

Paul Malignaggi, the Next World Champion

Written by Luca De Franco
Thursday, 30 March 2006 19:00

During one of my stays in New York City, I called Bruce Silverglade to ask him when I could visit Gleason's Gym. His answer was: "Come Wednesday at 3.00 pm, Paul Malignaggi will be here. He is one of the most talented kids around. He's the next champion of the world." So, I went to Gleason's and noticed a small crowd around a ring watching a light welterweight sparring with a much taller and heavier boxer. The size difference made no difference since the smaller guy danced around the bigger one and hit him at will. That kid who danced like a butterfly and stung like a bee, was Paul Malignaggi.

I understood why Bruce was so enthusiastic. Paulie was real fast and could turn a training session into a show. That's why about 50 people were watching him. And believe me, in Gleason's it almost never happens: people are used to see champions in the ring and don't pay any attention to them. But Malignaggi was something special. In fact, Johnny Bos told me that Paulie even had public sparring sessions: before his pro debut they put the ring on the beach at Coney Island; later in his career they did the same thing in front of the Brooklyn Court of Justice and in the heart of Wall Street, the heart of America's financial district.

Usually, a public training session is organized for an established world champion; Paulie had it before turning professional, which says everything about his popularity in New York. In Paulie's words: *"I was always supported by the New Yorkers, especially by the Italian-American community. Even when I was amateur they came to see me. I repaid them, compiling a record of 40 wins, 9 losses and becoming United States lightweight champion."* Paul told me this in perfect Italian, which was a big surprise for me. He speaks Italian so well because he spent the first six years of his life in Italy, even though he was born in Brooklyn. Paulie surprised me even more when he said that would consider a privilege winning the Italian title, even if his goals are to become world champion and being accepted into the Hall of Fame. Many Italian boxers snub the national title, while one of the biggest stars in New York says that he wants it... That is something that will surprise the Italian readers of The Sweet Science.

Anyway, talking with Paulie was great because I understood just how much he loves boxing. Like all the top trainers say, loving the sport is essential to make it big. Talent alone is not enough. Paulie is talented, but he's willing to make the sacrifices necessary to become an high-level fighter. *"I was doing the wrong things as a kid, so my uncle brought me to Gleason's. I learned to love boxing and I understood that I could make it as a fighter and as a man. In everybody's life, it comes a moment when one must decide if he wants to just keep hanging around or grow up. I decided to take my responsibilities and become a man. That's why I work hard every day. If the right sparring is not available, I spar with bigger guys. I don't want to miss a training session."*

Given Paulie's dedication, I wasn't surprised to see him winning match after match. You know, there so many hyped fighters around; the promoters put them against professional losers and the popular guys win building a good record. When they step up in competition, they lose (most times, they get KOed). But when Malignaggi faced boxers with winning records, he beat them

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all. In Italy, the boxing fans know about Paulie's accomplishments. TV network "SportItalia" broadcast his fight against Ramiro Cano. Popular weekly magazine "Sportweek," national newspaper "Il Corriere della Sera" and the major Southern newspapers (Paulie's family is originally from Sicily) wrote long articles about him. I dedicated to Paulie a chapter in my book "La boxe americana: luci ed ombre (American boxing: lights and shadows)" describing him as a future world champion. I also published part of the interview we made at Gleason's on "All about Italy," a magazine also distributed in the major U.S. cities.

I'm not saying that the average Italian knows about Paulie, because most Italians only care about soccer stars, but he is more famous here than many more accomplished champions. To make you understand: the Antonio Tarver vs. Roy Jones battles got five lines in the newspapers! I'm sure that when Paulie becomes world champion, every member of the Italian media will talk about him and he will receive offers to defend the title here. In that case, he will have to leave the showbiz in New York because the Italian fans don't like it. In Italy, most people think that fighting and entertaining are two different jobs. Paulie has another opinion: *"I do a lot of showbiz because that's what the people like in America. But that doesn't mean that I don't take the fight seriously. I train every day to win every fight. And I always do. There's no doubt in my mind that I'm the best in the world."*

With the champions currently reigning in the light welterweight division, many people could argue about who stands above everybody else. In the United States, most experts rate Floyd Mayweather (WBC) as the best pound-for-pound. In England, every fan is convinced that Ricky Hatton (WBA/IBF) would knockout Mayweather (and any other titlist). In Puerto Rico, they have no doubt that Miguel Cotto (WBO) is the number one. A competitor website doesn't put Paulie even in the top 15... I'm sure that Paul Malignaggi will shut them all up with a great performance next June 10 when he challenges Cotto for the WBO title at the Madison Square Garden. Will Paulie win? I think so. Cotto is an exciting fighter, but gets his too many times and is not as fast as Malignaggi. If the Puerto Rican doesn't come in the ring with a better defense, he will lose on points.

Paul Malignaggi

Born in Brooklyn on November 23, 1980

Height: 5'7

Stance: Orthodox

Trainer: Billy Giles

Manager: Sal Lo Nano

Amateur Record

40 wins and 9 losses

United States lightweight champion

Professional Record

21 wins (6 KOs) in 21 matches

WBC International light welterweight champion on December 4, 2004

WBC Continental Americas light welterweight champion since February 10, 2006

Next Fight

June 10 at the Madison Square Garden against WBO light welterweight champion Miguel Cotto