

Hatton-Tszyu Was Beautifully Ugly

Written by Bill Knight
Sunday, 05 June 2005 19:00

It was beautifully ugly.

And Ricky Hatton not only had the strategy, he had the strength and stamina and heart to execute that strategy. It seemed, in fact, as if he could have executed that strategy for 24 rounds. Certainly, he did it for 11 rounds.

The humble Englishman was anything but humble inside that roped off jungle they call a boxing ring. He attacked. And attacked. And attacked. He crowded a great champion, never allowing Kostya Tszyu the room he needed, never allowing him to get the extension on his punches ... the extension that has sent some of the best fighters into la-la land.

Hatton explained after the fight, making perfect sense when he talked of not backing away from a power puncher like Tszyu the way Zab Judah and Sharmba Mitchell did. No. That would give Tszyu room to drop those bombs he calls fists and that would be big trouble.

One problem.

That strategy is easier said than done. How many fighters have the strength or the will to roar forward, over and over and over again? Hatton was like a hyperactive 10-year-old; constantly animated, constantly moving, constantly going forward. He was bull strong against another bull strong man — but it might have been the case of a 26-year-old bull strong fighter against a 35-year-old bull strong fighter.

No matter. Hatton did it. And now he is a world champion, proud owner of the IBF junior welterweight belt. And he took it from a great champion.

Hatton fed off the adoring, cheering, booing throng of 20,000 in Manchester, England. He fed off being trained and fit and ready to fight at two o'clock in the morning. He fed off his moment in the sun, this moment of a lifetime.

But, more than anything, Ricky Hatton fed off his own talent and energies. One can feed off those frenetic things — that adrenaline of the crowd, the excitement of the moment — for only so long. The rest was Hatton. He had everything he needed. And more. The way he was jumping around after Tszyu failed to get off his stool for the 12th round, it was apparent Hatton had plenty more left.

Perhaps this was some sort of passing of the torch.

Tszyu has been a great champion and that 11th round slugfest in the middle of a June night in England might well have been the final round of a tremendous career. It was the beginning of Hatton's career on center stage. He has had plenty of fights, but this one catapulted him into the spotlight. Even if he had fought to the end and lost a decision, he earned himself some big, big

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paydays in the future. More people will want to see this man fight. In the end, there was no danger of Hatton losing any decision. He had this fight and, by doing so, he has etched his name onto some big paychecks in the future and, by the way he did it, Hatton has also scribbled his name into the hearts of boxing fans everywhere.

It was obvious from the moment he entered the arena that he would not be intimidated by this moment. No, he would be defined by this moment. Some people — athletes of all sorts — shrink from a moment like this. Not Hatton. He might be the first fighter ever to enter to “Blue Moon,” but somehow it worked. Many of his thousands of adoring fans were singing along to the tune. Hatton looked the way every fighter wants to look — as if he had been there before.

He turned around, took his time, and you could see him relishing the instant. You could almost see him breathing deep, drinking it all in and making a scrapbook for his mind. He was not going to be intimidated by this spotlight; he was going to enjoy it. You knew. You knew right then that he could handle this pressure situation.

What no one knew, though, was whether or not he could handle a bomber/champion like Kostya Tszyu.

Gradually, round by round, we all learned. You could see this man growing. You could see a champion being born. Will he wilt? Everyone kept wondering. Finally, we got the answer. No. Tszyu would.

It was indeed ugly at times, but it was also powerfully beautiful.

It was boxing. Boxing, like life, does not always come wrapped up in neat, pretty packages. Boxing, like life, is about getting out there — all alone, completely exposed — and fighting your way home. It shows the best there is in man. You can get hit. You can get knocked down even. But you keep coming, you keep fighting. Ricky Hatton never went down. But he got hit. Plenty. Yet on he came. Again and again.

Smiling so slightly afterward, he said, “I was coming on like a Trojan.”

Oh, yes he was.

And now Ricky Hatton is a world champion. He might have put the final period on the final chapter of another world champion’s story.

Tszyu said graciously that Hatton was the better fighter on this night. “I was never hurt hurt,” Tszyu said, “but it was not the best feeling I’ve ever had.”

When his corner urged him to stay on his stool for the 12th round, Tszyu said he said nothing at first. And when a fighter does not respond to something like that, it says everything.

Two careers might have passed in the England night.

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So many fighters struggle so mightily, never to achieve what either of these men has achieved. So many fighters' lives trickle off into the lyrics of a sad country song. Not these men. Not now. They are champions, past and present, and they were a class act in the middle of that dark night.

Ricky Hatton charged from the opening bell and never stopped charging. It was swarming. It was smothering. It was beautiful. It was ugly.

But then what could be more beautiful — no matter the style — of a man catching his dreams with nothing but a pair of gloves and an iron will?