

Johnny Tapia's Old Year Resolutions

Written by Phil Woolever

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There are different ways to say goodbye. It remains a bittersweet science.

Star-crossed former champion Johnny Tapia bids farewell to the gloved up side of things with a sold out fight for the hometown Albuquerque fans Friday night at Isleta Casino against Ildo Julio, 33-10-1.

For Tapia, 55-5-2 (28), one of boxing's most popular performers of the '90s, the surroundings may be modest compared to previous highs, but the simple fact he's still on the planet, let alone set to go ten retirement bound rounds makes it a compelling, heartfelt scenario.

"I've got just one more fight and I'll be done," said Tapia, showing some mileage. "This is where I want to end my boxing career because that's where I started. I'm taking it one day at a time. The truth is I love all the people. I give all the blessing to God and also my wife for taking care of me and guiding me. I've got about four fighters that I can train and that's what I want to do after this."

Sometimes the fallout from Tapia's dramatic, deeply documented days of athletic glory and substance abuse gloom seems to envelop his eyes in relapse and redemption.

In the stabilizing ring, there's only about half an hour of scheduled action to go.

"You know what? It's hard to say a lot of things about my life," reflects Tapia, who just turned 40. "But if I'm able to reach one person or two, I did my job. That's the good thing about it (sobriety). That's really what I want to do now. My hands have been broken and what I really want is to be able to reach out to the people and tell them what I've been through, what I've done, and the blessing of the Lord I've been given.

"If I can keep somebody straight, put a smile on their face, or if I can train them and they're happy, that's a good thing. Now I'm happy. God has really blessed me he's given me everything I have today because of boxing.

"I don't know if you heard but I was San Antonio for a while, then my [mother-in-law's] kidneys went out so I live in Farmington (NM) now, there's a big dialysis center there. First of all, early in the morning I take my [six-year-old] son to school, then I come home and take my mom to dialysis. Then I come back, and train. It's a pretty simple life.

"My brother served 19 years in prison, he's a heroin addict. I told my grandmother that's the way he is. She told me he's sick, someday it might happen to you. But when I did it, it was worse.

"Every night, I tell my son: no drugs, no alcohol. I want him to go the right way. I didn't have any help. I lost my mom. I lost my father. I lost my brother. So the truth is, all that hurt, maybe I put it in the ring."

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And it paid off.

"Let me tell you something and it's the truth," continued Tapia. "Everybody that comes around me wants to give me a drink or whatever; I've got that reputation already. And that's where it's at. But if I'm always with my wife, always with my family, I'll be all right. I've got my brother Keith, I've got Pops, I've got Junior, and if something's going wrong or happening, I call them."

Back when everything seemed to matter so much that every duke out scene was an adrenaline rush and every moment of every fight needed to be absorbed, I studied Johnny Tapia before La Vida Loca was living large.

One of the earlier cards I covered was a 1989 Top Rank show featuring Michael Carbajal, Ray Mercer, and Tommy Morrison in Phoenix before 15,000 screaming, good old days fans on an ESPN special. Tapia appeared, unheralded, in an untelevised undercard eight rounder.

Tapia was considered a strong prospect, but the bout was much tougher than expected. Turns out the opponent was John Michael Johnson, who ended up earning a legitimate title and good pro run himself.

It was one of the best prelim fights I ever saw.

From the beginning, Tapia has displayed boxing's heart on his sleeve.

By some definitions, living life to the fullest must include extremely different ends of the spectrum.

Tapia has tasted the flames and soared on the wings, at all points in between. Heard the suicide spectre SWAT team pounding on a Golden Valley standoff door. Listened to a fevered crowd, like the whole city was packed into the Pit, screaming his name as if he was the greatest hometown hero in New Mexico history.

As it all came down, Tapia probably partied harder and worked out more than most characters in the history of this zany rock. A life fully lived, indeed.

Tapia maintained a spiritual side, however dysfunctional. There has always been apparent soul.

"I'd tell my fans, Johnny Tapia's clean today," said Tapia as he headed into the final pro bell. "He's trying his heart out. Yesterday is gone and tomorrow never comes. That's the way I live, so if I can just live for today, and be OK today, I'll be all right."

When you can look at every day as a blessing, the blessing comes true in itself.

That might be all you end up with, but sometimes it's really all that counts.