

Hearing Is Not Always Believing

Written by Michael Katz
Tuesday, 04 April 2006 19:00

LAS VEGAS, April 5 – Hush, hush. Zab Judah decided to talk. I decided not to listen.

Judah, who had been sulking in his gym and ignoring all media during the buildup of Saturday's fight here with Floyd Mayweather Jr., was set for his "grand arrival" at Caesars Palace yesterday. This is a new promotion gimmick for photo and interview ops since the ritual pre-fight press conference and day-before weigh-ins do not garner enough attention for the hucksters.

But since Zab had made it clear he wasn't talking, brushing off a teleconference call last week, it was easy to go back to sleep and not worry about braving traffic on the Strip.

There was no compelling reason to listen to Judah anyway. What can he say that we already didn't know? Was he going to explain $E=mc^2$, the affect of global warming on the Albanian economy or why William Shakespeare was more overrated as a dramatist than as a quarterback? Zab's observations on the considerably narrower world of boxing have not been known to be that illuminating.

This was the guy who kept insisting he was the best fighter "pound for pound" in the world, even after Jan Bergmann dropped him and Kostya Tszyu knocked him down twice with a single blow. This was the guy who, in a bolt of intellectual brilliance, called Pretty Boy Floyd "pretty girl," who proved that silence is golden, especially after you lose, blaming his "bad night" against the ordinary Carlos Baldomir on Don King ("my promoter f'd up; Don King dragged me around the city every day").

The "world's greatest promoter" couldn't convince his recalcitrant star that selling pay-per-view buys was for his own good. Money talks, but Judah didn't think he was getting enough. His purse for Mayweather was slashed following the loss to Baldomir. He's lucky he still has a big stage, though I'm hearing the multimillion-dollar share for the Judah side became the lowest seven-figure amount possible and you don't need me to tell you who's getting the King's share (maybe three-quarters) of that.

Anyway, by keeping his mouth shut, Judah was obviously a lot less embarrassing. His father, however, did not know best and, in essence, substituted for his recalcitrant son on last week's conference call. Yoel Judah, did not win friends or influence handicappers.

Referring at times to "Baltimore" or "Baltozar," Yoel brushed off his son's loss by saying Zab gets up only for the "big" fights. He said Zab was going to "shut Floyd's big mouth." The only mouth Zab could shut was his own and he didn't have to punch himself in the face to succeed.

He opened it a bit yesterday at the "grand arrival" at the front door of Caesars Palace. But nothing he said was worth missing any extra sleep.

"I know all about Mayweather and what it takes to beat him."

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“I’m going to be aggressive real early and go right after him.”

“I’ve had a lot on my mind, that’s why I haven’t been talking.”

There, feel better? I often prefer it when the boxers bite down hard on their mouthpieces – and/or their tongues. Not talking is almost as good as not listening.

Was it more than 28 years ago – seems just like yesterday – when Muhammad Ali announced early in the pre-fight buildup he wouldn’t say anything about his fight with the young 1976 Olympic gold-medal winner, Leon Spinks? What could a legend say that could possibly sell a fight against a seven-bout novice? It was a nice gimmick, while it lasted. A couple of days before the fight, his longtime aide, Gene Kilroy, rounded up as many Boss Scribes as he could. Ali had grown bored with not talking.

Naturally, being silent for all those weeks led to Ali being victim to the Sphinx jinx (sorry, couldn’t resist).

Believe me, better fighters than Zab Judah have not talked to me. It did not help Gerry Cooney. I was the first kid on the block that Gentleman Gerry gave the silent treatment. His co-manager, Dennis Rappaport – still No. 1 on my sleaze list – had decided that the New York Times boxing writer should personify all Cooney’s critics. I liked Gerry, but I had just begun to wonder out loud why he was always fighting residents of old-age homes like Ken Norton, Jimmy Young and Ron Lyles. Did the Whackos – Rappaport and partner Mike Jones – know something we didn’t?

I think we learned what it was when he went away and hid after losing to Larry Holmes and then tried a comeback – only after a light-heavyweight, Michael Spinks, was the heavyweight champion. Cooney was not a fighter, which didn’t make him a bad guy, he just had other interests.

Ray (Boom Boom) Mancini didn’t talk to me for a long while, too. Fine with me. I had bought into the story of the son trying to win the title his father never had a chance to go for because of service in World War II. But after he became champion, he was to meet someone named Orlando Romero at Madison Square Garden. A young prospect approached me and said this Peruvian was hardly a worthy challenger. “I’ve had only two fights and I can handle him easily,” said the youngster, whose style similarities to Boom Boom made him a good choice for a Romero sparring partner.

After eight rounds, I had Mancini and Romero even before the Boom Boom was lowered in the ninth. Promoter Bob Arum screamed at me at the post-fight press conference that I cost him a million dollars by listening to some punk kid with two pro fights that Romero couldn’t fight.

The punk kid grew up to be a punk man named Vinny Pazienza and when I wrote that the kid was right, Romero was not a worthy challenger and what did that make Mancini, Boom Boom thereafter became Hush Hush whenever I walked into the room.

Frankie Randall, whom I had never talked with, once refused to talk to me. This was after I had

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sent money out with Pat Putnam to bet on Randall when he became the first boxer to score an official victory against Julio Cesar Chavez. I defended Randall when he was robbed of the title in the rematch, but when I tried to talk to him at his next fight, even his trainer, Aaron Snowell, was surprised that I was in the nonspeaking section. The explanation: Randall was managed by Carl King, who was then angry with me.

Come to think of it, there are a lot of people to whom I don't talk, although there are considerably more to whom I don't WANT to talk.

PENTHOUSE: As soon as I spotted Richie Giachetti in the dressing room of Sergei Liahkovich at the start of the Showtime telecast, I called my buddy Royce Feour and said I was switching my pick from Lamon Brewster. If there's one magician who knows how to teach heavyweights how to jab, it is Giachetti (prime example: Buster Douglas), who of course learned from the master, Larry Holmes. Now I don't know if Holmes's former trainer was involved in Liahkovich's preparations, but he was another example of the fine job trainer Kenny Weldon did with the surprising Belarusian boxer, including the wonderful line, "Next time I see you on the ropes like that, I'm throwing the stool at you."

Weldon was magnificent in the corner between rounds, reminding the White Wolf to stay behind the jab and "if you think you can stand toe to toe with this guy, you're wrong." When it appeared as if Referee Ernest Shariff was pestering Liahkovich with first constant warnings for imagined fouls and then, mysteriously, calling a halt in the action at the end of a furious fifth round just when the challenger was coming on after absorbing some heavy punches, Weldon yelled, "What are you doing, Ref?"

It was a wonderful all-round job by a trainer who once told me, when he handled Wilford Scypion before a title fight, that Marvelous Marvin Hagler was no big deal.

And while Brewster's will and courage made this one of the better heavyweight title fights, let's not jump overboard. It was, as Steve Albert reminded us, one of those rare "exciting, competitive heavyweight fights," but the reason it was so competitive is because neither man was, as Floyd Mayweather Jr. would say, an "A" fighter. And commentator Al Bernstein's wonderment at the hand speed of the 6-foot-4 giant from Belarus should perhaps be put in context. It was Brewster, slower than usual because, like many a heavyweight these days, he entered not in prime shape, who made it seem that way. Which leads us to the....

OUTHOUSE: No one is as big a Buddy McGirt fan as this poor bettor who cashed in nicely on him when, a 5-2 underdog, he easily handled Simon Brown. McGirt is a terrific trainer, but he's not one of those hands-on guys who make sure their pupils are up in the morning and out doing their roadwork. Antonio Tarver, for example, in addition to having McGirt in the gym, has a team of conditioners to make sure he's also in shape. Brewster did not look in shape.

Also, taking over from Jesse Reid – who had sparked Brewster to knockout victories over Foul Pole Golota and Luan Krasniqi – McGirt never sounded the proper tone of desperation in the corner. As Brewster fell further and further behind, McGirt concentrated on getting his charge into throwing more right hands. Sorry, Brewster is a natural southpaw who fights from the

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orthodox stance – his left is his money hand.

RUSSIAN ROULETTE: George Kimball noted it BEFORE Liahkovich upset Brewster – that if Wladimir Klitschko and Oleg Maskaev, in the next two heavyweight title fights, repeat earlier victories, the world is going to have four “communist” heavyweight champions. Liahkovich is from Belarus, WBA strapholder Nicolai Valuev is from Russia and Baby Brother Klitschko, challenging Chris Byrd for the IBF trinket, is from Ukraine while Maskaev, the mandatory challenger for the WBC’s Hasim Rahman is from Uzbekistan. So one century later, we may be looking for a Great Black Hope....Kind of makes James Toney’s crap about how African-American fighters can’t be beat look not only racist but stupid.

MORE DIS AND THAT: The heavyweight division could do worse than have rematches of its last two “title” bouts – Rahman-Toney and Liahkovich-Brewster. But it is still to be hoped that Samuel Peter and Calvin Brock and that unknown kid in some gym somewhere will come along quicker than you can say Shannon Briggs....Been told there’s a memo wherein Ricky Hatton says he doesn’t want to fight either Floyd Mayweather Jr. or Miguel Cotto this year. Sounds like in 2006 he’s going for non-fighter of the year....Bob Arum’s lovely bride Lovey under the weather; everyone say your bruchas, please....Arum, 0-2 against King in big fights (Sugar Ray Leonard vs. Roberto Duran in I, Oscar De la Hoya against Felix Trinidad Jr.), could get even Saturday night. Not only does he have Mayweather against Judah, he has a big favorite in the semifinal, Jorge Arce against King’s Rosendo Alvarez....We’ve already had two prime candidates for biggest waste of talent – Juan Manuel Marquez and Timmy Austin....Evander Holyfield is suing Don King for not getting him fights. That’s about the nicest thing I’ve ever heard about Don.