

# Punch Trajectories: A Study of Hard Times in Life's Squared Circle

By Ezra Salkin on March 7, 2013



"The worst pain of my life," Seeger said, "like a nail being driven through my forehead."

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By the time of the stoppage, every punch, or even any slight touch in the vicinity of Seeger's buzzed dome was like being struck with an anvil...

"Boxing is about being hit rather more than it is about hitting, just as it is about feeling pain, if not devastating psychological paralysis, more than it is about winning. One sees clearly from the tragic careers of any number of boxers that the boxer prefers physical pain in the ring to the absence of pain that is ideally the condition of ordinary life. If one cannot hit, one can yet be hit, and know one is still alive."—Joyce Carol Oates, On Boxing.

Where's the gym?

After being informed by my GPS that I'd "arrived" at my destination, I find myself parked next to a couple of adjoined brick buildings with chipping paint of dulled hues, in a wooded, unpeopled area.

The door on the leftmost building is barred. A painted wood sign reads "Mandy's: Breakfast, Lunch, and Dinner." On the outside of the second building is a satellite dish; someone appears to live there. Next to the buildings is an empty dirt lot taken up by a couple of mounds of debris, a tanker with the name Jarrell on it, a bulldozer; a pile of junk that might be considered an ideal child's playground. My eyes fall on a yellow page slapped on one of Mandy's dark windows; it reads Jarrell's Gym. Just a few miles outside Savannah's historic district—historic Savannah this is not.

Under the heading Jarrell's Gym, it says, "I can do all things through Christ, who strengthens me"—Philippians 4:13. Alongside the invocation, a Tasmanian devil is in the midst of his patented Looney Toons whirlwind and next to that is a small laminated photograph of a young woman.

But...where's the gym?

I stand there for a few minutes, perplexed, before a pudgy, brown-skinned girl jogs out of another nondescript building, partially hidden and fenced-in behind the building closest to the lot, sort of garage-looking. From a considerable distance, I can hear the rap music from her headphones. She smiles at me and waves before she disappears, jogging down the narrow, fractured road, over the railroad track, out-of-view.

That must be the gym.

As I consider the merits of walking into an unknown boxing gym like that guy whose face

1984 reads 9 comments

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## Al Seeger

|                    |                                  |
|--------------------|----------------------------------|
| Origin             | Savannah, Georgia, United States |
| Date of Birth(Age) | 1980.01.23 (33)                  |
| Rated at           | Super Bantam weight              |
| W-L-D              | W28+L5+D0=33                     |
| Height             | 5 feet 8 inches                  |
| Trainer            | Mike Jarrell/Jimmy Chumley       |

### Recent fights:

| Date       | Opponent             | WLD    | Result | Rnds. |
|------------|----------------------|--------|--------|-------|
| 2009.10.23 | Victor Fonseca       | 16-0-0 | L(TKO) | 9/10  |
| 2009.04.30 | Benjamin Flores      | 19-3-0 | W(TKO) | 8/12  |
| 2008.07.18 | Yuriorkis Gamboa     | 10-0-0 | L(TKO) | 1/10  |
| 2007.11.08 | Mike Oliver          | 20-0-0 | L(UD)  | 12/12 |
| 2006.10.21 | Daniel Ponce De Leon | 29-1-0 | L(TKO) | 8/12  |
| 2006.07.28 | Cesar Morales        | 19-4-0 | W(TKO) | 2/12  |

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By Ted Sares



you never see in HBO's Boxing After Dark introduction, an SUV drives up and parks alongside the fence where I'm standing.

In the driver's seat window is the face of a guy I *have* seen, a more fleshy version of the former Super Bantamweight appearing on posters around Savannah: Al—*the Quiet Storm*—Seeger: *Savannah's Golden Boy*.

## SUBBIF

Coming from the recycling yard—which, like the gym, is owned by Mike Jarrell, Seeger's former trainer—Seeger steps out wearing a tongue-and-cheek tee-shirt saying something about "hearing voices."

"Sorry, I'm late..." the retired 32-year-old fighter says. He shakes my hand and we walk into the gym. "My head was split in like three different directions..."

Inside, "Jarrell's Gym" is painted black on the most prominent wall behind a shop-worn ring. That same bible verse, just like the printed paper I saw outside. "Boxing: *The longest three minutes of your life*," it says underneath. That whirling Devil.

The ring is empty, but a number of kids, maybe middle-schoolers, hit the any-number and manner of punching bags Jarrell's has to offer in the gym's back wing.

With the exception of Don, the gym's caretaker, we're the only white dudes. Don, who sort of resembles one of the dwarves in *The Hobbit*, if not for the naked girl tattooed on his forearm, wears a ShoBox shirt that he no doubt picked up at one of Seeger's fights.

I show Al a small picture in a *South Magazine* profile titled, "The Comeback of Al Seeger," written just last year. We're looking down at the top portion of a man's forehead out of which an upside-down triangle's been carved out, a medical stencil of sorts pulling the outlying skin down to expose a series of cogs and mesh in the red negative where there should be skin. Positioned next to larger, more glamorous pictures of Seeger in the ring holding his belts, this one serves to illustrate the severity of his career-ending injury. Assuming it was just a stock photo from a medical journal for surgically-implanted metal head plates, I ask him, "Is that you?" I mean it almost facetiously.

"Yup...", Seeger says, like it's no big deal. "My friends told me it looks like I got a clock in my head..."

"Looks like a pussy, don't it?" Don chimes in.

\* \* \*

The truth of the matter...

"What doctors say does the damage is *angular velocity*... Now I hate to say it, but if I was training a fighter... I'd teach them to throw punches with angular velocity," Seeger says almost apologetically. "Boxing isn't ping pong..."

It wasn't "angular velocity," however, that destroyed Seeger's career, at least not angular velocity coming off a punch.

Next to his metal plate portrait in the magazine, the caption reads, "*Anatomy of a Head Butt*."

"Say, Al," Don interrupts, sitting off to the side, smoking a cigarette. "What about Ron Paul?"

"I would've voted for him," Seeger replies matter-of-factly, as if that wasn't an out-of-place question.

"No, no, not Ron Paul," Don, corrects himself. "The guy in that motorcycle accident—what's his name—Paul Williams."

"Oh, I should call Paul," Seeger replies. "See how he's doing..."

Yes, Seeger has trained at Jarrell's with the now paralyzed former champ and welterweight star, Paul "The Punisher" Williams. He's also worked with Nate "The Galaxy Warrior" Campbell. Unlike many of the others in this story, Campbell, after his own rollercoaster career—which included his huge upset victory of then-undefeated champ Juan Diaz in 2008—was just on a small career upswing. After already retiring once, he came back, winning some unexpected fights against younger fighters. (But, par the course for the 99 percent of boxers, the house usually wins. Earlier this year, Campbell, now nearly 41-years-old, quit on his stool against a bigger, younger opponent.) Seeger's also worked here with the less-heralded season-two star of Sylvester Stallone's *Contender* series, Ebo Elder. Anyone can train here, Seeger tells me—*for free*.

"Nate taught me a lot...", Seeger says, "about training and discipline." But it was Ebo, Seeger

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| Fighters   | Result   | Rounds  | Record               |
|--|----------|---------|----------------------|
| Edis Tatli vs<br>Felix Lora on Mar 9               | W<br>UD  | 12/12   | (19-0-0)<br>(17-9-5) |
| Luca Giacon vs<br>Emiliano Marsili on Mar 9        | L<br>TKO | 2/12    | (21-0-0)<br>(25-0-1) |
| Darren Barker vs<br>Simone Rotolo on Mar 9         | W<br>RTD | 4/12x3  | (24-1-0)<br>(35-3-0) |
| Danny Connor vs<br>Chris Evangelou on Mar 9        | W<br>PTS | 10/10x3 | (7-5-1)<br>(9-1-0)   |
| Johnny Garcia vs<br>Oscar Ibarra on Mar 8          | W<br>TKO | 11/12   | (16-4-1)<br>(27-8-0) |
| Shayne Singleton vs<br>Curtis Woodhouse on Mar 8   | W<br>SD  | 10/10x3 | (13-0-0)<br>(17-4-0) |
| Richard Commey vs<br>Bilal Mohammad on Mar 8       | W<br>KO  | 7/12    | (14-0-0)<br>(24-5-0) |
| Daniel Slaney vs<br>James Tucker on Mar 8          | L<br>TKO | 7/8x3   | (4-0-1)<br>(7-58-4)  |
| Dmitry Chudinov vs<br>Milton Nunez on Mar 8        | W<br>KO  | 1/12    | (7-0-1)<br>(25-6-1)  |
| Matias Ezequiel Gomez vs<br>Andrey Klimov on Mar 8 | L<br>TD  | 7/12    | (29-1-0)<br>(14-0-0) |



says, who perhaps gave him the most telling piece of advice. "Ebo always said, in boxing ...you can do *everything* right and still have it not work out." Ironic, coming from the point of view of a boxer-turned-evangelist.

In reality, no one does everything "right" in boxing or life, but Seeger, by his own account, gave boxing all he had. There are plenty of ways to analyze any situation, for better or worse, but one might argue, at least from his point of view, things didn't work out. But, by Seeger's own admission, that's life.

\* \* \*

Damn...

Seeger's career officially sank in a 2009 ShoBox co-feature bout with Victor Fonseca, 16-0 going in. In boxing lexicon, people like to talk about glass jaws, but Seeger left the Fonseca bout with a shattered forehead, the result of illicit head-butting.

In the *South Magazine* profile, Seeger's plastic surgeon, Dr. Bill Dascombe, compared the injury—Seeger's forehead, in the area where the sinus is located, had been pushed backwards—to the type of injury encountered by someone who falls off a horse or is launched from an ATV. Equally injurious was the blood found on Seeger's brain. According to Seeger, the Puerto Rican—a southpaw, (Seeger is right-handed)—flagrantly positioned his head to clash with the Georgian's, with impunity, time and time again. He did it to such an ignominious extent that *The Queensberry Rules* named referee Ruben Carrion the worst referee of the year, and *The Cruellest Sport* wrote "Incompetence of this sort is deadly." Seeger was ahead on two of the three scorecards when he was stopped in the ninth round. Because the fight was three years ago, Seeger's recent request to the commission, for vindication's sake, to get the decision overturned to a no contest has been denied.

"Man, I could've sued the shit out of them and they won't grant me the one thing I ask for?"

*Based on the circumstances that TKOed his once-promising career, I ask Seeger his opinion of a boxer like Bernard Hopkins, an inspiration to so many, not just fighters, but older athletes of all stripes, ex-convicts, and fans alike, etc. Beyond just his extraordinary accomplishments in this era, it's his dedication, his skills. The 'executioner's seriousness to do whatever's necessary within the squared circle that stands out to people, his professionalism. It's why the ex-con is still amazingly able to compete at the top level, as he approaches 50. However, from within that formidable cache, Hopkins employs his head as effectively as he does his right hand,*

*"I met him once," Seeger says of one of the few, almost household names in the sport. "I thought he was cool when I met him, but historically, I've been a bit of a Hopkins critic."*

*The reason, he says, is not so much because of Hopkins' underhanded tactics, but because when fouled, himself, he's the first one to flail into histrionics or "cry." "I still have my doubts about that shoulder injury when he was tackled," Seeger says, referring to the first Hopkins/Chad Dawson fight in October 2011: Early on, Hopkins opted not to continue, keeping his title in the process, by claiming a shoulder injury after, in a strange sequence of events, a young, petulant Dawson got under a Hopkins jab, hoisted the sly old champion off the ground, and threw him down on his back.*

While the Fonseca bout stamped things, it was Seeger's fourth loss in his last five; although all of those came against sturdy competition in the way of Daniel Ponce De Leon, Mike Oliver, and Yuriorkis Gamboa. His one victory during that stretch was his fight prior to Fonseca, against Benjamin Flores. Although Seeger picked up the North American Boxing Federation title—the WBC's regional title and "a nice step in the right direction" toward a world title shot—with this victory, the *ultimate* outcome was even worse than that of his own soon-to-be career clincher, making Seeger's own injury so soon afterward that much scarier.

In a haunting sense of irony, Seeger had said to referee Laurence Cole in the locker room just before, "The last time I saw you ([the De Leon fight, nearly three years ago), it was one of the worst nights of my life...Win or lose, let's hope this night goes better."

Flores, 19-3 going in, died five days later from a subdural hematoma in the center of his brain. He was 24 years old.

Seeger doesn't remember landing too many bludgeoning power shots in the fight—he controlled it, he maintains, more or less with his jab. Flores, in spite of a face that didn't look too marked up in photos I searched, unlike many fighters Seeger faced, wouldn't try to parry or roll with the jab. "He'd just absorb it..."

For every seven or so jabs Seeger landed, Flores came back with a right hook to the body that had Seeger swallowing blood. Around the 7th round, Seeger finally felt the momentum begin to shift in his direction, as Flores uncharacteristically started back-pedaling. He also,

like an animal in mortal peril, got more wild.

"That's when you know that the guy's in trouble," Seeger says.

Seeger cornered him on the ropes and landed a right cross. At that moment, Flores emitted a strange kind of noise that Seeger wasn't quite sure he could call a moan. Seeger flurried and Cole, to his credit, didn't waste any time stopping it.

Flores walked back to his corner on his own accord but quickly slumped unconscious on his stool. His team laid him on the canvas to wait for medical attention. Seeger, grabbing his first victory in four fights, didn't allow himself to become worried until the smelling salts failed to wake Flores.

*"It just looked like he was sleeping... We waited forever for him to get up."*

While this was happening, Seeger was trying to do his best to give a composed interview, going through all the regular winner's motions that had eluded him for his last three bouts—talking about being prepared, in good shape, and his opponent's toughness.

After Flores died, Seeger looked for reasons why. He couldn't blame Cole, who, unlike Carrion in the Fonseca fight, had done everything right. The next obvious person, to him at least, was himself.

One thing came to mind when he thought back to the pre-fight dressing room warm-up, where both he and Flores' teams were separated by merely a pinned-up curtain. Between the nerve-wracking sounds of both men cracking the pads and the expected "YaYaYaYah" Mexican war cry from Flores' side—Seeger heard a sort of sandy, rattling noise coming from one of his gloves. At the time, he didn't think much of it, but after Flores's death, Seeger began to obsess. It had only been a few months since the disgraced ex-champion Antonio Margarito had been found with a plaster of Paris type substance in his hand wraps going into his fight with Shane Mosley. Then years earlier, there was Luis Resto vs. Billy Collins, where Resto purportedly had an ounce of padding removed from each glove so his knuckles could be more readily felt, before he beat any hopes of a promising future out of Collins, effectively ending his career that night and leading to what many believe to be the fighter's suicide, not a car accident. Seeger was also well aware on that night his hands had been wrapped so tight that after he had taken the wraps off his hands were black and blue. The tightness naturally had added an extra level of density to his fists.

"You ever have your hands wrapped so tight you..."

"No... I've never had my hands wrapped," I say.

"Oh, well we'll wrap them so you can see what I'm talking about..."

Seeger was relieved in the weeks later when opening a new pair of gloves, after he'd started training again—he'd taken extended time off from not only boxing, but school and life in general; *"it seemed only right"*—when a small silicone packet, meant to keep moisture out of an unopened pack of gloves, tumbled to the floor with a slight hissing noise. What had sounded that night to Seeger like sand in his glove had simply been one of those packets, accidentally left inside, and burst as Seeger hit the pads.

After speaking with medical professionals in the months following, Seeger settled on the fact that Flores' fate was inevitable. "They told me, there'd been a spot on his brain waiting to burst... It was going to happen sooner or later in one fight or another, they said. But why'd it have to be *me*...?"

After choosing not to take up the offer by a promoter to be flown in for the funeral in Mexico—*"a tough call to make"*—Seeger got Flores' younger brother Miguel's number. He kept his apology short and somber.

"I just said... 'I'm so sorry.'" Miguel, who currently is campaigning with a 10-0 record in his brother's memory, told Seeger, without need of a translator, that it was okay: they didn't blame him...

\* \* \*

How do you hit someone after that?

It goes without saying how difficult it is for a fighter to come back after he does his job so well, he puts the man sharing the ring with him in the ground, knocking him out-of-time, as author Joyce Carol Oates puts it, not consciousness, forever—how often that fighter is altered, his killer instinct buried with his opponent.

After all, it wasn't beneath the pound-for-pound greatest of them all to have the fight in him altered irreparably by his own similar tragedy. That is, when Sugar Ray Robinson—also

Georgia-born—proved himself to be nearly as good a clairvoyant as he was a fighter when, in summer 1947, he killed 22-year-old Jimmy Doyle with a left hook after dreaming about it the night prior. (Robinson had initially refused to come out and fight that night, but he had been convinced by those around him, including a priest and a minister, that it was okay; it was just a dream.) “Sugar” was never quite the same.

Seeger might not be Sugar Ray, but he did have a weird feeling when he signed that pre-fight waiver.

On Thanksgiving at Seeger’s mother’s house, Seeger told me about the *note*.

He left it in his fight log, where he meticulously catalogued each day in the lead-up to the Flores fight like he did every fight. It was for his family in the event things worked out the opposite way they did.

“I told them that I loved them and not to be mad...that I died doing what I loved and that I’d see them again soon.”

*I was amazed when I arrived at his mother’s house on Wilmington Island—a well-to-do suburb just outside Savannah on the way to the Tybee Island beach community—to find the Seegers had only invited me...Well, me and Don—who actually had somewhere else to be. Seeger’s mother wasn’t even there; she’d gone to Florida to be with her sister, Seeger’s aunt, the nun—“When the Jehovah Witnesses knock on the door...I tell them sometimes, my aunt is a nun...I say, you know she goes and stays with people in hospitals who are dying, what do you guys do when you’re not knocking on my door?—so I was humbled to find it was just Seeger, his wife Rebecca, the two boys, Gracie the family dog, and me.*

*Staying here allows the kids to be in a better school district and Seeger doesn’t have to worry about being the victim of reverse racial profiling like he sometimes is at his actual residence; though he and his mother often don’t see eye to eye, but it’s been that way since he started fighting.*

*Now that the table’s been cleared, and we’re sitting by the fire. Ten-year-old Austin watches a game show about out-of-shape Americans trying to make it through a Crayola-colored, ninja course, while two-year old Atticus, a cherubic-looking child with brown skin and blonde locks pulls a stream of paper from a Fischer Price young artist’s table with a rolling canvas dispenser, marching all over the of now crumpled paper like it’s a carpet, while Rebecca does dishes in the kitchen.*

*Eyeing the toddler, through a mouthful of pumpkin pie, Seeger says, “Boxing saved my life...”*

(As this article went to press, Rebecca’s given birth to another boy.)

Sometimes grief attaches itself to other players involved, beyond the boxers. When Ray “Boom Boom” Mancini brutalized Duk Koo Kim to death in their 1982 match, not only did Kim’s mother take her own life in the months after, so did the bout’s ill-fated referee, Richard Green.

As it happened, Mancini attached himself to Seeger’s tragic event, in a preemptive measure to prevent that kind of negative psychological trajectory, and he called Seeger the day after Flores was taken off life support.

“I have no idea how he got my number,” Seeger says. “But he called and said if I ever needed anything, to give him a ring, now that I had his number...I never did call him, but it was real cool he did that...”

During that brief correspondence, Mancini warned Seeger that people would say a lot of “fucked up things.” Mancini, himself, was approached after the Kim fight by people who’d say, “Hey, you’re the guy who killed that Korean guy...” Sure enough, the next day a man whom Seeger had never seen approached him with the same chilling words, minus the “Korean.”

“I said, ‘Man...I didn’t kill anybody. It was a boxing match...”

Mancini also told Seeger that, if he thought the effects of the Flores’s fight would prevent him from doing what he needed in future fights, he should get out of the game. “If you stop in there, if you let up...that’s going to be your ass, he told me.”

That call may have indeed helped Seeger rebound. By all accounts, he was having a “good night” in his fight with Fonseca, only six months after Flores’ death, where he suffered his own career snuffer. This was in spite of his injury occurring in the second round—from that point on, under the bright lights, on the tape there’s a veritable dent apparent in his sinus area.

By the time of the stoppage, every punch, or even any slight touch in the vicinity of Seeger's buzzed dome was like being struck with an anvil. Entering that ninth round, still leading on the cards, Seeger really doesn't remember much but has the result to pick at forever.

"I think my body just said fuck it..."

*The rest of the events of that night and the days and nights that followed are almost as foggy. In the locker room afterwards, Seeger has no idea how much blood he'd been swallowing during the fight. He finds out when he hunches over on his bench because he feels like shit, and a red deluge pours down from his nose onto the tile... medicine, to stop throwing up... He's in the helicopter being flown to the nearest Texas hospital... Waking up from a dreamless sleep two days later after being put in a medically induced coma... He's recovering from surgery at home in Savannah, feeling "the worst pain of my life... like a nail being driven through my forehead." The swelling that originally wrapped around his head like a bandage has slunk down to his cheeks so, looking into the mirror, he sees the face or mask of an ancient lion, not a 28-year-old man.*

Seeger was 28-4 entering. It should be noted that Fonseca hadn't had a fight since October 23rd, 2009 either. And he still hasn't had one.

"Maybe Fonseca had some damage as well... Who stops fighting at 17-0?"

That was three years ago. In the months that followed, Seeger wasn't ready to give up boxing and didn't think he'd have to. He tried sparring, but the friction caused from the screws on the plate grinding against the inside of his head would spur gross and sudden nosebleeds.

"Sometimes I'd spar a big guy, a heavyweight... I'd be fine. But then, I might work with a 12-year-old girl and she'd touch me and I'd start bleeding all over the place."

Now that he's not taking any head contact, the only residual reminder of the plate is a shiny puffiness on his forehead that shows up in certain weather. "But you can feel it's there," he says. He proves it, taking my finger and pressing hard against a screw in his head.

Psychologically, though, things are a little different. He's much quicker to anger, he says, though, he admits that at least part of that has to do with the metallic taste of the way his career ended.

"The doctors say I internalize things... It's difficult for me to tell when someone's trying to insult me or not... Or maybe it's just that when I was fighting I had so much to lose if I acted up." When he lost not having a lot to lose anyway, he had no reason not to lose *it*, anymore. *The Quiet Storm*, as he was called, ceased to remain that way. "It's probably a little bit of all those reasons."

Incidentally, Seeger, in the last few weeks, has tried to start doing some ring work again, not to reboot his own career, necessarily, he tells himself, or to get back in shape, per se, but to reclaim that sense of vigor he once had doing what in some memories, not others, he remembers enjoying most. However, he's found his body, or his skin really, has softened over the last three years. After just one sparring session, a nasty blister metastasized on his foot, keeping him out of the ring for another week or two. For Seeger, however, the old and necessary corporeal resistance wasn't there anymore.

\* \* \*

The most stinging...

Interestingly, of all the traumas Seeger experienced during his career, the memory that rings most disappointing was his first "real" loss. That was his October 2006 fight with then WBO champion, Daniel Ponce De Leon in El Paso, about whom most of Seeger and my discussions eventually flood back to. The fight was for the IBA title and was the first of Seeger's string of losses. Seeger was 27-1 entering. (Seeger's one previous career blot came about because of heat stroke—*"Heat stroke,"* Don pipes in from out of the picture, defending his friend, his best friend. *"Al had heat stroke in that fight"*—and Seeger seemed to prove it, avenging the defeat by stoppage a few fights later.)

"I could've given you a thousand reasons why there was no way De Leon could beat me," Seeger says, doing a good impression of Muhammad Ali's *mummy*, trudging forward, straight up and bow-legged, throwing telegraphed punches, making fun of the Tarahumara Tribesman, De Leon.

*De Leon, only one of five brothers to survive due to the severity of conditions in the Northwest Mexico's Sierra Madre Occidental mountain range, has always been the type of guy who, usually, has been overlooked by his more talented, better-coordinated opponents. Just ask HBO's young heir, undefeated Adrien Broner. He probably would've made a similar assessment of De Leon prior to their 2011 fight; Broner's decision victory is*

*still considered controversial, much like the first decision victory by still-undefeated Floyd Mayweather over Jose Luis Castillo, to whom Broner is so often compared.*

"His punches came like Christmas," Seeger says. "I knew exactly what he'd do... He'd try and slap down my jab and then try and come over with his straight left, so I was going to beat him to it. So in the first round, when he went to slap down my jab, I came right down the pipe," he says, throwing a right cross through the stale gym air.

"And I caught him with it, too, right in the first round...in my mind, when I caught him... he went down." Sadly, it was only in his mind, however, and De Leon went on to win by eighth round TKO, leaving Seeger a battered, puking wreck.

The night before, pumped for his first opportunity in front of the big lights—only his second fight to be fought outside of Georgia—rather than take a light workout, Seeger ran for miles on the treadmill. Twenty-four hours later, in the ring, he had no bounce in his step. "My feet felt like they were sinking into the ring. It was the weirdest thing, like quicksand... I saw all his punches coming but I just couldn't get out of the way."

Reflecting back, he says what many fighters say in defeat. "It just wasn't me in there... I think I got caught in the moment." Yet, throughout our conversation, Seeger always seems prepared to put things in perspective, "I think it's human nature to have reasons for why things didn't work out."

The day before he stepped into the ring with De Leon, Oscar De La Hoya's Golden Boy Promotions approached Seeger in his locker room. If he didn't sign their contract, there wouldn't be a fight.

"It was like something you'd see in a movie or something... All those guys in the suits act like they're your buddy when they're standing there next to you."

According to Seeger, someone at Golden Boy told Seeger that De Leon was De La Hoya's "father's project." Seeger took this suggestion to mean De La Hoya didn't really care for De Leon and that in fact he was at the very least not against the idea of Seeger pulling the upset.

If Seeger were to win, he'd get \$150,000 for the rematch, and then he'd embark on a five-fight deal. His purse would go up incrementally by \$25,000, providing he kept winning. However, if he lost, his contract would be torn up; that much was understood.

After the loss, it took over a year before Seeger was able to get another fight. Matchmakers were apologetic when they told him he'd reached an awkward place where it'd be difficult for him to get fights from here on out.

"They said, you're not undefeated anymore and...you can punch." (Out of 27 wins at the time, Seeger had knocked out 22 opponents.). He'd become what they call high risk, low reward.

"Around 2007, before the economy tanked, it was much easier to get a fight...there were so many more shows. You could just slip onto an undercard somewhere."

One prominent matchmaker, told him he had gone from putting on close to 100 shows a year all the way down to 25. Jarrell himself had been doing about ten shows a year. Now Jarrell hardly sets foot in the gym, despite living next door—next to *Mandy's*, that small corner restaurant which Jarrell also owns—let alone promote. Boxing, it seems, has just become nothing more than an expensive hobby for him. All Jarrell's time goes into keeping the recycling yard afloat—"a sanctuary for washed-up fighters"—Seeger jokes. One day when I met him at the yard, he pointed out a chocolate-complexioned man in a hard-hat, a two-time Ghanaian Olympian with a remarkably similar story to his own, a man who has absorbed and dished out the same pains. It's like both of them, and others, are being recycled themselves. Meanwhile, keeping the yard afloat also means keeping the gym afloat, since anyone, as Seeger told me before, can, after all, train for free.

Jarrell's businesses dropped off around the same time Seeger started **losing**. "God, I felt so bad. Mike had invested so much in me...just like George [Peterson] did with Paul [Williams] and I'm losing left and right, while all this other shit is happening." Before his paralyzing motorcycle accident last year, Paul had more than returned George's investment, Seeger says. "I didn't want to just win that WBC title for myself...More than anything, I wanted to put that belt around Mike's waste."

Seeger confides that a few years ago a fire had put Mandy's out of commission. The restaurant, named for a daughter of Jarrell's who'd passed away—that photograph of the girl in Mandy's window—never reopened. Tight Savannah building ordinances played a part, according to Seeger.

"Mike's a real tough guy, a real guy." Seeger says.

Seeger's next big fight was with Mike Oliver, 20-0 at the time, at the Mohegan Sun. This time he lost a hometown decision in Oliver's backyard. Oliver's trainer, John Scully, the recently-departed trainer of light heavyweight champ Chad Dawson, practically told him as much.

"He didn't say he thought I won...but he said that was way tougher than he expected...You know what that means," Seeger says. "I like that guy." Of course, the only round available online is the 8th where Seeger admittedly took somewhat of a beating.

Again, it took another eight months or so before Seeger was offered an opportunity, the progression of things worsening—this one on only a couple of days notice.

"Yarri—Orki—Yuri—Yu..," Seeger says, imitating Jarrell trying to read the name aloud of Seeger's potential opponent, pretending to squint at an imaginary piece of paper in his hand. The name was Yuriorkis Gamboa.

"It was 2008...Mike had been busy at the yard by this point, with the economy being what it was, so he wasn't really familiar with Gamboa yet," Seeger says of the Cuban Olympic gold medalist defector with the glistening Mike Tyson physique compacted into a 126-lb. featherweight frame. He was 10-0 at the time, with 7 KOs.

Seeger was familiar with Gamboa, however. "Just a couple of months ago, I'd seen him DESTROY one of my sparring partners...and I mean DESTROY...I said, 'Shit Mike, this is the one fight...the ONE fight, you could get me?'"

Seeger thought the opportunity over carefully. It had taken so long to come... So, on two days notice, "I said fuck it."

The ESPN Friday Night fight purse was \$35,000.

\* \* \*

Dollars and sense...

"An old matchmaker once said to me, people get into boxing for two reasons...the first is the money. He never did give me that second reason..."

*Back to Seeger's mother's house, Thanksgiving again. I point out the generous-sized, cement pool in the back, posh but leaf-littered from not being used for a while, "Oh. Yeah..." Seeger says, nonchalantly. "That's the Gamboa fight, right there."*

"When I was fighting, I'd put everything on the credit card. I'd buy something and I'd just say to myself I'll pay it off after the fight."

Seeger's economic model proved more shoddy, in this case at least, than Jarrell's matchmaking. Before he knew it, Seeger was experiencing for once the proverbial, not literal, blood rush from his head as the IRS informed him over the phone that he owed \$60,000 in back taxes. They'd been waiting for *him* to call, he said.

"You know when you work a regular job, they take that shit out for you...In boxing, they expect you to take care of all that yourself, but most boxers don't have the education or the know-how to do that. If you get paid \$600 bucks, chances are you're going to go spend that \$600 bucks and not worry about it...All the while, I've been living, making plans—all the money is spent already..."

Seeger called the IRS back and threatened to get a lawyer. The good-humored lady on the other end replied, "Honey, we've got all the time and all the money in the world..."

In comparison to the memories with the IRS, even the Gamboa proposition seems more friendly. Leading up to the fight, realizing his sliding prospects, Seeger thought it wise to try to make himself more marketable. He got involved with Toastmasters International, a nonprofit that specializes in teaching people from all walks of life to become better public speakers, to help them get ahead. With that, Seeger hoped he'd at least be able to give a decent interview.

"This sport is only about this much talent," Seeger says, making a small arc with his hand. "Annnnnnd this much about how you market yourself," making an exaggerated gain in the other direction. "I was never going to be Prince Naseem (the most flamboyant fighter of the '90s), but I did the best I could..."

The day before the Gamboa fight, that investment seemed to have paid off. Seeger thought he'd given ESPN's Joe Tessitore a pretty entertaining interview—one that might make people want to see him again. When Tessitore asked Seeger his fight plan, his answer began like you might expect.



"Well, Joe... I've been watching the films of this guy. First, I'm going to establish my jab...I'm going to anticipate his hook, then...I'm going to slip his hook and hit him with a right hand. I'm going to circle, circle, circle, jab, jab, circle again...circle, circle, circle, circle, jab, jab, ...circle, circle, jab," each "circle" and "jab" intoned slower and more catatonically than the one before, "and then—" his pitch rising again—"he's going to be soooo dizzy and that's when I'm going to hit him with the right hand and BAM!" He pops another quick right cross at the non-existent Cuban champion who's now 22-0 with 16 KOs.

Tessitore told Seeger that was the most detailed fight plan he'd ever heard. The guy typing the transcript quit halfway through and looked up, dumbfounded. Jarrell looked over at Seeger afterward and said, "What the hell was that?"

Unfortunately, the taped interview never got a chance to air. Instead, Seeger was left with the echo of Tessitore's almost manic-pitched plaudits for *the other guy* as he was being helped to his stool, still in the process of regaining his senses.

"You don't buy that hype, buy in now! WOW!" said Tessitore, after Gamboa flattened Seeger in the first round with a right hand Seeger never saw. Typically, those taped interviews air sometime between the earlier rounds, but never that early. The knockout made ESPN's KO of the week.

"Man, I was so embarrassed..." he says, shaking his head.

Fortunately, Seeger always had the right people around him when he needed them, to help him roll with life's many pummels.

\* \* \*

Deal with it...

*When Seeger was in the amateurs, he made it to the 2002 US Nationals held in Vegas. The winner would be a favorite to make the USA Olympic team. Jarrell had flown out the whole team and many of Seeger's family members. Somehow, there was a miscommunication about the time of Seeger's first fight; Seeger was napping in his hotel room, which Jarrell had also footed, when he was awakened by a phone call saying they were calling his name. By the time Seeger grabbed his gear and ran across the street to the arena, it didn't matter how much he cried and begged; just as his family began walking through the doors, Seeger was told he'd been disqualified. "After that happened, Mike wasn't mad," Seeger says. "He just said, 'Fuck it, let's go out to dinner...'" Jarrell took everyone who'd made the trip out to one of the finest restaurants in Vegas. Afterward, Seeger promptly vomited his whole dinner...*

It wasn't until after the Gamboa debacle, that Seeger was reminded of how fortunate he was with his support system. On this night, as the ER was too full, he was sent to the psych ward instead. "Jimmy (Seeger's secondary trainer, after Jarrell,) told me, 'Sure you're embarrassed, but it could've been worse... you could've taken a long drawn-out beating and wound up getting stopped the same way in the 11th round—only with way more damage...You still have your career...'"

*Well, he mostly had the right people around him... In that same scene, a deranged smiling female patient—one who was actually supposed to be in the psych ward and may or may not have been in a straitjacket approached Seeger and asked if he was a boxer... Then she asked if he had won... Then she told him she thought he was cute... And then, that he looked just like her brother..*

"I've been lucky in boxing," Seeger says. "Well, I've been lucky and unlucky..."

Jimmy's words rang true. Other than a couple of hematomas growing on the back of his head that he would feel for weeks—caused by rabid punches in the clinch—Seeger, physically at least, had never felt so fine after a fight, in spite of his apparent destruction.

Always trying to look at the bright side, with the Gamboa fight, Seeger got to experience what he'd always heard about when fighters talk about getting hit with a shot you never see, and consequently never feel...

— Gay Talese's "The Loser": interior monologue of Floyd Patterson after getting knocked out for the second time by Sonny Liston

"In the dressing room I had a headache. Liston didn't hurt me physically—a few days later I only felt a twitching nerve in my teeth—it was nothing like some fights I've had: like that Dick Wagner fight in '53 when he beat my body so bad I was urinating blood for days. After the Liston fight, I just went into the bathroom, shut the door behind me, and looked at myself in the mirror. I just looked at myself and asked, 'What happened?' and then they started pounding on the door, and saying, 'Com'on out, Floyd, com' on out; the press is here, Cus is here, com' on out, Floyd...'"

He thanks me for my interest...

"You know, most people only want to talk to the winners. The winners are always surrounded by people. When you lose, it's just you walking back to the dressing room by yourself..."

To this day, Seeger says he has anxiety nightmares about boxing, but maybe it's more about life, he can't tell. It's only natural for him to find himself comparing life to boxing, he says.

"In the dream, I'll be in my dressing room and then I'll look in my mirror and say to myself, 'How the hell did I get here?' Somehow, I'll know I wasn't prepared..."

After entering the De Leon fight with a record of 27-1, and leaving the Fonseca fight, five fights later, 28-5, Seeger struggled to find ways to come to grips with the realization that things weren't going to end the way he had once imagined.

"I had to start to get used to the idea that maybe I won't be making \$150,000 a fight. I'd lost four of my last five. And, with the last one, I lost my career... This was not supposed to happen..."

One way he's tried to cope is by helping other fighters in the gym, fitting in training between working at Jarrell's yard during the days, while going to school at Savannah Tech a couple of nights a week—working towards a degree in electrical engineering/computer science—and still coming home every night to his family.

But even what should've been therapeutic in Seeger's post-pro-boxing life has at times proven beyond frustrating. In the last year alone, a scarily demeanored heavyweight-sized man walked into Jarrell's, his second day out of prison. He wanted to turn his life around and boxing, he believed, was his first step.

"If he's all in, I'm going to be all in," Seeger had said at the time. The fighter, naturally, was trying to overcome his own harrowing past—raised by drug addict parents until his mother died and his father went to prison for murder.

*"He told me, while we were training, that even though his father killed a man... in a... you know... premeditated way"—he earned the man's trust cooking him a hot dog and then while he was eating it, not looking, he gouged him in the neck with some kind of tool—"that it wasn't murder because he had it coming." Seeger remembers driving his raw protégé all the way to Atlanta for an amateur bout one time, just to have the opponent turn around and leave after laying eyes on him. "He was pissed," Seeger says. "Keep in mind, I was the one who had to drive him back... just me and him alone in the car the whole way..."*

He showed promise.

According to Seeger, he was a very hard worker and a fearsome puncher. In a couple of months, Seeger had him in "real" fighting shape, dropping him down to 175 lbs.

Sadly, Seeger couldn't keep the ghetto inside the man relegated to the ring nor could he stay away from that old life on Savannah's East Side. Just after Seeger started believing that this man might've been brought into his life for a reason, the boxer got himself carted back to the cage.

"He just sent me this picture the other day... from prison," Seeger says, scrolling through his text messages and then passing me his phone: A grinning black man with big arms pulling up his tank top, trying to show abs that, on his dark torso in the dark, poor quality photo, weren't exactly shining through.

"Still got it," the message under the photo reads.

Luckily, there are enough inchoate fighters of all ages who wander into Jarrell's to keep Seeger busy. We stop talking for a minute, as Seeger, his blister now healed, slips on some body padding before climbing into the ring to do some work with Daniel Spenco, a 28-year-old amateur and daytime barber with plans of going professional—"sooner than later."

A couple of Spenco's children watch from ringside as the skinny white guy with the high guard steps into their father's chest, after Spenco fires some well-practiced combinations at Seeger's pads. Once Seeger gets on the inside, the two struggle in a battle of turning one another.

While this happens, Don tells me about his ex-wife, "the bitch."

"Do you ever bring Atticus to work in the gym?" I ask Seeger, cutting Don off. The two

fighters take a break, Spenco gasping for breath on the second rope.

"His heart's not in it right now," Seeger says of his 11-year-old son. "I think I kind of took the fun out of it for him when he was little...Being here, training all time..."

As it happens, our conversation is coming to a close. Seeger actually has to run to pick up Atticus from his "friendlier sport" of choice, swimming.

"I don't want to be one of those Dads, always showing up late," he adds.

\* \* \*

One more question...

In the recent *South Magazine* profile, Seeger is quoted as saying he was "glad things worked out the way they did, that all the guys he grew up watching and studying, they're broke. These guys are 47 and are still trying to fight. Why?"

Still, I say, as the interviewer, it's only fair if I ask if he thinks about ever making a comeback. I bring up Ricky Hatton who, in spite of seeming to possess all manner of comforts post a 2009 retirement—after being left on his back by the great Manny Pacquiao, only so recently left supine himself—had his hopes of a comeback kaboshed this past November by a single body shot. After all, I'm not the only one who's pestered Seeger with the question.

"Well, I won't say I'm coming back. That'd be irresponsible of me...But man," his voice lighting up again. "If I start working out and that light can find a spot to shine through," he says, tapping his temple, not far from where he'd pushed my finger to the head screw. "I know I can make the sacrifices needed. I'll put it that way...It's been three years. The doctors say my injuries—the bone—should heal..."

But then, as if he's delving deep, past the metal plate and cogs and into darker recesses, a look of distaste crosses his face. "But man, we talk about boxing as being fun, and yeah, we do have *fun*...But when you look back and remember what it's really like in there," he says, pointing to the ring. "Boxing is nasty...*real* nasty. Anyone who tells you otherwise," he says, shaking his head. "They're not telling the truth."

As we walk out of the gym, though, into the night and a light rain, he turns the thought back again. "Rebecca says to me—she's a good woman. 'Al, you're meant to do something bigger than boxing'...I say, Rebecca, there ain't nothing bigger than boxing," he says, remembering times still not distant when he'd be able to walk into the pancake place and have his tab taken care of. He laughs a laugh that's tinged with both humor and sadness.

Seeger invites me to come back to the gym anytime I want...He even offers to work with me, personally, show me some of things that can't be understood from just watching, reading, or writing for that matter—what it feels like to have your hands wrapped, for example. After all, anyone can train here, he says.

"For free..."

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## Mike Oliver vs. Al Seeger from the Mohegan Sun 8 Nov 2007

Mike Oliver ("The Machine") takes the vacant IBO Super Bantamweight title in an action packed 12 round fight at the Mohegan Sun Casino and Resort on 11/8/2007. Action here from the 8th round. New York, New York (May 15, 2008) — [www.gofightlive.tv](http://www.gofightlive.tv)

## 【2008.07.18】Yuriorkis Gamboa vs Al Seeger

Buffalo Bill's Star Arena, Primm, Nevada, United States. ESPN2 Friday Night Fight. featherweight 10R. Got to see this!!!

### Al Seeger

Al Seeger talks about his future in boxing.

### Amateur Boxing Coach Pro AL Seeger 1

3 weeks to game time! Box , Sparing , Amartuer Boxing Frank & Kerry coach AL on side of ring.

## Amartuer Boxing Coach Pro AL Seeger 2

3 min x3 = Tired! Boxing , sparing , Amartuer Boxing , fun ! Coach Pro AL on the side of ring

## Amartuer Boxing Coach Pro AL Seeger 3

Amartuer Boxing , sparing

Tags: al seeger Joyce Carol Oates mike jarrell Ron Paul Paul Williams Nate Campbell Juan Diaz Sylvester Stallone ebo elder victor fonseca dr. bill dascombe ruben carrion Bernard Hopkins Chad Dawson Daniel Ponce De Leon, mike oliver Yuriorkis Gamboa benjamin flores Antonio Margarito Luis Resto Billy Collins Jr. Sugar Ray Robinson Jimmy Doyle Ray Mancini Duk Koo Kim richard green Muhammad Ali Adrien Broner Jose Luis Castillo Floyd Mayweather Oscar De La Hoya George Peterson John Scully Mike Tyson Joe Tessitore Gay Talese Floyd Patterson Sonny Liston Ricky Hatton Manny Pacquiao Ezra Salkin



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al seeger 06:19pm, 03/09/2013

Ezra....

I can't tell you how honored I am that you did this story on me. My appreciation is amplified by the fact your literary style was the most unique I've ever read. With all the conversations we had, your ability to piece this story together is testament to your talent. Thanks again Ezra, and thanks to all of you who took interest in it - and any part of my career.

walt 10:57am, 03/09/2013

Great article

ezdafez 10:26am, 03/09/2013

Thanks guys, I definitely put a lot of time and passion into this. But I couldn't have done it if Al wasn't such an amazing guy with such a great and sad story he was willing to tell in a very honest way. I also have to give credit to a couple of other articles on the man that clued me in that I had such a great character in the neighborhood, including local Savannah press and a great profile by Jake Donovan on Boxingscene.com.

Tex Hassler 01:47pm, 03/08/2013

If you can find a way to make a living other than pro boxing, by all means take it. I am still in pain from a punch or two taken in training 40 years ago. NO I am not joking.

the thresher 11:55am, 03/08/2013

Yes he did.

Matt McGrain 11:22am, 03/08/2013

You did your subject matter justice here my man. Somehow.

dollarbond 06:40am, 03/08/2013

Amazing to read this over a coffee and danish. What outstanding writing!

the thresher 06:26am, 03/08/2013

I am going to send this out to people on my distributions lists as an example of truly amazing writing.

the thresher 05:38am, 03/08/2013

A simply fantastic article. Maybe one of the very best I have ever read. I know a lot about this fight and the circumstances could not be more tragic.

This article is like a book and should be the start of one. It's the best I have read on Boxing.com so far. In fact, it's the best I have read anywhere for quite some time. Make me proud to be on Boxing.com. And this one raises the bar.



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