

Shame, Shame on You (and You Know Who You Are)

Written by Michael Katz

Wednesday, 20 September 2006 19:00

LAS VEGAS, Sept. 20 – You call yourself a fight fan, but all you want to see are blood and guts.

Someone else's.

That's what you pay for, and when you don't get your pound of flesh, or pint of blood, you think you've been robbed of your hard-earned money, as if the price of a ticket entitles you to a seat at the guillotine.

Hopefully, you're not in the majority. If I thought that you were, I doubt if I could continue aiding and abetting your vicarious thrills. But I truly believe that you are outnumbered by those of us who like to see a good brawl, when accompanied by skill, to see the flip side of the coin, the great courage and determination of the competitors. Yes, Diego Corrales and Jose Luis Castillo gave us a classic fight, but what is remarkable is how they each battled back from adversity. Their courage is enhanced by danger.

But you can't call yourself a fight fan if all you want is to put the competitors in that danger. You're nothing more than a ghoul who can't appreciate the subtleties of boxing. You call yourself a fight fan, but it's not the fighting that interests you, it's the blood.

Damn the torpedoes, it's full speed ahead. Forget defense, forget setting up punches. You want what you surmise is action. If they could erect bleachers by the spot where the most accidents happen on the New Jersey Turnpike, you'd pay \$500 for a ringside seat to the next crash. Back in the Fifties at the 24 Hours of Le Mans, one of France's great auto races, a couple of cars locked wheels and flew into the stands. Officials gave a death toll in the fifties, though about 150 died. The French didn't count all those who succumbed in hospitals after the race. The point is, you don't have to guess which part of the stands was the first to fill the following year. Auto racing's version of fight fans were out in full force. They weren't there to see how clever the drivers were shifting gears.

You call yourself a fight fan, but you were heading out the door starting in the tenth round as Marco Antonio Barrera, who spent so much of his great career giving you his own blood and guts, decided instead to give Rocky Juarez a boxing lesson. You spent much of the match booing and calling Barrera a dog, chanting "Beso," or kiss, because boxing wasn't why you were sitting in the MGM Grand Arena.

It was one year, minus a day, from the night Leavander Johnson suffered fatal injuries in a Vegas ring, and you probably expressed your condolences when the warrior died. You call yourself a fight fan, but you tell yourself you're not barbaric. You don't see yourself the way director Robert Wise did in his 1947 film noir classic, "The Set-Up," still the best boxing film in my opinion. Wise showed close-ups of the fight fans in all their Roman Coliseum gory. Old women with hatred etched on their faces, screaming their lungs out; men choking on blood lust.

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You call yourself a fight fan and when one of the competitors gets in serious trouble, you rise out of your seat in gleeful anticipation of the kill. You might as well point your thumbs downward. Tell me what part of “sport” is a knockout, the rendering of a fighter unconscious.

It’s not like Diego Corrales, showing the flip side of the brutal game, somehow hanging in during all the adversity with courage and guts. That’s the kind of stuff that makes boxing so compelling, but the fight fan who roots for the KO is not looking for drama, any more than a gawker at a ten-car pileup is looking to give someone CPR.

You call yourself a fight fan, but you regard Barrera as useless and never mind all those great rounds with Erik Morales, Manny Pacquiao, Kennedy McKinney, Junior Jones, Naseem Hamed. You have no use for a smart boxer who reminds us that “this is a sport where you’re supposed to hit and not get hit.” Thank goodness Barrera turned into a great boxer; otherwise the world may have had another useless lawyer. But that same intellect that had taken him to law school, when applied in the ring, enabled him to shatter the stereotypical “Mexican fighter” that he resembled early in his career.

He proved over and over again that, when necessary, he can “go to war.” But you wish that some of the world leaders would learn from him that sometimes it’s healthier to use diplomacy and tact. He had a tough time with the aggressive young Juarez in May, then demanded a rematch to prove that he was the superior fighter.

“I beat him with one hand,” he would say winning 10 of 12 rounds on my ringside card (when two veteran Vegas judges, Chuck Giampa and Dave Moretti, each scored it seven rounds to five, I asked the best of them all, Duane Ford, how he saw it from his seat in the expensive section, and he also gave Juarez only two rounds, the same two I did – the third and fourth).

He was a 4-1 favorite in May and escaped with a split decision. This time, he was a much more attractive 3-2 choice and left no doubt as to who won.

At the post-fight news conference, we almost had the fight of the night, with apologies to Israel Vasquez’s comeback stoppage of Jhonny Gonzalez. With the Juarez claque berating Barrera for “running,” Rocky’s girlfriend and Marco’s wife almost got into it. I liked Senora Barrera on points because, if Juarez’s lady didn’t know more about boxing than did her man, a jab and a move to the left would suffice.

One of my colleagues, Doug Fischer, wisely pointed out that perhaps all the booing was not for Barrera. I believe it was, but Juarez certainly deserved his share. It was his inability to solve the simplest puzzles that turned round after round into what ace publicist Bill Caplan said was a Roy Jones Jr. “safety-first” demonstration. Not quite, because even when boxing defensively, His Royness could juice up the show with some cheap frills.

Barrera failed to engage. His “partner,” Oscar de la Hoya, pointed out “we all know he can fight and stand in there, but Barrera used his skill, his intelligence.” He won with one hand, why waste the other? His left hand had Juarez’s right eye nearly closed by the end. Juarez may be lucky Barrera used only one hand. But you who call yourself a fight fan did not want to see a

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boxing match, especially a one-sided one. Barrera had no sympathy for you.

“Instead of coming into ‘I’m Still the King’ I should’ve used (as his entrance music) ‘I’m Nobody’s Fool,’” he said.

Instead of giving Juarez a chance in a shootout, he saved himself for the fight he really wants, a rematch with Manny Pacquiao, which already has been penciled in by HBO for next March. And if Pacquiao doesn’t win his rubber match Nov. 18 with Erik Morales, the ghouls will have to be satisfied with Barrera-Morales IV.

OUTHOUSE: Joe Souza is one of the great cut men in the world. The Texan was in Rocky Juarez’s corner when Barrera landed an uppercut to the right eye (the challenger’s description) in the fifth round. But Souza was kept on the floor by the challenger’s amateurish trainer, Ray Oliveros, who instead had his son up in the ring working on the injury. Finally, Souza was invited up after the tenth round but all the doctors at Johns Hopkins couldn’t have done any good by then. It is certainly no surprise that Juarez was not given a Plan B, or could not figure out one for himself, during amateur hour....Leave a little room for the scoring of that four-round pay-per-view opener that went by majority decision to Jorge Paez Jr. Derrick Campos, the opponent from Topeka, deserved at least a draw and, if it had been a five-round fight, probably would have scored a knockout. Paez’s kid better look for work in the circus.

PENTHOUSE: Vazquez deserves much credit for getting up twice, though the first knockdown was more a case of being caught off-balance, and eventually breaking down the frail-looking Gonzalez. Vazquez, a minus \$1.55 favorite (what you needed to bet to win \$1 and why do I have to keep explaining this?), has been considered the king at 122. He showed true grit in stopping Gonzalez in the tenth – and no, the bantamweight titlist’s trainer, Oscar Suarez, was not premature in waving the towel – but he should also be thankful that Joan Guzman moved out of the weight class.

Guzman moved two divisions higher and outboxed and outslugged the tough Argentine, Jorge Barrios, in what was somehow scored a split decision. I think the fight was closer than most of my colleagues had it – 115-112 for Guzman – but there should have been no doubts that the undefeated Dominican speedster won. He’s got wonderful moves, terrific hand speed and I’ve got to find a spot for him on my pound-for-pound list....I wish to hereby acknowledge the assistance of former junior middleweight champion Raul Marquez, at ringside for HBO Latino, in translating what was raining down from the MGM Grand stands. The personable Marquez, now fighting at middleweight and hoping for another shot, is on Telefutera this Friday against Elio Garcia, who went into the tenth round on one of Vernon Forrest’s comeback fights. I’m afraid, though Marquez was always an exciting fighter, he might be a tough sell to HBO or Showtime, the only networks who can pay him what he wants unless he gets on one of Bob Arum’s pay-per-view undercards.

B-HOP SERIOUS: Guys, and gals, don’t take Bernard Hopkins too seriously when he says he wants to challenge Oleg Maskaev. He’ll stay retired. You know why? Because there’s no way he can get to Maskaev, unless Dennis Rappaport is smart enough to scrap Paul Okhhello, the Japan-based Ugandan, as the opponent for a proposed December voluntary defense and

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switch to the longtime middleweight king before Samuel Peter gets his mandatory shot. Once Peter fights Maskhev, there won't be any other voluntary defenses for Oleg – and Bernard won't be looking to face the Nigerian Nightmare.

Happy New Year, even to the goyim.