

**No counting  
him out **Tony  
Ayala Jr.**  
attempts to  
revive a  
boxing career  
after spending  
the past 16  
years in prison**

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**Text:** SAN ANTONIO - On a miserably hot day in June, **Tony Ayala Jr.** was doing situps on a wobbly table. For a man trying to make good after 16 years of hard time, at least the hardscrabble setting for a fairy-tale, Rocky Balboa-like comeback is in place.

A musty haze hangs in the Zarzamora Street gym, a shoe box of a building that hugs the gritty part of this city's East Side and once served as a bingo hall.

As **Ayala** grimaces with each situp, the noise around him distracts his efforts to trim his waistline. There is the rat-a-tat-tat of the jump rope, the swish of spit hitting a bucket, the whining whirl of the big, dusty fan that sits in the window of the sweatbox, and the grunts of the anonymous club fighters who pound the heavy bag.

The journeymen peek at the 36-year-old with the receding hairline and the thick mustache and must wonder what it's like to go to hell and back, to be a promising young fighter with Tyson-like power and a \$750,000 paycheck on the horizon one minute, and Inmate No. 69765 the next.

But today, **Ayala** is preparing for his first prize fight since 1982, against middleweight Manuel Esparza for a guaranteed purse of \$200,000 on Aug. 20 here in his hometown. This is the latest step on the road back - a journey that began with **Ayala** seriously contemplating suicide - to what he hopes will lead to

the title shot he blew when he was a teen-ager.

The odds are stacked against him, as they would be for any thirtysomething who has spent nearly half his life behind bars and is now trying to compete in a young man's game. And frankly, not many want to see him succeed. There is not a whole lot of sympathy out there for convicted rapists.

But the day **Ayala** lost it all was a lifetime ago, way before the boozing, the heavy drug use, and the vicious behavior that led to his 16-year stay in prison for sexual assault. Now, he just wants another chance, another chance to prove to his hometown that he is straight and clean, another chance at a title shot that was within his grasp after he was undefeated in 22 pro fights, another chance to love his wife, Lisa, whose own love for him wavered from time-to-time but never dissipated.

"I lived two lives," he said. "My life as a boxer was pretty honorable. But outside the ring, as you can tell, I was pretty messed up. I had some serious problems that I didn't deal with, and it cost me 16 years of my life. But God has blessed me with a golden moment, a challenge. I'd be stupid not to take on this challenge. I'm not going to blow this thing." DOWN FOR THE COUNT

**Ayala** seemed destined to become a fighter. His father, and trainer, **Tony Ayala Sr.**, worked two jobs - he was an airplane mechanic at Kelly Air Force Base and ran a hamburger joint - so that his boys could work on their boxing skills. The oldest **Ayala** boy, Mike, 41, was a World Boxing Council super bantamweight champion and made 19 title defenses. Sammy **Ayala**, 40, was once ranked No. 7 in the world as a lightweight and junior welterweight. Paulie **Ayala**, 32, had 18 amateur fights as a bantamweight, but had to retire because of cuts on his eyes.

But **Tony** was considered the fiercest of the **Ayala** fighters. After knocking down one opponent, Jose Luis Baltazar, he spit on him because Baltazar insulted him before the fight. **Ayala Jr.** kept beating another opponent, Robbie Epps, even after the referee had stopped the fight because he believed Epps had insulted his father.

From the time he began his professional career in 1980 until 1982, he was 22-0 with 19 knockouts. He became the mandatory challenger for the WBA junior middleweight title held by Davey Moore, in which he was guaranteed a purse of \$750,000. There was even talk of future fights with Sugar Ray Leonard, Roberto Duran, Thomas Hearns and Marvin Hagler.

**Ayala's** future appeared to be set.

"It's like the way people looked at Mike Tyson when he first came up; there was an excitement about him, an electricity," said Don Elbaum, a longtime boxing historian who served as an adviser for several fighters, including Moore. "The Davey Moore fight? That would have been over with in two or three rounds. And **Tony** absolutely would have beaten Sugar Ray Leonard. **Tony** was a brawler, but he was smart. He had a left hook that he could knock out heavyweights with. Everyone was always fighting for his life when they stepped in the ring with **Tony**."

But it would be **Ayala's** life that was soon in peril.

He was loaded on heroin and booze during the early morning hours of New Year's Day 1983 when he returned to his West Patterson, N.J., apartment after a night of arguing with his wife, Lisa Paez. Once Paez was asleep, the 19-year-old **Ayala** broke into the house of a female neighbor, tied her up and raped her.

According to the police report, at one time during the assault, **Ayala** asked the woman if she wanted to have his baby.

**Ayala** had already been on probation for assaulting a woman in the ladies' room of a San Antonio drive-in theater four years earlier. There would be no leniency for the sexual assault. He was sentenced to 35 years in prison and would have to serve at least 15 before becoming eligible for parole.

No one in the **Ayala** camp has made any excuses for what he did. Not his father. Not his wife, who had an on-again, off-again, on-again relationship with him while he served prison time. Not **Ayala** himself.

Perhaps one can pity him because he was, he says, sexually molested as a little boy by a family friend.

"I blamed myself for what happened," he said, "I thought what happened to me was because I was bad, fat, unlovable, or perhaps even gay."

Or one can pity him because he hung with the wrong crowd and was already smoking reefer by the time he was 11.

"It went from marijuana to heroin pretty quick," he said, "I was under the influence of that stuff all the time, even when I was fighting. I fought three times just before I used heroin."

But **Ayala** refuses to make excuses. When pressed, however, he serves up explanations:

"I thought I was a wild and crazy guy, but I never fantasized about raping women," he said. "I didn't get off on controlling women or beating women up. I'm not into sadomasochist types of relationships. That's not what I was about.

"Why did it happen? It happened because I realized that there was a great deal of insecurities going on inside my head. I wanted to be loved by someone who didn't know me, who didn't know I was a prizefighter, who didn't know I had money. I wanted to be loved because I was a person, because I was worth loving. It was insane, crazy. I realize that. A lot of people ask, 'Wasn't having your wife enough?' Yes and no. I thought I'd fooled my wife into marrying me." DOING TIME

Rocky Balboa-like comeback? Maybe. Maybe not. At the least, **Ayala** can say he met the man who gave the character life in the five Rocky movies.

Part of the prison movie, Lockup, starring Sylvester Stallone, was filmed at Rahway prison in New Jersey, where **Ayala** did much of his 16 years. **Ayala** was on standby as an extra for the movie in which Stallone's character exposes the warden for illegal doings.

But prison, of course, was anything but a fairy tale for **Ayala**. And in the beginning, **Ayala** was determined not to have anything to do with it. During a telephone conversation with his father, nicknamed Big **Tony**, **Ayala** cried and wondered whether he could do so much time in a place where he needed permission just to see birds chirping.

Finally, **Ayala** begged for his father's blessing so that he could kill himself. Big **Tony** granted it, then said he'd take his own life as well.

"**Tony** had such a long stretch ahead of him, the demons were still in his head," Big **Tony** said. "I said, 'What a cowardly way to go.' I told him I would do the same thing. I said, 'You committed a terrible crime, and now you are paying for it, but you are not the only one in this. Your family, your family name.' I told him that I'd stand by him through the whole thing. After some deep thinking, he said he had

changed his mind and would do the time."

On the advice of a friend, **Ayala** began therapy sessions with the Trenton State Prison psychologist, Brian Raditz. From the beginning, **Ayala** connected with Raditz. The two had a close relationship with their fathers and an athletic background in common. Raditz, 45, was a former amateur boxer and played college football at Glassboro State College in New Jersey.

**Ayala** took to the therapy sessions like he was training for a fight. Scheduled for only once or twice a week, sometimes **Ayala** found ways to get into Raditz's office four or five times a week.

Slowly, **Ayala** began confiding more and more in Raditz. According to the police report, **Ayala** said the sex was consensual. But as the therapy progressed, **Ayala** said he broke down and finally admitted to the crime, recounting every horrible detail. He also confided in Raditz about how "a family friend" sexually assaulted him for two years while he was in elementary school. He told Raditz about the drugs, and the booze, and the violence.

"I was really messed up having been sexually molested and I guess that's why that when I got in the ring, there was a rage, and outside the ring the rage still existed," **Ayala** said. "I recognized very early the happiness I could find through the use of drugs. I progressively got worse as I got older and used more drugs. When I smoked or got drunk or used heroin, life was OK. The challenge outside the ring was to make more money to get more quantities of drugs. Inside the ring, the challenge was to use my manhood for my sense of honor. It's like, I'd beat you down or you'd have to kill me so that I wouldn't impose my will on you."

But with the therapy sessions came the healing. And as the months turned into the years, as the 1980s turned into the 1990s, the itch to box stayed with **Ayala**. At Rahway State Prison in the early 1990s, he often sparred with the heavyweights. His sparring privileges were soon revoked, however, when, according to Raditz, **Ayala** sent four men to the hospital with broken ribs.

"When that happens," Raditz was told by prison administrators, "we have to pay for police cars to follow the ambulance. It's not cost effective." WHAT LIES AHEAD

Now, on this hot, miserable day, just minutes after his workout, **Ayala** is sitting on the back of his shiny, blue pickup truck that his wife bought him shortly after his release from prison last April.

He's talking about how much things have changed since he was gone: "I'm still learning how to use a cell phone," he says, "I just know when it makes a sound, press the 'send' button."

And he's talking about life as a registered sex offender: "I've had no problems with anyone since I've been back. The reception has been pretty good. Regarding his registration as a sex offender Hey, that's something I've got to deal with. But the state does not have to worry about me. I'm not some sick guy that has to get off by beating up on women."

But mostly, as he rubs the sweat from his brow, **Ayala** is talking about freedom, and chasing a dream that ended that New Year's Day some 16 years ago. For **Ayala**, it's not can he do it, but when. He is expected to fight two or three more times as a 160-pound middleweight after the Esparza fight. If things fall right, he'd like to get down to 154 pounds to have a chance at WBA junior middleweight

champion David Reid, or International Boxing Federation middleweight champion Fernando Vargas. There's even been talk of a future fight with Oscar De La Hoya, who has talked of moving up in weight class.

Yet, boxing historian Bert Sugar submits that the biggest battle **Ayala** must win is the battle against himself.

"You have to ask yourself that when Raditz helped **Tony** with his problems, did he also take the thorn out of his paw?" Sugar said. "Is the one thing that made **Tony** so good and so angry not there anymore? Now, that he is not a terror outside the ring, can he be one in the ring? That's what we are all waiting to see." **Ayala** waits as well.

"Why fight? Pride, maybe," he said. "I want to get with these young bucks who think they are all of that. When I was fighting in the 1980s, I ruled the junior middleweights. I have my health, my body, and while it isn't what it once was, it's a lot better than I thought. I've got a chance to do something historic, to redeem myself.

"I'm going to do everything in my power to do just that. Everything."