up with my father’s family. I hardly saw her until I was 18 or 19. When I was older, my father sent me to NY [New York] to live.’

‘Every time I came back to Puerto Rico, I used to visit Wilfredo and my mother. They were a very nice family and he was always in the street, boxing. I couldn’t communicate with Isabel because she was deaf-mute. I hardly saw Jacobo because he was always working.’

‘Isabel was deaf so Wilfredo, of course, was very protective of her. They were living in a very poor neighbourhood. He wanted to get out, and he was able to do that. Wilfredo really helped out my mother. After one of his early fights, he bought her the house that he lives in now. He took care of his sister, Isabel, and did everything for her. She had three children and he provided for them. One of them is a lawyer.’

Whatever energy Paula had, she put into her family. Later on, when Wilfredo became a world champion, she begrudgingly accepted his profession but didn’t travel to

fighters. It was too difficult for her. As a teenager, Wilfredo was already moving into the boxing spectrum, but he always knew where he stood in regards to his mother.

‘My mother was always after him,’ said Julia. ‘She always wanted to know what he was doing. She was very close with both of them and they had a very tight-knit family. For my mother, it was almost like she had lost three kids when she and my father separated. My dad stayed with all three of us.’

One thing all family members agree on is that once Wilfredo got the boxing bug, he never looked back. Julia never saw him much but she recalls a family that did everything together, even if they didn’t have much.

‘He used to hang out with the neighbourhood boys where kids just played around,’ said Julia. ‘That’s when he picked up boxing in the streets in Santurce.’

She added, ‘I heard about Wilfredo selling those coconut candies when he was younger. I remember back then two cents was a lot of money. I could buy a lot back then with two cents.’

Along with the makeshift store, Jacobo was also an avid boxing fan who took to the streets to set up matches for the local kids. Whether or not he knew that his son had a gift was not evident, but the passion for boxing was strong in the Gomez family.

‘Jacobo married Paula, and they lived in a small house behind my mother [who Wilfredo called “Mafela”],’ said Jorge Marquez Gomez, Wilfredo’s uncle. ‘They bought a house in Chi Chi Marin neighbourhood. When Wilfredo was born, Jacobo made a business in front of the house to help economically. Jacobo was very happy all the time. He loved to tell a lot of jokes. He was a very nice person to be around. When I was a kid, I liked going to Jacobo’s house. He was like the cool uncle.’

‘Jacobó was always in a good mood. He had these roosters that he would fight. And Wilfredo was raised in that environment. In that time, Jacobó also would set up fights in the streets for the kids. The kids were fighting all the time, and that’s how Wilfredo grew up. At the time, there was another taxi driver named Enrique Carrion. He would help the kids with boxing. Since he had a full-time job as a taxi driver, all of his extra time was spent helping the kids.’

No one ever had a bad thing to say about Jacobó.

‘My father had that little store and he would sell foods like rice, beans, cheese, and juice,’ said Wilfredo. ‘It wasn’t like a happy hour place, but just a place to gather.’

As a young boy, Wilfredo reflected those same qualities that attracted people to his father. People wanted to be around him. He was not introverted, but rather an easy-going boy who had a growing passion to become a boxer. More importantly, although his focus was boxing, Wilfredo never stopped learning. He always wanted to engage in the learning process, and that carried over to adulthood.

‘I liked history,’ Wilfredo recalled. ‘I liked learning about other countries in Latin America. I liked learning about the history of the United States. I wanted to understand the hardships and how life was in those places. For me, it was important to go to school.’

According to all accounts, Wilfredo became obsessed with the sport. Early on as an amateur, Wilfredo had Carrion as his guide, and he helped Wilfredo see the benefits of his role model status among his peers.

‘Before Wilfredo became famous,’ said Marquez Gomez, ‘he was very disciplined and very respectful. He had Carrion to help him understand how to be polite and courteous. Carrion also helped him understand how to be well behaved and a good sport.’

‘Qui Qui would always say, “You’re going to be champion of the world,”’ Wilfredo recalled.

The more that Gomez became involved in boxing, the less his family members saw him. Prior to his first amateur fight, Gomez had already gained acclaim for his street fights.

‘I was always fighting in the streets,’ said Gomez.

No one knew what Gomez was truly capable of. But the first day he walked into the local boxing gym something clicked. There was no backstory or convoluted story, just a boy who wanted to learn how to box and was willing to go to great lengths to learn the sport.

‘It was a very tiny gym,’ Wilfredo recalled. ‘The boxing mat was a floor, a dirt floor. But we just put on the gloves and sparred.’

At 13, Gomez recalled one of his first forays in the ring when he faced off against a jockey, ‘I knocked him out with one punch. I had a God-given gift as a puncher. I knocked him out with a left jab and right hand.’

Early on, Gomez relied on Carrion to take his aggression and refine it in the ring, which was not always an easy task. Carrion needed to see a level of dedication to his craft before he devoted himself to Gomez, or any young fighter. When Carrion began to work with Gomez, the teenager was a one-dimensional fighter; thus, Carrion’s job was to ensure that by the time Gomez moved into the professional spectrum, he would possess the mental and physical capabilities to maintain his speed, composure, and movement during a gruelling bout.

‘I knew him as an amateur and he was masterful,’ said Puerto Rican broadcaster, Rafael Bracero. ‘He was a wonderful boy who came from poverty. He came from a poor society. As an amateur, he was excellent. He was like nothing I had seen, and to that point I had seen some great fighters.’

Bracero added, 'He was dealing with a lot of problems at home. He had a lot of ability. Enrique Carrion developed technique and power.'

Every great fighter experiences this early transition. A trainer, often a local one, will immediately begin to size up the young boy coming back to the gym each day. The trainer will need to see what happens when that fighter gets hit for the first time. Also, the trainer must gauge if the fighter is in the sport for the long haul, or if he is merely trying to find something in himself and then leave the gym. Carrion, the taxi driver, knew that Gomez had something that appealed to him or he would not have continued to work with him. He trained Gomez out of the Sixto Escobar Gym in San Juan and would later move on to mesmerise crowds at Malta Corona Gym on 22nd Street in Santurce. Instead of just instilling confidence in the ring, he also wanted young Wilfredo to understand that he had a responsibility to act a certain way because people began to look up to him.

'[Carrion] drove a minivan and he would transport tourists to and from the hotels. He would tell me, "You're going to become champion of the world one day!"' said Gomez. 'At the time I was a very disciplined fighter.'

Only two years later, Gomez was fighting in the 1972 Olympics in Munich, Germany. Since Gomez was not old enough to fight in the prestigious Games, local officials had to doctor his birth certificate to secure him a spot. It was an extremely tense moment for Gomez, who was leaving home for the first time. Coupled with the terrorist attack which targeted the Israeli athletes, Gomez faced a host of pressures as a 15-year-old.

'No, that wasn't knowledge,' confirmed Gomez regarding the birth certificate. 'I was a year younger, but I didn't have to present it. I recall doing it, but the talk about the certificate never materialised.'

When it came to learning the ropes, Gomez and Vellon both struggled with mastering table etiquette.

‘When we went to a gala, we all sat – around 12 of us,’ Gomez animatedly continued. ‘We sat down and we had no idea what to do with the spoons, knives and forks. We were making fun of one another. We didn’t know what they meant when they said which spoon is for each meal. We didn’t know which one was for the meat and which one for the seafood. When I see Vellon we always think about that and we laugh.’

Gomez represented Puerto Rico as a 112lb flyweight, 10lb less than he would fight as a professional. He was learning how to succeed as an amateur and was developing all of the nuances of being a great amateur fighter. Later, Gomez would be forced to learn an entirely new, foreign style as a professional. He lost to Egypt’s Mohamed Selim, 4-1, in the second round on 31 August 1972. Gomez was disqualified for dipping and leading with his head, an infraction in amateur fighting.

‘I was only 15 at the time and I didn’t know the Olympic rules,’ said Gomez. ‘If I were two years older, I would have fought very differently.’

Selim was knocked out in the third round. Gomez’s close friend Jose Luis Vellon, the featherweight representative from Puerto Rico, also dropped his first Olympic match-up to Argentina’s Alberto Mario Ortiz. In a legendary bantamweight match-up, Cuba’s Orlando Martinez stopped future world champion Alfonso Zamora, 5-0. Gomez knew he would eventually move up and face the spectacular Cuban.

‘I was very nervous going into the fight. I was very young. I didn’t have any experience,’ said Wilfredo. ‘It was the first time I left home. It was my first international competition. I would later win six gold medals.’

Paula implored her son to be strong and not to worry because it would help with the experience. She knew exactly how to soothe her son, who was quickly growing into becoming one of the best boxers in Puerto Rico.

On 5 September, Gomez became part of the frightening narrative that was beginning to unfold in the Olympic Village as the Black September faction of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation began a harrowing evening of terror which ended in the deaths of 11 Israelis.

‘The place where we were staying was very close to the Israelis,’ said Wilfredo. ‘Hector Cardona kept us all together. We were sequestered and we couldn’t do anything. It was a very intense moment.’

Despite feeling the tension of the moment, Gomez and the other Puerto Rican athletes were kept inside until the violence had subsided and the threat diminished. The murders of the Israelis created a pall over the remainder of the Olympic Games.

No one expected Gomez to return with a gold medal but the experience proved invaluable. Studying the Cuban fighters allowed Gomez to devise his own plan for success against the best fighters in the world. First, he wanted Orlando Martinez.

‘Back then the Cubans were considered professionals,’ said Wilfredo. ‘Orlando was the Olympic champion that year and I remember seeing him. I told him, “I will get you on the way down.” He was a slippery fighter who punched well. He hit hard.’

‘The Cubans have 15 or 20 years of amateur experience. Here in Puerto Rico, amateurs are amateurs.’

Due to his amateur status, Gomez was getting opportunities that eluded his parents. He was travelling around the world and experiencing new cultures. Still, they were not sold on his newfound passion.

‘My dad didn’t want me to box because of the damaging punches,’ said Wilfredo. ‘But I would still sneak out and practise. My mom wanted me to be a doctor or lawyer.’

Two years later, Gomez earned his way to Santo Domingo, in the Dominican Republic, to compete in the Central American and Caribbean Games which started on 27 February and ended on 13 March.

The talented Gomez had significantly improved as a fighter. Both physically and mentally, Gomez had matured and did not make the same mistakes that marred his Olympic performance in 1972. Twenty-three countries competed in 18 different sports. Now, the burden was on Gomez to shine. If he wanted to make a statement, the Games provided him an avenue to showcase his talents. In the quarter-final bout, Gomez knocked out Ramon Henriquez in two rounds, and then returned in the semi-finals to decision his nemesis, Orlando Martinez, in three rounds. It was his second victory in as many bouts over Martinez as Gomez decisioned the Cuban the previous November. Then, on 9 March, Gomez secured his gold medal by knocking out Jovito Rengifo in three rounds.

‘I was only 16 or 17 years old,’ said Gomez. ‘It was a very hard fight.’

Gomez’s friend Jose Luis Vellon, who fought as a featherweight and also a lightweight during his career, recalled the bout with the mature and experienced Cuban. ‘I was fighting at 132lb and Wilfredo fought at 119lb,’ he said. ‘I was heavier than him, but I sparred with him a little. Back then, he had such a hard punch – a very, very strong punch. I saw the fight with Orlando Martinez. He was a gold medallist in the 1972 Summer Olympics in Munich. He was a god. Martinez was the best boxer in Cuba and Wilfredo, at 17, was like a child. Then, Gomez went out and beat him.’

Sparring with Vellon helped sharpen Gomez. Moving and boxing well, Vellon was 'hard to hit', fast and had a strong punch.

With Carrion as his guide, Gomez was making remarkable progress. What was more important was the relationship that developed. Gomez often looked at Carrion like his 'papa' and put his trust in him. At that age, that strong bond was more important than any of Gomez's victories.

'I learned a lot from him,' said Gomez. 'I learned that the left hook to the liver was a killer. I learned to move laterally and use my speed. I learned how to hit and avoid punches at the same time. He showed me how to throw combinations and use head movement. Those are skills I perfected later on.'

Another impressive victory later that March came over a local phenom, Wilfred Benitez. Benitez was a young star under the tutelage of his father Gregorio, a respected trainer who had a legendary temper. After Gomez decisioned Benitez in a nondescript bout, Gregorio and Enrique Carrion got in a fight in the corner. The two would never meet again in the ring.

'It was an okay sparring session,' Gomez recalled. 'I felt comfortable against him. I remember my father got into a fight with someone in the other corner. Then Carrion fought with Benitez's father. Gregorio got into it with someone in the crowd. Gregorio was a good trainer, but he couldn't control his temper. He liked to go to the racetrack to make a lot of bets. He lost a lot.'

There was something special about Wilfredo 'Bazooka' Gómez long before he fought for the 122lb world championship. The way he carried himself. The confidence. The feeling of being invincible. The utter defiance. For Gómez, it was only a matter of time before he would become champion of the world.

Anyone who saw him fight during this time was likely to concur. The young fighter had already backed up his prediction that he would beat Martinez, but becoming a world amateur champion would be the climax of a near perfect amateur career.

Surprisingly, in 96 fights, Gomez had only suffered three amateur losses. The first recorded defeat was the one to Selim in the 1972 Olympic Games, then Gomez suffered a loss to Martin Vargas, and his third came against the tall, powerful Derrick Holmes in the final round of the North American Boxing Championships in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Holmes was born in the New Carrollton suburbs of Washington, DC with Sugar Ray Leonard and they spent a lot of time together in and out of the ring. While Leonard became the Olympic darling, Holmes began to etch his own career.

‘Wilfredo was walking around with this muscle shirt, showing off,’ said Holmes.

Occasionally, amateur boxers will develop a friendship, but Gomez and Holmes did not share any similar interests, except for one incident where they were flirting with the same girl a week prior to their showdown.

‘He got the girl,’ said Holmes. ‘I got the trophy.’

Holmes stopped Gomez in one round a month before he was set to compete in the World Championships in Havana, Cuba. It was a huge shock to Gomez, who had never been sent to the canvas. He didn’t have much time to regroup. Holmes would stay the course as an amateur but miss his opportunity to go to the 1976 Olympic Games because he would lose his focus.

‘[Holmes] hit me right on the chin and knocked me out,’ Gomez recalled. ‘That knockout loss gave me more motivation to be well prepared in Havana and not get hit by another lucky punch.’

That August, Gomez headed to Cuba in what would represent his final amateur boxing experience. Everything that Gomez had dreamed of was now coming to fruition. In the ring, Gomez had learned something new from each bout. When Gomez started as an amateur, he was raw and lacked experience to make certain decisions in the ring. Now he fought with an assertiveness that belied his age. It was no secret to the Cubans that Gomez was the star, and his victories over Martinez, their gold medallist, were reminders that he was a fighter with few flaws in his repertoire.

‘Orlando Martinez was much more experienced than Derrick Holmes,’ said Gomez. ‘He was a very strong fighter.’

Travelling to the Games with friend and fellow fighter Jose Luis Vellon, Gomez knew that his amateur career was winding down. On 24 August 1974, Gomez stopped Peru’s Miguel Viti just two rounds in to a second-round match. Next, two days later, Gomez knocked out Poland’s Krzysztof Madej in two rounds in the quarter-finals. Then, on 28 August, Gomez needed only one round to secure his third stoppage against France’s Aldo Cosentino.

In what would be his last amateur bout, Gomez next stopped Cuba’s Jorge Luis Romero in two rounds. In that fight, Gomez systematically destroyed a very good fighter. He knocked him down three times in the first round. Maturity, speed and power were all rare attributes for a 16-year-old, but Gomez displayed them in abundance.

‘He beat Romero in the final,’ said Vellon. ‘I remember Romero went to the floor five times in the fight. Gomez killed him. It was a one-sided fight. Wilfredo showed that he was a superb boxer.’

Away from the ring, Gomez may have made a greater impression – on all Cubans.

It was around this time that Gomez was baptised ‘Bazooka’ by famous Cuban journalist Rene Molina for the

power in his fists. Prior to that nickname, Gomez just went by 'Dynamite'.

'Wilfredo was a very happy, happy, guy,' said Vellon. 'He was crazy for girls. He didn't talk much about his boxing. He was humble. Even now when I go to Cuba, everyone only wants to talk about Wilfredo.'

Prior to heading on their journey, Gomez worked for the government with Vellon.

'We worked with kids who came from very poor neighbourhoods,' recalled Gomez. 'We were teaching them how to box and talking to them about motivation. We tried to help them get focus and help them with their lives. These kids were all different and specialised in different areas. But I only talk boxing.'

It was a masterful performance by the Puerto Rican to become the world amateur champion at 122lb. The Cubans pleaded with Gomez to stay in Cuba and get a world-class education, but Gomez had his sights set on the professional ranks; conversely, Vellon decided to stay and take up their offer to get his education.

'I remember the world championships were held in Cuba,' said Puerto Rican broadcaster Rafael Bracero. 'They had a lot of great young boxers there. They liked Wilfredo because he was an extrovert. He beat guys who would be world champions. He knocked out all of them. Back then in those games, you knocked out one guy and the next guy was better. The people there wanted Wilfredo to stay and make his residence in Cuba.'

'I have been dealing with sports for a long time. I have seen a lot of boxers in my time. I saw Sugar Ray Robinson, the best boxer in history. I remember thinking that I hadn't seen something like what I had with Wilfredo.'

While Gomez set his sights on greener pastures, Vellon decided to take his chances and get the level of education

that he believed was not possible in Puerto Rico. For the previous three years, Vellon had worked alongside Gomez in various capacities, but now was the time to go their separate ways.

‘I remember we started working together at 16 or 17 years of age for the government,’ said Vellon. ‘We would work with children and teach them sports like baseball and basketball. We started boxing together in 1971 and we both were national champions and went on to the international tournaments. I fought as a featherweight and a lightweight and Wilfredo fought as a flyweight.’

‘After the World Championships, I had the opportunity to stay in Cuba and study, but Wilfredo said he wanted to go back and turn professional and make money. I didn’t want to fight as a professional, and some people were very critical of that.’

‘I remember after I won the bronze medal at the World Championships, a newspaper reporter came to talk to me. I told him that I wanted to stay in Cuba and study and that was the headline the next day. After reading the story, a Cuban came to talk to me and said they can help me. I didn’t have an opportunity like that in Puerto Rico. Wilfredo and I kept in touch after that moment.’

From all of his recollections, Gomez thoroughly enjoyed his time in Cuba. He even planned at some point to continue his education. But everything that provided him a sense of comfort was back in Puerto Rico. He was not as invested in academics as he was in creating a better life for his family.

‘Vellon stayed in Cuba, but they wanted him to convince me to stay too,’ said Gomez. ‘But it was never an option. There was no money there. Vellon lived there for 15 years and never came back. They offered me a lot of things [such as] a house, a chauffeur – but I said, “No.”’