

Of All The Hair Brained Schemes...

Written by Ron Borges
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Paulie Malignaggi shaved his head Tuesday. Better late than never.

Three days after the IBF junior welterweight champion half-blinded himself with hair extensions Bob Marley would have been proud of during his fight with Lovemore N'dou last weekend, Malignaggi rid himself of the problem by ridding himself of every hair on his head. Loyal cornerman Danny Milano probably saved his career by unevenly clipping off the tresses that were constantly in his fighter's eyes and thus allowing N'dou to hammer him far more effectively than might otherwise have been the case, and the fighter finished the job days later.

Milano's quick thinking came after Malignaggi's promoter, Lou DiBella, had gone berserk when he first saw his fighter's latest hair-do.

"We had an argument on Wednesday about it," DiBella said of the week before Malignaggi barely escaped with his title after winning a split decision that caused at least some to wonder if Malignaggi's hair had blinded judge Phil Edwards (who saw it 115-114 N'dou) more than it had himself. "I explained it was an idiotic idea and it would get him in trouble. If you're a kid who feints a lot, like Paulie, and your hair is flying all over what will the judges think? Some of them will think he's getting hit when he isn't.

"They couldn't keep it tied up and even when they taped it down with all the sweat and water the tape came off and it was in his eyes again. I finally ran to the corner to tell them to cut the damn hair off but Danny was already doing it.

"The kid feels like an ass now but he survived and he won with a broken hand. He made the fight much harder than it had to be. It was one of the more bizarre evenings I've had in boxing. When I asked him what he was thinking later he told me he thought the hair extensions looked good. He paid a price for it big time. His hair is all over the place, he couldn't see anything and it created a problem. Put it this way, when Milano started cutting his hair in the corner he didn't complain. Then, BOOM, his hand breaks."

The latter is the real long term problem for Malignaggi, who had his oft-injured right hand surgically repaired for the fourth time on Wednesday by noted Boston-based hand surgeon Dr. Stephen Margles. The last time Margles worked on Malignaggi's hand he fused some bones together after removing some pins that were actually causing more problems than they solved and his work held up for five fights, including Malignaggi's title victory and his courageous performance in defeat against Miguel Cotto.

But that hand deserted him again against N'dou when he struck his challenger on the elbow midway through the fight. Although DiBella didn't notice it at first, Oscar De La Hoya was sitting next to DiBella and told him immediately his fighter was hurt.

"Oscar said N'dou had his arms crossed in a defensive position and Paulie's right hand hit him

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in the elbow and he saw Paulie wince,” DiBella said. “Between the hand and the hair it was ridiculous. Paulie says to me later, ‘It was a hairy situation, Lou.’ That’s why I love the kid. He did something stupid and he couldn’t see for crap because of it but he’s got courage.”

Although no one can be totally sure yet, Margles has assured both Malignaggi and DiBella that the IBF champion will be fit and ready in time for an already planned showdown with RING magazine junior welterweight titleholder Ricky Hatton. Hitman raised more questions about his future than he answered in the main event of the card that co-featured Malignaggi, when he won 10 of 12 rounds against Juan Lazcano, but came out of the fight with his face so bruised and battered after nearly being stopped in the 10th round by the light hitting former lightweight champion that his future seems in doubt, just one fight removed from having been stopped by welterweight champion Floyd Mayweather, Jr.

The plan was for Malignaggi and Hatton to look spectacular in front of a crowd of over 57,000 at City of Manchester Stadium in England, thus setting up a showdown between the flashy American and the hard-punching and wildly popular Brit. Instead they got hairy situations for both, literally for Malignaggi and figuratively for Hatton.

Assuming the plate that was put into Malignaggi’s hand allows him to heal properly, the belief in all corners is that the fight will still come off as planned, but when you have been forced to fight one-handed as often as Malignaggi has there will be ample cause for concern.

“This is the fifth or sixth time he’s hurt his hand,” DiBella said. “It’s a remarkable situation what he’s been able to accomplish despite those injuries. His hand will never be what a normal person’s is. Actually, his career has been saved by the fact he’s not a puncher. If he was a puncher he’d have no career by now.”

Malignaggi (25-1, 5 KO) has often been seen as suspect because of his lack of punching power. He has won consistently on speed and rare boxing ability in a sport where such attributes can often be negated by strength and power. That is why Cotto was able to beat him, but that night is also when Malignaggi showed the level of his skills, coming back from early trouble while absorbing severe punishment to box his way into both the fight and the hearts of everyone who watched him that night.

In the end he was battered and overwhelmed but he was still standing at the end, the winner not of a fight but of the respect of Cotto, who many believe may prove to be the best welterweight in the world when all is said and done.

Hatton does not have the skills or the strength of Cotto but he is equally relentless and a hard puncher who has 31 knockouts among his 44 victories, with his only loss coming last December when Mayweather stopped him in the 10th round of what became a one-sided beating.

He is still considered the best junior welterweight in the world but that reputation suffered a bruising equal to the one his face sustained from Lazcano (37-5-1, 27KO), who was challenging Hatton after a layoff of more than a year since his loss to Vivian Harris.

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Although it was expected Lazcano might cause Hatton some difficulties, nobody expected what they saw in round 10, when Hatton was badly hurt and seemed on his way to the floor when referee Howard John Foster stepped in and stopped the action to allow Hatton to tie his shoes. Had he not, Hatton's face seemed likely to be lying next to his shoes after a few more punches, but after the inordinately long break, his head was again clear and he coasted on to victory.

So what seems likely to be the case in November if Malignaggi's hand is healed enough for him to fight, is that a fading Hatton will face a now more physically flawed Malignaggi at Madison Square Garden. Hatton at his best would be a clear favorite but after the loss to Mayweather and his struggles with Lazcano, DiBella and a lot of other people believe a freshly shorn and bionically fit Malignaggi may prove to be more than he expects, if not more than he can handle.

"Six months is a long time to go between fights but in this case it's a blessing," DiBella said. "Hatton is relentless. He's an honest fighter. He gives you 110 per cent of what he has but I think you could see against Lazcano that he's beatable. The most difficult style for Ricky is Paulie's.

"If you just want to go in there and stand and war with Hatton it's perfect for him. Paulie won't do that. His movement and his boxing skills will be a problem for Hatton.

"Paulie would prefer fighting in the U.S. but it's up to Ricky Hatton. We acknowledge Ricky's status as the money fighter so if he wants us to go to the UK we will but I think the most lucrative fight is in the U.S.

"I give the kid his props. He's a rock star in the UK. But he didn't do that by being the best pound-for-pound boxer in the world."

He did it by beating people down and often paying a price for it, a price that may have begun to take its toll on Hatton at 29. Paulie Malignaggi has paid a different sort of price for the success he's achieved, one that has left his right hand mangled and repaired more times than an old jalopy.

But if it holds up six months from now you can count on two things – Paulie Malignaggi will extend Ricky Hatton farther than the Brit would like and he won't be extending his hair one inch beyond his scalp when he does it.