

# The Man Who Didn't Kill Davey Moore

Elio Ruiz

Cuban. Residing in the United States.

*Based on an interview with the former Boxing World Champion, Ultiminio Ramos Zequeira.*

Ultiminio Ramos Zequeira told us his story surrounded by a black and white photographic background, while seated in the living room of his humble Mexican home. He came to the world in the year 1941, in a neighborhood in the city of Matanzas, at the north end of Cuba. At barely eleven years of age, he began learning the art of boxing while his father made money betting on the fights. At fifteen, after several years of intense training under the supervision of his master “Kid Rapidez,” Ramos jumped into the professional arena in the Havana Sports Palace through his father, a man whose desire to manage a world champion was so strong that he fathered thirty-two children with two women. Only with the last one, Ultiminio, would he realize his dream. However, the radical political split in Cuban society would turn the dream into a nightmare.

On his way to win the island's national title, the young Ramos caused the death of one of his opponents, the well-known and very young “Tigre Blanco” (White Tiger): he was a victim of Ramos's killer right punch. It was at the year 1957. The incident made Ramos doubt whether he should go on in his aim of becoming the national champ. To his great surprise, the deceased young boxer's own mother encouraged him to continue his career, and to take the championship, as Ramos eventually did. At the ceremony, he dedicated the belt to

“Tigre Blanco,” which got him thunderous applause from the crowd gathered in Havana's Sports Palace. After that, his manager took him on a Latin American tour, in 1959, just when Castro's revolution would change Cuba forever.

He fought in Venezuela, Panama, Puerto Rico and Mexico. The last country welcomed him as one of its own. His skillful Cuban dancing made him quite popular amongst the ladies in the land of the Aztecs. Ramos decided to stay while the political scene in his native land was sorted out. He never imagined that his absence would be permanent, despite the fact his father had warned him earlier that he should never return to Cuba if he wanted to become great among the greats of the skillful art. The elder Ramos distrusted the new rules of game in Havana.

The night of his debut in Mexico City, the judge's decision went against Ramos, a shameless act; he stole the victory from him. To Ramos's own surprise, the public emphatically disagreed with the verdict, and proceeded to set fire to the “Mexico” arena. After this great show of sympathy, ferocious loyalty, and support on the part of the Mexican fans, the new “Sugar” realized that he had found a new homeland in which he could continue his career, and his journey to glory. In addition, professional boxing had been definitely banned



*Ultiminio Ramos Zequeira*

by the government that took power in Cuba, in 1959.<sup>1</sup>

Under the supervision of “Kid Rapidez” (also trainer to four future Cuban world champions),<sup>2</sup> and the management of Cuco Conde, and on his way to winning the world championship, Ultiminio “Sugar” Ramos would have to fight a fearsome fighter from Ohio, Featherweight World Champion Davey Moore, or the “Little Giant,” as the sport’s media called him in the United States.<sup>3</sup> Nobody could ever beat him in Mexico. He was undefeated at home. Responding to the Cuban boxer’s challenge, Moore said to the press: “If Sugar Ramos wants to take the championship away from me, of course, he’ll have to kill me first.”

Exactly a year earlier, Cuban Boxer Benny “Kid” Paret was killed at the hands of Emile Griffith, at Madison Square Garden, in New York City. No one wrote a poem lamenting his murder; but Norman Mailer wrote a thrilling note about the fight:

“Paret died on his feet. As he took those eighteen punches, something happened to everyone who was in psychic range of the event. Some part of his death

reached out to us. One felt it hover in the air. He was still standing in the ropes, trapped as he had been before, he gave some little half-smile of regret, as if he were saying, ‘I didn’t know I was going to die just yet.’ Then, his head leaning back but still erect, his death came to breathe about him. He began to pass away. As he passed, so his limbs descended beneath him, and he sank slowly to the floor. He went down more slowly than any fighter had ever gone down. He went down like a large ship that turns on end and slides second by second into its grave. As he went down, the sound of Griffith’s punches echoed in the mind like a heavy ax in the distance, chopping into a wet log.”

Complex and dangerous times came down following the Cuban Missile Crisis; this set the world on the edge of nuclear war, with Cuba as the eye of a historical hurricane. Sugar Ramos didn’t understand the expectations that had been created around the fight with Davie Moore, only because he was born in Cuba. For him, it was as simple as making good on the promise that he had made to his father when he was only a nine-year old boy: become a World Champion.

Finally, the fight was scheduled for March 23, 1963, on the baseball field at Dodgers Stadium in Los Angeles, California (just one year, to the day, after the fatal Paret-Griffith fight at Madison Square Garden in New York City). The odds were ten to one for the African-American boxer. The Afro-Cuban would fight for his native city, “Matanzas,” instead of Cuba; the name was printed on one of his pant’s legs. Ironically, *matanzas* means *slaughters* in Spanish.

Songwriter Phil Ochs narrated the developing situation this way:

"It was out to California young  
Davey Moore did go  
to meet with Sugar Ramos and trade  
him blow for blow.

He left his home in Springfield, his  
wife and children, five.

The spring was fast approaching; it  
was good to be alive.

His wife, she begged and pleaded: "You  
have to leave this game.

Is it worth the bloodshed and is it  
worth the pain?"

But Davey could not hear above the  
cheering crowd.

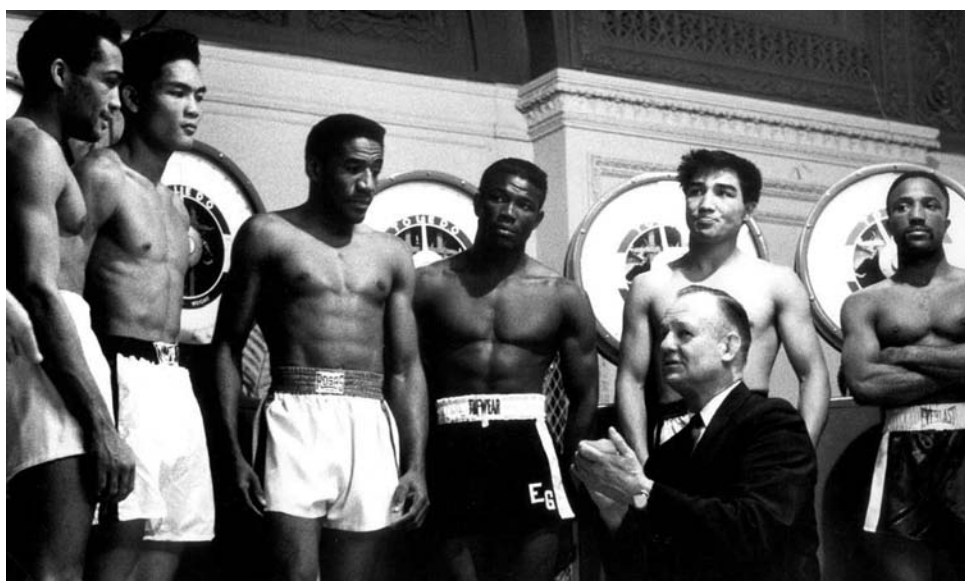
He was a champion, and champions  
are proud.

Hang his gloves upon the wall; shine  
his trophies bright clean.

Another man will fall before we dry  
our tears.

For the fighters must destroy, as the  
poets must sing,

as the hungry crowd must gather, for  
the blood upon the ring."<sup>4</sup>



*Ultimino Ramos, Davey Moore, and other boxers*

Notes:

- In reality, boxing in Cuba is a semi-professional activity. Boxers fight and receive a minimum salary.

2- Luis Manuel Rodríguez, Ultimino "Sugar" Ramos, José "Mantequilla" Nápoles, and José Legrá. Legrá was crowned World Champion as a Spaniard.

3- There were two African-American boxers and World Champions with the same name, Davey Moore. Both died before the age of thirty. The Davey Moore we refer to in our story was a native of Lexington, Kentucky, who then lived in Springfield, Ohio. He died in a hospital in Los Angeles, 1963, as a consequence of the fight against Sugar Ramos at Dodger Stadium. The other Davey Moore made his career in the eighties, and was a native of New York. He died tragically in 1988, when he was run over by his own car.

4- "Neurologists determined that the injury could not have been caused by a punch. Viewing a videotape of the fight, they focused on Moore's fall against the bottom rope, late in the 10th round. In what a doctor called a "million-to-one" accident, the rope had struck Moore like an expert karate blow." *San Francisco Chronicle*, Friday, July 27, 2001.