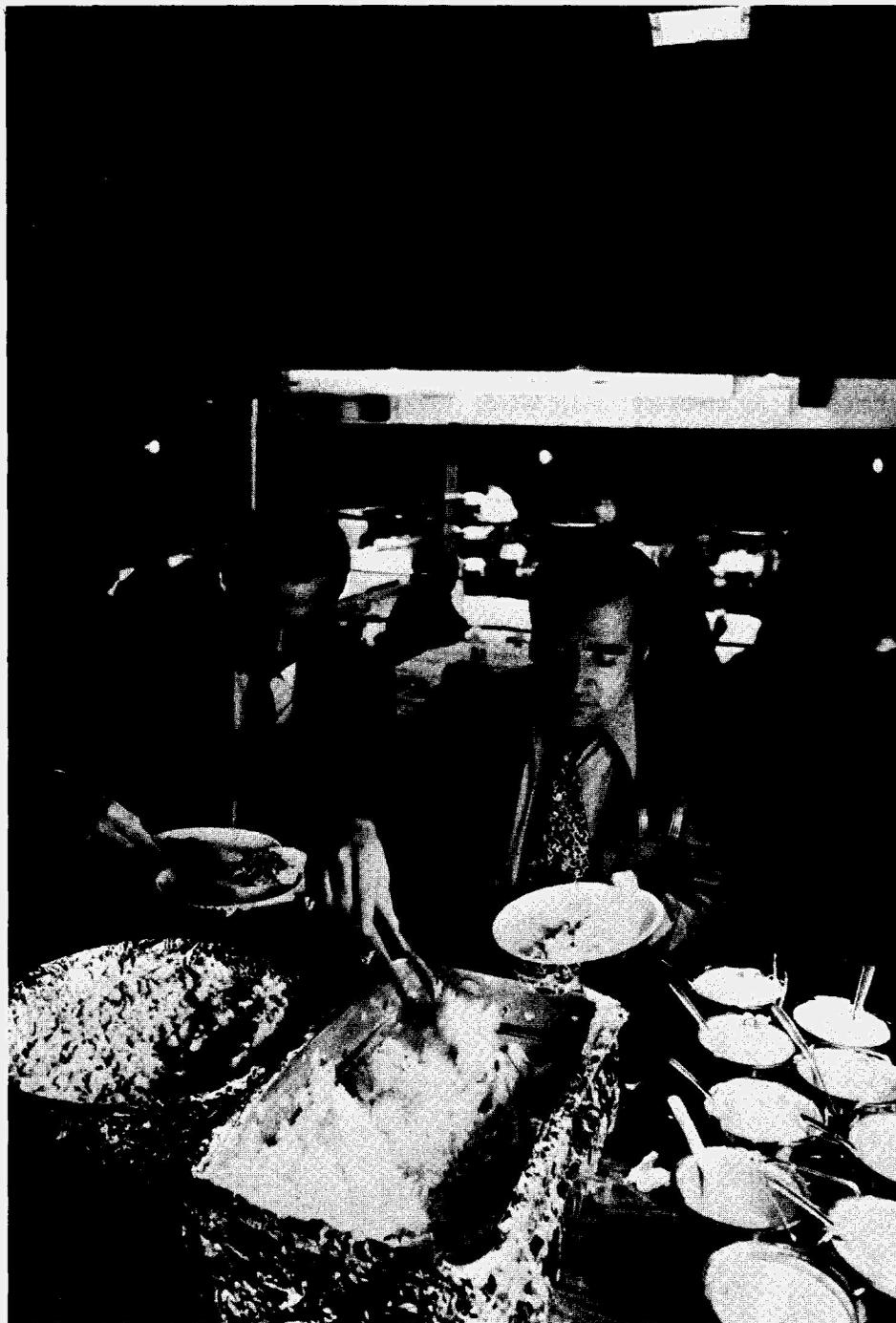


THE BLOOD ON YOUR STEAK DOESN'T MEAN IT'S RARE

by Ralph Keyes

Photography by Robert Black



Left: Charlie "Bad News" Austin jabs a left to the jaw of Memo "Gorila" Lopez. Above: Before the fights, patrons serve themselves salad.

■ Rudy Ramirez couldn't decide whether to unfurl his hand-lettered cardboard sign the other night at the Club 21. The sign read, "Let's Go, 'Bad News' Austin." New York Met fans wave banners like that in Shea Stadium, but this was National City after all, the Club 21 isn't Shea and Charlie "Bad News" Austin doesn't much resemble Tom Seaver.

"What do you think?" Rudy asked me soon after we met. "Think I oughta wave it?"

Why not? There we were at a National City night club, sipping Margaritas and eating steak on white tablecloth at ring-side, waiting for 28 rounds of boxing to begin, so why not throw in a 13 year-old kid from Lemon Grove waving a banner for one of the fighters?

The Club 21 is one of the few night clubs in this country to sponsor live fights. Although supper-club boxing is a very popular pastime in Europe, it's been slower to catch on in the United States. San Diego fight promoter Ozzie Nollet first tried boxing in the Club 21 seven years ago, but then he had a heart attack and didn't get back to it until last December. Similar attractions had since sprouted in Lake Tahoe, Vegas and New York's Playboy Club.

"Hey, Bad News is here!"

Rudy practically dragged me by the hand to meet his hero of the evening. On the way over, he ran down Austin's recent record. "This is his first fight since he fought Monzon in Argentina. [Carlos Monzon, currently middleweight champion of the world.] He got killed in the second. He's fought Chuck Hamilton for the state title and lost. He rocked him in the seventh and then Hamilton came back to rock him in the eighth and he lost a close decision." (Actually Austin was stopped in the seventh.)

Austin was sitting at a supper table with his friend Dave Roberts, and another fighter from Detroit. Short-haired and gaunt-faced, Austin wore a pale Nehru shirt with colorful trim.

"I've been fighting 16 years," he said, leaning away from his friends for a few moments. "I guess I'll keep going for another three years. I'm 31. I've got five



kids—four girls and a boy. I just got me a job in construction, doing tapering, you know. Today was my first day. I really like it.”

How about fighting?

“It’s been fun. Yeah, it’s been fun. I’ve got to travel. I usually do most of my fighting overseas—England. Australia. Japan. Italy—you know. Denmark. In ’68 I fought Nino Benvenuti when he was middleweight champ of the world.”

“Split decision,” Rudy piped in.

Austin smiled at the Lemon Grove kid and explained. “I beat him for nine rounds. The tenth was a draw. They gave it to him by one point. They stole the fight from me.”

Rudy: “He did too. I was there. In front of my television.”

Rudy wanted to know whether Bad News had ever fought for the title. “I never had the opportunity,” said Austin. “They wouldn’t give me the chance. Once I had seven fights lined up with the top ten contenders—Griffith and all—and they all backed out. So the newspaper gave me the name Bad News.”

(An article in the *Evening Tribune* for May 14, 1968 attributes the promotion of this nickname to Austin’s manager Doil Millsap, adding, “The gimmick worked and led to plenty of publicity, which helps when you win a few, lose a

few and don’t turn the boxing world upside down.”)

The Club 21’s tables were filling slowly that night, too slowly for Ozzie Nollet. Nollet is a balding, tank-like former middleweight who fought decades ago under the name “Kid Williams.” He says he’s putting on boxing at the “21” because of a love for the sport. At the rate people were drifting in, it had to be love.

“I’ve called a few people,” worried Nollet, surveying the empty tables, “people who are normally here. But one guy said he had just spent three days at the San Diego Open. Another had been to the tennis matches. That’s what hasn’t helped boxing any. San Diego is such an active city. There are so many things going.”

Until the Coliseum recently started having fights again, the Club 21 was the only place in San Diego where you could regularly see live boxing. Their fights are official, licensed by the California Athletic Commission, and are covered by sportswriters from this country and Mexico.

The physician in attendance is Dr. William K. Lundeen. Dr. Lundeen says that except for a broken thumb in March and one dislocated shoulder before that, his only job in five months has been treating “routine lacerations.” A long-

time fight fan (his wife Grace was the first licensed lady boxing manager in California), the Claremont GP with a blond goatee says he’s never seen a bad fight at the “21.” But Dr. Lundeen admits a preference for the Coliseum, says it somehow seems more appropriate. “It smells like the Greyhound Bus Station,” he explains with a little smile. “Beer in the aisles. Yelling.”

Of course the “21” isn’t quiet. And one guy did wear a red umbrella on his head which he said was to keep the beer off.

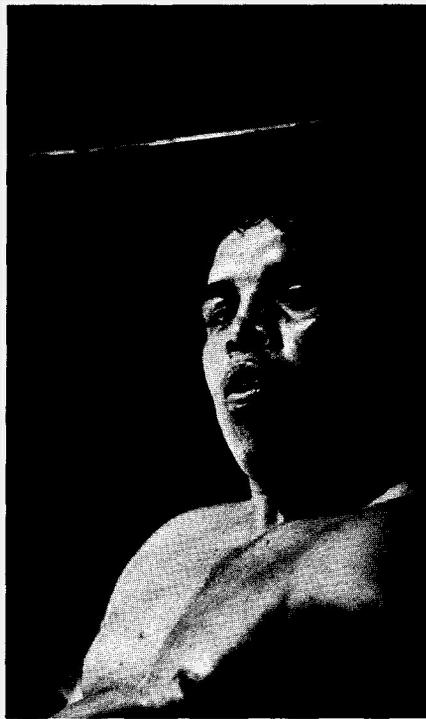
But the doctor had a point. The co-ed crowd which had filled the tables by 8:30 were hardly your average fight crowd, picking away with plastic knives and forks at paper plates full of steak, mashed potatoes (real), green beans, and salad while swigging weak beer from weaker plastic cups.

We asked the waitress why the plates were paper and utensils plastic. “Oh,” she explained cheerfully. “That’s so you won’t throw things into the ring that might hurt someone.”

The first fight was about to begin and Rudy joined us at the press table for color commentary. (A boxing referee once said he’d always like to have a ten-year-old kid next to him at fights. He’d ask him who won and the kid would be right every time.) The kid pulled out

Rudy Ramirez, 13, visits with his idol “Bad News” in the Club 21 locker room before the main event.





Above left: "Pago Kid" Ledoux between rounds. Right: "Gorila" Lopez between rounds, as the end nears. Below: Austin and Lopez ponder each other as diners look on.



his notebook to point out how many times he'd scored fights the same as refs and judges here and in Los Angeles. Rudy explained that he got interested in boxing through his brother-in-law who was a Golden Gloves champ. Now he regularly goes around to southern California and Tijuana fights with his friend the reporter from *World Boxing*. Asked how he knew so much about all the fighters, Rudy replied, "I read magazines."

The bell sounded and the first two fighters danced out. Max Valdes at 135 was billed from Chula Vista and Gabriel Vega at 135½ from National City. "But they're really from Mexico," Rudy whispered in my ear. "When they say they're from National City they're just trying to trick us out, get us to say 'yayyyyyy'."

Half the crowd's comments were in English, half in Spanish.

"Come on, Chula Vista!"

"Pegale, pegale, pegale - Vega."

"Put some blood on his nose!" shrieked the woman at the bar.

"Cuidado Vega, que te da con el derecho!"

Valdes had squinty eyes and looked menacing. Vega seemed inexperienced. They flailed away at each other with red gloves, which Rudy assured me weren't regulation weight. "These guys ain't boxing," he sneered. "They're fighting." He pointed to Vega. "This guy's scared. I saw him fight two times before, and he lost both. He runs out of gas."

Between rounds, the fighters gulped water from canteens held to their lips by trainers. After the third round Valdes couldn't find the bucket and the fourth was about to begin, so he let out a mouthful of water all over his stool, two feet away from my beer. Then he went out and ran into Vega's fist for a bloody nose. That made the woman at the bar happy.

Valdes of the menacing looks won the fight on points and was booed for his effort. After the decision was announced, coins and bills were thrown into the ring and the fighters' managers scrambled around picking them up. The fight before last, in February, two managers got in a ringside brawl over a dollar bill. The 73-year-old manager won.

Rudy scampered off for a few minutes, then returned to tell me he had done some investigating and found out that Valdes was really from Guadalajara, his opponent from Morales. "You see," said the kid tossing his head back, "I told you there was some jivin' around."

Rudy thinks he might like to be a boxer, though at 85 pounds his record is

continued on page 92

only 2:1 in schoolyard fights this year. "But," he points out, "I was born in San Diego, so when they announce, "In this corner, from San Diego—RUDY RAMIREZ!—there ain't nobody gonna have to be checkin' me out."

The second fight was between Manuel Elizondo out of L.A. (Rudy said Durango) and "Pago Kid" Ledoux—billed "Amer. Samoa, S.D."

This fight had an extra dimension, and the air was rent with shouts of "Arriba la raza!" and "Arriba Mexico!"

Elizondo won a decision.

"Come on," said Rudy jumping out of his seat. "let's go see Bad News in the locker room."

We went to the rear corner of the club, to the tiny cubicle where Austin's hands were being taped. Bad News was to fight Memo (Gorila) Lopez in the main event. He recalled knocking him out once before, years ago in Phoenix, and expected to do so once again. "Same routine. Set him up. Jab. He was pretty tricky before. Did a lot of crazy stuff."

Austin was thinking about his family as tape got wound around his hands for the umpteenth time. "My son's been fightin' for nine years now and he's just

ten." Bad News grinned, then stopped smiling. "I don't want him fightin'. A master's degree in college or a doctor or anything but boxing. It's a hard way to make a living."

The final preliminary was between two Mexican lightweights, one a cautious newcomer, the other a cautious veteran.

"Be sweet, you two, be sweet!" shrieked the woman at the bar.

"Don't hit him in the forehead, or you'll break your gloves!"

José Miranda, the veteran, won a decision on points in the eight-rounder. Dean Geddes, manager of Baja's San Antonio Shores who was sitting with his wife, Teresa, at the press table, commented that he'd often seen Miranda win fights in Tijuana with that same meticulous style.

From behind, John Hobbs tapped Rudy and asked how he'd scored the last bout. Hobbs, a construction worker from Lemon Grove, had come to the "21" with his old high school friend Jim Bennet and their wives.

"I scored it 6-1—see," said Rudy holding up his notebook. "Just like the ref."

Hobbs grinned. "So did I."

Hobbs and Bennet seemed to really be enjoying themselves, and Mrs. Hobbs also, but Martha Bennet said she didn't want to come again. "I don't like the violence," she explained. "I always feel sorry for the person who loses, and when it's this close and you see the fellow get beat up."

"Well they're paid for it," protested Corine Hobbs.

"I know," conceded Mrs. Bennet. "But seeing it on TV's not so bad."

The main event was about to begin. Lopez was announced as "the veteran fighter from Guadalajara." About Austin's age, Lopez had a big scar on his left shoulder above a bird tattoo. He was short and squat with a huge belly which sometimes had to catch up with the rest of his body when he moved. Lopez' robe read MEMO LOPEZ GORILA III. Two of the letters had been pasted on and didn't match the rest.

"Come on," a guy yelled as Austin danced out. "That fat little wop can't hurt you."

Rudy suddenly remembered and pulled out his sign. He unfolded it and held it up hesitantly for a few seconds, looking around to see if there was any response. There wasn't and he soon re-folded the sign and slipped it back underneath the table.

Bad News showed the years of experience in his fighting style—cautious, never a careless move, with just the sug-

There wasn't much shouting as the fight ended, and no one seemed to care much when they announced a unanimous decision for Austin.

As the customers filed out, some lingering at the bar for one last drink, a subdued Charles Austin sat in the locker cubicle, his buddy Dave Roberts a few feet away. "I've got to stop fooling myself," he muttered. "I've got to get in shape." Bad News looked up. "He surprised me. I tried to get him too fast. I wasn't in condition. I thought I was." He shook his head and looked down once again. "I've only been in the gym five days—two weeks ago."

"What now?"

He perked up a bit. "I'm trying to get Windmill White, but I'm going to stop fooling myself and get in shape. Got to stop fooling myself."

"It's all right," said his friend Dave Roberts. "It was a good workout for you, Charlie. A good workout."#

SAN DIEGO MAGAZINE *apologizes to Robert Black, whose photography for "Whatever Happened to the Bostonia Ballroom?" was erroneously credited to Bill Reid.*