

Falling In Love With Boxing Again

Written by Robert Mladinich
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On the second installment of ESPN's "The Contender," which was broadcast on July 25, hard-punching Gary Balleto of Providence, Rhode Island, joined Cornelius Bundrage and Norberto Bravo in the winner's circle after garnering a hard-fought, well-deserved five-round split decision over Aaron Torres of Philadelphia.

In doing so, the 30-year-old Balleto raised his record to 30-2-2 (25 KOS), while the cocky and loquacious 27-year-old Torres saw his ledger dip to 14-3 (6 KOS).

Balleto not only won a war of attrition in the ring against the equally determined Torres, it is hard to imagine him not winning over scores of mainstream fans in the process.

He is a full-time building contractor who for much of his career viewed boxing as a hobby more than anything else. But his natural power and engaging personality resulted in him becoming a New England fan favorite.

Unlike many of his fellow contenders who come from impoverished backgrounds, Balleto seems to be enjoying a comfortable middle-class existence.

As some of his television rivals and teammates battle for their very existence, Balleto seems to be battling only to serve a deeply rooted emotional need that is stoked by his love for the sport.

While it is always easy to root for someone who is pursuing their dreams, often at great expense or risk, what makes Balleto's story even more compelling is the somewhat shaky support that he receives from his family.

Having endured numerous injuries over the years, including a broken jaw, cracked ribs, fractured hands, and several concussions, one of which resulted in a two-year ring hiatus, it is easy to understand their reluctance in supporting his dangerous endeavors in the squared circle.

Both his lovely wife Kristina, and the oldest of their three children, a boy who is a spitting image of his father, seemed terrified at the thought of him fighting. As ennobling as the show tries to make boxing, and as much as you want to root for the immensely likeable Balleto, their obvious worries are very disconcerting.

Knowing that they had already bore witness to the long-term effects of just one concussion; perhaps Balleto is being a tad bit selfish for putting them through the emotional rigors of watching him engage in such a grueling intense competition.

The fact is, however, that regardless of whatever else Balleto does for a living—and how much he doesn't need boxing—he is a fighter by nature and should be lauded for pursuing his dream, even at great risk to himself.

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His wife, who was his high school sweetheart, knew what she was getting into when she said “I do,” and I have long ago given up on expressing publicly when professional athletes should retire.

That said, I admit that I was very affected by both Balletto’s performance in the ring and his well-chronicled role as a hardworking family man. The fight was as thrilling as his wonderful relationship with his family was heartwarming.

Balletto is not only a winner; he is a man on a mission. This writer will be rooting for him every step of the way.

The show’s producers did a masterful job of selecting participants for this season’s show. The personalities are meshing well and lots of drama and rivalries seem to be formulating.

As easy it is to root for Balletto, it is just as easy to cheer on Bravo and Bundrage, both of whom scored big victories in the season’s special two-hour opener.

The 35-year-old Bravo, who hails from Tucson, Arizona, beat Rudy Cisneros in another sizzling five rounder. Nicknamed “El Gallito,” which translates into the “Fighting Rooster,” Bravo has been boxing professionally since May 1991.

His seemingly nominal record of 21-10-3 (12 KOS) belies an abundance of talent and heart. Although he has faced seven undefeated fighters during his career, he has been stopped only once.

Moreover, he has always worked at least one and oftentimes two jobs to augment his income and support his fiancée and four children. A plasterer by trade, he is currently employed as a maintenance man at the Honeywell Corporation.

Displaying traditional Mexican grit and determination, Bravo has often stated that he would fight to the death if necessary. Given his relatively advanced age and his somewhat spotty record, he is thrilled that the producers saw enough potential in him to take a gamble on him.

“This show means everything to me,” he said. “I am fighting to make life better for my family. I don’t want to let them down, and I don’t want to let down the producers who believed in me enough to put me on the show.”

Bundrage, who hails from Detroit, is another fighter who is easy to admire. When the show’s participants were picking teams in episode one, he was selected dead last even though he is the biggest and most muscular fighter on the show.

You felt for him as his nemesis, Michael Clark, who was a renowned amateur, taunted him relentlessly about his nickname of K-9. Howling like a wolf, Clark insinuated that the bighearted Bundrage was a dog and that he (Clark) would beat him easily.

When the two finally squared off and Bundrage survived a few shaky moments to knock Clark

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down and win a decision, the excitement was palpable.

With a record of 22-1 (13 KOS), Bundrage is big, strong, durable and resilient. He has already overcome great adversity on the first show. If he was as man without mettle, he would have easily folded up against the more naturally talented Clark.

Bundrage's victory, as well the wins by Bravo and Balletto, have so much more to do with who they are as people than what they are as fighters.

These are all fine men chasing big dreams. None of them have a sense of entitlement, and none are averse to putting in the work to make their lofty dreams come true.

I can't think of three better fighters to start off a season of a show that was written off by many as being simplistic and silly. These guys personify all of the good things that boxing has to offer – for both the fighters and the fans.

I have been a boxing fan for as long as I can remember. But it was in 1976 that I truly fell in love with the sport for the first time.

The success of the United States boxing team at that year's Olympic Games in Montreal, which spawned five gold medalists, including Sugar Ray Leonard, as well as the Academy Award winning film "Rocky" made that happen.

Over the last decade or so, my interest has waned considerably. There are too many titles and not enough fighters to get excited about.

"The Contender" is making me fall in love with boxing all over again.