

Sean Fitzgerald's Love/Hate Relationship With Boxing

Written by Robert Mladinich
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Sean "The Irish Express" Fitzgerald of Worcester, Massachusetts, was exhorting his fighter, undefeated middleweight Enrique Palau, to stay calm as Palau feverishly tried to stop durable journeyman James North at the Connecticut Convention Center in Hartford, Connecticut, on September 23.

Going into the fight, Palau, who hails from the same town as Fitzgerald, had scored four straight first round knockouts. In beating North, whose record now stands at 8-14-2 (3 KOS), Palau was forced to go the distance for the first time in his career as he improved his record to 5-0 (4 KOS).

Even though Palau didn't score a knockout, Fitzgerald was happy with the outcome. He sees Palau as a very viable prospect and believes that in the long run going the distance will prove to be very beneficial for him.

"He's a little wild and he's got to sharpen up," said the 36-year-old Fitzgerald, a former fighter who is the proprietor of the Camp Fitzzy gym in Worcester. "But he's got big cojones and he listens real well. This guy (North) went the distance with (undefeated prospect) Anthony Hanshaw. We rolled the dice and it paid off."

As a fighter, Fitzgerald was no stranger to rolling the dice. He is a former amateur standout who competed against Team Canada and Team Ireland. As he professional, he began his career in 1990 as a middleweight and ended it in 2001 as a cruiserweight. He compiled a 29-2-2 (11 KOS) record along the way.

He was a New England fan favorite who he engaged in many fan-friendly battles. Although he has one win and two draws against another local attraction, Peter Manfredo Sr., whose son Peter Jr. was a finalist in the first season of "The Contender" television series, Fitzgerald is best known for his two high profile losses.

In August 1993, he was stopped by the legendary Roberto Duran in the sixth round in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi. Four months later he was blasted out in one round by Dana Rosenblatt in Connecticut.

"I fought Duran when he was still pretty good," he recalled. "I was doing very well, but just ran out of gas. I have nobody but myself to blame for that."

Even more disappointing than the fight itself was the amount of money Fitzgerald earned for the bout. After all was said and done, he left the arena with \$2,900.

His fight with Rosenblatt was not much better. Fitzgerald concedes that it was not his best performance, but says that an array of personal issues contributed to the loss.

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The most Fitzgerald ever saw as a pro was the \$22,000 signing bonus he received from the New Jersey-based Tommy Parks, who trained multi-division titlist Bobby Czyz for many years.

After signing with Parks in 1994, Fitzgerald got lots of good sparring with Czyz and former middleweight contender James "Hard Rock" Green.

Under Parks' tutelage, Fitzgerald finished up his career with eight straight wins. He was looking at a WBO cruiserweight title shot against Johnny Nelson of England in early 2001 when a head butt incurred in sparring caused enough nerve damage to his left eye to force retirement.

Fitzgerald was devastated. Being on the outside looking in of the sport that had come to define him as a person was unbearable.

Realizing he had to keep his hand in the game, he opened up his gym a few years later. It now boasts about 120 members, most of whom are there for fitness more than actual boxing.

Because Fitzgerald is so happy to be doing what he's doing, he gives equal parts of himself to fighters like Palau and ordinary members who are just looking to stay in shape. He heads to the gym every night after finishing work at a federal correctional facility, where he plans activities for the inmates.

He is very grateful to his wife Susan, as well as his two children, Colin and Owen, who are four and two respectively, for allowing him the time to indulge in his passion.

Fitzgerald is the first to admit that if not for boxing, he would probably be an inmate himself. When he was still a youngster, his parents got divorced and he began angrily acting out.

It was only after he found boxing that he was able to contain his anger. He loved the discipline the sport required, he loved the travel it enabled him to do, and he loved the attention that it garnered him.

"If not for boxing, I know I'd be in jail," he said. "Boxing introduced me to my first trainer, Carlos Garcia. He was like a father to me. He changed my life for the better."

Not a day goes by that Fitzgerald doesn't think back to the early days. That is one of the many reasons he is so dedicated to Palau, a construction worker with a wife and four children who is battling the greatest of odds for a better life.

"I see a lot of me in him," said Fitzgerald, who also co-trains WBA junior middleweight champion Jose Antonio Rivera, another once troubled youngster from Worcester who found salvation in boxing. Rivera also held the WBA welterweight title.

Fitzgerald never traveled far from the Main South section of Worcester where he was raised. While he's not too thrilled about the outcome of the Duran and Rosenblatt fights, he still says that boxing was a blessing to him.

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If he could give back just an iota of what boxing gave him, he'd die a happy man. Still, that doesn't stop the ambivalence he often feels about the game. As much as he loves the sport of boxing, the business of boxing is a whole other animal.

"I have a love/hate relationship with boxing," said Fitzgerald. "It's been that way for a long time, ever since I turned pro. But in the end, I love it more than I hate it. That's what keeps me in it. That's what will always keep me in it."