

Final Acts of Bravery and Desperation

Written by Patrick Kehoe

Tuesday, 26 September 2006 19:00

When boxing fans fixate over the possibility of Bernard Hopkins trying his hand at a heavyweight brass ring or Mike Tyson's next boogiemán ring return or why Lennox Lewis and Vitali Klitschko should finally reenact the last classic heavyweight thriller for the sake of 'normalizing' the symbolic status of boxing's elite division, well, they are neglecting the possibilities right in front of them.

No doubt, world boxing today, in many aspects, lacks the ability to maximize the case for its commercial and theatrical relevance as sporting entertainment. As a sporting spectacle, boxing's impact has been miniaturized and marginalized within a culture awash with the excessive graphic violence of cinematic and virtualized production. What boxing historically gave to urbanized (global) culture was a ritualizing of person to person combat as sporting achievement, a semi-regulated bloodletting theater where tactical enterprise, brutish necessity and athletic domination was contested as a big business of often intoxicating fatalism. Romanticism met pragmatism whenever boxers found access to money and notoriety beyond what they could have reasonably dreamed possible caught up in the welter and desperation of the ghetto, barrio or slum, those hell's kitchens of depravity.

Born into the absolute margins of social, ethnic and/or religious backgrounds came forward passionate, emboldened men and women to partake, suffer, achieve and fail in this athletic lottery manifest as a prolonged series of martial encounters for money, fame and dignity. This was boxing's tempting myth of strife as access, survival as possibility, and for decades it fed the business of grassroots boxing, club boxing. Television turned local boxing into regional and national programmed packaging, the fighters recast for exposure as product as much as competing athletes. In the West, modern boxing had only the melodramatics of professional wrestling; media sensationalized gangsterism, and the serialized ethos of the Old West, as paralleling formulations of situational violence.

Having crossed over the millennial divide, postmodern culture radiates violence and conflict as high definition normality. From video games to Ultimate Fighting to family vehicles designed as urban assault vehicles – The Hummer – to the manifest status of our political time 'The War on Terror,' living within Western Culture means being actively compliant with the trappings and conditions of conflict as environment. If boxing was and remains a Darwinian jungle – save for the initiatives of transparency of Lou DiBella and Oscar De La Hoya's Golden Boy Promotions, notably – then it has also been swallowed whole by the day to day exigencies of living in the post-modernized world of contained threats and looming apocalyptic scenarios.

Sensitive to the calamitous times we now find ourselves living in, one is tempted to say, "Boxing may be the red light district... but man, it's CRAZY out here!"

Yet the promotional product, the satellite signal, the cable fed melodrama that championship boxing survives as – devalued internally by the politics of regulatory relativism and editorial diffidence – manages to produce gems of sustaining brilliance in the careers of legends such as

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Marco Antonio Barrera, Eric Morales, Oscar De La Hoya, Joe Calzaghe, to name but a glittering few. Complaining about the mediocrity of the heavyweight division comes so easily, casting such a stain over global boxing that we forget just how mesmerizing some of our greatest fighters are, in this age beyond the historical mantle of the heavyweight championship.

For there is no heavyweight championship; therefore there cannot truly be a heavyweight champion. The unanimity of consenting affirmation that once made possible the status of a fighter being universally understood as 'the heavyweight champion of the world' cannot exist today. In fact it's been that way for decades. Even the reign of Lennox Lewis was rife with accusations of fraud, his claims to universal recognition challenged in court by promoters, managers and opponents, on television airwaves across the globe, his legitimacy vilified over the internet via a torrent of disclaiming attack and critical critique.

With the climate of instantaneous litigation, contractual relativism and conflicts of interest excused as business as usual, the entire structure of determination for the heavyweight championship has become a theater of the absurd, championship belts multiplied almost at will, the standing of a 'championship reign' a temporary honorarium for professional perseverance. We need only mention the name of Oleg Maskaev for our immodest proposal to clarify it.

Understanding the 'antic hay' that is the heavyweight division, we can also turn past the fading megalomania of James Toney and Antonio Tarver and the presumption of might making endless right of a now aging Bernard Hopkins to see the true currents of wonderment in boxing. For this fall, the timelines of magnificent men – Manny Pacquiao and Eric Morales – intertwine yet again, the survivor of their rubber match fated to make a thrilling return with Marco Antonio Barrera for what will surely summarize their peerless careers. Sports Illustrated should tell that triangulated and trouble tale of grandeur, grit and greatness, the nova effect of those careers a beacon of what remains noble and particular to the sport of contemporary boxing.

No, we don't need any lessons in caged aesthetics from the madness of the octagon. Let the ratings, in this sense, be damned! Further, the experiment of making boxing into reality television fare – that over-edited, dystrophic experiment called *The Contender* – an abortive soap opera simulation of boxing's dynamical reality can only make the informed boxing fan nauseas. And so we who love boxing must look to the elementary, the tested best of our age. Even as such gilded chapters near their ending. Morales ready to finally decide upon the nature of his last career zealotry against Pacquiao. Promise the firebrand Filipino that Barrera waits as his ultimate reward for ending the legend of Morales and we can only imagine the explosion to come.

Interestingly, the case for Barrera finalizing his own career against Pacquiao was made with thudding urgency by Rocky Juarez and his failed regicide. Now Barrera knows his career must end by facing up to the winner of Pacquiao and Morales; such a perfect geometry of intersecting paths. Undoubtedly, Barrera suspected his rematch with Pacquiao was assured when "The Typhoon" sank Morales January 21, 2006 at the Thomas and Mack Center in Las Vegas. Twenty-seven seconds shy of ten rounds, ten rounds of torturous humiliation. And yet that's the kind of debt Morales would like to pay back, in kind, in treasure and in full measure. Then the pride of Tijuana would have a surprise for his old friend from Jalisco.

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Of course, these are not the imaginings of Pacquiao. He's not sentimental for perfect endings, the stuff of cliché riddled story lines for HBO promos. Pacquiao does nevertheless believe in all sorts of contradictions like magic spells and self-determination and the hand of God descending to defend the honor bound and fighting the perfect fight and that things are meant to be, if you are born to do something for the spirit of an entire people.

Mostly these three great champions understand the risks of acting upon what many would call fate, those final acts of bravery and desperation giving meaning to the struggles for greatness. If only just for the coming season, boxing is in good hands.

And the teaming hoards of the real contenders ply their rough trade far away from the parallaxing eye of video display. Destitute but buoyed by unchecked optimism, young men and women toil and train for the right to be ready to make their case, to fight the fight of their lives at the appointed time, against unimaginable odds.

And somehow beyond the trauma of troubled lives and impinging miseries, unknown figures begin to form habitual routines and innate rhythms suggesting they are the undiscovered heirs to Armstrong, Marciano, Robinson, Ali, Duran and Hopkins. Something timeless promises that they to will have their days of reckoning. And the world will take final notice.

So, all is not lost in boxing, after all.

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