

Leija Warning For Arturo Gatti

Written by Robert Cassidy Jr.
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The last thing a fighter wants to do is take Jesse James Leija for granted. Just ask Francisco Bojado, Hector Camacho Jr. and Joel Perez how that works out.

On Saturday night in Atlantic City, Arturo Gatti will look across the ring at a fighter who is in many ways a lot like himself. They are a pair of rugged, throwback fighters who have competed at the elite level for a decade. But the question is: will he look through Leija toward that mega showdown with Floyd Mayweather Jr. later this year?

Leija, who challenges Gatti for the WBC 140-pound crown, hopes to find himself in the familiar role of spoiler.

"I can't control anything except the fight that I'm in," said Leija. "So I don't worry about stuff like that. I control what is in front of me and that is me fighting Gatti and that's that. Hopefully I will just put a damper on all of their plans."

It will take an extraordinary effort for Leija to accomplish such a feat. Gatti has resurrected his career over the last three years and Atlantic City has been the site of some of his most heroic efforts. But Leija is no stranger to the big stage. This is a man who has faced Azumah Nelson four times (2-1-1), Oscar De La Hoya, Shane Mosley, Kostya Tszyu and Louie Espinoza.

There were times when it seemed certain that Leija (47-6-2, 19 KOs) was headed for retirement. Few would have argued had he stepped down after losses to De La Hoya and Tszyu, but at 38-years-old he is as crafty as he is tough and he keeps reviving his career with important victories, such as the decision against Bojado in July.

"I am a determined person and think I get better with age," he said. "I have faith in myself and God and I think he wants this for me. He wants me to do well in life and I just work hard and I never believe anyone when they tell me I can't do anything. I go up there and I prove them wrong. The fights that I lost were to Hall of Fame guys that were just great fighters. I've never lost to an average fighter."

Gatti (38-6, 29 KOs) is hardly an average fighter. There are times when he takes his robe off and one expects to see Superman's "S" on his chest. But for all his blood-and-guts drama, he is beatable. He has dropped fights to Ivan Robinson and Micky Ward – neither of whom is as good as Leija.

Gatti-Leija is a compelling matchup with major implications for the future of both fighters. To secure that future, each man has to focus on Saturday night. If images of Mayweather Jr. enter Gatti's mind, it could make for a long bout.

"James is a crafty fighter, very experienced," said Gatti. "He takes one round at a time. He is very cautious and I will try to take him off his game plan. I am the younger guy, the stronger

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guy. I'm not going to worry. I am in great shape and I am ready to fight."

A sidebar to this fight is that cutman Joe Souza will work Leija's corner and not Gatti's. The veteran cornerman has worked with both camps for many years, but has known Leija longer.

"If [Gatti] gets cut during the fight, it will be on everybody's minds, How bad is the cut and how the cutman will control it," said Leija. "I've known Joe Souza since I was two years old. He is family. He trained my father in the late '60s, early '70s. But I was going to let [Joe] make that decision. He thought it would be wise if he went with me. Plus he's from San Antonio and people would hold that against him if he went with Gatti."

It will be interesting to see if Gatti, who is prone to cuts, misses the services of Souza.

"It is out of loyalty so I respect that," said Gatti of Souza's decision. "He's been with James for a long time, since the amateurs, and I won't need a cut man that night. I don't plan on mixing it up."