

Ricky Hatton Lives To Fight Another Day

Written by Michael Woods
Sunday, 21 January 2007 19:00

Well, that sort of stunk, didn't it?

I was expecting a helluva lot more from the Hitman on Saturday night, and really, weren't we all? He promised that he and Juan Urango would deliver the goods and provide the punters a thrilling spectacle.

It wasn't thrilling, not even close. So how much of the fault for the pedestrian clash should be attached to Urango, who too often fought with the savage passion of a Department of Motor employee? This guy certainly didn't meet expectations, and bordered on the delusional as he raised his hands in the air repeatedly and beseeched the fans in Vegas to share in his exultation as he sleptwalk through another round.

But back to Hatton...

He hurt my feelings.

Wait, before you scroll down furiously to the bottom of the page and craft a scathing comment, branding me a megawuss, hear me out.

I love the Hitman, or should I say, I want to love the Hitman. He is the antithesis of the super-entitled, megalomaniacal, overindulged manchild that litter (and I use that term purposely) our professional sports franchises and too often set such a piss poor example for the children.

Hatton could fall into the mode of the pampered sportsman, and luxuriate rudely in his ample riches and fawning fan club. Instead, he strolls into his neighborhood pub in Manchester and downs pints and eats plates of fried food without airs. Like too many regular Joes, he overdoes the chow, and the pints, and not infrequently his motor skills at the end of the night make the stroll home a more adventurous outing than it should be. But that makes him that much more lovable, and relatable, because he is one of us. He is Everyman, even though his bank account is bulging and he'll never have to taste the numbing sameness of the 9-to-5 grind.

Hatton is someone any sports fan can admire unapologetically and any kid pugilist can aspire to be.

He could be one of boxing's best of breed, someone we with a vested interest can point to with pride as a prime example of the best the sport can boast. Talented, humble, persevering—Hatton at his best spurs gushing adjectives that make him a potent emissary for a sport that is always searching for worthy applicants in this sphere.

When Hatton promises viewers (and those three thousand hot-for-Hitman fanatics who ponied up their hard-earned cash to skip the pond and trek from Manchester to Vegas) that he and his foe would provide an enthralling 36 minutes of back-and-forth action, we took him at his word,

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because he is Everyman, the pint hoisting, Weight Watching Hitman, who is just like us, if we had a smidge more athletic talent. He seems incapable of artifice, a regular dude incapable of putting on airs.

But I have to wonder if he was in marketing mode when he said, "When you walk into a boxing ring, you hope you leave the fans with something special, and with Juan's style and mine, I don't think too many people will be falling asleep," before the Vegas debut. This was stated before he and Urango engaged in a too-huggy twelve that paled heavily in comparison to the Castillo/Ngoudjo co-feature. "I have not been in a rubbish fight in my life and this will be no exception," he promised last week, virtually offering a money back guarantee. "We will no doubt put our heads on each other's chests and knock the crap out of each other. This is the entertainment capital of the world, and I believe in entertainment. It's high on my agenda to put on a show."

It's time to recheck the agenda, Hitman, if not for me, then for the adoring Mancunians who cobbled together the cashish for the airfare and hotel stay. You've presented yourself as an entertainer, and seem to comprehend that a boxer functions as much as an entertainer as athlete if he or she wants to climb to the top of the megastar ladder. You know it, of course. I mean, being compared—even jokingly—to John Ruiz because of your propensity to hug should jolt your every body fiber and catalyze you to watch your food and drink intake between bouts.

I was pleased to see that not all UK writers (and judging by some emails I got, UK fight fans) were sipping the Kool Aid after this performance. John Rawling came out with a stern one-two, writing, "For a man who had referred to himself as 'boxing's Mr Entertainment,' Ricky Hatton looked a long way from the ultimate showman in producing a muted performance on his Las Vegas debut to outpoint the strong but limited Colombian Juan Urango..."

Owen Slot pondered what this outing really meant in the big picture when he wrote, "You can admire Hatton's guile for finding a hard path to victory, or you can question what happened to 'Mr. Entertainment' and the performance that the British challenger promised would dazzle boxing's capital city."

Slot opined that Hatton's "workrate slowed and he started throwing single punches and then falling forward into the clinch. One punch, clinch; one punch, clinch. Totally out of character, this was the staccato rhythm with which he elected to defend his clear lead."

I saw Steve Bunce called Hatton "often brilliant..." but then in the same paragraph he countered his assertion when he admitted that this performance was not "classic Hatton because the two-fisted puncher limited his work to single pops of weighted and measured punches like he has never done before." So it's not as if an adoring press corps will let Hatton pull much if any wool over Hatton's own eyes.

It was at least mildly reassuring to hear Hatton after the bout talking about a newfound respect for proper conditioning.

"I don't think my weight will increase too much this time because the fight is not too far away

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and obviously it's the kind of fight you want to stay in shape for," Hatton said postbout. "I will go away on a family cruise and relax but then it will be back in the gym to prepare for Castillo because we all know that is a massive fight for me."

Emanuel Steward took in the performance ringside, and he told TSS that he thinks Hatton earned a 'B' on the night.

"Urango was a difficult opponent to fight," Steward said. "Physically, he was a strong guy, and Hatton felt his power in the sixth with that body punch. He didn't throw a lot so Ricky couldn't counter and throw as much as he would've liked. This was a businessman's fight. He felt, let me win this one, and there will be big money in the next one."

This tactic, win now, even if you look mediocre, and live to fight another day, for more pay, depresses me. I know this is a sign of the times, that the money that is to be made in sport can render even a bloodthirsty automaton more of a bean-counter than we could think possible. Steward is no fan of the development, either.

"That happen today more," he says. "Ali, Leonard, Hearns, Hagler, they were going all the way. Then you look at Mayweather, and he just wins to keep the superfight alive. It's more business than fighting. I don't agree with it."

That said, Steward promises that the old "styles make fights" adage will ring true when Hitman Hatton and ScaleHater Castillo face off.

"You're going to have a great fight. That's what happens when you have these guys, mostly 30 and up, fighting each other. When you get the legends fighting the young guys, the young guys are so defensive minded. They've watched Castillo dropping Corrales, for instance, so Ngoudjo doesn't open up. Hatton and Castillo are going to go man to man."

Steward is almost certainly on target with that call. But I thought that was going to happen in Vegas on Saturday, and I thought it was going to happen in May against Collazo.

I don't want to believe that Ricky Hatton is more like us than not, that his eating and drinking habits truly crimp his effectiveness. I don't want to believe that Hatton is starting to emerge as more of a marketer, someone who overpromises and then underdelivers, than someone who could help to carry the sport into the next era.

SPEEDBAG It was good to see Jim Lampley on air with Larry Merchant and Emanuel Steward on Saturday night. Lampley, age 57, gave no indication that he was rattled by the domestic abuse charge thrown at him on January 3rd by a girlfriend.

The media is relentlessly effective when the aroma of scandal is in the air. If it bleeds, it leads, is the popular saying. When the HBO boxing play-by-play was accused three weeks ago, media outlets readily shared his accuser's side of the story with rich detail.

The female accuser stated that Lampley threw her to the floor of a New York restaurant several

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months ago, and that particular portion of her story certainly raised my eyebrows. I live in New York, and when a celeb sneezes, any number of gossipmongers fixate on them, and ponder publicly whether they might have a coke problem. I couldn't believe that this restaurant beef happened and it didn't get any play in the papers.

My dealings with Lampley have always been cordial, and businesslike, and I had a hard time believing that he was capable of behaving in the manner his accuser described. Now, it's looking like perhaps, just perhaps, the case against Lampley could evaporate, as authorities take a harder look at the circumstances, players and histories of the parties involved.

And if it turns out that this incident didn't take place as was described, would the retractions be featured as prominently as the scurrilous assertions? We all know the answer to that rhetorical query...