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"Baby Jake" Matlala

Four-time world boxing champ

At a memorial service held in a boxing ring at the Nasrec Sports Centre for "Baby Jake" Matlala following his death in December 2013, Gauteng Sports MEC Lebogang Maile described the pint-sized fighter as "the shortest boxer in the world whose fight records counted among the tallest."

Affectionately referred to by boxing writers as the "Little Big Man" due to his diminutive size – 147cm – Matlala was involved in 11 South African title fights and 18 world championship bouts.

Acknowledged by radio listeners as one of the 100 Greatest South Africans, Matlala fought 68 professional boxing matches – winning 53 – over an 18-year career.

He first donned gloves as a 10-year-old at the Soweto-based Dube Boyz Club, where his father trained as a boxer. Matlala's mother was set against her son following his father's career path, fearing that his stature would see him pounded by opponents, but her son soldiered on defiantly.

Matlala launched his professional career on 2 February 1980 in the coastal city of Port Elizabeth in a fight against Fraser Plaatjie, from which Matlala emerged victorious in the fourth round.

A fifth-round technical knockout over Simon Moema was one of the boxer's most noteworthy bouts on his way to securing the Transvaal Junior Flyweight title. Only three more contests saw the fighter crowned as the South African Junior Flyweight champion.

Matlala won his first World Boxing Organisation (WBO) flyweight title bout against Pat Clinton in Glasgow in May 1993. Once again in Glasgow, he secured a second world title in 1995 by defeating Paul Weir to take the WBO Junior Flyweight title. The following year Matlala managed to retain his WBO crown against Weir.

Following a crushing 12-round victory over Mickey Cantwell, Matlala was in a position to challenge Mexican Michael Carbajal for the IBA Junior Flyweight title. He faced Carbajal in Vegas on 18 July 1997, where it is said he delivered the best performance of his career, hammering Carbajal for nine rounds before the referee stopped the fight. This display of tenacity and triumph over the Mexican boxer, rated one of the best in the world, raised Baby Jake's international profile.

In his final fight, at the age of 40, Matlala again tasted victory, this time against Juan Herrera at The Big Top Arena at Carnival City, Brakpan on 2 March 2002.

The 5 000-strong crowd were enthralled by the big-hearted little man, who, still dripping with sweat, walked to where Mandela was seated in the audience and presented the for president with his World Boxing Union championship belt.

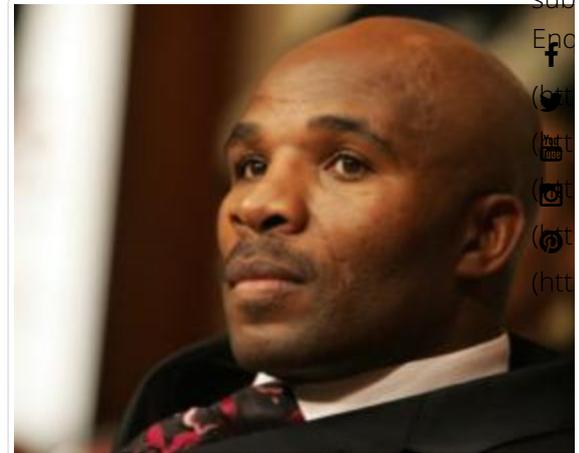
"This is for you, our greatest world champion," Matlala told Mandela, to a rousing ovation.

Sadly, Matlala could never quite achieve the same roars of applause outside of the boxing ring. He studied for a Bachelor of Commerce degree, hoping to swap his gloves for a business suit, but his fast-food franchise, Baby Jake's Diners, failed and a business partnership with boxing promoter Branco Milenkovic also turned sour.

Following reports of Baby Jake's recuperation from double pneumonia in 2011 and his inability to pay exorbitant medical bills, the boxing fraternity came to his aid with a fundrai bout titled *Night of the Big Little Man* at Emperor's Palace in Kempton Park.

Among the items auctioned for the Baby Jake fundraiser was the IBA belt Matlala won from Carbajal.

Matlala died two days after Nelson Mandela, on 7 December 2013, at the Charlotte Maxeke Johannesburg Academic Hospital (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charlotte_Maxeke_Johannesburg_Academic_Hospital), aged 51. He is survived by his wife Mapula and his two sons, Tshepo and Masego.



'Baby Jake' Matlala. Photo courtesy iol sport (<http://www.iol.co.za/sport/boxing/baby-jake-back-in-hospital-1.731226>)

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