

VALERIE'S DEATH

[FIRST Edition]

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His hands were fast, hers were soft. His life was Mean Streets, hers was Sesame. He dreamed of winning back the world championship. She dreamed of winning him back from the ring. And when she saw that his love for the ring could not be torn asunder, she killed herself.

It was a week ago yesterday that Valerie Chacon, 31, turned up the radio, locked her bedroom door, pointed a gun to her face and pulled the trigger. The shot echoed over the isolated 20-acre farm near Oroville, Calif., 65 miles north of Sacramento.

Word reached Bobby Chacon as he was leaving his Sacramento hotel room for a light workout at the gym. He was thinking about his fight Tuesday night. He was shocked but not surprised when he heard. Valerie had threatened suicide. He drove home, careening over the last 10 miles of dirt road.

"She was still a pretty woman," Chacon said later. "Even with half her face blown away, she was still a pretty woman."

Bobby Chacon became the toast of the Los Angeles barrios when he won the World Boxing Council featherweight title Sept. 7, 1974, knocking out Alfredo Marcano in nine rounds. He was a 22-year-old baby-faced assassin, a product of San Fernando High School, as popular a Mexican-American athlete as LA had ever had. Smiling, affable and well-expressed, Chacon was a celebrity of major proportion. When he appeared in public, it was common for Chacon to put his arms around Valerie and announce, "I owe everything to her."

Valerie Chacon would blush and smile, but didn't say much. She was a striking woman, with long dark hair, exotic features revealing her Irish- Chinese descent, and a shapely, diminutive figure. Valerie could not match Bobby's gregariousness; she did not even try. The irony of Bobby's gratitude tore at her insides. She died ruing the day she suggested he become a fighter.

When they had met as teenagers at San Fernando High, Chacon was a street rat and she was the prim, studious daughter of strict, working-class parents. The polarity was magnetic. He was exciting to her. She was the stability he never had in a broken home. Valerie decided Bobby needed direction.

"Bobby was a street fighter," said Jackie Barnett, Chacon's manager of five years. "He was little but feared. And he was always coming to her with another bruise. One day they were sitting in front of the television. Boxing was on. She said, Bobby, you can do that. Why don't you go into a gym?' And he said, OK."

"In four years, he was champion."

In the early years, Valerie went to see Chacon fight and enjoyed herself. There was no reason not to since Chacon, blessed with speed and power, was winning and taking only minimal punishment. His record was 25-1 with 23 knockouts when he won the title. He had money, two children (later a third) and an adoring wife. "Their love was idyllic," said Barnett. "They were more in love than ever."

There was one catch. There had to be. As a fighter, Chacon had great instincts and physical gifts. He had no discipline.

"His greatest problem was his living habits," said Frank Sarecho, a friend and later Chacon's trainer for a time. "He couldn't train. He was too lazy and wouldn't sacrifice. When he first walked into a gym, they should have taught him, but they didn't. And then it was too late. They never taught him how to eat right. He always had trouble making weight. Nobody taught him about his body."

After one successful defense, Chacon signed to fight Ruben Olivares, the one fighter who had defeated him.

"Two days before the fight, Bobby was 16 pounds overweight," said Barnett. "They stuck him in a steam room. He almost had to be carried into the ring." Olivares knocked out Chacon in two rounds for the title.

Valerie's distress crystalized a few months later. Chacon, again out of shape, lost a decision to Bazooka Limon and for the first time got busted up. Then he fought David Sotelo and won a decision, but Sotelo knocked him down and worked him over late in the fight. Chacon had an ugly cut above one eye.

"I never want you to fight again," Valerie told him. Chacon announced his retirement and stuck to it for eight months. It took him that long to realize his dilemma. He was a boxer, period. It wasn't a financial necessity, because he had invested in valuable property.

"What else could he do?" said Sarecho.

When he started fighting again, he knew that Valerie hated his extended absences for training as much as the punches he absorbed.

"She was his life," said Barnett. "He couldn't bear to be away from her for the three weeks of training camp. I had to cancel three of his fights because of this. I made excuses for him, but that was the real reason. Once, he came to camp and wouldn't eat anything. I asked him what was wrong. He said Valerie hadn't said goodbye to him."

Now, when Chacon fought, Valerie would sit in the stands with her hands over her eyes.

"She was pallid at fights," said Barnett. "He would spin his opponents around so he could look at her and tell her he was all right."

Chacon lost to Arturo Leon in November, 1977, retired and unretired. He worked his way up to a title fight with Alexis Arguello in November, 1979, and lost by a seventh-round KO.

When Chacon fought Limon for the third time in March, 1980, Valerie took a job tending bar in Barstow, near where her parents lived. The fight was viewed by the bar patrons on television. Chacon won a bloody split decision.

"That fight really set her off," said Barnett. "She cried when the customers began yelling for Limon to go after Bobby."

Chacon placated Valerie by retiring again. Before Christmas in 1980, he moved his family out of LA to the farm north of Sacramento. One friend thought Chacon was worried about his children being corrupted by the street culture that had ruled his youth. He bought 20 acres next to 20 acres owned by Valerie's brother, Alan Ginn, and his wife. Not a neighbor or another house was in sight. The small town of Oroville was 10 miles away.

"That place is really in the sticks," said Ben Swesey, the boxing writer for the Sacramento Bee. "It's beautiful land, so help me. But it is as remote as you can get."

In the following months, Valerie looked for a job in Oroville. She thought that if she could establish an income, Bobby would feel less need to fight. She was a teacher's aide for a while, but the pay was minimal. She had written several children's books in the past and had been disappointed when they were rejected. She had studied to be an ambulance paramedic but had never followed through. Her self-esteem was low.

"She was a good cook and kept a nice house," said Barnett. "She was a real charmer, but she didn't think she was. She had a big inferiority complex being around Bobby so much."

Swesey remembers driving to the farm to interview Chacon. Valerie asked him what he would like to drink. Swesey requested a beer.

"A while later she comes walking into the house with a six-pack," said Swesey. "She didn't have any beer so she drove into town for some."

"But when we asked her to pose for some pictures with her family, she refused, almost violently. She went into her bedroom."

In February, 1981, Chacon came out of retirement again, knocking out Robert Garcia in LA. In May, 1981, Chacon lost another title fight, a 13th-round TKO to Cornelius Boza-Edwards. After carrying the early rounds and hurting the champion in the ninth, Chacon faded. Again, his conditioning cost him. "Bobby just ran out of gas," said Sarecho.

Chacon was away training for seven weeks before the fight. Valerie was inconsolable. "That was when the real showdown began," said Barnett.

"I'll fight for one more year or until I lose," Chacon told her.

He won a fight in LA and another in Tijuana, Mexico. Valerie went with him to Tijuana but did not attend the fight. On Feb. 23, Chacon knocked out Renan Marotta in Sacramento. "I probably should have lost," Chacon told reporters. "Because my wife is back in Oroville and I know she wishes I lost. Because when I lose, I'm going to quit." Chacon confided to a friend that Valerie had attempted suicide before the fight, only to be stopped by her mother.

"She was not hospitalized at the time," said Barnett, "but she was under observation."

In early March, Valerie traveled to Hawaii by herself. "She wanted to get away," said Debbie Ginn, her sister-in-law.

Barnett received a telephone call from Valerie soon after her return. She asked Barnett, a

screenwriter by trade, if he still planned to write Chacon's life story. Barnett told her that he did.

"I'll give you an ending that will make you a million dollars," said Valerie.

"What ending?" said Barnett.

"I'm going to kill myself," said Valerie.-

Bobby Chacon decided to go through with his fight the day after Valerie's suicide. The state athletic commission, the promoter, his trainer and manager were against it. Chacon insisted. Valerie's brother and father supported his decision.

He showed up for the physical Tuesday wearing Valerie's wedding ring on a gold chain around his neck.

Dr. P. B. Montemayor, the examining physician, probed Chacon's mental condition.

"I asked him a few questions, and I didn't have to ask him any more," said Dr. Montemayor. "He kept going and going. I had my stethoscope on his heart and I was feeling for his pulse.

"He was talking about how he heard about it, and how he drove back to the farm and ran into the house before they took her away. He was talking about the gory details in the bedroom.

"During this time his pulse and heartbeat didn't go up a beat."

Barnett understood Chacon's implacability.

"Bobby came from the tough part of the (San Fernando) Valley," said Barnett. "He's seen a lot of death. He's seen one of his best friends from school get shot and killed. He has compassion, but he is resolved that this is part of life. He accepts it."

Chacon fought with a fury, dispatching Salvador Ugalde on a TKO in the third round. Afterward, he sobbed.

"I told my wife I would fight another year or until I lose," said Chacon. "That's out. From now on I'm going to be in great shape. Boxing is going to be like another marriage."-

Valerie Chacon was cremated Thursday. Her remains were scattered over the Pacific Ocean.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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