

A Legendary Night, Jersey Style

Written by Zachary Levin

Tuesday, 06 December 2005 19:00

When we spotted the Ringside Lounge in Jersey City, we knew the club show couldn't be far away. A decision was made that after the fights we'd grab a couple beers at the boxing bar. Little did we know what the place had in store for us.

Sponsored by the promotional company Main Events, last Wednesday night's card was held at an old German catering hall in North Bergen, NJ called Schuetzen Park, which hasn't hosted boxing since 1986. The intimate venue would be camera-ready for *The Sopranos*—and will be ideal for boxing once they remedy the abysmal lighting and sound system. When I realized a familiar-looking mug with a remarkable comb-over was Carmine Lupertazzi, or, rather, the actor Tony Lip who plays the Brooklyn mob boss on the show, it confirmed life does imitate art.

The show was billed "Back to the Future," as the promoters pray a successful one lies with the two featured fighters of the evening, welterweight Joel Julio and featherweight Jason Litzau.

It's no secret Main Events had an unfortunate 2005. Their flagship fighter Arturo Gatti was sliced up by a gloved Ginsu knife in "Pretty Boy" Floyd Mayweather. Welterweight prospect Kermit Cintron wilted under the bright lights of ESPN's first PPV show, and was summarily dumped by his promoter. The once-hot lightweight Juan Diaz was cut before his match with Ebo Elder, and now has been bereft of TV for almost a year. The preternaturally gifted Francisco Bojado is MIA as far as boxing is concerned, but if you drop by your local KFC, you might find him there. Featherweight Rocky Juarez received a gift decision against Zahir Raheem in '04, but then got shellacked on HBO by an unknown Mexican named Humberto Soto.

What anxiety Main Events' Kathy Duva and Carl Moretti must've felt when they signed their new can't-miss kids?

But this is the business they've chosen. And once again they've put their faith in the hands of a couple very young men: one of whom can't have a legal drink in the States, Columbian Joel Julio (24-0, 21 KOs); the other a 22-year-old Minnesotan who couldn't grow stubble on his chin if you gave him a month, "The American Boy" Jason Litzau (16-0, 14 KOs).

Julio took the stage first. He was in against a fearless Cuban, Hicklet Lau, who is much better than his 19-14-2 record. The journeyman almost always goes the distance with the better 140 and 147 pounders. Against Julio he displayed nimble feet and an elastic torso that initially frustrated the prospect. When caught with a flush shot or trapped in a corner, Lau would grin and rope-a-dope like a young Chris Byrd. He conducted himself with an admirable haughtiness that won over this observer.

Lau's problem is he can't punch, and had no way of keeping the other man honest. Julio's not your average Columbian banger, usually a gritty, game, wild bunch that lack fundamentals. This predator's well-schooled. He was on balance, applied pressure behind a stiff jab, and patiently closed the distance on Lau.

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The right hook from hell that put Lau down in the fourth round is what makes the 20-year-old special. Lau beat the count—still wearing his customary grin upon rising—but Julio's an instinctive closer. He bulled the opponent into a corner and threw combinations upstairs and downstairs, dropping his man again. Lau got up quickly and wanted to keep fighting. The referee mercifully protected the boxer from himself, halting the bout at 2:11 of the fourth.

If Julio doesn't pan out, no one should accuse his promoter of incompetence; only that they're in a business based on educated guesswork, not science.

But as Einstein said, "Things should be made as simple as possible, not any simpler." Which was the gist of Pernell "Sweet Pea" Whitaker's advice to Jason Litzau, who desperately tried to lay out Miguel Angel Munguia (15-5-1, 13 KOs) but had to settle for a unanimous decision. The former great implored the kid to stick to basics, while the boxer endeavored to please the crowd and mimic his flashy idol (Whitaker), who famously disregarded convention during his magnificent career.

The special attention paid to the lithe, towheaded slugger would've been invaluable, if only Whitaker was in his corner. "Sweet Pea" was sitting ringside, closer to Munguia's Spanish-speaking team. However, the venue was so small and Whitaker so vociferous, the boxer caught every word. Torn between listening to his trainer, Bob Van Sickle, and the boxing legend a mere 20 feet away, he attempted to satisfy both parties. At the ten-second warning sounding the end of the minute break, "The American Boy" would rise from his stool and move toward Whitaker, who didn't just talk to the flummoxed fighter but graciously pantomimed his instructions.

Midway through the bout, I tapped Whitaker's shoulder and asked how long he's mentored the talented but flawed Litzau.

"I don't know this guy!?" he bristled, anxious to resume his tutorial. "This is the first time I ever seen him fight. But I think I'm having some type of affect on him."

"One thing about good Mexican fighters," Whitaker counseled, "is they take good head shots but they don't take good body shots. That's why you gotta stay down low. And he needs to jab. Jab sets up everything. It's never gonna be effective if your hand stays down low."

Returning to my seat, I almost tripped over the "Bayonne Bleeder" Chuck Wepner. He was comparatively reticent but must've enjoyed one of Litzau's clever tricks. Periodically, he'd step on the Mexican's lead foot, pinning him in place, then unleash a jolting one-two—the same maneuver Wepner employed to down Muhammad Ali 30 years ago.

The sound of the fight crowd still ringing in our ears, *TSS's* Robert Ecksel, Bob Mladinich and I dissected the evening over beers at The Ringside Lounge. The bar attracted a tough-looking clientele and was filled with shots of fighters of varying status. A fair share was of Mike Tyson posing with the bar's Portuguese proprietor, Mario Costa. A short middle-aged man with a mound of black hair, I recognized him inside the bar's kitchen, fussing over a stew while gnawing on a stubby cigar.

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Costa, a genuine boxing insider currently training Sultan Ibragimov, keeps a tiny ramshackle gym adjacent to the bar. For years the Gatti Brothers, Arturo and Joe, lived in the gym's basement when they were fledgling pros. Costa was Arturo's advisor before his current manager, Pat Lynch, intervened. Canada's Hilton brothers also camped in the dwelling, which evokes POW scenes from *The Dear Hunter*.

Costa offered to give us a tour of the space and regaled us for an hour with boxing stories, many of which are not safe to print—lest *someone* end up in the weeds by JFK Airport. He regularly co-trains with Carlos "Panama" Lewis, and the two worked with Francois Botha when he fought Tyson. He explained that Tyson gave "The White Buffalo" the payday as a personal favor to him.

Costa joked about the tortured ex-champ's lustful side or the literal whacks he's gotten in on Don King, but also described the stuff that never makes it to the tabloids. How Mike often shows up unannounced and has Costa gather the local children for boxing lessons. How the two plot a day when they will expand the gym, get all the lost kids off the streets, and never charge a cent. Costa knows it's a pipedream, reminding you of George and Lenny's fabled farm in *Of Mice and Men*, but it's something the two fantasize about whenever they meet.

When we exited the gym, Costa wanted to show us one more thing. We walked around the back and swerved clear of an angry pit bull on an unnervingly long leash. We looked up and there it was: a pigeon coop with "Tyson's corner" inscribed on the door.

Costa takes care of the 600 exotic pigeons while Mike is globetrotting. He keeps the hut heated through winter and feeds the birds daily. It smelled rank inside, but you grow accustomed to it, and the reverberating coos lull you into a peaceful state.

"Mike sits in here from the break of dawn all through the night," Costa said. "He don't leave. I bring meals out to him. He loves it here. He could write a book about every pigeon."

Main Events will be doing another show at Schuetzen Park in February. Judging from this past one, the fights will be good and the crowd star-studded. But the bonus will come afterwards, when we stop by to see Mario Costa at his Ringside Lounge.