

Toney XXL

Written by Joe Rein
Saturday, 29 July 2006 19:00

Nostradamus would have a gimme with James Toney.

It's a medical problem: Knee-Jerk Zidane (a less pernicious strain of Duran-Tourette...sadly, incurable). But unlike ZZ, James only has flare-ups *outside* the ring. Canvas causes 47-minute remissions. For 23 hours, he's on earthquake watch -- a seismic event going someplace to happen.

The recent tremor was at the new Palm restaurant in Los Angeles: a presser for Toney's WBC 12-round heavyweight eliminator on SHOWTIME CHAMPIONSHIP BOXING against Samuel "The Nigerian Nightmare" Peter on Sept. 2, tabbed NO RISK, NO REWARD, at STAPLES Center, just across the street.

Note to Goossen Tutor: When you issue MEDIA ALERTS for Toney pressers -- like Gallagher shows -- encourage raincoats right below 'for working media ONLY!' *Understandable, considering the gourmet luncheon*

Pressers are no-muss no-fuss: Get the information out. Above all, run smoothly; the pricey room's only booked for so long. Sure, there's supposed to be some salty quotes and face making for the morning editions (or nanoseconds later on the web) but nothing that changes the architecture of the building ... *a safe bet with Toney*. He starts with irascible and brings new meaning to G Rated.

Plus, with his history, it's a re-hash -- just insert Peter's name. And, if you're under deadline, there's file-footage of Toney presser explosions. There's bound to be a 270-pounder; he flattens them for drill sparring at Wild Card... *A little Photoshop...who's to notice the difference?* But, the temptation to see *the happening* live is too much.

After entrées that would make it criminal to write anything negative about the promotion, the media took seats in the front section of the banquet room, waiting for the curtain to go up. The principals, Samuel Peter, manager Ivaylo Gotzev and co-promoter Dino Duva took their places, with Dan Goossen, Toney's promoter, at the podium, and reps from SHOWTIME and STAPLES Center in attendance. Only Toney was conspicuous by his absence -- like the champ making the challenger wait.

Goossen, checking his watch and the door for any sign of Lights Out, soft-shoed, soliciting questions. One no-clue Teletubbie piped up with queries that were to reporting what Julie Louis-Dreyfus was to dancing on Seinfeld.

The Toney circus arrived not a second too soon.

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James, in shades and a Guys-‘n’-Dolls butterscotch pinstripe, tricked-out with enough diamonds and platinum to warrant the presser at Ft. Knox, was the ringmaster at the center of the parade. Hip-hop “Pomp and Circumstance ” befitted his arrival. *Let the games begin* was in his swagger, impatience on his face -- a contrail of aggression in his wake.

Team Toney, a Felliniesque-aggregate of family, sparring partners and acolytes (the only thing missing were the acrobats) filled the remainder of the five rows of folding chairs and clogged the doorway, raising the buzz to a GM assembly line. No one just over 5’9” makes a bigger entrance.

Samuel Peter, big as he is, in a pinstripe that would cover Dodger Stadium, was invisible. It was like sharing the screen with Steve McQueen. He was a spectator at this show.

“How’s it feel fighting in L.A., Dawg?” one of JT’s Detroit homies shouted out.

“L.A. gonna be Detroit for one night,” Toney beamed. “D Block in the house!”

The usual Alphonse ‘n’ Gaston ensued -- each side praising the other for taking the fight. *We’re not going to sink to the level of the others you’ve seen*
. Toney drummed on the table with his fingers.

When Peter mumbled in the cadence of South East Nigeria in response to how he’ll do against Toney, a reporter blurted out, “I don’t understand?” Toney crooked an eye, “He said he’s gonna beat me. Next question!” (Redd Foxx couldn’t have thrown it away better.) With every utterance, he strutted sitting down.

He doesn’t answer questions; he suffers them. It took more endurance to sit there than do 12 rounds.

The sniping picked up slowly, with Toney jabbing over Duva’s remarks -- the needle sharper each time from both. Toney, shaking his head, sniggering – exasperated, “Talkin’ about me like he gonna run through me like Swiss cheese.” It was Groundhog Day for the 77th time. Caltech was warning a Magnitude 6.5. No chance of an *implosion*
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Then, in a coup of statesmanship, Duva put a ten-ton straw on the camel’s back.

With an eye to the box-office, after giving Toney faint praise for his skills; he called him dumb for taking the match. *Russian roulette with live rounds*. Warming to the task, Duva put some sinew in it the second time, leaning closer to Toney from the podium.

“You talk a lot for a guy that’s not getting in the ring, old man. You sound like *you* want to fight me,” Toney spat.

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From Goossen's swivel-around and lynch'm sentiments from Tonyites, Duva realized he may have stepped over the line and tried to smooth things. Looking at the mother of James's children – doing his best Rodney King, 'Why can't we all just get along?' Duva explained, "I didn't mean *you* when I called James dumb..." *Why isn't he patching things up in Lebanon?*

A shouting match between Toney, Duva and Gotzev escalated from predictable to out-of-control (which fits Toney better than "Lights Out"). Photogs scampered for angles. We were at DEFCON 3 – no Ali wink and nudge.

(The tip-off to a faux show: the guy that goes berserk is usually in sweats, not an ad for Jacob The Jeweler.)

Adding fuel to the fire, a front-runner with the Toney hoards called-out Duva to bet on his man. "Pick your poison!" Toney snapped.

He wanted at Duva and Gotzev, ripping off his jacket that cost more to tailor than most cars. (Hard to hide the chip on his shoulder.) He drew no distinction between Godzilla and milquetoast: a slight means being rendered limb-from-limb and ground to powder.

It took all of the king's horses and all of the king's men to restrain him; he was bucking like a Brahman. Goossen's eyes rolled, "*Here we go again.*" Toney went from zero-to-Vesuvius from the git-go, flinging a glass of water at Duva and Gotzev, spraying Goossen -- acting as honest broker -- and Peter, while he struggled to break free and disembowel the manager and promoter, knighted "Dumb and Dumber," by Goossen.

With a wall of muscle shielding them, Duva and Gotzev, (now looking like an enraged flamenco dancer with his slicked black hair and knitted brow) berated Toney at blood-oath intensity. (Shades of Johnny Friendly taunting Terry Malloy in ON THE WATERFRONT.) Their number three heavyweight contender -- damp suit, not withstanding -- didn't stampede to their defense. This wasn't his arena. "I do not do my fighting at a press conference," he said. "I do my fighting in the ring." (Succinct, if a little stilted, like his style.)

It may portend for the bout. We were in a no-man's land – no rules. Though Peter can separate a man from his senses (and his head from his body) with either hand, if it wasn't for his dam-busting power, he'd be one more lumbering brute drilled in a gym to box -- *a learned fighter*, a manager's hope to cash-in on heavyweight money, not a fast-twitch improviser like Toney.

On TV, the scuffle's a giggle before the weather report. At Ground Zero, it's a bar brawl -- large bodies blurring by. The chaos is not the worry; it's the collateral damage.

While Toney was being bulldogged away by his camp, kicking, cursing and frothing, Goossen, ever the trooper in the midst of shot and shell, kept rattling-off the attractive seating packages to the few that weren't caught up in the tsunami carrying Toney out of the room and down the staircase past wide-eyed business-lunchers and out the front door.

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On the way out, some spit-balled precautions for James' next presser: maybe a Hannibal Lecter rig, or shackled like Sampson; but with his hair grown in maybe they tried and failed. No one asked. Toney has a Bobby Knight-affect on questioners.

The biggest opportunity missed -- with all the yelling back and forth -- is why Toney's lead and counter rights -- landed so flush -- didn't dent Rahman at all? *Is it as his critics insist: He shouldn't be in with dreadnaughts?*

Jim Hill, the CBS Sports TV anchor, still nimble as his NFL cornerback days, kept a mic in Toney's face, dancing backwards down the stairs while The Bulls of Pamplona were thundering.

Out on the sidewalk, Toney, ringed by press poking microphones like banderoles, bellowed and paced with the hell he was going to visit on Duva and Gotzev when they came out. All of it unintelligible, as if scrunched by a tight headgear.

Toney was at home: center stage – *the man*, roiling and boiling for a fight, as large and animated as the two-story figure of Kobe Bryant plastered on the side of the Palm.

Fed up with waiting for Gotzev and Duva to exit, Toney's claque left en mass like a swarm of killer bees, angrily buzzing.

The chickens eventually come home to roost. All of James's excesses will one day come due. But for one night in September, before injury and age claim him, get a glimpse of old school, the doppelganger from Detroit – not the rampaging bully, but one helluva fighter. "Not no boxer, not a runner, not no track star."

Within 20 feet under ring lights, he's all about business...*and what a businessman!*

The five-time world champion may give up youth, every physical advantage and single-sock power, but Peter will be in against legends: Eddie Booker, Holman Williams, Charley Burley, and mostly, Archie Moore; Toney's channeled them all.

With all Toney's cunning, Peter may have the power to do what no one else has, but it won't detract from what Toney's accomplished, except for those who have the knife out for him for not looking like the Spartan ideal or a role model.

What Peter doesn't know is: Toney has renewed incentive; if he wins, his crossover appeal is unlimited: Public Broadcasting is fighting the FCC's ban on profanity.