

Jabbing Gianluca Branco

Written by Jesse K. Cox
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Jabs are a funny tool for boxers. They're the fastest punch in every fighter's arsenal, but they do the least damage.

The delivery comes from left for the orthodox, and right for the southpaws such as myself. No matter what side they come from, they can stun and build up points without ever leaving the opponent in serious danger of taking a fall after a hard snap to the nose, mouth or where ever the punch may land.

Nonetheless, the jab is one of the most important punches for a fighter to master. It's a matter of when to flash it out there, and how. Gianluca Branco had enough fights coming in against Miguel Cotto on Saturday in Puerto Rico to know when and where to put his jabs. Unfortunately for the Italian, he knew nothing about how to throw it.

That how, of course, is using his feet. Any fighter who ever used the jab to his or her advantage knew it wasn't to be thrown or set up too often from a stationary position. Flicking it becomes tricky when trying to coordinate two feet with one fist. The basis of every boxer's training isn't strength or speed; coordination is the root of all in boxing.

Granted, Cotto isn't a beast with which Branco is wholly familiar. Cotto is of the western, non-European school where technical skills are overshadowed by seemingly laser-guided bombs to the body and head. Stand-up Euros have a tendency to lull opponents before considering a hard hook or uppercut.

Until then it's just jab, jab, jab and jab.

It's not necessarily flawed or weaker than the philosophy of the seemingly more brutal Western Hemisphere, it's just different. Polish light heavyweight Tomasz Adamek made it work and captured the WBC championship in a majority decision over brawling Australian contender Paul Briggs last spring in Chicago.

Branco's efficiency with the jab certainly made a win over Cotto on the Puerto Rican's own turf plausible. Branco hadn't attained a 36-1-1 record before the bout by fighting like a chump. Cotto was 24-0 beforehand, and his most recent resume had him as the reigning WBO light welterweight champion. You can't argue with those credentials.

Puerto Ricans know their boxing, at least that's what the HBO commentators Larry Merchant, Emanuel Steward and Jim Lampley made mention of more than a few times. Being as that I've never been to Puerto Rico, let alone watched a fight with anybody from the island, I had to take their word for it.

After the first few rounds, I didn't need a boxing aficionado from the Caribbean or even Steward to tell me where Branco was coming up short.

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The last 24 hours of my life were clouded by fever and bronchitis, leaving me to take up a foggier cough-syrup induced state. Doped up or not, Branco would have fared better with me in his corner than the dopes he'd hired. It seemed they hadn't intended on their job requiring much more than rubbing Branco's shoulders on the way in and waving Italian flags during Michael Buffer's rousing introduction.

I've admittedly never sealed a cut or quelled a swollen eye. Perhaps that's where my own credentials would have understandably fallen short for the job of standing in his corner. The only thing I could offer to Branco that may have given him a slight advantage comes out of my own common sense. It's the same intuition that tells one not to stand in oncoming traffic.

Branco's corner, however, couldn't be bothered to drop a hint that leaning against the ropes for two out of three minutes with your faced covered wasn't a good idea.

Perhaps it was an ill-conceived rope-a-dope. Maybe they thought Cotto would punch himself out and Cotto could then dance and pop that jab at will. Unfortunately for Branco, that tactic worked 30 years ago until the trainers and fighters caught on and learned to measure punching output against what appeared to wilting in front of them on the ropes.

Branco just stood there to my horror. He just planted himself, occasionally countering with a surprising cross. Every time Branco's feet moved, it merely walked him into another blast to the body or head.

Branco doubled up the jab a few times, but he was fading too fast in points. His swollen jaw and right eye weren't making matters better for him. This Italian's strategy and corner were horribly flawed, turning what many had hoped to be a quality fight into another one-sided bludgeoning.

In this case, flight may have been the remedy for this fight.