

Gulf Coast Up From Standing Eight

Written by Bernard Fernandez

Wednesday, 14 January 2009 19:00

When you stop and think about it, certain geographical regions of this country are a lot like the toughest, most resilient fighters. You can knock them down, beat them silly, and yet they keep coming forward. They are, in a word, indomitable.

In terms of the panoramic picture of the Mississippi Gulf Coast's ongoing recovery from 2005's Hurricane Katrina, the worst natural disaster ever to hit these United States, Saturday night's HBO's "Boxing After Dark" telecast of the defense by WBC welterweight champion Andre Berto (23-0, 19 KOs) against Luis Collazo (29-3, 14 KOs) is no big deal. It's strictly a made-for-TV production, a single bout to be staged in a side room at the restored (at a cost of \$550 million) Beau Rivage Resort Casino in Biloxi.

But the mere fact that a world title fight is coming to an area that has known more than its fair share of death and destruction is a microcosm of what Biloxi, and the other 10 communities along the Mississippi Gulf Coast, are all about. If you were to compare those gleaming casino resorts that rose from the ashes – or, more accurately, from the receded floodwaters of Katrina -- to an actual boxer, the names that might come to mind are never-say-die scrappers Matthew Saad Muhammad and Arturo Gatti.

HBO, which loves to provide its viewers with the perspective of back stories, is almost certain to frame Berto-Collazo within the context of a Biloxi that just 3½ years ago looked like a war zone. Think Berlin, 1945.

You want stories of miraculous recoveries? How about the fact that the opulent Beau Rivage, built on floating barges at the juncture where the Gulf of Mexico meets land, opened exactly one year after Katrina laid waste to it and pretty much the rest of Biloxi's prime shoreline real-estate. It was almost as if the town's citizens answered the knockdown blow they had received with a furious assault of their own. Go ahead, Mother Nature. Hit us with your best shot. We can take it, although we'd rather not have to. Haven't you learned by now? Like that old wristwatch commercial, we can take a licking and keep on ticking.

Lou DiBella, who promotes Berto, recalls coming to the area as a senior vice president of HBO Sports for the April 25, 1998, matchup of Roy Jones Jr. and Virgil Hill at the Mississippi Gulf Coast Coliseum in nearby Gulfport. Even then, nearly 29 years after a more compact but even more powerful hurricane, Camille, nearly obliterated the region from the face of the earth, there was evidence that not all of the scars upon the land had been fully healed.

Katrina, in effect, was like the delayed payoff of a 1-2 combination from a power puncher, the devastating overhand right that followed Camille's jolting jab.

"The fact that the Beau Rivage is beautiful and up and renovated and is hosting a title fight on HBO, that's a very good symbol," DiBella said. "It shows that life is going on down there post-Katrina."

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Vincent Creel is the public information officer for the City of Biloxi and he said such signs are popping up all over, like daffodils in the spring. He said he isn't the most astute fight fan, but he does know his history. Don King staged a show at the Beau Rivage on Sept. 13 of last year, in which Timothy Bradley defended his WBC super lightweight title on a rousing unanimous decision over Edner Cherry, and the Gulf Coast's rich tapestry of boxing dates back to 1881, when John L. Sullivan slugged it out with Paddy Ryan in Mississippi City.

Since casino gaming invigorated the region in 1992, much as it did for Atlantic City beginning in 1978, Biloxi and other Gulf Coast communities are far less likely to be dealt a mortal blow from a soft economy or killer hurricanes.

"What the return of these casino-resorts meant to us was people going back to work," Creel said. "Prior to Katrina, the casinos employed 15,000 people. These are full-time, salaried employees; the total doesn't even count the supply houses and the restaurants in the area that benefit from visitors coming in. During the rebuilding, that number shot up to 17,000. It's down to 12,000 now, in part because of the economy, but it's rising.

"After a year, all of the casinos were back up and running. The first one opened in December 2005. Two others came on-line by the beginning of 2006. And you know what? We did more gaming revenue in 2007 than we had ever done. Casinos grossed more than \$1 billion that year, and that was just in Biloxi."

In essence, the casinos – some of which have sought to make big-time boxing a staple of the entertainment experience they provide patrons – accomplished more in a relative short period of time than was achieved in the decades that preceded it.

"Some people will tell you – with a degree of accuracy, I might add – that Biloxi and the Gulf Coast did not fully recover from Hurricane Camile in 1969 until casino gaming was legalized in 1992," Creel said.

No wonder Gulf Coast residents, at least those who don't equate slot machines and blackjack with the evils posed by demon rum and painted hussies, offer daily thanks for gambling palaces and, one supposes, the fights that were and are subsequently lured to the area.

"Even Nostradamus could not have predicted what the gaming industry has done for us," Creel said.

Berto, in his own way, is reflective of the power of determination and redemption. He has his own Mississippi story to tell, and his appearance at the Beau Rivage is something of a homecoming.

The son of Haitian-American parents, Berto was born in Miami and he resides in Winter Haven, Fla. He ventured to the casino town of Tunica, Miss., about 30 miles south of Memphis, in 2004 to try to earn a spot on the United States Olympic boxing team that would compete in Athens, Greece, later in the year.

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Heavily favored in his weight class, Berto – a two-time National Golden Gloves champion, two-time National Police Athletic League champion and three times a U.S. Amateur championship medalist – was winning his bout with Andre McPherson, at least what little of it that actually transpired, when he threw McPherson to the canvas late in the first round.

Berto was disqualified for having committed the flagrant foul and, just like that, one of America's best hopes for an Olympic boxing medal saw his dream dashed before it had much of a chance to even take shape.

Fortunately for Berto, his heritage allowed him to make it to Athens on the Haitian team. Because of his pro-influenced style he didn't medal, but his disappointment proved short-lived.

"Interestingly, I don't think (not making the U.S. team or getting a medal) cost him very much because he's got a world title and has been paid better than the gold medalist for the American team, Andre Ward," DiBella noted. "If you gauged worldwide interest, I think Berto's recognition is greater than Ward's.

"And Berto's style – whether he fought for Haiti, America, Great Britain, Ireland or whomever – is so pro, with an emphasis on hard shots and a lot of body work, is not the style to score a lot of points in international amateur boxing."

DiBella believes that Berto, just 25, has a chance to evolve into the sort of star attraction to keep interest in boxing alive after the familiar but aging names finally fade from view.

"I think he's one of them," DiBella said of Berto's potential to fill the charismatic void that is sure to come when the old standbys exit. "And by the way, we'd better stop looking to the old guys or we're going to have no fans left. We are not developing the next generation of boxing fans. This idea that a sport that's fading domestically should concentrate heavily on foreign fighters and guys that are totally at the tail end of their careers is preposterous.

"It's one of the reasons I'm not a big proponent of the Paul Williams-Winky Wright fight. You have Paul Williams again extending himself to fight a bigger guy, but an old guy who should frankly be gone and nobody really cares about anyway. And as great as Bernard Hopkins is, he's 44 bleeping years old. His beating Kelly Pavlik didn't do anything positive for the sport. What we need to do is build young stars."

DiBella said HBO, whose stable of fighters is graying like the populace of a Florida retirement community, has the clout to again develop a farm system of up-and-coming attractions.

"Arturo Gatti was never one of the big pound-for-pound guys, but he was tremendously exciting," DiBella noted. "He was, in essence, a made-for-HBO star. HBO built him. How many 'Boxing After Dark' appearances did Gatti make? Enough so that he broke through to become bigger than he otherwise would have been.

"Marco Antonio Barrera, Erik Morales, Junior Jones, Naseem Hamed, Kevin Kelly – that whole slew of little fighters got giant paydays, and now Manny Pacquiao has jumped ahead of where

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any of those guys were. So don't tell me it can't be done, and don't tell me that Berto can't become one of those have-to-see fighters."

If there is a difference between Berto and Biloxi, it's that Berto, disappointed though he might have been by his Tunica misadventure, is undefeated. Biloxi knows defeat, and how. But it also knows about fighting back, about spitting into the eye of adversity.

Camille, the second of three catastrophic Category 5 hurricanes to make landfall in the U.S. in the 20th century, blew into the Gulf Coast near Bay St. Louis, Miss., on Aug. 17, 1969, packing sustained winds of 190 mph and a storm surge of 24 feet. By the time it moved out of the area, it left in its wake 259 dead and \$1.42 billion in property damage which, adjusted for inflation, would be \$21.2 billion today. It was the second-strongest hurricane in recorded history, behind only the Florida Keys Labor Day Hurricane of 1935.

Katrina was less powerful than Camille – it was "just" a Category 3 when it made landfall near Buras, La., on Aug. 29, 2005 – but it was considerably wider, doing damage from Texas to Florida. Most notably, it submerged large tracts of New Orleans as the fragile levee system constructed to protect the below-sea-level city was breached in 53 places.

Most Americans, when they think of Katrina, recall the misery of the people trapped inside the Louisiana Superdome or the Ernest Morial Convention Center. The prevailing images are those of the ruined Lower Ninth Ward, hammered home by a Spike Lee documentary that was televised by HBO.

Only 80 miles to the East, the Mississippi Gulf Coast took a less-obvious and not-quite-direct hit, which is not to say it escaped major destruction.

"A number of people were killed here by Katrina because they refused to believe any hurricane could be as bad as Camille," Creel said. "That was a fatalistic attitude; 53 died here in Biloxi alone. Had the storm hit during the night, we would have lost 10 times that many, and maybe more.

"We took a backseat to New Orleans because the story in New Orleans had every bell and whistle you could imagine. It was an absolute train wreck. There were so many failures of governmental agencies. Over here, we didn't have a lot of those issues. We also are not below sea level."

What Biloxi did have was debris, so much of it that, if placed in an area the width of six football fields, it would have risen the height of a 200-story building.

"And that's just in the City of Biloxi," Creel said. "But it's like our governor (Haley Barbour) likes to say. We got knocked down, got back up, hitched up our britches and went to work rebuilding."

Again with the boxing references, but they do seem to apply, don't they?

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Perhaps a more fitting quotation to describe the latest rebirth of the Gulf Coast comes from the late Nobel Prize winner for literature, William Faulkner, a Mississippi native who understood the depths to which mankind can sink, and the heights to which it can ascend.

“Man will not only endure, but he will prevail,” Faulkner wrote.

Amen to that.