

No Mercy on North Broad St.

Written by Zachary Levin

Tuesday, 06 June 2006 19:00

An ominous black cloud was forming over Manhattan and heading southwest. An early departure beat rush-hour traffic on the Jersey Turnpike to North Philly. The storm wouldn't catch up until much later.

The first stop on North Broad St. was at a cheese-steak joint, the second was at the legendary Blue Horizon. This was a special day for me—but one mixed with regret. This was to be my first time at "The Blue." Not sure how I managed it, but there it is. I'd done Philly a few times, but never entered this landmark. For a boxing scribe who lives just 80 miles away, it's the equivalent of being a Civil War buff from Philly who never made it to Gettysburg.

The place was just as I had imagined it. I went up into the famous steep rafters and got a bird's eye view. It was small and densely packed; the crowd practically spills into the undersized ring. It was an oven set on broil—no AC, of course. The 100% humidity, unforgiving ring lights, and body heat of the packed crowd made for a bloodthirsty climate. Since I couldn't punch out the fat drunks sitting behind me, the next best thing was watching trained professionals dole out some hurt.

The seven-fight undercard was put together by a boxing legend himself, Don Elbaum. He'd matched them well this evening. These were real club fights. No world-beaters, but everyone had guts. The main event looked promising. Local heavyweight and Blue Horizon regular "Fast" Eddie Chambers (25-0, 13 KOs) was facing a worthy opponent in grizzled, hard-punching veteran Ed "The Hammer" Mahone (23-6-2, 23 KOs).

In the mid to late 1990s, Mahone was a staple at the Great Western Forum in Englewood, CA. He looked like the goods, a legitimate future contender. He had size, was an excellent body puncher, and he could thump—every win coming by stoppage. He got his big shot against Vitali Klitschko in Germany in 1999. The towering Ukrainian got rid of him in three. Since then, Mahone has gone 2-5. Still, he's regarded as tough and dangerous. He has scratched out a living as a respected sparring partner, working with the likes of Hasim Rahman, his conqueror Vitali Klitschko, James Toney, and Audley Harrison.

Mahone, 33, entered the ring in an old gray robe with flaking lettering on the back. He had an unkempt afro and a scruffy beard. He was extraordinarily relaxed, having spent his life on the road in front of hostile crowds, never once fighting in his native St. Louis.

The first round was close. Mahone was Foreman to Eddie Chambers' Ali. Plodding, he stalked his man, concentrating on the body. His advantage in size and strength seemed almost unfair. But there was a glaring disparity in speed. Chambers, a 24-year-old who could make cruiserweight, throws sharp, blinding combinations. He brings his hands back quickly after getting off, and doesn't stand there taking a picture. He works behind a high and tight guard Winky Wright would admire. This isn't a prototypical Philly fighter, a snarling brawler in an alley; he's a cool sniper picking off his target. Lucky for his opponents, he shoots rubber bullets. But a

No Mercy on North Broad St.

Written by Zachary Levin
Tuesday, 06 June 2006 19:00

barrage of those will still do damage.

By the third, Mahone was living proof of this. He wasn't close to going down, but was reeling around from getting peppered with pinpoint shots. There were moments when he looked like a man getting attacked by a bunch of angry bees—stumbling away to buy himself space and time, before having to cover his beleaguered head and hope for mercy. He couldn't parry the stingers, especially with eyes rapidly swelling shut. Going into the fourth, Mahone began to resemble a noted guest sitting ringside, human catcher's mitt Randall "Tex" Cobb. Still, he gathered himself in spots and attempted to stay in the fight by bravely moving forward. But he pawed more than he punched.

Later, his trainer Jesse Revelo explained this was part of the plan. Mahone was conserving energy—what with the heat and the 10-round distance—enduring these early salvos, and letting the kid punch himself out. Was this a premeditated strategy or a rationalization after the fact? It's true that Mahone is a notoriously slow starter and, in spite of some losses by stoppage, a durable survivor who can punch. It's possible he was saving something to uncork later. We'll never know. Chambers landed a little one-two—nothing concussive—and referee Wayne Hedgepeth halted the bout 33 seconds into the fourth. The crowd booed the stoppage. This reporter believes he deserved more time, as did Don Elbaum and several ringside media. (Imagine if the hair-trigger ref Richard Steele had worked all of Lamon Brewster's fights? He would've been denied half of his victories, and certainly would've never won the WBO belt when he blasted Wladimir Klitschko in the fifth.)

Mahone didn't complain about the stoppage. Then again, Mahone doesn't complain about much. When I've asked him about obstacles and disappointments in his career, he refused to address the subject or make allowances for himself. He should change his moniker to "No Excuses." After the fight, when asked about his TKO loss, he said, "No use in crying over spilled beans."

I had to disagree with Mahone—not necessarily about the questionable stoppage, but about the literal robbery I'd just learned he was a victim of. Apparently, between one of the rounds of the fight, executive director of Pennsylvania State Athletic commission, Greg Sirb, screamed at Mahone's corner, "He better start fighting back or I will not pay him!" (I was on the other side of the ring and didn't hear this, but it was confirmed by trainer Jesse Revelo, cutman Joey Eye, and reported by Bernard Fernandez of the Philadelphia Daily News.)

True to his word, Sirb said immediately following the fight to Bernard Fernandez, "Neither fighter is getting paid. Both fighters are going to have to appear before the commission." Sirb allowed that he wouldn't rule the fight a no-contest and believed Chambers had done nothing wrong. But, he said, "You always [call in] both. I want to hear from both sides."

I was not privy to these comments recorded by Mr. Fernandez, and learned of them a couple minutes later. I attempted to speak to Mr. Sirb about his decision but he refused to discuss the matter. "That's it," he repeated several times, implying his decision is final and this reporter wasn't entitled to an explanation. Neither was Vernoca Michael, the promoter of the card and co-owner of the venue. She was not officially informed of the matter until after midnight, when

No Mercy on North Broad St.

Written by Zachary Levin
Tuesday, 06 June 2006 19:00

Mr. Sirb had left the building and called her on the phone.

When I entered Mahone's semi-public dressing area to speak to him and his trainer, it was just after Sirb had been there. The executive director had berated the fighter—loud enough for everyone to hear—accused him of intentionally dogging it, and informed him his pain and suffering was for naught.

Don Elbaum was ecstatic about Chambers' performance but felt the stoppage was premature. Regarding Mahone's purse being withheld, he said it was ludicrous. Eddie Chambers himself felt Mahone was game but outclassed. He felt terrible when he learned Sirb planned to not pay Mahone. Chambers' manager, Rob Murray, was equally repulsed and perplexed. Of the numerous people I spoke to, no one would endorse what Sirb thought he saw—particularly his desire to deny Mahone his pay. It appeared Sirb was unwilling to consult with anyone on this.

The storm had finally reached Philly. Driving rain showed no mercy to North Broad St. as the last customers filed out of the building. In the back, Mahone removed his handwraps and gingerly stepped out of his cup. He dressed in silence and occasionally glanced at his damaged face, reflected in his dressing-room window. He put on delicate glasses, which distracted from the swelling and bruising, and even lent him an air of nobility. His purse would've been \$5,000. That's slightly more than a quarter of what he got paid to fight in Germany last December, when he went the distance with Henry Akinwande.

He's been losing lately, but he doesn't come to lose. Maybe from a matchmaker's perspective he does, but not his. He thought he could take Eddie Chambers, probably right up until the ref told him he couldn't. Maybe he should've flown to Philly and picked a fight on the street. If he got busted up, he'd have the exact same to show for it.

Please note: The Sweet Science will keep readers informed of Greg Sirb's proposed hearing, and the ultimate conclusion regarding Ed Mahone's and Eddie Chambers' respective purses.