

Carmen Basilio was boxing's real-life 'Rocky'

Movie bio likely on former champ

By Mike Latona
Staff writer

IRONDEQUOIT — Here's a Rocky who wasn't manufactured in Hollywood.

Unlike the heavyweight champion portrayed by Sylvester Stallone, there's no fiction in Carmen Basilio's slow rise from humble beginnings to the pinnacle of the boxing world.

Yet one very real similarity does exist between the two: within the next couple of years Basilio could join Rocky as a featured movie subject.

"Carmen Basilio is the real-life Rocky," asserted close friend Lou Buttino, a St. John Fisher College journalism professor.

Basilio and Buttino — who both hail from Canastota, N.Y. — have reached an agreement with the Florida-based Film Producers International studio. When and if enough investors commit toward the movie's estimated budget of \$18 million to \$20 million, production could begin immediately.

"If the right combination (of investors) stepped forward, we'd start shooting tomorrow," said Buttino, an accomplished author who is hoping to emerge either as the movie's creative consultant or screenplay writer.

This movie would most likely play up to a network or cable television audience — devoid of the profane language so abundant in *Raging Bull*, the 1980 hit flick that chronicled the life of another gritty ex-champion, Jake LaMotta.

"This studio (Film Producers International) is only interested in PG-rated movies. They're not into the psychotic and sex stuff," Buttino commented. "Carmen wants the story told with decency, so Hollywood doesn't want to touch it."

Now 65, the former world welterweight and middleweight champion is nonchalant about the possibility of becoming the subject of a film biography.

"If it happens, it happens. I'm not going to worry about it at this stage of my life," said Basilio.

While Basilio's story may lack Hollywood titillation value, it's a feel-good account of a successful boxer whose strength of will enabled him to overcome the frequently violent and corrupt world around him.

Born on April 2, 1927, Basilio, along with his three brothers and six sisters, grew up on an onion farm in Canastota, about 25 miles east of Syracuse.

He began his boxing career while serving in the Marine Corps, and turned professional in 1948. It took seven



In the basement of his Irondequoit home, former world welterweight and middleweight boxing champion Carmen Basilio is surrounded by paintings, photographs and other memorabilia from his illustrious career.

Babette G. Augustin/Photo editor

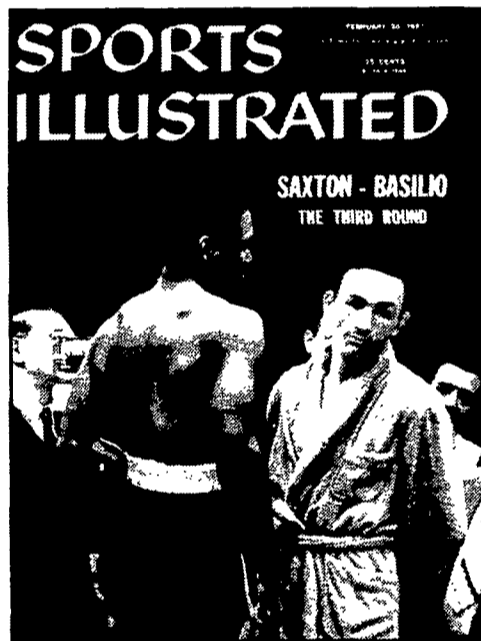
years and 55 fights to reach the top, but finally, on June 10, 1955, the 28-year-old Basilio scored a 12-round knockout over Tony DeMarco in a world championship welterweight bout in Syracuse.

Slightly more than two years later, Basilio won the world middleweight title with a 15-round decision over Sugar Ray Robinson in front of nearly 50,000 spectators at Yankee Stadium. Basilio collected a best-ever paycheck of \$236,000 for the fight.

He retired in 1961 with an overall record of 57-16-6, including 27 knockouts. Basilio had battled in nine world championship bouts, winning five, and was a three-time cover subject of *Sports Illustrated* magazine.

Upon retiring from the ring, Basilio maintained a steady work load. For nearly 20 years he was a physical-education instructor at LeMoyne College in Syracuse. He began developing ties to Rochester in the early 1960s when he was hired to represent the Genesee Brewing Company; Basilio still appears on Genesee's behalf at several functions each year.

Basilio moved from the Syracuse area to Irondequoit in 1987 after marrying his second wife, Josie. They are parishioners at Christ the King Church, 445 Kings Highway S.



Basilio was a three-time cover subject of *Sports Illustrated* magazine.

Basilio enjoys his current lifestyle, which includes traveling the country to play golf with the likes of Joe DiMaggio, with whom he shot 36 holes in Florida last winter.

His basement is loaded with photographs of himself with such celebrities as DiMaggio, Yogi Berra, Rollie Masimino and Phil Rizzuto.

"All Irishmen," the craggy-faced Ba-

silio quipped.

Although he enjoys being on the move, Basilio doesn't entertain plans of abandoning upstate New York.

"No way," he stated. "I want to be around the people I was brought up with. You could travel all over the world, but there's no place like home."

Despite his many years in the limelight, Basilio has never let fame go to his head. He answers every one of the numerous autograph requests that still come pouring into his house daily.

"You're still a human being, no different than anyone else," he said. "You have to be good to everybody, because they're the ones who got you there."

"People like me. I enjoy being with people, because I'm a people," he reasoned with a grin.

His outgoing personality and strong work ethic have been Basilio's formula for success in all phases of life.

"I had the willingness to live a clean life and stay in shape," Basilio commented. "It all depends on how badly somebody wants to be something, whether it's a boxer or doctor or a lawyer."

"You have to live with the sacrifices; you've got to pay the price. I told that to my kids at LeMoyne until I was blue in the face."

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