

Arturo Gatti ... Remembering the Warrior

Written by Jake Donovan
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Watching Arturo "Thunder" Gatti cry in Buddy McGirt's arms while pleading for one more round against Floyd Mayweather was no easy sight for any diehard Thunder fan. The preceding six rounds did not help either, as Gatti took a beating without being able to give back anything in return. Normally, Arturo will take two or three to give back at least one. On June 24, 2005, all he could give back was his heart, which is always on display.

After watching Mayweather's virtuoso performance, it's easy for the critics to lend support to the claims of Gatti being an overrated slugger. Those who go there ignore the fact that Gatti never pretended to be a pound-for-pound entrant. What Arturo gave to the sport goes way beyond x's and o's. It was far more will than skill that has repeatedly filled up the Boardwalk Hall in Atlantic City for the past decade.

Despite a successful amateur career in which Gatti was far more boxer than slugger, Arturo transformed into a human highlight reel during the heart of his prime. The boxer and slugger were both on display the night he beat Tracy Harris Patterson for the IBF super featherweight crown in Madison Square Garden nearly ten years ago. It was boxing that earned him enough rounds to win that the fight on the cards. It was his heart that enabled him to cross the finish line.

It was the first time he won a world title, but certainly not the last time he'd leave the crowd gasping with every punch. A mere three months after winning the crown, Arturo entered what was intended as a routine title defense. It turned out to be the fight that would define his career and jumpstart the legend of the modern-day warrior.

Gatti returned to the arena that made him a world champion, though relegated to the small room. The circus played the main room that evening, but the high wire tightrope act took place downstairs in The Theatre against battle-tested Wilson Rodriguez. The defense was intended as a gimme, but developed into a war very quickly. By round two, Gatti was knocked down and had both eyes swollen shut. Little did Rodriguez know that Arturo had him right where he wanted him.

After surviving a brief eye examination by the ringside physician, Gatti willed himself back into the fight. "This has been a time capsule round," was the call from ringside by HBO's Jim Lampley. The following round would go down as one of the best of 1996, and perhaps any other year. Rodriguez battered Gatti throughout the round, to the point where a stoppage could not have been questioned. What would never be questioned from that moment onward is Gatti's heart. Still operating on limited vision from both eyes, Arturo not only absorbed the brutal beating, but rallied back toward rounds end to pummel Rodriguez in a neutral corner. It was a round that perfectly captured the wild rollercoaster ride that was the fight.

Arturo carried over the momentum into the fifth, flooring Rodriguez with a body shot. Rodriguez would rise from the canvas, and stage a rally of his own. The two-way action carried over into

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the climactic sixth round. Midway through, Rodriguez let his hands go, but left his chin exposed just enough for Gatti to uncork a perfect counter left hook.

“DOWN GOES RODRIGUEZ ... WHAT A LEFT HOOK!”

Lampley nearly screamed himself hoarse that night, as did the 4,000 or so in attendance. Larry Merchant's post-fight claim of repeated showings of the fight never happened. But he was right when he said it would be a fight none would soon forget. He also coined the phrase that would be repeated through the years: “Can you believe ... Arturo Gatti?”

What made the fight so special is that it was the first of three fights in three consecutive years where Gatti would participate in the Fight of the Year.

Gatti received a much needed soft touch four months later, when he was fed Pepe Correa in the co-feature to Riddick Bowe's first fight with Andrew Golota. It was the night of the infamous Garden riot, and also a rare night where Gatti did not steal the show. He was impressive in scoring a third round knockout, but the bout was off TV and soon forgotten the moment Jason Wilson slammed a walkie-talkie off of the back of Golota's head.

The tune-up was Arturo's third straight at Madison Square Garden, but would serve as his last for the next four years. He took the “Thunderstorm” to Atlantic City, New Jersey, where he would headline or play co-feature to five straight cards on the Boardwalk. The first was a rematch against Patterson to start off 1997. The outcome was the same, though by a much wider margin. Arturo managed to go the full twelve without a scratch. He was also able to show a different side – that of the boxer we became familiar with earlier in his career. The timing of the transition was odd – it was the first fight where he abandoned his traditional AC/DC “Thunder” music entrance in favor of the theme to “Rocky.”

The warrior wasn't needed that night, but would need to surface in his May non-title fight on CBS. Arturo took an over-the-weight bout against former featherweight Calvin Grove, looking to test the lightweight waters. Grove did all he could to drown him in such waters, but Arturo eventually prevailed in stopping Grove on cuts in about as thrilling a fight as one could ask for from free TV.

Fans would pay to see his next fight. Even in serving as the co-feature to Lennox Lewis' one round blitz of Andrew Golota, Gatti and Gabe Ruelas made the pay-per-view telecast well worth the purchase price in a five round brawl that would go on to be named 1997's Fight of the Year. Ruelas was outfought throughout, but fared far better than anyone ever imagined. So well, in fact, that he had Arturo hurt several times in the fourth and fifth round before succumbing to Gatti's “Thunder.” It would come in the form of a counter right and a left hook, the latter crashing against Ruelas' jaw as he crumpled to the canvas. He beat the count, but was in no condition to continue.

The thrills didn't stop there for Arturo, even if the winning did. Gatti would engage in a 1998 campaign that resulted in three straight losses. All three fights warranted Fight of the Year consideration. His first fight with Ivan Robinson landed such honors in a landslide. So valiant in

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defeat was Arturo, that veteran scribe Michael Katz commented how Gatti was the first fighter in history to warrant consideration for Fighter of the Year without winning a single fight.

It started with an over-the-weight grudge match with Angel Manfredy. Even without a title on the line, both fighters fought like champions. Ultimately, a cut suffered early in the fight became too much for Arturo's skin to handle. Despite mounting a rally, he was forced into submission when the ringside physician deemed the cut too severe for him to continue.

A supposed quick fix against Ivan Robinson seven months later developed into the Fight of the Year – and also Arturo's second straight loss. The plan was for Arturo to tear through the light-hitting Robinson and secure either a rematch with Manfredy or a shot at a lightweight title. Instead, he was taken to hell and back by the high-speed boxer, relying on a fourth round knockdown and a go-for-broke rally late in the tenth to make things interesting on the scorecards. It resulted in a split decision loss and a rematch four months later. The rematch didn't help. While still thrilling, it wasn't as good as the August fight. Arturo's performance wasn't much better, this time dropping a close unanimous decision.

Gatti returned in 1999, as Main Events scraped the bottom of the barrel to find an opponent he could beat. They found one in Reyes Munoz, who for his troubles was knocked out in two and sent out of the ring on a stretcher. The same would transpire six months later, when Gatti returned to Madison Square Garden. Only this night would be shrouded in controversy.

Going into his bout with Joey Gamache, Arturo started a never ending debate about weigh-ins the day before a fight. He weighed in at an announced 142 pounds. Immediately after weighing in, he jumped off the scale and downed some water ... all before Gamache's camp could protest that the weight was inaccurate. Their claim would be further validated when Arturo gained a supposed eighteen pounds over night, weighing 160 by fight time. Gamache had little chance going into the fight; he had even less of a chance at a severe weight disadvantage. Gatti would score a second round knockout. It was so brutal, that fans still talk about it to this day. It was a near unanimous choice for Knockout of the Year, one that had Gamache out upon impact and in need of a stretcher to exit the ring.

Arturo made a statement in his next fight two months later, but only outside the ring. The NYSAC demanded that all non-heavyweights weigh in the same day of the fight. Arturo easily made weight, before scoring his third straight second round knockout. After the fight, Larry Merchant questioned when the real opponents would come.

Before Arturo could get there, Joe Hutchinson would give him all he could handle in a bloodbath of a fight. It was Arturo's return to Montreal, but also the last time he would fight in the town where he was raised. Gatti absorbed an assortment of punches and headbutts throughout. He also received an extreme benefit of the doubt from the referee, who allowed the fight to go on when 90% of the officials would have stopped it. Even with the win, nobody was convinced that Arturo would return to the championship level.

His handlers seemed to agree; they secured him a lucrative date on HBO as a comeback opponent for Oscar De La Hoya in early 2001. Gatti received a then-career high payday, and a

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career worst beating, as Oscar scored a first round knockdown en route to forcing a stoppage in five. The only plan at the time was for Arturo to take the payday, prove to be brave in defeat, and then head off into the sunset.

Instead, Gatti fired his entire corner, and hooked up with trainer Buddy McGirt. A former two-time world champion, McGirt earned a new reputation as a quick-fix trainer. Gatti would help extend that reputation, returning to the ring in January 2002. He delivered perhaps the most complete performance of his career, overwhelming former 140 lb. titlist Terron Millett in four rounds. Once again, HBO had reason to believe they could make a superstar out of Gatti.

Four months later, another farewell was planned. This time it was for Gatti's opponent, the equally tough-as-nails Micky Ward. Instead, it built a long-running association between the two, starting with a trilogy, and evolving into a special friendship which exists to this day.

HBO paid more for their first fight than for any other fight in the history of their Boxing After Dark series. Both fighters returned the favor by engaging in a fight which is still regarded as one of the best ever. Aiding its cause was their too-good-to-be-true ninth round. Gatti went down from a body shot, and was nearly out from the ensuing flurry. The old warrior returned, as Gatti turned the tide midway through. Ward absorbed the assault, and rallied back big time toward the end of the round. Ward delivered a beating so brutal that Jim Lampley screamed from ringside for referee Frank Cappuccino to stop the contest. Gatti would survive a round Emmanuel Steward proclaimed "the round of the century." He not only survived, but came back to throw nearly 100 punches in the final round. His efforts were only good enough to pull even on one card, with the other two judges awarding the fight to Ward.

Many disputed the decision, but were thankful that it led to the first major trilogy of the 21st century. Purists will thumb their noses at the series, insisting that any two barroom fighters are capable of providing similar action. Those who just love the sport for what it is will always recall Gatti and Ward throwing caution to the wind for thirty rounds over a thirteen month span.

The fight fans in Atlantic City were grateful that the rematch and tiebreaker landed in their neck of the woods. It marked Arturo's return to the Boardwalk, and the fans responded by selling out the Boardwalk Hall six straight times. The second and third fights with Ward forever connected Arturo to the South Jersey fight crowd. So much that they turned out in full force for fights with Gianluca Branco, Leo Dorin and Jesse James Leija.

The Branco fight represented Arturo's return to the world championship level, even if many refused to recognize him as a true world champion. Such honors were reserved for Kostya Tszyu, who unified the division before giving up the WBA and WBC titles. Arturo won the latter in a vacant title match against Branco, and successfully defended it twice with knockouts over Dorin and Leija. Those that turned out for the fights could care less what title was at stake. All they knew was that Arturo was fighting, and that was good enough.

For hardcore boxing fans, it wasn't enough. They demanded to know why Gatti continued to avoid Mayweather, who became his mandatory challenger in May of last year. The fight was finally made after several postponements and near cancellations. The moment the fight was

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signed, many predicted the end of the Arturo Gatti run. Some prayed for a miracle, hoping that Arturo could somehow bring back the warrior and find a way for will to prevail over skill. It never came close to happening. Floyd dominated nearly every second of their fight this past weekend. The odds going in were 4-1. The ratio of punches landed between the two was even greater than that, as Floyd landed at will and caught very little in return. The end result was Buddy McGirt keeping Arturo on his stool prior to the seventh round.

Some view the ending as a limited warrior finally getting exposed. Others simply recognize Floyd's greatness, and point to the majority of his victims also struggling against the undefeated pound-for-pound phenomenon.

Those who were able to appreciate him for what he is and represents can forgive and forget. We never claimed Arturo was among the best fighters pound-for-pound. We merely asked for a fun night of boxing - win, lose or draw - when he entered the ring. More often than not, he went above and beyond the call of duty, giving us all of his heart and soul. After years of nonstop thrills, we owe it to him to at least say thank you in return.

Thank you, Arturo.