On August 25, after enjoying a night of great fights promoted by Lou DiBella at the Manhattan Center in New York, I had the pleasure of speaking with newly crowned IBF lightweight champion Leavander Johnson of Atlantic City, New Jersey. Two months earlier, on June 17, Johnson, who had lost three previous world title attempts, returned from Italy where he had won the vacant crown in a bout against local hero Stefano Zoff.

Accompanied by his brother Craig, who served in an advisory capacity in his brother's career, Leavander, while eating a slice of pizza, spoke nostalgically, if not particularly fondly, of his 16-year journey as a pro. He talked about all of his travels and travails, which included no shortage of promotional entanglements, broken promises, and bitter disappointments.

Mostly, however, he talked about his future, which he was sure was going to be bright. He said he was a young 35 and armed with a newfound youthful exuberance that only vast experience can bring. Now fighting under the promotional banner of DiBella, he was certain that his best days were still ahead of him. He described winning the title from Zoff as a dream come true.

Less than one month later, at the MGM Grand in Las Vegas, that dream turned into a fighter's worst nightmare. In Johnson's first defense, against former WBC junior lightweight champion Jesus Chavez of Mexico on the September 17 pay-per-view televised undercard of Erik Morales-Robbie Peden, he took a frightful beating and the fight was stopped 38 seconds into the eleventh round by referee Tony Weeks.

He later collapsed in his dressing room and was rushed to the nearby University Medical Center where he underwent emergency surgery to remove a blood clot from his brain. Johnson fought gamely with the same courage, grace and tenacity that he always displayed as a fighter.

Sadly, in the end, Johnson lost the only fight in his life that really mattered. At 4:23 p.m. on September 22, while surrounded by his family and others that he loved, Johnson, the father of four children whom he adored, passed away. He never regained consciousness from the Chavez fight.

"His passing is a terrible reminder of the dangers inherent in our sport of boxing," said DiBella. "Despite the high level of medical care and regulation in Nevada, it is also a reminder that the health and safety of fighters must be protected to the greatest extent possible and that national uniform health and safety regulations must be instituted and enforced."

Johnson's father Bill, who was also his trainer, was working his corner against Chavez. "He was fighting for a world title, then a few minutes later, here he is fighting for his life," he said a few days after the fight while his son was still clinging to life. After his death, Bill Johnson relayed through DiBella that Chavez is a great champion and that he and his family believed that he was "blameless in this tragic situation."

Earlier in the week, Chavez paid a visit to the hospital. “My heart goes out to Leavander Johnson and his family,” Chavez, now 42-3 (29 KOs), was quoted as saying in the New York *Daily News*. “It’s very difficult to think that something like this could happen. It’s very difficult for me to think that it could happen in a fight I was involved in.”

Unfortunately for Johnson, as well as for Chavez, it did. It is too early to tell how this event will affect Chavez, who although he once served hard time for armed robbery, seems like an inherently decent young man.

Like he did throughout his ring career, Johnson, whose final ring ledger is 34-5-2 (26 KOs), continued to upset the odds until the very end. When he was first brought to the hospital, doctors did not expect him to live through the night. Every hour that he lived, they said, brought more hope, although hopes for an even partial recovery were never too high.

But Johnson, who no one could ever accuse of being a slacker or a quitter, fought on and displayed the same grit and determination that enabled him to become a world champion after such a whirlwind and tumultuous career. While many other fighters his age were packing it in, Johnson still believed in himself enough to bring the championship dreams he had been fostering since he was a child to fruition. Beating an Italian fighter in his own country only made it more dramatic and memorable.

“If there is any comfort to be taken at this time of great sorrow,” said DiBella, “it is that Leavander lived his dream and died a champion doing what he loved most.”

Although Johnson left this world much too early, that is quite a legacy to leave behind.

DiBella Entertainment and the Johnson family are establishing The Leavander Fund to support the essential needs and education of Johnson’s four children. Legal services are being provided pro bono by the law firm of Wolf, Block, Schoor & Solis-Cohen. Information on the Leavander Fund, as well as funeral arrangements, will be forthcoming.

All of us here at *TheSweetScience.com* and *TheBoxingChannel.com* extend our thoughts and prayers to the entire Johnson family.