

Chicago's St. Patrick's Day Massacre

Written by Jesse K. Cox
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CHICAGO – I can't recall being so close to a canvas. Then again, I can't remember ever catching a whiff of something so fetid that hadn't been dead and left out in the sun for a few days.

Indeed, I spent Friday's card with the photographers, leaning against the mat for the perfect shot. It's a wonder with all the speckles of old blood and sweat on the Aragon Ballroom canvas that biohazard suits weren't issued with the credentials. Cheers to the photographers for risking bacterial infection for the right shot, but next time – since my health insurance isn't all that great – I'll take my typical seat below the canvas as a writer.

Those with a weak stomach or queasiness need not apply for any part of the boxing world. There's no way to prepare for the abnormal facial swelling and gaping cuts that pour blood.

Friday's bouts would have sent those poor unprepared fools running out of the building onto Lawrence Avenue, decrying the evil atrocities they've witnessed. Somehow the smell of the canvas can turn my stomach – well, that and the threat of catching a skin-eating bacteria – but swelling and blood intrigue me.

Gilbert Venegas stepped into the ring as a fan favorite, only because of his Illinois roots. At 9-1-2, he'd proven to this boxing market his worth as an up-and-comer. Francisco Rincon weighed down Venegas' rise – if only momentarily – when two uppercuts opened the wound over Venegas' right eye. Liberal use of the jab shredded it the rest of the way to have the fight called in Rincon's favor in the third round.

The worst was still to come. A very bloody St. Patrick's Day massacre involving headliner David Diaz.

Four straight fights have yielded four straight cuts on the Chicago lightweight's face. Silverio Ortiz of Mexico gets credit for making it a quartet, although referee Gino Rodriguez, Diaz and his corner agreed a headbutt caused it. My glance caught the cut after the headbutt and an instant after a broad left hook thumped Diaz's right brow, turning the cut into a canyon. This was just the first round of the 10 which would be fought to completion.

Diaz planned to pressure Ortiz from the first bell. He'd hoped to avenge the draw his first career title shot for the IBA belt against Ramazan Palyani suffered in December. Diaz wanted to prove his conditioning's worth. It's a mindset in the ring he later regretted.

Ortiz staggered Diaz in the fifth round, but it seemed only the hometown chants were holding him up. Not only had Ortiz staggered him, his constant left-jabbing to that cut caused a constant bloody dribble down Diaz's face and off of his chin. Both fighters were smattered in red by the end of the round, but the right side of Diaz's was a grotesque sea of red.

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The sixth round got underway, but Rodriguez called timeout to check the cut.

"I didn't want them to stop the fight," Diaz said afterward. "I didn't like to win that way. (The cut) blurred me up a bit, but I didn't want the ref to know it was bothering me."

Diaz's cornerman Jim Strickland deserves credit for having the cut sealed well enough for Diaz to concentrate on wobbling Ortiz in the eighth, although Diaz punched himself out with Ortiz on the ropes and couldn't knock the Mexican down.

With the bulk of the blood stopped and Diaz ahead on points, there were few worries in Diaz's corner. The judges' scorecards reinforced that feeling afterward as the Chicagoan earned a unanimous decision for his 30th career victory.

"I feel that Gino did the right thing," Diaz said. "I felt I did enough to win. I don't feel ashamed of my fight."

Standing with a fellow reporter in Diaz's dressing room, we got a close look at the cut, which spanned nearly three quarters of his right eyebrow. Even Diaz didn't know how horrible the gash he'd suffered.

"I've had bad cuts," he said just before peering into the mirror behind him. "Oh, but not that bad."

BELLY UP ON 'LIGHTS OUT'

Karma did not prevail. Emanuel Steward made it a personal rule not to bet against James Toney. Steward's caveat didn't apply to the 2-to-1 odds stacked against Toney. Smelling a sure thing that Toney wasn't in the physical capacity to shatter those odds, I predicted he wouldn't have that belt by the end of the night.

Through all of that, karma failed to smite Toney's doubters as Hasim Rahman retained his belt on a draw. Incredible.

These are the days to pick the small payoffs. The easy winners such as Duke and Connecticut, or the damned New York Yankees. Oh, how I despise those pinstriped sots, which is strange because I don't even care about baseball.

It seems the underdogs have drained the universe of breakthroughs for the underdogs all this week. My NCAA bracket collapsed in a matter of a day. The serious gambler should take a bet-free sojourn away from the sporting world. It would be too tempting to bet on the longshot. God only knows how long it will be out of whack, so it's best to avoid Tarver-Hopkins and everything leading up to and including the Kentucky Derby – that's where the real sharks are setting traps for the financially bold bettors.

Beware, friends.