

## Santana Shows He's Back In A NY Groove

Written by Eric Silverstadt

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I was at the first Broadway Boxing card in April, 2004 and in the last year, DiBella Entertainment's series has been few, with one card even hitting the road to Florida.

Wednesday night's bouts at the Hammerstein Ballroom in the Manhattan Center, just west of Herald Square in the largest, civilized city in the world seemed to put promoter Lou DiBella at the crossroads. With most of his local fighters now either elevated to network performers or dropped from DBE's roster, last night's Broadway Boxing could conceivably be its swansong.

Walking into the Hammerstein last evening, the crowd was small, the place smelled musty, and the usual posse/celebrity contingent was not to be found. I could have been in a gym waiting for a sparring session to begin. However, the opening bout shook the roof from first bell to the final punch. Joselito Collado from Queens with a 1-0 record was squaring off against Vineash Runega of Manhattan, who brought a 2-8-2 record into this super bantamweight fight. A mismatch on paper, it exploded into a non-stop four rounds of action with Collado, egged on by his loud-mouth advisor (also the venue's caterer) winning a unanimous decision. A lightning start to an evening, later marked by controversy outside the ring.

Forty-two year old Ray Darden, a middleweight from Detroit, making his fourth appearance in the Manhattan Center, is a lunchpail fighter, the house opponent who arrives in shape and always gives it his all. In his 19th year of fighting professionally, Darden was robbed last night in his middleweight weight bout against Brooklyn prospect Ariel Espinal. Darden clearly took the fight to the stubborn Brooklyn kid, but all he got was a plane ticker home and a majority draw. By now, the crowd had begun to pack the joint and boos cascaded from the cheap seats.

Next into the ring was highly touted Brooklyn prospect/Golden Gloves champ, Raymond Biggs, Jr. of Brooklyn. The sleek Biggs, undefeated in seven pro fights was taking on Baton Rouge import Chris Gray, sporting a mediocre 8-6-1 record. There was nothing mediocre about this bout, aside from the judges' scoring (as in the Darden fight). Biggs was knocked down once and a second knock down was called a slip. A slip indeed as he slipped away with a split decision in the six-round junior middleweight bout. Gray gave it to Biggs, who showed plenty of polish, but was just clearly beaten on this evening. The across the board 57-56 scoring showed how close the fight was, but the local youngster got the hometown decision.

The action heated up for a junior welterweight bout featuring newly signed DBE junior welterweight, Joel Torres of Puerto Rico. He carried an 8-0 record into an eight-rounder against always tough Mike Gonzalez, now fighting out of Milwaukee. This was straight up action from the first round as Torres displayed the talent, discipline, and heart that earned him a three fight deal from DBE. Torres and Gonzalez went at each other, but in the end Gonzalez was outclassed and lost a unanimous decision. Again, the judges' scoring was questionable as one judge gave all eight rounds to Torres. He clearly deserved the win, but the scoring indicated a trend that would continue until the final fight.

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Edgar "El Chamaco" Santana of Spanish Harlem, via Puerto Rico, didn't let the judges interfere with his junior welterweight bout against the wily Grover Wiley from the Cornhusker state. Wiley who went the distance against Dmitriy Salita (who was recently dumped by DiBella), was banged around by El Chamaco. Santana, on the comeback road after his first loss in five years last spring, came into the ring in terrific shape and scored a first round knockdown. With crisp punches, improved footwork, and intensity from the opening bell, Santana threw combinations, while working the body and moving in and out against Wiley. Circling his opponent like a matador on a mission to kill the bull quickly, Santana showed none of the slow starter mentality that has occasionally marked his fights. A devastating left to the kidney put Wiley down again. The game fighter got up and with the frenzied Boiricans cheering him on, Santana ended the fight at the midway point of the third round as Wiley laid limp against the ropes.

It was a galvanizing performance by Santana, who is often dismissed by many boxing "experts" as an underling in New York City's crowded junior welterweight circuit. His manager, the charismatic Ernesto Dallas, had promised that his fighter, still peeved that Salita had turned down an HBO fight, would be smokin'. Smokin' he be and Santana should get the step-up to a network fight.

The final fight of the evening pitted Staten Island junior featherweight Gary "Kid" Stark Jr. seeking revenge against Andres Ledemsa. Ledemsa had knocked Stark out cold last May, a stunning upset that derailed Stark's rapid rise in the division. Stark took two low key fights (both wins) in Kentucky and Florida before returning home as last night's headliner.

The 28-year-old Stark, fighting with heavy beard to mask his baby face, dominated the opening two rounds, mixing body punches with head shots. "Kid" was throwing heavy leather looking for a knockout to avenge the earlier loss. Yet, the tide changed late in the third when a small mouse appeared under Stark's right eye. It was a weird mouse as there wasn't any blood but by the 5th stanza, Stark's eye ballooned to the size of a small plum. Ledemsa kept banging at it and won the middle rounds as his quick footwork and stick and jab technique kept Stark, who now appeared desperate, at bay.

I was watching Stark's father, Gary Stark Sr. The trainer and all around corner guy, curiously removed himself from the ring after the 6th round. In an exclusive interview to [thesweetscience.com](http://thesweetscience.com) this morning, Stark revealed he let Andre Rozier take over ring instructions. By the 7th round, the ring doctors were examining the eye and Stark Sr. was now completely out of the ring, hanging by the ring post.

"The father in me was thinking about stopping the fight, but we all know "Kid" has the heart of a warrior and I couldn't do it," the father said. The eighth round began with Stark's first attempt to recapture the fight's momentum and he dominated until Ledemsa caught him with a left directly on the eye, thirty seconds before round's end. The ring doctor was overheard saying "he may catch him" indicating that Stark's eye may have looked awful, but the doctor believed Stark would be taking Ledemsa out shortly.

Thus, we had a doctor acting as a corner man and the fight continued. The last two rounds were won by Stark who came forward constantly throwing everything he had left in him.

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When it was announced he won a unanimous decision, more than a few boos were heard, especially when one judge had it 97-93. Thesweetscience had it 5-4-1 for Stark and that may have generous as Ledemsa appeared unhurt and quite healthy at the final bell. Ledemsa's cutman, the quotable Danny Milano, told me that "the New York State judges saw all the fights that night with thick glasses," obviously referencing some of the questionable earlier decisions.

Yet, some startling news was revealed to thesweetscience in a phone call to Gary Stark Sr. "Kid" Stark's mouse was more than a swollen eye. The inadvertent elbow from Ledemsa not only opened a cut that required 21 stitches after the fight, but "Kid" sustained fractures to both his right cheek bone and right orbital socket. This was stunning news and shed some light on Stark's disappearance in the middle rounds. Yet, it also shined a bigger light on "Kid" fighting through these fractures, giving everything he had until the final bell.

It's a shame that Ledemsa isn't a more high profile fighter with a bigger promoter and a better record(14-8-1), as a third fight would be real interesting between the two. Yet, I doubt neither "Kid" Stark nor his promoter, Lou DiBella want to see anymore of Andres Ledemsa.