

Broadway Boxing Back in the App

Written by Robert Mladinich
Wednesday, 08 June 2005 19:00

New York-based boxing impresario Lou DiBella will continue to spotlight local talent from all five boroughs with the latest installment of his much-lauded Broadway Boxing Series on Thursday, June 9, at the Manhattan Center.

Because of DiBella's steadfast determination to return boxing to its roots in the Big Apple, the Manhattan Center, which is located just one block from Madison Square Garden, has become a sort of de facto training ground for boxing's future stars.

Not so coincidentally, DiBella's love for all sports at all levels—but especially at the grassroots level—is not confined to boxing. A few months back he purchased the Norwich Navigators, the Double-A affiliate of baseball's San Francisco Giants.

"I've always loved baseball as much as boxing, and knew I'd be involved in it someday," said DiBella, a Harvard educated attorney who is the former vice-president of HBO Sports. "When I first got out of college I interviewed with several teams but wound up taking the job at HBO. With all that's happened lately, especially my unpleasant litigation with Bernard Hopkins, I wanted to balance my life a little more. This seemed like a great fit."

DiBella is a natural promoter who manages to draw from New York's gorgeous mosaic at all of his shows. His recent business collaboration with Damon Dash, the CEO of Roc-A-Wear clothing, ensures that an abundance of fans and celebrities from the Hip Hop community will be on hand. Others who are often in attendance are the Reverend Al Sharpton, the perennial presidential candidate, esteemed author Budd Schulberg, and longtime porn star Jamie Gillis.

Thursday's show will be headlined by 23-year-old junior welterweight Dmitriy Salita, a native of Odessa, Ukraine, who now resides in Brooklyn. An Orthodox Jew who refuses to fight on the Sabbath—from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday—Salita, 21-0 (12 KOs), has a tremendous following within New York's large Russian and Jewish communities.

Salita will square off against Louis Brown of Indianapolis. With a record of 14-1 (10 KOs), most expect that Brown will give Salita a stern test. However, Salita - a 2001 New York City Golden Gloves champion whose trainer Jimmy O'Pharrow says "Looks Russian, prays Jewish and fights black" - is no stranger to big challenges.

A workhorse in the gym, he has an abundance of self-confidence, much of which comes from his strong spiritual foundation. Moreover, he sees no moral ambiguity between his devotion to Judaism and his choice of vocations. Nor does he care about the criticism he has heard over his refusal to fight on Jewish holy days, of which there are 70 a year.

"I will never compromise my beliefs," he said. "It's not a question. I have a personal relationship with God that I won't compromise. Boxing is such a big part of my life, but it won't get in the way of my religion. It can't, and it won't."

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Among the other fighters scheduled to appear are junior welterweight Edgar Santana, super bantamweight Gary “Kid” Stark Jr., and junior middleweight Andre Berto.

The crowd-pleasing, 25-year-old Santana, who resides in Manhattan’s Spanish Harlem and has a record of 13-2 (9 KOs), only became interested in boxing when former light heavyweight champion Jose Torres came to his junior high school to speak. He is scheduled to fight Derrick Moon of Fort Worth, whose record stands at 10-8-1 (2 KOs).

Early in his career, while living in his native Puerto Rico, Santana was part of the Felix Trinidad Sr. stable. Much to his chagrin, he found himself relegated to the backburner while Trinidad Sr. spent the majority of his time with his millionaire son.

For his last nine fights Santana has been trained by Hector Roca, who moved mountains in preparing Hilary Swank for her Academy Award winning role in the film “Million Dollar Baby.” According to Santana’s young manager, Ernesto Dallas, Roca has moved mountains with Santana as well.

“Edgar is naturally gifted and very powerful, and the two fights he lost were genuine losses, we’re not going to offer any excuses for them,” said Dallas, the former owner of the New York Boxing Gym in Yonkers, New York. “Edgar isn’t always the easiest guy to train and he doesn’t have a lot of amateur experience, but Hector has really brought out the best in him. I don’t think anyone can question the fact that Edgar is now a genuine prospect.”

The 25-year-old Stark, who grew up in Staten Island is 11-0 (6 KOs). Of Guatemalan, Puerto Rican and Jewish descent, he was a gifted college baseball player before quitting school so he could box full time. After just 13 fights, he was invited to the Olympic Trials in 1999. He is currently sponsored by Dash, rapper Jay-Z, and Chris Gotti, a record executive with The Inc.

His initial interest in the sweet science was spawned by his father, Gary Sr., a retired corrections officer who had been a Golden Gloves fighter in the early eighties. Stark is scheduled to take on Juan Carlos Santiago of Las Vegas, whose record is 8-5-1 (2 KOs).

The 21-year-old Berto grew up in Winter Haven, Florida, where he still resides. DiBella, who says he spent more time scouting Berto than any other fighter he has signed, is certain he is destined for greatness.

Undefeated in five bouts, with three knockouts, Berto had a sensational amateur career. He won a bronze medal at the 2003 World Amateur Boxing Championships in Bangkok, and was a two-time National Golden Gloves champion and a two-time National PAL champion.

He was expected to represent the United States in the 2004 Olympic Games, but was disqualified at the Trials in Tunica, Mississippi, for tossing his opponent to the canvas in their opening round bout. He was reinstated into the Trials after filing a grievance with the USA Boxing Grievance Committee.

However, a second committee overturned that decision. Not willing to give up on his Olympic

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dream, Berto, who has dual citizenship with the United States and his native Haiti, wound up being Haiti's lone boxing representative in Athens.

The way Berto sees it, just getting to the Olympics was a monumental feat. He had seen so many of his friends succumb to the temptations of the street and wind up either dead or in jail. He credits his father, Dieusiel, a strict disciplinarian and onetime Ultimate Fighter, with keeping him on the straight and narrow. He sees each of his fights as having equal importance, and views Thursday's bout against Akron, Ohio's Anthony Little, 4-1 (1 KO) as another step toward the boxing immortality he and so many others envision for him.

(Broadway Boxing's first fight is at 7pm tonight. Tickets are priced at \$100, \$75, \$50, and \$35. Tickets are available at the box office or by calling DiBella Entertainment at 212-947-2577.)