

Margarito's Beatdown Made Me A Believer

Written by John Nguyen

Saturday, 12 April 2008 19:00

A few months back, when the fight schedule for April 12 was announced, I circled the date on my calendar. I made a promise to myself that, on that evening, I would be planted directly in front of my television, cheeks squarely in the well-worn grooves of my couch, thanking God that such a thing as DVR exists so I wouldn't have to choose between HBO and Showtime's dueling fight cards.

It's not often that I can shoot down my wife's social agenda with a husband veto (I'm smart enough to pick my spots wisely), but veto I did. Though the evening brought some some surprises, disappointments, and numerous, vocal complaints from my beautiful wife (who knows, she might read this), I was glad I'd committed myself to the night of fisticuffs.

For what it's worth, here are some thoughts from a night of intriguing fights:

Glen Johnson vs. Chad Dawson

For me, this was the pleasant surprise of the night, though the fight itself didn't really bring any real clarity to the division. I expected a reasonably violent encounter, with Johnson pressing in the only way he knows, but I figured Dawson's youth and athleticism would be enough for a win. Essentially, that's what happened, but the conclusion was not as definitive as anybody would have liked.

Honestly, I've always held out on jumping on the "Bad" Chad bandwagon. Sure, he's got all the physical assets needed to be dominant, but he's always had an unpolished quality that made me wonder. Along with being a little raw, he has frequent defensive lapses, as well as a chin that raises some eyebrows. His title winning effort against Tomasz Adamek was impressive, but getting knocked down and almost out late in the fight just added more evidence to the case against Dawson.

Against Johnson, Dawson may not have silenced critics on the issue of his chin or defense, but you have to love the heart the kid showed. Yes, he waded on the inside unnecessarily during extended moments, giving Johnson his only chance for victory, but when Johnson finally tracked him down and hurt him, Dawson resolutely refused to go down. He held when he had to, used his bicycle to pedal out of trouble, and, most impressively, fired back some heavy artillery to show that he had gumption to go with his physical talents. Maybe this is the type of trial by fire he needs to improve as a fighter.

As for Glen Johnson, if you don't love this guy, you just don't love boxing. He's an endangered species in the fight game: a guy who will fight anybody, anywhere, anytime, and give his opponent an evening of pure hell in the process. He learned the game the hard way, and became a hard man in the process. He ate some serious shots from Dawson and didn't come close to slowing down. Johnson has serious claim to the title of toughest dude in the fight game, as well as one of the most underrated fighters of this era.

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In the end, it came down to the younger man doing just a little more in the middle rounds to seal the deal. No issues with Dawson getting the decision, but I'm not sure about the 116-112 margins by which he got it. Regardless, it was a great fight that, to me at least, was unexpected.

Antonio Tarver vs. Clinton Woods

This fight brought both surprise and disappointment for me. The surprise was not so much that Tarver won, but more the way that he won. He showed more movement, energy, and purpose than he had since defeating Glen Johnson in June 2005. Kudos to Tarver for committing himself toward making one last charge at age 39, since as of late, he had been much more bark than bite.

The disappointment came in Clinton Woods' uninspired performance. Gone was the spirit he showed in his efforts against Johnson, Roy Jones, and Julio Gonzalez. The winning formula for Woods was to pressure Tarver and see how many miles Tarver had left on his engine. The problem for Woods was this pressure could only apply this pressure sporadically, while otherwise aimlessly waiting on the outside. Perhaps it was nagging injuries, perhaps it was the magnitude of the fight, or perhaps it was simply Tarver's peppering punches, but the bottom line is that Woods will likely rue this missed opportunity for the rest of his career.

Where this puts Tarver in the light heavyweight mix is unclear due to the fact he didn't beat a full-throttle Woods, but at least he can still be considered as an elite light heavyweight, something that was in question going into the fight. A matchup against Dawson, Johnson, or the Hopkins/Calzaghe winner will prove decisively if Tarver still has what it takes to reign atop the division.

Antonio Margarito vs. Kermit Cintron

I'll be honest, I watched this one with a little more interest than the others. Not only did it promise to offer the best chances for a firefight, but it was the only fight for which I had offered a prediction. During my series on the March Madness Welterweight Tourney, I made an admittedly bold prediction that Cintron would score the upset over Margarito, a prediction that, now, would suggest I had dropped acid prior to writing it.

Allow me to indulge a bit to justify why I wrongly chose Cintron:

1. I figured that, under the tutelage of Manny Steward, Cintron would make it a point to keep Margarito at the end of his jab, creating room for his long-range bombs.
2. I believed that the slow starts Margarito showed against Santos, Clottey, and Williams would again prove problematic.
3. I thought that Margarito's penchant for eating clean right hands could spell trouble against Cintron, a murderous right hand puncher.

I thought wrong. Very wrong. What can I say? My bad.

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Even with all of the above mentioned scenarios playing out, it was still a risky pick to go with Cintron. Seeing as how none of these things happened, the result was, not surprisingly, a wipeout for Margarito. After a reasonably successful first round utilizing the jab and keeping Margarito at workable range, Cintron slowly fell apart. As soon as Margarito got inside, the fight was effectively over. You just got the feeling that Cintron did not possess the resources to re-establish himself on the outside, especially not against a version of Margarito that had fistic homicide on his mind. Gradually, the fight began to look a lot like their 2005 encounter. Margarito's unrelenting assault bordered on maniacal at times (the shot of him screaming at a downed Cintron to get up was one of the more unsettling images I've seen in a while).

In hindsight, Cintron showed that he certainly had more tools at his disposal this time around, but the same tendencies to wane in the face of warfare surfaced again, as he looked to the ref to intervene when things got a uncomfortable. In all fairness to Cintron, though, the body shot that crumpled him would have dropped any welterweight out there. He was well on his way to defeat, but that left hook hastened matters greatly.

Turning to the victor, Margarito produced perhaps his most impressive performance to date. Truthfully, I've always been reluctant to accept Margarito as the goods. His inconsistent, unimpressive performances against his top tier opponents did little to convince me, nor were his blowouts of lower-level opposition particularly good arguments. However, this beatdown of Cintron made me a believer. Granted, Cintron is tailor-made for Margarito, but the savagery of Margarito's performance is one not often seen. Like Glen Johnson, Margarito is one of the last badasses walking the boxing landscape. He's simply a no-nonsense fighter who understands boxing is the hurt business, and for him, business is very good indeed.

Alfonso Gomez vs. Miguel Cotto

For me, this was the disappointment of the night. While I expected Cotto to wear Gomez out, I expected this to fall into the category of noncompetitive, yet entertaining. Maybe I, along with many boxing insiders, gave Gomez too much credit for his recent form. Maybe Cotto simply got an added dose of confidence from his wins over Judah and Mosley. Whatever "maybes" we can dream up, the reality was that this wasn't even close.

The thing I found most surprising was how quickly Gomez folded in the face of Cotto's attack. Make no mistake, Cotto was in rare form, firing on all cylinders, but I thought Gomez' experience against bigger fighters would allow him to absorb the punishment, for a little while at least. That was clearly not the case.

It's hard to deduce much about Cotto from this performance, since he so thoroughly outclassed Gomez. Instead, it is far more intriguing to look ahead at the potential July barnburner between Cotto and Margarito. While so much of the talk in the welterweight division has focused on a potential Mayweather-Cotto match, Margarito-Cotto is in an entirely different league when it comes to sheer entertainment value. After Saturday night's display by Margarito, it also brings a high level of competitive suspense along with it.

I'll go on record right now as saying I probably won't offer much of a prediction for that one, as

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to me, it's a toss up fight. For now, I'll just circle July 26 on my calendar, and hope for the boxing gods to smile on us once more and bring this fight to fruition. If the fight gets made, I'll try to work up the nerve for another husband veto.

What was that, honey? Sure, I'll rub your feet...