

Victor Valle Is Dead at 82; Fixture in World of Boxing

By RICHARD GOLDSTEIN

Victor Valle, a boxing figure for more than six decades who trained world champions but was best remembered for developing Gerry Cooney into a ballyhooed heavy-weight contender of the 1980's, died Dec. 24 at Jacobi Hospital in the Bronx. He was 82.

Valle, who lived in the Bronx, had a heart attack, according to his son, Victor Jr., who is also a boxing trainer.

"Fighters are like beautiful women; too many times they'll break your heart," Valle once said.

Valle enjoyed his share of success, compiling a 46-1 record as a featherweight in the 1930's and managing the world champion boxers Alfredo Escalera (junior lightweight), Esteban DeJesus (lightweight) and Billy Costello (superlightweight).

But Valle faced disappointment as well, most notably when Cooney, seeking Larry Holmes's World Boxing Council heavyweight title amid hoopla likening him to Sylvester Stallone's "Rocky," was knocked out in the 13th round of their June 1982 bout in Las Vegas.

Valle had trained Cooney since his pro debut in 1977, seeking to harness the undisciplined punching style of a 6-foot-6-inch, 225-pound slugger while capitalizing on his ferocious left hook. He had forged a strong bond with Cooney, even composing a variation on Al Jolson's "Sonny Boy" that ended "you're my son, Gerry Boy."

Listening to the chunky, silver-haired Valle croon his "Gerry Boy" tribute in Cooney's dressing room after he knocked out Ken Norton in the first round in May 1981, Red Smith wrote in *The New York Times*: "There really is such a thing

as a law of compensation, and when you hear Victor Valle sing, you know for sure that he must be very good at something else. Like training a fighter."

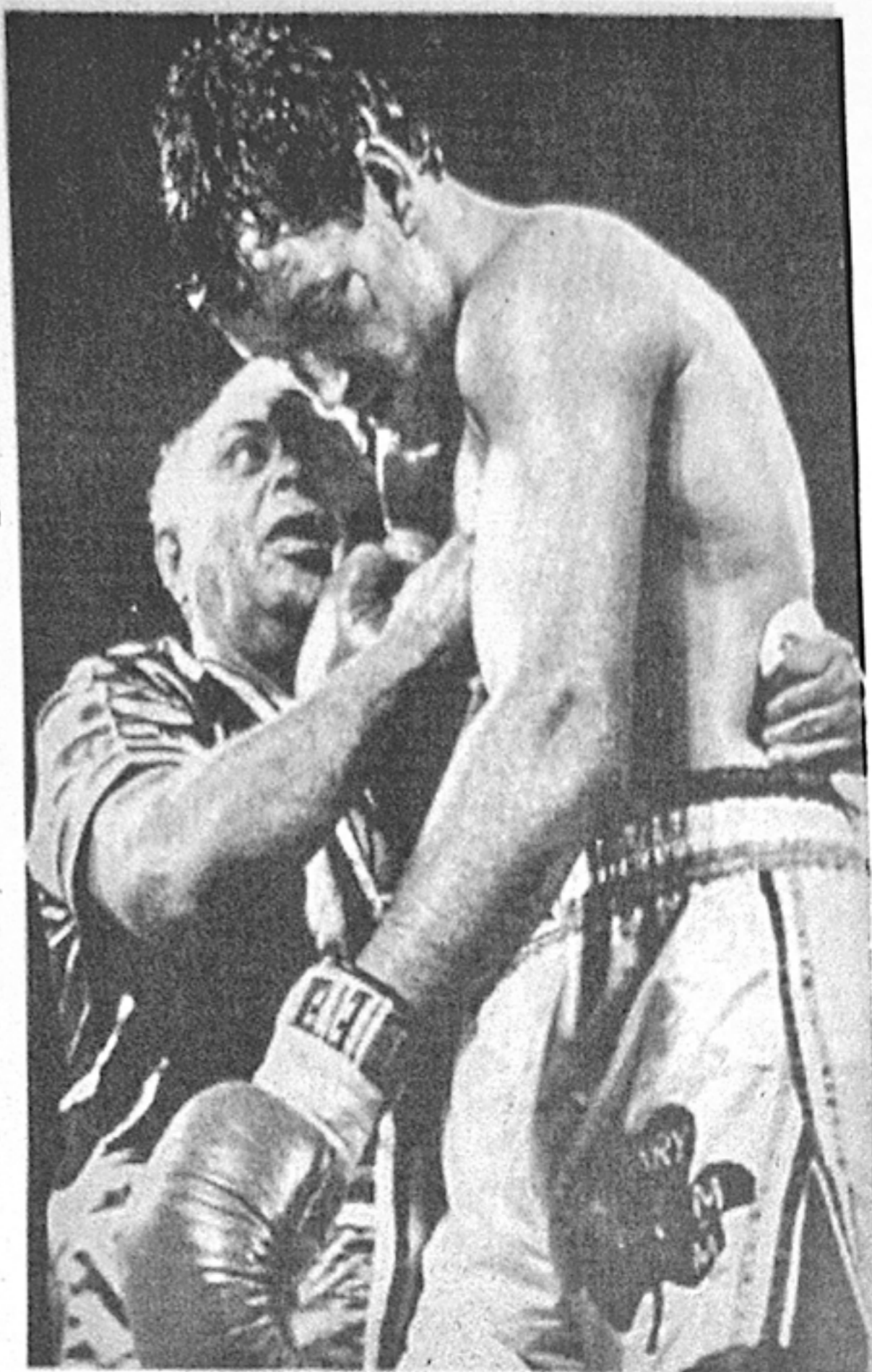
Valle was born in San Juan, P.R., but grew up in East Harlem, where he learned to box by punching makeshift training equipment — sandbags tied to fire escapes. He challenged the toughest boys in the neighborhood to street fights and made a few dollars from winner-take-all passings of a hat.

Valle made his debut as a pro boxer at age 17, and over the next four years lost only to Sammy Angott, a future lightweight champion. After breaking his right hand for the third time, he became a trainer, and he remained active into his 80's, training boxers with his son, who survives him together with five grandchildren.

Cooney became Valle's biggest draw, labeled in the press — to the boxer's distaste — as a "great white hope" in a heavyweight division dominated by black fighters. Valle's associates in the Cooney entourage, the co-managers Dennis Rappaport and Mike Jones, earned the nickname the Wacko Twins over their flair for publicity. The Cooney hype got a boost just before the Holmes fight when Cooney made the cover of *Time* magazine alongside Stallone in his boxing pose, the movie "Rocky III" having just opened.

But Holmes pummeled Cooney, prompting Valle to jump into the ring in Round 13 to get the fight stopped. That was in character with Valle's credo that a trainer must demand respect but also "show the fighter that he cares — that's not a machine out there."

"A trainer must know how to control a fighter's character," Valle said



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The trainer Victor Valle, left, with the fighter Gerry Cooney after a bout with Larry Holmes for the World Boxing Council heavyweight title.

in explaining an almost father-son relationship with Cooney, whose father died shortly before Valle began to train him. "Maybe it was my strong way of dealing with him, but we clicked."

Minutes before each of Cooney's bouts, the trainer and the fighter

would put their arms around each other and say the Lord's Prayer. "You need the prayer to remind you to win in a way without killing the other man," Valle explained. "Then I talk tough. I tell Gerry: 'It's gonna be you or him. Let's go in there and get this man out of the way.'"