

Losing Big in Atlantic City

Written by Robert Ecksel
Thursday, 02 February 2006 19:00

There's little as thrilling as leaving the safe confines of New York City behind and venturing into the big bad world in search of boxing. With that spirit of adventure in mind, The Sweet Science's Zachary Levin and I decided several weeks ago to travel to Atlantic City for last weekend's fistic doubleheader by the seashore, Friday night's card at the Tropicana headlined by Virgil Hill, followed by Saturday's clash between Arturo Gatti and Thomas Damgaard at Boardwalk Hall.

As it is with most affairs of this sort for boxing writers in the new, but feeling old fast, millennium, it took dozens of phone calls, emails and, yes, even faxes (that's the fight game for you), to arrange credentials, transportation, room reservations and whatnot. Zach Levin, a loyal aide-de-camp if there ever was one, did the dirty work and arranged one night at the Tropicana for \$95, a special in-house bargain for journalists covering the fight, and the next night at Bally's for \$125, a reduced rate again for the boxing press, at a ritzier hotel/casino on the boardwalk.

We took a bus from the New York Port Authority on 42nd Street and two hours later, disoriented from riding in a vehicle whose windows were too smudged with dirt to see through, arrived in Atlantic City. We disembarked at the bus loading depot of the Trump Hotel/Casino, where we redeemed, if that's the proper word, our \$30 bus tickets for a Trump Casino credit card embossed with our names and \$15 in cash to pour into the slots. Thanks a million, Donald. You're hired.

Zach and I were weighted down by the detritus accruing to true journalists: changes of clothes to look good (the big fights are like the Oscars, sans red carpet and Joan Rivers), camera gear (for that hoped for riot and Pulitzer Prize winning photo), and, of course, the laptop, every writer's best friend and worst enemy, that essential link to the outside world from the desert island privations of our profession and ambition.

With all that baggage in tow, we left the Trump Casino, hit the boardwalk and the smell of salt water was like a slap in the face. We turned right and started heading toward the Trop. Zach and I passed Boardwalk Hall, a fantastic art deco pile that was in the film *Snake Eyes*, Brian De Palma's "boxing movie," his homage to paranoia, political assassination and fixed fights. Then we hit an expanse of empty lots interspersed with teensy strip malls offering taffy, fudge and backrubs.

The Tropicana, we discovered, is on the wrong side of the boardwalk tracks, but it was where Friday's card was being held, so it would do. Neither of us are gambling men, so when we entered the casino we worked our way as quickly as possible through the stale air, bells and whistles, lights and action, smoke and mirrors, polyester and flop sweat in the joint. Zach and I found the hotel lobby, which was vaguely fancy-shmancy with potted palms like a lobby in an old-time movie palace, but with real low ceilings, because it was on street level, below the boardwalk level, beneath the casino, just spitting distance from the empty sidewalk. We stood in line with noisy foreigners, all of them American-born and living in the States, so that we might check in and get a room.

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A young lady assisted us and it only took fifteen minutes. Mission accomplished, we made it to the room, and before unpacking, before checking the view (it was a parking lot), before doing anything, I pulled out the laptop, turned that sucker on, and got back to the business of running The Sweet Science. But there was one small problem. The room, which was supposed to have wireless, had nothing. I couldn't get onto the internet.

For those who don't run websites, trust me when I tell you that not being able to log into the internet is an experience just short of death. And not because I couldn't click onto girlie-man chat rooms or Google the history of burlesque in Atlantic City, but because a slew of great writers and hip fight fans were dependent on TSS's *being here now*, and the flow of information, constant even when things are slow, accelerates during big fight boxing weekends.

Zachary spotted my distress – I might as well have been wearing a sign around my neck – and called the front desk to see what was up with the lack of online service. He was put on hold, transferred, put on hold and transferred once again, only to end up where he started. Then he was put on hold. Then the line went dead.

We decided to forgo the internet and get our credentials for the Friday night fights first. It was still late in the afternoon so there was no mob scene to impede getting what we needed. Zach decided to scope the arena and make sure everything was alright with our seats, never a certainty in this day and age, while I returned to the front desk to bitch and moan, but to try to do it nice.

Standing in a line I was standing in only an hour ago, I was fortunate enough to catch the eye of the gal who checked us in and she waved me over. I just started in with "How do you expect working journalists here from New York to cover tonight's fight to file stories without an internet connection?" when she smiled and said, "Let me talk to my manager." In less than a minute she returned as accommodating as could be. We were being moved out of the North Tower, the second-class tower, I learned, the tower without internet, into Havana Tower, which was a lot less funky than where we were, and which was rumored to be wired.

Havana Tower rises invisibly over a faux Cuban square with a fountain surrounded by wrought iron benches. Nearby, a 1950s American car painted in candy colors, like what you might see in old Havana, stands out like a sore thumb, and overpriced shops filled with nothing of consequence sparkle their worthlessness for pod people with good credit. Feeling not at home but even less like a visitor, I was pleased to discover, once I scurried to the room and triple-locked the hollow door, that there was a DSL cable I could hook into that actually worked. I called Zach on his cell and told him the good news. He sounded as relieved as I felt.

I needn't describe Friday's bouts in detail. Zach took care of that in exemplary style with his ["Pay-Per-Screwed, Live from The Tropicana!"](#) He wrote way into the wee hours of the morning, before waking me at five to start editing before posting, at which time he went to sleep.

Absorbed as usual in the task at hand, I lost all track of time. I vaguely remembered this bubbling, gurgling noise coming from somewhere, but was too busy to pay it much mind. At

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some point I remember peeling my eyes from the screen, leaning back in my chair, and seeing what looked like a large blood stain at the foot of Zach's bed. I wasn't sure if I was sleep-deprived, or if I slipped into a *Barton Fink* moment, but I glanced over at Zach, he was breathing, he was alive, so I got back to work.

After editing and posting Zach's article, and preparing the next two articles to go online, I decided to take a breather and go out to the boardwalk, to take a look at Atlantic City in the daylight. AC, like Las Vegas, is a place better seen at night, except that Atlantic City looks a thousand times worse: spectacularly ugly buildings towering over low-rise keepsakes of another era surrounded by rubble-strewn lots of abandoned dream projects.

At that hour of the morning the boardwalk was almost empty. There was the rare jogger, the rare homeless person, the rare suicidal staggering drunk, but at that time of day, with the sun still low in the sky, the boardwalk is owned by the gulls. Big, loud, ugly, nasty-looking birds, their hard black eyes look at the world like it was a piece of fish. I took a moment to consider the seabirds on the boardwalk, the seabirds on the railings, the seabirds in flight – and they acted like they were kamikaze pilots and I was Pearl Harbor. Concerned for my safety, worried about my dry cleaning tab, I ran for cover in the casino and returned to the room.

Zach was awake when I arrived. He was standing at the bathroom door and staring at the floor. "What's up?" I asked. "There was some kind of problem last night with the toilet," he said. "I vaguely remember hearing this gurgling noise." I looked at the bathroom floor, which to my amazement was six inches deep in white and pink soap bubbles. I couldn't friggin' believe it. Neither could Zach. He called the front desk to have them send up a plumber. I corralled a maid in the hall and told her there was a tsunami of soap bubbles coming from the toilet.

After housekeeping and a plumber arrived, cleaned and corrected the mess, Zach asked what the problem was. He was told that someone in the bathroom room above ours took a bubble bath which overflowed in our toilet.

We checked out of the Trop and trudged toward Bally's for our Saturday digs. We walked past Boardwalk Hall again, toward a better part of Atlantic City, although only separated by a few blocks. Bally's wasn't as low rent as the Trop. The scale was still airport scale, but even bigger, overwhelming, overpowering, but there was a relatively understated, for Atlantic City, faux Greco-Roman feel to the lobby and the room, which was agreeable.

Once we were checked in by a young Filipino woman, the routine was pretty much the same as before: unpack the computer, don't take a breath, shoulder to the wheel, nose to the grindstone, hurry up and get to work, a never-ending flow of text was calling my name. We were told that this room, which looked out on a roof garden instead of a concrete car park, had wireless, but for the life of me I couldn't find it, so I called the front desk.

I was told that Bally's did indeed have wireless service, but I had to come down to the front desk and pay \$9.95 in advance for 24 hours of use. It seemed a bit stingy to wheedle ten bucks for something so cheap and simple as use of a wireless connection, but I had no choice but to comply. I went down to the front desk, paid my dime, and returned to the room to get to work. I

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tested the wireless – and couldn't get a signal. I tried again and again and again. Running out of ideas and patience at about equal measure and the same time, I called the front desk, this time to complain, and was told there must have been some kind of misunderstanding: "Bally's doesn't have wireless, it has DSL, and there's a cable in the room." "Where?" I asked. "Behind the TV," I was told.

The TV was one of those big fat ancient TVs, not plasma anorexic thin like it ought to be in '06, but one of those beefed-up old school numbers, a cathode ray tube weighing a ton and as cumbersome as a doghouse. It was wedged into a corner on top of a heavy TV console with doors and shelves, a console designed specifically to be wedged into a corner. Peering around that baby, an inch here, an inch there, on my knees, standing on a chair, I couldn't see a thing. I turned on the lights in the room and opened all the drapes. It was still dark as hell, spooky, like Venusburg at twilight. I was sure Zach had a flashlight in his knapsack, or at the very least he'd be able to spot that elusive DSL in a New York minute and that would be that, but he was doing his thing, running on the sand, and I was doing mine, and at that moment I wouldn't have minded trading places.

Zach arrived. I explained the dilemma. He looked for the DSL and found nothing. I called the front desk and they told me they'd send a Bally's technician to the room. He arrived half an hour later and was a friendly guy with a mop of dark hair and a low-key disposition. We didn't mind having him around, he was a light presence in a dark room, but he couldn't find the DSL cable either. "Where is that darn thing?" he kept asking. "It's gotta be here somewhere."

It wasn't until he moved the customized cabinet with the whale of a TV on it – Zach must have helped, it was a two man job – that he discovered a scrunched piece of metal and wire covered in balls of dust. He examined it and declared that it must have once been a connector box for a DSL cable. "It looks like no one ever used this before," the tech guy said. "How the hell did it get under there?"

He said he needed some tools, he'd be back soon, and left the room. Zach started jumping rope. I tried opening a window, but it was soldered shut. The good-natured Bally's guy returned with his tools and did his thing. With pliers he twisted the abstract mini sculpture into a semblance of its former self as a DSL connector box and cable. Smiling and shaking his head at the absurdity of life, he told us, "I'm really a welder. I just do this on weekends."

He got the DSL hooked up. I plugged it into the computer, and although the line was good, the screen kept saying there was some kind of ERROR, TRY AGAIN. So I tried again, and again. I told the tech, who was packing his stuff, about the ERROR, TRY AGAIN window on the screen and asked what he would do if he were in my position. He said there was a special phone number I should call – he pointed to an embossed steel plate attached to the TV cable – that would activate the internet in the room. Then he said "Good luck" and left.

I dialed the toll free number and it connected me to a Bangladeshi who swore he was in Las Vegas. The gent walked me through what we needed to do several times (you know the procedure – if that doesn't work, we'll try this – the dog chasing its tail routine), doing everything humanly possible to activate the internet. According to the Bangladeshi, no one had ever used

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the internet in this room at Bally's before. I took in the news, but didn't feel like a pioneer; no, I felt out of step, out of synch, out of time and my mind, like I'd been teleported to an earlier era.

But I was finally, gratefully, after more hassles than I could count and more help than I would have ever dreamed necessary, back online and ready to get back to work – with a little time to spare before Gatti-Damgaard. Then, not five minutes into my jubilation, I got an email that said The Sweet Science was down in the nation's capitol. Damn! Down in DC! What will George Bush do now? I clicked on TSS and it was gone, all right, vanished, disappeared, a great big nothing zero. I'm a content guy, not a tech guy, and all I could do was pass on the bad news. Then more emails started arriving: Nashville, New York, Milan, Bangkok – all down, no Sweet Science, my whole wide world wide web in shambles.

To our chagrin here at TSS, the website was down for two days – and during a big east coast boxing weekend, no less. I did all I could. Zachary Levin did all he could (["House of Gatti Still Standing After Weathering Storm"](#)

) and then some. The snafu was, as the saying goes, due to circumstances beyond our control. To those who missed us when we were gone, mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa, et cetera and all that jazz, here's hoping it won't happen again.

To those who thought The Sweet Science was not only down but out, think again.