

Lionel Rose: battler who united Australia

Lionel Rose unified the nation more powerfully than Bradman, if more briefly — Bradman never had 250,000 cheering him through the streets.



Australian Lionel Rose was the first Indigenous boxer to win a world title in Japan in 1968.

By Will Swanton
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Lionel Rose met Paul Keating. Snipped him for a hundred. The Prime Minister reckoned he never carried any cash. Rose persisted. Did him slowly. Come on, mate. Can't you spare a lousy hundred for a battler?

Larrikinism abounded in Australia's sporting stars of the 1960s and 1970s. Rose, Dawn Fraser, John Newcombe, larger than-life characters. It was the 1990s by the time Rose hit Keating where it hurt. The hip-pocket. Mischievousness was alive and kicking in Rose, and part of the reason for the request, but he needed the dough, too.

Keating rolled his eyes, grinned, eventually threw in the towel. He grabbed the money from elsewhere and handed it over. Thanks, Rose said. And while you're at it, do more to help Aboriginal Australia.

“Got the Prime Minister for a hundred!” laughs Rose’s first cousin, Graeme “Porky” Brooke. “He got three Prime Ministers like that. What a man he was. The happiest man you ever saw. My hero. My idol. He was a joy. You’ve never seen anyone like him. He had a laugh, he had a good time, we all know that.



Lionel Rose turns to embrace Fighting Harada

“But he cared about people more than any man I have ever known. I loved him and I will always love him. I miss him and I will always miss him. I only ever wanted to be one thing when I was growing up. I just wanted to be Lionel Rose. But there was only one.”

Rose was born in 1948. Indigenous Australians were deemed insignificant enough to be ignored in population figures. Not more than three apples high, skinny as a rake, Rose was raised in a tin shed at the Aboriginal settlement of Jackson’s Track at Gippsland, about 60km east of Melbourne.

Nine Rose siblings, plus their parents, Roy and Gina, were unable to go to town at Warragul. They had the wrong skin colour. Rose had a little girlfriend called Jenny Oakes. Other parents banned their children from going to the Oakes house because “the black kid” was there.

Rose’s first real boxing trainer was Jenny’s father, Frank Oakes. Rose and Jenny became husband and wife. She left him when he went off the rails, but never stopped loving and caring for him. He died in her arms at Warragul in 2011.

Rose’s humpy had no electricity, no running water, no money, nothing on the menu except wallaby, rabbit or possum if any had been caught and cooked. Otherwise it was damper again. No such luxury as toothpaste. Rose brushed his pegs with charcoal every night before tucking himself into his hessian sack on a floor that definitely had no carpet.

School was not a priority for the young fellow. One day he actually did make the trek to Drouin Primary. Perhaps he stubbed out his cigarette at the front gate. He was a smoker from the age of 10; chain-smoking by his teens. The roll call began. Lionel Rose? No answer. The teacher said it again because, miracle of miracles, he appeared to have turned up. Lionel Rose? Still no answer. The teacher looked at him and said, “Isn’t your name Lionel Rose?” He said, “No it’s not. My name is Slim Rose.”



Lionel Rose in Sydney in 2008

Skinny as skinny could be. Like plenty of Aboriginal boys clobbered by poverty in the 1950s and 1960s, Rose learned to play guitar and raise his dukes. Strumming a six-string, or four-string, or two-string, or however many strings weren’t broken, was a way to pass the time. But an Indigenous bloke with pugilistic talent could end up going a round or two, for a pound or two, in one of Jimmy Sharman’s tents. Roy Rose made a few quid in Sharman’s travelling show before his son, this cheeky, sweet, lovely, kind-hearted, free-spirited young soul — who would become a cheeky, sweet, lovely, kind-hearted, free-spirited older soul, even while pestered by three heart attacks, the plonk, the smokes, gambling and a debilitating stroke — had grander stages in mind.

Slim’s chances? None, ordinarily, from Jackson’s Track. But he loved to box. Loved it. Wrapped his fists in rags and shadow-boxed in the dirt and dust. Went to Melbourne as part of a charity trip for disadvantaged children, and saw a fight at Melbourne Festival Hall of George Bracken, the excellent Aboriginal welterweight. That was it. Hooked good and proper. Every time Bracken fought in Melbourne, Rose’s grandmother, Adelaide, would take him there and back. It wasn’t easy. They hitchhiked.

Rose’s punching bag was a flour sack filled with sand, hanging from a tree. Racism meant team and most individual sports were out of the equation. Boxing offered Indigenous kids a chance. The ring gives anyone a chance if you’re brave enough to step in it. When talent in Rose became apparent, real talent, the young bloke was sent to the big smoke.

He was 15. Living and training with Jack Rennie. An amateur fight was teed up for Festival Hall. His father was tickled pink. His boy, fighting at a famous venue. Roy Rose died two days before the bout. Lionel was comfortable with Lionel by now; only a few family members called him Slim. He went straight from his father's funeral to his fight. Fast forward four years ... and he became Australia's bantamweight champion by sending Rocky Gattellari to hospital on a stretcher.



Lionel Rose with Jack Rennie

Then came a life-changing phone call at the Rennie home.

A promoter from Japan was on the line. Offering a stoush against the legendary Masahiko "Fighting" Harada for the world bantamweight title. Why did opportunity knock? Harada's original opponent was injured. And the young Rose, still only 19, was considered easy pickings. Rose said two words to Rennie: "Take it."

In February 1968, he went to Tokyo and won a 15-round classic. If you care to list Australia's 10 Greatest Sporting Triumphs, this is up there.

Ten people farewellled Rose from Melbourne Airport. An estimated 250,000 lined the streets for his return. It was a bigger reception than the Beatles, Queen of England or US president Lyndon Johnson had received. It's still the biggest Melbourne has seen. The national embrace of Rose came less than a year after the 1967 Referendum in which Australians voted overwhelmingly for constitutional Aboriginal rights.



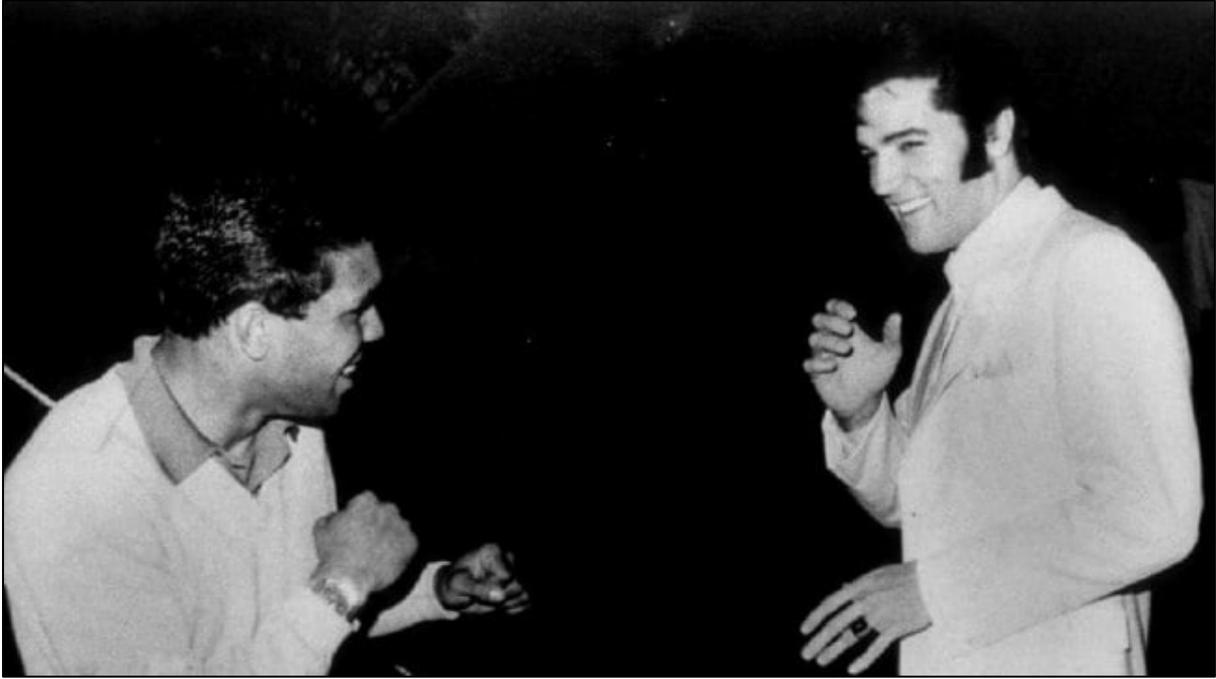
Lionel Rose with Prince Philip the Duke of Edinburgh

Rose proved the black-white divide could be eliminated if and when the intent was there. His impact on his own people mirrored American boxer Joe Louis's ability to unite African Americans in the 1930s. Miles Davis once recalled the joy in "sitting around the radio waiting to hear the announcer describe Joe knocking some motherfucker out." Rose was similarly rousing in his pomp. At his funeral in 2011, the revered Archie Roach recalled listening to a radio call of a Rose fight while his foster carer told him: "This man who's fighting, he's your people."

Rose beat Harada. It was epic. He was an instant national hero. The first Aboriginal world champion. Soon-to-be the first Aboriginal Australian of the Year and an MBE. He saw the quarter-million throng in Melbourne and went rather quiet for one of the few times in his life. He said: "I didn't think so many people cared." His mother told him: "You've done well, son." He told her to join him in the open-top car parade to Melbourne Town Hall. He told Jack and Shirley Rennie to join in, too. Two blacks, two whites.

At the time, a young Tony Mundine was knocking blokes out in Sharman's tents. He still remembers the impact of Rose's world title when racism and prejudice still meant Indigenous people were widely treated like second-class citizens.

"It was a great honour for the Aboriginal community to have a world champion in Lionel Rose," Mundine says. "He was looked on as a great hero to someone like me. When he beat Harada, it made me think, I'm going to have a go, too. We all wanted to do a Lionel. He made us think that if you had a bit of talent in boxing, you could go all the way. I was a teenager then. We became friends. He helped me. Inspired me. Wanted the best for me – and everyone. What a marvellous man he was.



Lionel Rose shadow boxes with Elvis Presley

“We’d go out to Aboriginal communities in Northern Territory and Western Australia, and he was incredible to all the kids out there. What a truly great fighter he was. More natural talent than you’ve ever seen. Speed. Power. Everything. It was unbelievable how good he really was.”

Mundine graduated from Sharman’s travelling show to the Australian championship in four weight divisions, and the Commonwealth belt in two more, while having a lifelong friendship with Rose.

“Lionel had a magic in him that made everyone like him,” Mundine says. “He was a very humble guy. A very funny guy. Always happy. Singing. Dancing. He’d get his guitar and play. I have a gym in my garage, and there’s photos of him in there, and I look at those photos every day. I spent a lot of time with him and never stopped looking up to him as a hero. If you knew Lionel, you loved him. Even Elvis liked him.”

True. Rose was preparing to defend his bantamweight belt against Mexican Chucho Castillo at Inglewood, near Hollywood in December, 1968. As Rose would recall: “I was punching a heavy bag in a gym in LA and I hear a voice sing out, ‘Hey, Lionel! What’s doin’?’ And it was Elvis himself. I was in awe of him, but he said he was in awe of me.”

Two days before the fight, Rose was told Presley – let’s call him Elvis! – wanted to see him at the MGM Studios, where he was shooting *The Trouble with Girls*. Rose pulled off his gloves, quit training, drove to MGM, spent two hours with the King, got along famously, left with a signed \$1 bill for his mum.

I hope Elvis sang Hound Dog when Rose was there. I hope when he got to the chorus ... “You ain’t never killed a rabbit ...” Rose interjected and said, yes I have! A dollar for his mum wasn’t a bad get. Still, he should have snipped him for a hundred.

Rose beat Castillo, but in truth, he was only great for 18 months. He won 42 of his 53 fights but the real glory days were really only from 1967 to 1969, when he lost his world title to Mexican Ruben Olivares. Rose trained obsessively hard to become world champion but by the time of the knockout loss to Olivares, he was partying even harder. Appearing on the Ray Martin Show, he conceded he was here for a good time, not a long time, and he proved good to his word.



Mourners reach out to touch the coffin of Lionel Rose as it is carried through Festival Hall in Melbourne in 2011

Sixty-two wasn't a bad knock. Given he had three heart attacks in his 30s, pushing on past a half-century was a gallant innings. Rose was loved because he was everyman. Strong and yet a slave to his weaknesses. Mighty but fallible. Powerful yet excruciatingly vulnerable.

Brushes with the law when the plonk or illicit substances had their grip. He loved a drink. Loved a smoke. Loved a punt. Loved getting back to the bush and playing his guitar with his family.

In an interview for the National Library and Australian Sports Commission in 2008, Jenny Rose spoke of his "lovely charisma ... a beautiful nature ... Lionel doesn't have any regrets. Ever. He never dwells on things or gets miserable or down in the dumps ... Lionel is Lionel. A bit of a free spirit."

Rose said in that same interview: "I had a bad day here and there, you know, but all my times were good. You don't dwell on things, do you? Another day is another day."

Barry Michael, a lion-hearted superfeatherweight world champion, was one of Rose's sparring partners and best mates.



Lionel Rose waves to the crowd in a triumphant homecoming after winning the world bantamweight crown in 1968

Michael says of Rose the boxer: “I’ve sparred and fought thousands of blokes all around the world. He had the best reflexes of anybody I ever saw. Barely human, those reflexes and instincts, like you get in so many great Aboriginal athletes. We’d be sparring, right, and he’d be standing in front of me like a cobra ready to strike. Then he’d go jab, triple hook, fast as lightning, and I’d think, what the bloody hell was that?! He hit me one time with a right and my mouthguard flew into the wall about 20m away.

Michael says of Rose the man: “A generous spirit. Never said no to an autograph. Talked to anybody. Wouldn’t hurt a fly. He’d give the shirt off his back. Great heart. Great fun. He was a scream, Lionel. Prime Ministers weren’t the only ones he hit up for a couple of bucks. He bit me a few towards the end, too. Baz, can you give me 50? Baz, can you spare a hundred? I always did. I wouldn’t do that for many people. If you knew Lionel, you loved him, and you would do anything for him.”

I’ve trawled through countless hours of footage, interviews and stories about Rose. Talked to umpteen people. Three yarns in particular have stuck in the memory bank.

Memorable yarn #1: The sincerity of his first cousin, “Porky” Brooke, while talking about Rose. “He was the nicest man in the world,” Brooke said. Just a beautiful, humble man. . He wasn’t perfect, but who is? He had a heart of gold. Always happy, even in his bad moments. What a man. What a man. A hero. He would put a smile on your face every time you saw him. The best. The best. When Lionel came to see me ... happiest memories of my life.”



Lionel Rose reunites with Fighting Harada in Melbourne in 2004

Memorable yarn #2: In 1996, when Rose was 48, a six-year-old Indigenous boy called Tjandamurra O'Shane was doused in petrol and set alight while playing at school. He had burns to 70 per cent of his body. Chances of survival? Slim and none. Rose sent him his world title belt in the hope it would help him get off the canvas. At Rose's funeral, where he might again have been stunned at how many people cared, O'Shane said of the gift: "Hanging above my bed in Royal Brisbane Hospital, it saved my life."



Lionel Rose entertains at a concert

Memorable yarn #3: At Rose's reception at Melbourne Town Hall after his win over Fighting Harada in 1968, a journalist asked if he thought the victory would help his

people in their times of struggle. Rose didn't say much while saying everything. "I'm not too clued up with all this," he replied. "I just think of myself as an Australian. I don't go in for all this black and white thing. To me, we're all Australians."

What a man of contradictions. He worked his backside off to escape Warragul. Then he went back there. Made the most of his talent then gave it away. After decades of Aboriginal boxers drinking themselves into oblivion, or simply losing their drive, or routinely accepting they were worthy of no more than Sharman's tents, only able to go so far, Rose became world champion. An unfathomable achievement.



Johnny Famechon, Tony Mundine and Lionel Rose in 1977

Then once he'd done it, he felt no desire to keep on doing it. He had proved himself to the person who mattered most. Himself. He unified the nation more powerfully and emphatically than Bradman, if more briefly — Bradman never had 250,000 cheering him through the streets of Melbourne.

Then Rose fell into decline. Pissed his fortune against the wall. My thoughts on that? It's sad. But it was his choice. He never pretended to be anyone he wasn't. I bet he had a heart as big as Phar Lap's. I bet.

Lionel Rose showed we can overcome adversity if we want to. I think he showed we can plummet back into it if we don't mind our step.

He was on no crusade for reconciliation; he was simply living his life, and we were deeply touched by the genuineness of it. He lived Openly. Joyously. Perilously. Foolishly. Fearlessly. If he inspired, it was a reminder to be yourself, for better or worse. Don't worry about trying to impress anyone. You just might impress everyone.



Evonne Goolagong and Lionel Rose in 1972

More than anything, I wish I could have met the bloke. I would have reminded him of his shock at the scale of the street parade in Melbourne. I would have shouted him an ale and said you know what, old mate? The People really did care. And I hope they always will.

I would have agreed with him about the black and white thing. Makes no sense to me, either. We're all Australian. And then I would have slung the old battler a hundred.

Will Swanton
Sport Reporter