

FIDEL LABARBA'S AMATEUR RECORD

by Ric Kilmer

Fidel LABARBA was born September 29, 1905, at 452 Robbins Avenue, the Bronx, New York, to Domenico and Palmina (Cianci) LaBarba. Fidel eventually had four brothers and two sisters: Louis, born 1889; Ted, 1899; Tony, 1902; Joe, 1903; Mary, birth year unknown; and Anna, 1912.

The LABARBA family had come from Abruzzi, Italy. According to an interview by Burris JENKINS, Jr., published in American newspapers in late January 1927, Fidel said,

"My people were poor people – even in Italy where my father and his five brothers were born. The five brothers scattered all over the world and the only one who made money was the one who went to South America. My father made the mistake of having too many children. So most of us had to get out and work."

The future Olympic Games champion had a first cousin named Danny Tullio (originally "Di Tullio," but changed to "Tullio" at Ellis Island). Danny's parents, Corinto (Cianci) and Rocco Di Tullio, had been fruit peddlers in New York. Palmina and Corinto were sisters. The Tullios once lived next door to the LaBarbas in the Bronx, but had since moved to Los Angeles. Around 1910, when Fidel was five-years-old, his mother died. Soon afterward, Domenico and his children followed after the Tullios and moved to California in hopes of finding better job opportunities. Domenico worked as a construction labourer and at railroad yards, sometimes up north at Bakersfield, which often kept him away from home. Thus, the five boys were left to fend for themselves. The two sisters had been sent to a Los Angeles convent to be raised until they each reached age 12. (It is unknown whether Domenico remarried, and if Anna was a child of any such marriage.)

Getting out to work, and to do his part to support the family, Fidel became a newspaper boy for *The Los Angeles Express*. "They would find a corner where the guy wouldn't handle our paper, only the Herald," Fidel said.

"Then they would let me out of the truck; the guy was always bigger than me. When a customer walked up, I would rush in with my paper,

pushing the other guy back. The pushing match ended with me – Bingo! – knocking him down. After that, the guy would leave us alone. This went on and on. They gave me \$3.00 a week, plus the money I received from the papers."

Fidel attended Central Jr. High School, and then Lincoln High School, in Los Angeles. According to the JENKINS interview, the then-flyweight world champion said: "I used to get into all the sports at school. Football, basketball, baseball. Of course, I had to play on the lightweight football teams, and I was quarterback on that – less than 100 pounds, you know."

He began boxing around age 12 or 13 in little informal events held weekly at places such as the Elks Club, which were promoted by the well-known Carlo CURTIS.

"Sometimes we would have nude women at these events" Fidel said. The first known recorded mention of "Young Fidel" occurred September 18, 1920, when *The Los Angeles Times*, announced a boxing/wrestling show at the Italian picnic the following day at Selig Zoo. Eventually, Central Junior High School boxing instructor Bob HOWARD saw Fidel's boxing potential. Per the Jenkins interview: "Then one day I boxed a fellow for the championship of the school and won. And some of the boys suggested I try out for the amateurs. My brother was a fighter, you know, under the name of Ted Frenchie. That's how I met Mr. Blake here." Fidel found it ironic that his first "official" amateur opponent was none other than Dave Mariney – the same fellow he had defeated for the high school championship. This was at a semi-monthly boxing show sponsored by the Los Angeles Athletic Club (L.A.A.C). "It looked like a crime to match the two," reported *The Los Angeles Times* November 4, 1920. LaBarba was about four feet tall, and his opponent a foot and a half taller. "But Barba [sic] soon showed he knew how to take care of himself."

George V. BLAKE was the referee at that fight, according to *The Los Angeles Times* report. BLAKE and Charles KEEPEN ran these L.A.A.C. shows. BLAKE had come to Los Angeles from Chicago in 1904. He had been a



United States Army boxing instructor during World War I. By the early 1920s BLAKE was a well-known referee for boxing venues such as Jack DOYLE'S Vernon Arena, and would become the regular referee at the soon-to-be-built Hollywood American Legion Stadium. He was very well-respected, and known as a man of impeccable character. BLAKE took an interest in the young and talented Fidel LABARBA, and asked Bob Howard to have him come down to the club. "I was asked four or five times, but was embarrassed to go" Fidel explained. He was self-



conscious of his poverty; he owned only one pair of torn tennis shoes. He finally mustered the fortitude to go see BLAKE, thus starting a very long relationship. Per the JENKINS interview: "Smiling like a proud father, Blake contributed: 'Yes, I remember very well the first time he came in for a tryout. He weighed 95 pounds and was 14 years old. I knew he had the stuff from the start. Fidel always had class sticking out all over him.'"

While in high school, Fidel sometimes worked nights until midnight, racking pins at a bowling alley, then sleeping on a cot in back of the building. In the morning he would grab a bite to eat at the local restaurant, then head off to school about a mile away.

By 1924 Fidel had lost only one bout after some 30-plus recorded amateur contests. (He later claimed during the JENKINS interview that he eventually amassed around 50 total fights during his amateur career.) George BLAKE took eight of his L.A.A.C. boxers to Boston in May 1924 for the A.A.U. tournament and Olympic trials; Fidel won the A.A.U. Flyweight Championship and qualified for the American Olympic boxing team. Two months later he won the Olympic Gold Medal in Paris. After the Games, BLAKE arranged an amateur card at DOYLE'S Vernon Arena with the American Olympic fighters, at which Fidel finished out his amateur career by a first-round knockout over Pat PRINGLE.

On October 14, 1924, Fidel LABARBA began his remarkable professional boxing career by defeating the highly-rated Frankie Grandetta. "It was the worst beating Frankie

ever received in public," declared *The Los Angeles Times*. Fidel became known as one of the "cleanest" boxers ever to have fought. For example, he was described by *The Ring* magazine as a "clean-cut, gentlemanly type, wonderful character, modest to the point of shyness and genuine class all the way through." (August 1931 issue, p. 50.) He went on to win the vacant Flyweight World Title in 1925, which he himself vacated in late 1927 to attend Stanford College with the stated intention of entering the stock brokerage business. His professors later convinced

him he could always go back to college, but he could not always be a boxer in prime condition. Plus, he was missing out on hundreds of thousands of dollars in ring earnings. So, he left Stanford after a year to resume his boxing career. Meanwhile George Blake was always with him. Fidel continued to box until an eye was severely damaged in 1932 while training for a bout with Kid Chocolate. (Despite several measures and surgeries to save it, the eye eventually was lost.)

After retiring from boxing in 1932 Fidel then pursued a career as a professional writer. He had been writing articles for various magazines, such as *Colliers*, even before he quit fighting. By the late 1930s, he was working for the *20th Century Fox* film company, directly under studio chief Darryl F. ZANUCK, whom he had met while playing polo near the studios. While at 20TH CENTURY FOX, Fidel co-wrote the 1939 movie *Susannah of the Mounties*, starring Shirley TEMPLE, and 1942's *Footlight Serenade*, with Victor MATURE and Betty GRABLE. (The story loosely paralleled his life.) He served his country as a Staff Sergeant in the United States Army Air Corps during World War II. While stationed in Naples, Italy in 1944 he met Luisa G. BERTOLINI, who became his third wife in 1945. (A daughter, Vicki Marie, was born later that year. Their son, F. John, was born in Santa Monica, California, in 1953.) Fidel had married Marian De BECK in 1927. They divorced two years later. She later married actor Charles RUGGLES. The name of Fidel's second wife, to whom he was married six months, is unknown at this time.

LABARBA, Dec. 1923.
The caption reads: Fidel LaBarba. The Baby Shark of the Squared Arena.



Fidel returned to work for *20th Century Fox* until 1949. From 1949 to 1960 he was a sports writer for the Santa Monica Outlook. (On Dec. 19, 1952, former longtime manager George BLAKE, 71, died in Los Angeles after a long illness.) Fidel worked various jobs after 1960, including a position with the California State Athletic Commission as an inspector -- weighing in amateur boxers and wrestlers at the Olympic Auditorium, for example. He retired from the Athletic Commission after suffering a heart attack in 1966.

The great Fidel LABARBA died of congestive heart failure in Los Angeles October 2, 1981, and is buried in Plot 4 0 1607 of the National Veterans Cemetery in Riverside, California, where his wife Luisa, who passed on Dec. 29, 1998, also rests.

Source of the JENKINS interview: Jan. 28, 1927 *Tacoma News Tribune* (Tacoma, Washington, USA).

LABARBA quotes not attributed to the JENKINS interview come from his son, F. John LABARBA.

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(Considered incomplete)

Sep 19, 1920	Battling Bennie	Selig Zoo, Los Angeles, CA	Scheduled: No result published
Nov 4, 1920	Dave Mariney	L.A.A.C., Los Angeles, CA	W-3
Dec 17, 1920	Trifa Distarse	L.A.A.C., Los Angeles, CA	KO-3
Jan 20, 1921	James Piela	L.A.A.C., Los Angeles, CA	W-3
Jul 13, 1921	Fred Kremis	L.A.A.C., Los Angeles, CA	Scheduled: No result published
Jul 28, 1921	Fred Kremis	L.A.A.C., Los Angeles, CA	Scheduled: No result published
Sep 29, 1921	Benny Marks	L.A.A.C., Los Angeles, CA	W-3
Oct 20, 1921	Benny Marks	L.A.A.C., Los Angeles, CA	W-3
Nov 21, 1921	Benny Marks	Hollywood Legion Pavilion, CA	D-4
Nov 29, 1921	Benny Marks	Foresters' Hall, Los Angeles, CA	W-3
Jan 19, 1922	Joe Piela	L.A.A.C., Los Angeles, CA	W-3
Jan 26, 1922	Young Joe Rivers	Doyle's Arena, Vernon, CA	W-3
Feb 9, 1922	Benny Marks	L.A.A.C., Los Angeles, CA	W-3
Mar 9, 1922	Al Pimenthal	L.A.A.C., Los Angeles, CA	TKO-2
Apr 27, 1922	Mike Marijo	L.A.A.C., Los Angeles, CA	W-3
May 25, 1922	Rudy Ricco	L.A.A.C., Los Angeles, CA	TKO-1
Jul 19, 1922	Mike Marijo	L.A.A.C., Los Angeles, CA	W-3
	(Southern California Amateur Tournament Preliminary -- George Blake, Organizer)		
Jul 20, 1922	Benny Marks	L.A.A.C., Los Angeles, CA	W-3
	(Southern California Amateur 112-pound Championship)		
Aug 26, 1922	Young Joe Rivers	Doyle's Pavilion, Vernon CA	W-3
Sep 14, 1922	Mike Avita	L.A.A.C., Los Angeles, CA	KO-3
Oct 7, 1922	Joe Lizer	Newsboys' Club, Los Angeles, CA	Scheduled: No result published
Oct 25, 1922	Joe Cooper	Newsboys' Club, Los Angeles, CA	W-3
Nov 9, 1922	John Conroy	L.A.A.C., Los Angeles, CA	TKO-2
Jan 11, 1923	Rudy Reco	L.A.A.C., Los Angeles, CA	W-3
Mar 8, 1923	John Conroy	L.A.A.C., Los Angeles, CA	KO-3
	(Southern California Amateur 112-pound Championship)		
April 9, 1923	Samuel Williams	Boston, MA	W-3
April 9, 1923	Harry Brown	Boston, MA	W-3
April 10?, 1923	Joseph A. Lazurus	Boston, MA	L-3
	(National AAU Tournament, per The Los Angeles Times, Oct. 2, 1924.)		
May 23, 1923	Sailor Reyes	L.A.A.C., Los Angeles, CA	KO-2
	(Semi-final for Pacific Coast Amateur Flyweight Championship)		
May 24, 1923	John Conroy?	L.A.A.C., Los Angeles, CA	W-3?
	(Pacific Coast Amateur Flyweight Championship.)		
Sep 6, 1923	Henry Garcia	L.A.A.C., Los Angeles, CA	KO-1
Sep 20, 1923	Sailor Rosenbaum	L.A.A.C., Los Angeles, CA	Canceled
	(Bout called off when Rosenbaum, champion of the U.S.S. Nevada, could not get shore leave.)		
Nov 8, 1923	Sailor Mullens	L.A.A.C., Los Angeles, CA	KO-2

Nov 29, 1923	Mike Salvint (For the Newsboy 112-pound Championship)	Newsboys Club, Los Angeles	Scheduled: No result published
Dec 6, 1923	Sailor Navarro	L.A.A.C, Los Angeles, CA	TKO-1
Dec 13, 1923	Buddy Riggs (LaBarba refused to fight when Riggs could not produce an A.A.U card. LaBarba did not want to jeopardize his amateur status.)	Newsboys' Club, Los Angeles, CA	Canceled
Jan 10, 1924	Cecil Taylor	L.A.A.C, Los Angeles, CA	TKO-3
Feb 7, 1924	Maurice Jafe	L.A.A.C, Los Angeles, CA	KO-1
April 3, 1924	August Gotto	L.A.A.C, Los Angeles, CA	W-3
May 8, 1924	Harry Paza (Southern California Olympic Try-outs)	Doyle's Coliseum, Vernon, CA	KO-1
May 19, 1924	William G. Randeo (National AAU Flyweight Tournament and Olympic Trials; LaBarba-Randeo opened the tournament.)	Boston, MA	W-3
May 20, 1924	Pete Sarron (National AAU Flyweight Semi-final & Olympic Trials; LaBarba's opponent incorrectly reported as "Phil Goldstein" by The Los Angeles Times. Source here: The New York Times.)	Boston, MA	W-3
May 21, 1924	Ray Fee (National AAU Flyweight Championship; LaBarba qualifies for American Olympic Boxing Team)	Boston, MA	TKO-3 (Referee stopped bout.)
Jul 15, 1924	E. Warwick (England)	Velodrome d'Hiver, Paris, France	W-3 (First Round)
Jul 16, 1924	Gaetano Lanzi (Italy)	Velodrome d'Hiver, Paris, France	TKO-2 (Second Round)
Jul 18, 1924	Rennis/Rennie?(Canada)	Velodrome d'Hiver, Paris, France	W-3 (Quarter-Final Round)
Jul 19?, 1924	Rinaldo Castellenghi	Velodrome d'Hiver, Paris, France	W-3 (Semi-Final Round)
Jul 20, 1924	James McKenzie (G.B.) (Wins Olympic Flyweight Championship -- Gold Medal)	Velodrome d'Hiver, Paris, France	W-3 (Final)
Sep 18, 1924	Pat Pringle	Doyle's Coliseum, Vernon, CA	KO-1 (Final amateur bout)

Source for all bouts: *The Los Angeles Times* (except the afore-mentioned *San Francisco Chronicle* & *The New York Times* articles).

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