

In This Corner, a Reason to Believe in Malignaggi

Written by Michael Katz
Thursday, 08 June 2006 19:00

LAS VEGAS, June 9 – There's a specter over the Miguel Cotto-Paulie Malignaggi fight tomorrow night at Madison Square Garden and his name is Billy Giles. He's 56 and I haven't seen one mention of him in all the prefight hype, but if Malignaggi scores the huge upset, it'll be largely due to Billy Giles, one of the best trainers you've probably never heard of.

"What do you mean 'upset'?" said Giles, brushing off the 9-2 odds that favor the undefeated Cotto or the 7-2 you can get on his kid. "I don't think it's an upset. We should win easy. Paulie's faster, quicker, taller. Cotto is slow, one-dimensional, he comes straight in. He doesn't know how to block punches."

Yes, but he can punch like a burro, has great heart and has faced much better opposition than has Malignaggi, who has only five knockouts in a 21-0 career. But I remember, more than a quarter-century ago at what was then called the Felt Forum at the Garden, another young, brash New Yorker was about to make his pro debut at the age of 18. Though he had won a couple of local Golden Gloves title, none of the "experts" I consulted – Harold Weston, the Garden's matchmaker, fight manager Shelly Finkel – thought the kid was anything more than a nice amateur who wouldn't make it big in the pros.

It was a 1980 four-rounder against no tin can, a solid pro named David Brown, and after being dazzled by the kid's handspeed and counterpunching, I saw something that shocked me. In the second round, I believe, the kid, a southpaw, threw a right hook that missed behind Brown's head. Then, with his right hand behind Brown's neck, he pulled the opponent's head down straight into a left uppercut.

Later, he would use the same trick to score a one-round knockout of the rugged John Montes. I immediately told everyone that Hector Camacho was a future world champion. At the age of 18, he already knew tricks that most pros don't know now. His trainers were a couple of guys from his Harlem neighborhood, Bobby Lee Velez and Billy Giles.

Both were disciples of the great Bobby McQuillen. "Not great," said Giles, "THE greatest, the best trainer who ever lived." Giles was more than a disciple. He was a nephew. Billy worked with many of New York's finest – including Aaron Davis and Irwin Pierre Louis – and he would surface in the corners of such as Oleg Maskaev and Fabrice Tiozzo. Being friendly with Victor Valle Jr., he said he might go back to working with Maskaev, who challenges Hasim Rahman for the WBC heavyweight belt Aug. 12. But most of the time, Giles confesses to just "coolin' out." It's not like he needs boxing.

Malignaggi is different. Giles lost a 9-year-old son to cancer last year and the boy was close to Malignaggi. He liked the Brooklyn blabber even before he became a member of the family. "He's very easy to train, a smart kid and a quick learner," he said. "We've had a perfect relationship."

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If Giles, and Malignaggi, are correct, and Cotto is indeed as slow-footed and one-dimensional as they believe, punching power will not mean all that much from either man. Cotto won't be landing that many shots – “my guy's not going to be easy to hit,” said Giles – against the elusive Malignaggi, whose lack of power shouldn't hurt the WBO 140-pound belt-holder. However, if Malignaggi can negotiate around the Puerto Rican icon and accumulate points via a hit-and-make-miss strategy, he should do very well.

Cotto, said Giles, is very susceptible to Malignaggi's combinations. “He stops punches, he doesn't block 'em,” said the trainer.

The danger, of course, is that Cotto can always start slowing down Malignaggi, especially with his hard hooks to the body. The slower Malignaggi gets, the more Cotto will land. It could be a race better than the Belmont Stakes tomorrow in New York, Malignaggi entering the stretch with a nice lead and trying to hold on to the end. Belmont Park has the longest stretch in American racing, but nothing is as long as the final rounds for a tiring boxer. A trainer can lead his horse to the water, but those last tough yards can only be negotiated by heart and guts.

MEANWHILE: In Atlantic City, Bernard Hopkins showed again he was a born promoter when he took Antonio Tarver's promise to knock him out within six rounds and turned it around. Tarver bet \$250,000 on the knockout and Hopkins said, for a guy who recently was in bankruptcy, means that he'll have to go for broke and so the two old men will actually put on a good show. Talk is easy. At their ages, Hopkins is 41, Tarver and older 37, it figures to be more posing and clutching and panting for breath. It certainly doesn't figure to be as intriguing as Malignaggi walking a tightrope against Cotto, knowing one slip and he could fall....A couple of days ago, word in New York was that the Atlantic City show had sold less than 2,000 tickets whereas the Garden was 3,000 from a sellout. If a show doesn't do well at the gate, it does not figure to do well on pay-per-view so I'm guessing Tarver-Hopkins does less than 300,000 buys. The competition in New York needs far less for Bob Arum to break even, especially with a nice live gate; I'm guessing 150,000....Hell, I can't pick fights, might as well try working another gig.

CORRECTION: Earlier this week, I wrote that there's no sense mourning for the financial losses of Arum and co-promoter Gary Shaw because of Jose Luis Castillo's failure to make weight canceling the anticipated rubber match with Diego (Chico) Corrales, that the fight insurance would ease the pain. But Dandy Dan Rafael, one of my astute nephews, says fight insurance does not cover fat. Okay, I'm sorry for them. But I'm still not going to pass the hat.

PENTHOUSE: Bob Arum, for going ahead with his Garden show despite HBO usurping his date with Tarver-Hopkins. How's that for an upset, Arum in the PENTHOUSE?...Also, for reasons I won't go into in order not to embarrass the recipient, let's add Tom Zbikowski, the Notre Dame football player whose pro debut at the Garden is the semifinal, for dipping into his pocket to help a guy out.

OUTHOUSE: Arum and his rivals at Golden Boy for not working things out so that boxing fans could watch both cards live. The game doesn't need dueling dates.

MORE DISS AND THAT: Fred Sternburg, the PR whiz, was working up a storm with Tommy Z.

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One need not be Sherlock Holmes to decipher Fast Freddie's fine hand behind some of the great quips coming out of New York. To wit, Robert Bell – the 2-2 fighter from Akron, Ohio, who opposes Zbikowski, will be wearing a Ohio State football uniform into the ring. Bell said he would turn Tommy Z into Tommy Zzzzzz after the Notre Dame football captain takes a "Big Ten-Count."....Or the grand old man of boxing, Angelo Dundee, who's working Zbikowski's corner, saying when it's over, Bell is "going to think he got by the Four Horsemen."...While Tarver-Hopkins viewers will have their accustomed top crew from HBO – Jim Lampley and Larry Merchant, despite all the criticisms, are still terrific and Emanuel Steward is always good to hear – there'll be a wonderful voice heading the telecast crew in New York. Welcome back, Tim Ryan, who was the best when he worked the fights a quarter-century ago for CBS with Gil Clancy. Too bad, though, he's saddled with George Foreman. Wallace Matthews, who of course knows it all, should help....If you're among those who will try to watch both telecasts tomorrow night, I suggest wearing a cervical collar to cut down on neck damage. Besides, it's a fashion statement.