

Roberto Benitez: I Wanna Get Mine

Written by Zachary Levin
Monday, 19 June 2006 19:00

“Tear his f---in’ hole open!” howls a hugely pregnant woman jumping to her feet.

The crowd at Tampa’s State Fairgrounds Hall follow suit, ducking and parrying shots, as the action in the main event climaxes. Teddy Atlas, ESPN2’s “Friday Night Fights” analyst, ratchets up his delivery. A ringside judge’s white shirt is sprayed red, like Jackson Pollack’s run out of canvas.

Two hundred paces from the spectacle, alone in a gray cinderblock hallway, sits a 122-pound figure wearing 8-ounce Everlast gloves. Roberto Benitez has a towel draped over his head, his back to the ring, as if he just suffered an L.

No, he’s still an undefeated super bantamweight—3-0 with 2 KOs. He’s suffering a different agony. He’s the “swing bout,” meaning he has to be ready to fight at a moment’s notice. His gloves and protective cup have been on for over two hours—he stretched, shadowboxed, and hit the pads three times already. His bout was switched from a scheduled eight rounds, to six, and now four.

If the undercard had several quick stoppages, Benitez might’ve fought before the main event and got on TV. Or if the main-go ended early—It’s 11:05 pm; the bell just sounded the 10th—he still might’ve gotten airtime afterwards.

But he’s relegated to the “walkout bout”—no TV. When his moment comes, nearly the entire crowd will depart for the Wing House Bar & Grill down the road. As Roberto ducks through the ropes, the “FNF” crew will coil cables and wrap equipment. When the announcer trumpets, “...10-time national champion and 2004 Olympian!” his family and friends will be a raucous cheering section—but one you could throw a blanket over. A handful of boxing junkies may stick around, knowing he’s world champion material. But, in general, there’ll be a spent, post-coital energy to the affair. This is an indignity all but a precious few prizefighters must endure at the beginning of their career.

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A fledgling pro like Roberto often fights on short notice, not even learning his opponent’s name till the last minute. All he can hope for is that he’s in optimum condition and can adjust to the other’s size and style once the bell rings. The goal is to stay busy, fighting at least six times a year, racking up wins against an ever-increasing level and variety of opposition. At the club level, bouts frequently fall through just before showtime; someone not making the contracted weight, making unrealistic demands regarding his purse, injuries are a common problem too. The few boxers talented and lucky enough to reach the top of the food chain, the ones seen on HBO or Showtime, fight two, three times a year. They have 12-week-long training camps devoted as much to strategy and analyzing tape as conditioning; appropriate sparring partners are brought in who resemble the other man, or, maybe, have fought him in the past. Roberto

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has a long way to go before achieving this rarefied status. For now, he's subject to powers beyond his control.

Had Roberto played basketball or football, he'd be a lottery pick—set for life before dirtying his uniform. His amateur resume should be in Ripley's: Four Everlast U.S. National championships, two National Golden Gloves titles, a silver at the 1998 Goodwill Games (where he defeated Cuban World Champion Manuel Mantilla).

In 2000, he was a hairsbreadth away from making the U.S. Olympic team, losing a controversial decision to the eventual 112-pound representative. He was offered lucrative promotional contracts, but opted to stay amateur and go for gold in Athens. That year, he moved up a division (119 pounds) and swept the Olympic trials and box-offs, becoming a member of the U.S. Olympic team. But, strange as it sounds, this didn't guarantee him a spot at the Games. He had to fight in an international qualifier, and lost a terrible decision to a fighter from the Dominican Republic. A U.S. team member barred from competing, Benitez was the casualty of an amateur system that sometimes makes the pro game look honorable.

Before the 2004 Olympic debacle, major boxing promoters were inquiring about Benitez's future plans. "But a lot of those guys didn't want to offer a signing bonus, and they knew that's what a fighter like me would want," he says.

This was a drastic change from 2000, when 140-pound U.S. silver medallist Ricardo Williams received a \$1.4 million for signing, while others got handsome six-figure inducements. Problem was, Williams, and some of his equals, were fat, apathetic, and retired by 2004. Benitez suffered the backlash. Of course, his not getting to even compete for a medal and losing out on the attendant hype, did not help his cause.

"Don King was interested," he says, "but they didn't want to dish out any money. You know what they said? 'We are the signing bonus.' His name, his power. Promoters want to sign you as cheap as they can. A fighter is desperate to sign a contract and turn pro. Any kind of little offer may sound big to us, because we just want to fight. They think we're not educated, not business-smart. My philosophy is make sure they pay you something, because a person that makes an investment in you wants a return. They can get you a contract and put on the shelf. Why? Because they have too many fighters to worry about; they focus on whichever one impresses them. I told them, 'You gotta give me some security. How do I know you guys are going to push me and make me the star that I know I can be, if there's no investment involved?' We would never get a meeting face-to-face, because they would know that we was negotiating."

Roberto spoke with Shelly Finkel, perhaps the most successful manager/advisor in boxing. "He was nice," Roberto says. "He knows I have a good background. He was interested in 2000. But he didn't want to deal with fighters in my weight division."

Historically, there's not much money to be made on little men below featherweight (126 pounds). After the heavyweights, most of the money pools around the middleweights. But there are countless exceptions to this stereotype.

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“We talked to Top Rank (Bob Arum),” he explains, “they wasn’t interested either. First they said they wanted Mexicans and Puerto Ricans. Not Dominicans. At one point they said I was too light. That’s crazy! They got a history of working with great champions at low weight divisions. My advisor was telling them, ‘This is a start. This is a market you can start capitalizing on. Dominicans support their baseball players. It can be like that for boxers.’ Arum signs all these Puerto Ricans—from P.R.—immediately because they got a history of selling out there. It’s easy to make them a star, like Felix Trinidad.”

This negative process was grinding Benitez down, and costing him precious time from the ring. It’s virtually impossible today to develop a prospect into a world champion without a high-profile promoter. Benitez’s advisor Paul D’Antuono sought out what fights he could. But four fights in his first year as a pro is like doing 35 in the passing lane. He also paid opponents out of pocket, which will burn a hole in your wallet. A phenomenon of moving a young fighter is that an opponent—which in boxing parlance suggests the one expected to lose; fodder for a rising prospect—generally demands the lion’s share of a purse. It’s a standard quid pro quo in the industry. Add in Benitez’s stellar pedigree, and you’ve got some canvas-backs feeling like Trump.

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In light of his years of toil and struggle, it seems wrong to describe this as the “beginning” of Benitez’s career; the 25-year-old southpaw doesn’t recall life before boxing.

“My father was a big boxing fan,” he says from the Church Street Boxing Gym in New York City, a week before his fight. “It’s the only sport he watches. He don’t like baseball! Dominicans, they all love baseball. He hates it. We used to sit down every Saturday night and watch Telemundo boxing matches on free TV.”

His parents, Jesus and Martina, emigrated from the Dominican Republic and settled in Williamsburg, Brooklyn—long before it was chic. When he was seven, they moved to the Jacob Riis housing projects at 12th Street and Avenue D in Manhattan’s Alphabet City. The bullies at P.S. 34 feasted on the Latin Lilliputian. So, when Jesus came home from his factory job, he’d teach his son to punch, holding up pillows and sofa cushions for a heavy bag and focus mitts. The boy wanted the real thing. He cut an after-school program his mother enrolled him in, and visited a local Boys Club with a boxing program. At first he watched coach George Ayala’s sessions from the sidelines. When he finally joined, the two rarely skipped a day for the next 10 years.

“Coach Ayala threw me in the ring one day—my second day, actually—and I got hit a lot,” he says, touching an arrangement of features so fine and boyish he’d get carded buying cigarettes. “But I kept coming back.”

Most don’t. That’s how boxing coaches weed out the ones without the big stones.

“I wasn’t a natural,” he admits. “No timing whatsoever. Stiff. I didn’t have any sugar in me. The looseness came along with experience. Guys like Floyd Mayweather and Muhammad Ali, they

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were born with athleticism and speed.”

Ray Velez, his current trainer, describes him as “a grinder. He’ll do whatever it takes to be the victor.”

Already at weight, Benitez lifts a sweat-soaked shirt after his workout at Church St. and inspects his corrugated abs. His waist so slender it’d send Nicole Richie to the vomitorium in envy. In a few days, he’ll leave for Ocala, Fl., where his mother and two younger sisters now live, and he stays part-time. He shuttles back and forth like a gypsy, depending on his fight schedule. He doesn’t keep an apartment, relying on friends and family in Brooklyn and New Jersey to put him up. It doesn’t occur to him to complain; struggle and displacement is all he knows. Like Mickey told Rocky about silk sheets—“The worst thing that happened to you, that can happen to any fighter: you got civilized.”—Benitez believes hunger is his friend.

His workout completed, he walks to his old ‘hood in Alphabet City. The balmy weather belies the circumstances he left the Jacob Riis projects under. He points out a playground where a big, mean girl once called him out and nearly kicked his ass; the Boys Club where he learned his trade (the program now eliminated); he tells payback stories about the bullies who took him for a sucker; how most guys, no matter how big, had too much respect to test him once he became a recognized boxer, winning national tournaments.

These memories are quaint compared to the dark episodes his family braved during the crack epidemic of the ‘80s and ‘90s. Before they were even teenagers, most of his friends joined gangs and dealt drugs. Most are dead, doing life, or on the street.

“There was pressure to join,” he says, pulling up in front of the projects and pointing to his old apartment. “You know, you always want to be cool with the other guys. Boxing helped me out, though. It kept my mind focused. I was a good student—B’s and C’s—and my parents were strict. It was school and boxing.”

He sits on a bench in the center of the projects, adjacent to a basketball court with rims without nets and an empty playground. Except for the places he mentioned, Alphabet City is unfamiliar to him. Gentrified, it’s filled with trendy cafes, boutiques, charming gardens, and, well, lots of bourgeois white folks. But the projects remain unchanged. The buildings, the same drab, institutional brick. There’s graffiti dating back to Mayor Koch’s administration, and more unleashed pit bulls than owners, it appears. When he waves to a familiar pitbull owner, the man looks at him sharply and turns away. The pride of Jacob Riis, who had posters of his face and accomplishments hanging in the neighborhood, has been gone for many years.

“I remember gunshots going off late at night,” he says, his eyes scanning tree branches ornamented with plastic bags. “There were a lot of crazy psycho people, man. There were kidnappings and robberies. You had to be careful back then.”

Sometimes that wasn’t enough.

“I don’t talk about this,” he says, getting up and walking toward the F.D.R. Drive where he used

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to do roadwork, “but when I was 14 these three Spanish guys broke into our house and held us up. I’m coming home from the gym on a hot summer day. I try to open the door; it wouldn’t open. Somebody was holding it. Then they grabbed me and threw me inside; they all had guns. They searched our house for a long time. My mother made me sit down. My sisters were there but not my father.”

“15, 20 minutes later,” he continues, “my father was coming into the apartment. We knew what was about to happen but we couldn’t yell, ‘Leave!’ Because of the guns. They grabbed my pops. You know when they’re about to kill a person; it’s just like in the movies. That changed me. Damn, my father! You know what I’m saying? He was fighting back. One guy was holding him down; the other had the gun pressed to his face. They were trying to shoot him...but they couldn’t do it. Somebody was—I want to say a spirit or God—protecting us.

“That day changed me,” he explains. “In a way it influences my boxing. My mom was holding me down but I was screaming and wanted to fight. When they had my father, I was willing to take a risk. I showed that side of me. I got heart. I’m a warrior. A pitbull. I’m a daring person. I take risks and chances to get mine—I wanna get mine! Know what I’m sayin? I think about it now. I was that young, and I didn’t care. That’s how strong my blood is. And I’m a giving person. If you’re with me, I got your back.”

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At 16, Benitez received an invitation to finish up high school in Marquette, Michigan, where the University of Northern Michigan hosts a scholarship program for Olympic-bound American boxers. Once he completed high school there, he attended NMU, earning an Associates Degree in Business. (Meanwhile, his family moved to Ocala, FL.)

He experienced culture shock—a Latino Kevin Bacon, à la Footloose. He formed a tight bond with his fellow boxer-students, some of whom went on to medal in the Olympics and win world titles.

“We used to call that place Emerald City,” he says, referring to the former HBO prison series “Oz.” The boxers were mostly inner-city kids uprooted from their environment and placed in an unwelcoming, sterile dorm “in the middle of nowhere.” When not in class, they boxed six days a week, were weighed almost daily, and did roadwork at dawn in the bitter cold. Roberto rarely saw his family during this time. What made it tolerable was the collective dream: Olympic glory, followed by professional success.

* * *

The day after he lost that international qualifier for the Olympics in Athens, he didn’t sulk, asking “Why me?” He sweated buckets at the Bad Boyz Gym in Ocala. He found himself jumping rope next to a fellow gym rat, Paul D’Antuono. They started talking about Roberto’s next move. He wanted to turn pro, but he was unsure of where to begin or whom to trust. D’Antuono was on the scene from when a young Cassius Clay and Angelo Dundee were at the 5th Street Gym in Miami. He once managed a promising featherweight whose career was cut short after a terrible

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car accident. Grief-stricken, he slowly developed a yen for another fighter.

Thus, Team Benitez was formed. D'Antuono is his advisor. Randy Wilds, a successful union negotiator, focuses on the contracts. Ray Velez, who has known the boxer for years, is his trainer. Ace cutman Freddy Corritone's services go beyond stopping the flow of blood; he's alternately a clown, a raconteur, a psychologist, and a sharp set of eyes in the corner. Recently, Bronx-based promoter Joe DeGuardia signed Benitez. Not the biggest act around, he has proven himself a capable one, helping light heavyweight Antonio Tarver achieve significant seven-figure purses.

Neither DeGuardia nor D'Antuono would reveal specific numbers regarding Roberto's signing bonus and purses. But the promoter likened his income to a young high school teacher. A knowledgeable source suggests his current purse will be in the \$5,000 range—which is considered good money for a fighter in his weight class who didn't medal in the Olympics. (Fighters topping an ESPN2 card generally get \$10,000.) If Roberto stays busy over the next year, he might fight seven or eight times. But an injury or a couple fights falling through can quickly cut that number in half. On the other hand, his team isn't divvying up his purse—as other would—at this stage of the game.

Considering the lowest paid player on the Minnesota Timberwolves is getting \$398,762 this season, or that the average salary for the worst paid team in MLB (Florida Marlins) is still \$327,000, you can understand why boxing is often called The Hardest Game.

Benitez's mother and two sisters want him to hold Dominican flags when he does his ringwalk. D'Antuono objects. The Latin fans will be there for him no matter what, he explains. Roberto could come out dressed like Kim Jong-il and they'd still love him.

"We're selling the All American Kid," D'Antuono says. "That's where the money is. Joan Guzman is the best Dominican fighter in the world right now—24-0, the WBO Super Bantamweight Champion. He gets \$300K per fight; if he spoke English, it'd be \$3 million."

Benitez & Co. are still ironing out some marketing kinks. His moniker was initially "Slim Terror." Lately they've been using "Game Over," and are wearing black T-shirts with those words emblazoned on the back.

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Right now, his only concern is the man in front of him, Yamin Mohammad—4-10-1—of Dayton, Ohio. He's rugged and comes to fight. Most of his bouts are in an up-and-comer's backyard.

The bell rings. Benitez, on the shelf for the past 17 months, comes out cautiously. Mohammad thrashes his body and attempts to rough him up on the inside. The strategy backfires; a cut opens on the opponent's left eye.

Done with his broadcast, Teddy Atlas opts to stick around and watch Benitez. He called his pro debut and is curious to see his development.

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“You see the amateur pedigree of Benitez,” Atlas notes, “because he didn’t let the cut influence him one way or the other. That comes with some experience. Some guys would get exhilarated, prematurely, just because they see blood.”

Benitez shows a balanced attack, going to the body and head. All his combinations are set up with a sharp jab. Toward the end of the first, he rips Mohammad’s body—he doesn’t take it well.

“What’s good for the goose is good for the gander,” Atlas says. “He went to my body; let’s see how he likes it to his body. Mohammad was knocked out his last fight. You don’t want him to get confident. He has lost six of his last eight, so you can call him an opponent. But Benitez isn’t treating him like one. You don’t see him looking to land one big shot. He’s sticking with what he needs to, to be successful today or tomorrow. I like that.”

The round’s over. A minute passes. Ding! Benitez instantly drives his man into a corner, hitting him with an uncountable flurry of punches. Muhammad is dazed. His eyeballs roll in their sockets. The ref jumps between them, waving off the fight.

His hands in the air, Roberto Benitez smiles toward his corner and mouths “Game Over.” He surveys the near-empty arena, where all but a few witnessed the one kid on the card with the right stuff.

Minutes later he’s with his team in his dressing room, stuffing a gym bag. The room is rife with bloody towels, soiled hand wraps, orange peels, and the air reeks from a clogged toilet. He studies his studies his hands, which look too delicate for the job they’re assigned to do. “I wish I woulda been on ESPN,” he says.