

## Li'l But Bad Crashes Back Onto the Scene

Written by Michael Katz  
Wednesday, 19 July 2006 19:00

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LAS VEGAS, July 20 – There's a major welterweight fight in two days and since none of the major welterweights are in it, maybe we can look past it into the past. In nine days, Stevie Johnston – old "Li'l But Bad" himself – returns to fight Vivian Harris with his wife's words echoing in his ears: "It's a good thing you're not fighting Vivian Johnston because I'll kick your butt."

When you go face first through a windshield at 45 miles an hour, you don't choose your ring opponents by name. You just feel lucky you're alive, and after three years you feel even luckier to be back on the national stage, even if it's in a place you can't pronounce. Johnston is a substitute for a substitute on an HBO Boxing After Dark card from the Chumash Casino in Santa Ynez, Calif., and his name – not his wife's – conjures up the thought, "He's STILL fighting?"

What's in a name. Harris, the former WBA junior welterweight champion told me years ago, that Vivian was a common boy's name in his native Guyana, although somewhat less so in his Brooklyn neighborhood. Vivian is a common name around the Johnston house in Denver. Mrs. Li'l But Bad is named Vivian.

She and the four kids are still in Denver because her husband wants to make a name for himself again in boxing. He used to be pretty good, you remember. The two-time former lightweight champion knocked out Sharmba Mitchell in 1994, two years before Harris turned pro. He was UPSET by Jose Luis Castillo in 2000 – lost on a split decision in what Ring magazine called the upset of the year and later in 2000 fought a draw with the erstwhile lightweight star.

Johnston may not be the same guy he was before his 2003 accident on a dark Colorado two-lane road where an ongoing truck swiped the car in which he was a passenger. He is still only 33 and has won four straight since returning last October, but not against "live" opposition.

His new manager, Jim Rider of Vero Beach, Fla., said Johnston was "better than ever." In that case, Harris doesn't have much of a chance, despite his six-inch height advantage over the 5-foot-5 southpaw. Johnston, counting four comeback victories over the usual inanimate objects since his return in October, is 38-3-1 with 17 knockouts. He was never a big puncher, but his quickness, work rate, combinations and overall skills enabled him to go into Paris and take a 135-pound world title from Jean-Baptiste Mendy in 1997 – eight months before Harris was to make his pro debut.

The landscape has changed a lot in the lighter divisions since then. Harris, who wasn't on the radar back then, managed to win a 140-pound title, but was stopped by the light-hitting Carlos Maussa 13 months ago and has had only one subsequent fight on his "comeback." He was to have met Mike Arnoutis in some kind of eliminator July 29, but the Greek suffered a cut eyelid in training and promoter Gary Shaw went through a couple of other choices before settling on

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Johnston, who dropped out of sight after losing a 2003 lightweight eliminator to Juan Lazcano. A few months later, while he was contemplating what went wrong, he was in the wrong place at the wrong time.

“The seat belt didn’t hold up,” said Johnston from Vero Beach, where he has been living since his comeback began last October. It held up well enough to keep him alive, even if it did not improve his looks.

He woke up in the hospital. The driver of his car didn’t have insurance. He couldn’t collect any help from the truck driver, either. He never stopped. “He got away,” said Johnston, “it was a hit and run.”

So after 160 or so stitches and a couple of years to think things over, Johnston decided he’d better get back in the ring. He journeyed to Vero Beach on an invite to see trainer Buddy McGirt and met Rider there.

He was with McGirt for a while, but Rider has his own gym – and fighters like Prince Badi Amaju, who on the same BAD night meets Roy Jones Jr. atop a pay-per-view card in Boise, Idaho, as the former pound-for-pound leader goes as far off-Broadway as possible (Sir Laurence Olivier or Elvis never played Boise, even after they died, let alone while they were living).

“I think Stevie has trained every single day since he came to Florida,” said Rider. “He takes care of the wife and kids, says he’s just like the guys who went to Iraq, that he’s got something to do.”

The restored face has held up to months of sparring and the four victories. The only cut he has suffered in that time was beneath an eye due to a clash of heads.

“I don’t anticipate he’s going to lose a round,” said Rider, who said “ironically” he grew up in Denver before making his fortune in Scottsdale real estate and Florida.

Johnston, who was a staple of network TV, will be making only his third start on HBO. He beat Cesar Bazan to regain the world title he dropped to the Mexican on a split decision and also beat Angel Manfredy for the cable giant. He said he knew Harris was “tall and a good boxer, I’ve got to be on my A-game. It’s going to be a good fight.”

The junior welterweight division is in flux. Many of its recent stalwarts – Floyd Mayweather Jr., Ricky Hatton and Miguel Cotto – have moved up to welterweight or are about to (Cotto is already penciled in to meet Arturo Gatti, an almost prohibitive favorite over 147-pound champion Carlos Baldomir on Saturday in Atlantic City). Then there are lightweights, Castillo and perhaps Diego Corrales, who like Johnston are moving up to 140.

“It’s going to be loaded,” said Johnston. “It’s a new era.”

Apropos of nothing, Johnston turns 34 on Sept. 28 – which means he was born the very day I

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returned with my young bride to the United States from six years in Paris.

**PENTHOUSE:** The only major welterweight on HBO's show Saturday night will be Sugar Shane Mosley on the taped delay of his convincing six-round knockout of Fernando Vargas. At 34, Mosley is back in peak form and never mind that Vargas was a perfect foil. The way Mosley moved to give Vargas angles, the snappy combinations he was able to get across, the way he could step to the side and then back in, were all reminders of just how good he once was. He may, in fact, be the best welterweight in the world, certainly the one with the greatest chance of knocking off Floyd Mayweather Jr. And he'd probably be at least a 2-1 favorite over Antonio Margarito....Let's give Vargas a hand, too. Maybe it was the trouble making 154 pounds, but he looked shot. Proud warriors do not retire, at age 28, after such performances. I can hear it already, the Main Events chorus of wrong weight. Vargas will get a gimme at 160 and guess what? He can beat Javier Castellejo again to win a paperweight title. Castellejo just upset Felix Sturm for one of those phony belts....But Mosley was the one who really emerged as a major player again, especially if as he says he'll have no trouble making 147 pounds....Mosley, and his boss/partner, Oscar de la Hoya, wouldn't let Vargas get away with having Gatorade – or Nehi grape or Yoo-Hoo – to drink between rounds. But on the night the prodigal father returned to the corner, Mosley was allowed Jack (his father) and water.

**OUTHOUSE:** Something is rotten in the state of New Jersey. How does Arturo Gatti rate to be more than a 2-1 favorite over the “real,” if limited, welterweight champion, Carlos Baldomir? Maybe it's that somehow Baldomir's camp has incredibly allowed three New Jersey judges to be assigned to the Atlantic City fight. Gatti has been a Jersey resident for years and he is the King of Atlantic City....And something is not kosher in New York where Dmitry Salita, Lou DaBully's not-so-great Jewish hope, is being allowed to fight a ten-round main event against a late sub, Shad Howard, who is coming off a first-round knockout loss May 19 in Albany (which, last I heard, was still part of New York State) in a six-rounder. That the New York State Athletic Commission is allowing this travesty is not surprising; these clowns allowed Miguel Cotto to get into a 16-foot ring against the elusive Paulie Malignaggi that had so much padding it was like moving in not-so-quicksand. The question is how come the Better Business Bureau hasn't moved to stop this joke....Main Events hasn't been doing all that well by its fighters. First, Calvin Brock is given Mission Impossible, trying to look good against the clutching Timor Ibragimov. Now Carl Moretti – one of my favorite matchmakers, by the way – gives Juan Diaz a farewell gift by digging deep in the Philippines to find Randy Suico, a junior lightweight who could accomplish an amazing feat – making the exciting lightweight titlist look boring on the Mosley-Vargas undercard. Jim Lampley and Emanuel Steward of HBO were raving about Diaz's “consistency.” After a while, “consistency” becomes repetitive....Can't believe Floyd Mayweather Jr. connections are seriously considering Cory Spinks – and not Bob Arum's \$8 million for a fight with Antonio Margarito. Must be a negotiating ploy; it's always good to look as if you have more alternatives than you really have.

**FEARLESS FREDDIE:** Issued under the banner of Sternburg Communications Inc., “Coming to your quotational rescue” is this offering allegedly from Jeff Lacy, one of Fred's clients: “Maybe I should change my ring name from ‘Left Hook’ to the Magic Man since I'm the one who made Antonio (Magic Man) Tarver disappear.”