June 28, 2009. The Cappiello Brothers Boxing and Fitness Gym, located in downtown Brockton is where promoters Rich and Mike Cappiello make their headquarters. Together they provide the backbone of boxing in Massachusetts. It can't be easy. In these parts, the Sweet Science has been given a standing eight for decades now, but the Cappiellos are proving themselves to be great corner men with an endless supply of smelling salts -and their shows aren't bad either. There's a rock in their lineage which may explain their dedication: the Cappiellos are cousins to the Marcianos. "The Showdown at Early Sunset" was hosted at the Roxy, a nightclub located in Boston's theatre district across the street from the Wang Center, where less sincere spectacles are presented for more than the $40 charged here.

I took my seat a half-hour before fight time. Goody Petronelli went strolling by with a spit bucket. I silently saluted him. Soon the joint was filled from purple wall to purple wall. It was a young crowd, so it got loud. Someone evidently thought it should be louder still because death metal started blaring over the speakers. The chairs were rattling, as was the cochlea of my inner ear.

Philadelphia's Frankie Trader began the night's mayhem against unheralded Geraldo Alarcon of Veracruz, Mexico. Both men are twenty-three years old and both had a "4" and a "0" on their respective records, though Alarcon's "0" comes first in the listing. Trader came sliding out of his corner to showcase his progress as a stylist –he relies on his legs, spins off of left hooks when cornered, and uses elegant combinations. He had the same look on his face as you'd find on a phlebotomist at the nearby Tufts Medical Center. Alarcon was game, but he was a slip late and a jab short until his efforts were arrested when the bout was stopped on cuts in the fourth round. The phlebotomist was jubilant.

This is a common response of victorious boxers, this jubilation. It is not something we see much of in a society that has become well-fed and jaded. And why would we? Progress has seen the government knit giant pillows to cushion our every fall –except for the six foot one. Expressions of uninhibited joy are reserved for those who had everything to lose but didn't, it is found among those who know famine and see a feast, or who felt the touch of the Reaper and emerged unscathed. We watch the victorious boxer leap or cry for joy and vicariously share it from our seats. Sometimes we see a battered journeyman transform himself into a conqueror, or a great champion grasp a glory reserved for gods. Sometimes we may even get goose bumps.

Death has touched us collectively lately; perhaps the small victories at the Roxy were more poignant because of that. Michael Jackson's music has been playing all over the city of Boston since his death Thursday. When thirty-four year old heavyweight Phil "Killah" Miller danced into the ring, Jackson's falsetto accompanied him. Miller skipped merrily around celebrating life and contemplating concussions, and then with a flourish straight from the "Smooth Criminal" video, he spun his sweaty fedora hat into the crowd. The crowd ducked. Miller fought with his hands at waist-length and leaned back as if he were a heavyweight from 1910. Bald, with a belly like a witch's brew, his stance looked less like Jack Johnson's and more like James Earl Jones' portrayal of Jack Johnson in the film "The Great White Hope". Miller's punch of choice was an

overhand right, which suggested to me that he was restless to end the fight and recommence his authentic self –a dancing machine here to rock with us. His opponent was the unrated Steve “Jigsaw” Jaeger. Jaeger looked willing, but spent four rounds grinding his teeth until Miller mounted an attack. When that happened, Jigsaw would come apart –barreling forward with wildly swinging arms. Miller won a majority decision. At fight’s end, “Don’t Stop til You Get Enough” went blaring again and the victor moon-walked across the ring, gyrated like an unemployable stripper, and proved that his sedated performance in the fight was only to conserve energy for the entertainment.

Another heavyweight bout followed between Rashad Minor (1-1) and Lewis Cotuna (0-0). It was a wild affair until Minor caught Blackwell with a winging left hook; Blackwell fell over with the rigidity of a telephone pole struck by lightning. If there were any abolitionists in the crowd, this was a fight for the file. Boxing purists can also point to it and argue strenuously that professionals, particularly in the heavyweight division where the danger is greater, should not be licensed until they develop a defense with fewer holes than a sieve.

The Russian Andre Nevsky demonstrated real promise as a future mechanic against Philadelphian Roberto Burgess. Both were southpaws though the similarities ended there. Nevsky was loose. Burgess was tight. Nevsky got low and hit the body; Burgess aimed for the head and missed. Nevsky threw combinations on the move; Burgess threw single digits and was stationary. During the first round, a rotund corner man pranced around at ringside chanting “U-S-A, U-S-A!” Nevsky, though entering the ring with a Russian flag unfurled, resides in Clinton, MA. So no one joined the chant; no one, that is, except for a well-lubricated fellow fat man in the fourth row who could barely stand up to show his camaraderie. In the fifth, Nevsky landed a straight left, which hurt. Then he landed four right hooks, which hurt more. Finally, a right hook, left cross combination and the tension left Burgess all at once as he collapsed to the canvas. He got up because Philadelphians never lay down for long. Even their beds are vertical. He got up, but gravity and gravitas in the form of a right hook sent him down again. A towel sailed in. The Russian flag waved triumphant. The Philadelphian got up.

Light middleweights Derek Silveira and Petronelli-trained Antonio Chaves-Fernandez fought a frenetic four rounds with chins up in the air and enthusiastic, though unleveraged shots peculiar to beginners. “Irish” Danny O’Connor, 7-0, arrived like Michael Collins to an IRA rally. O’Connor, a welterweight and southpaw, has a fighting style that is difficult to draw a bead on. He sways to and fro, though not for leverage so much as positioning. He sneaks shots between and around his opponent's guard from the back foot. Canadian Sebastian Hamel (10-20) seemed to have an epiphany during the last twenty-five seconds of the bout, suddenly realizing that O’Connor’s shots didn’t hurt, and so came on royally. It was too little, too late.

The main event was intended to showcase the return of Mike “Machine Gun” Oliver (21-2) who was outgunned in his last two outings and stopped. Oliver, pinned to the ropes by Castulo Gonzalez (9-8) in round two, threw so many punches that I lost count of the rat-a-tat-tats. Castulo did what the old-timers say you should do when you’re dealing with a rapid-fire stylist –make it a dog fight. Unfortunately for Gonzalez, the likelihood of injury increases in dog fights, and he sustained a cut over his right eye. The bout was declared a “no decision” after the cut was ruled the result of an unintentional headbutt at 1:43 of the second round. Oliver swore that

his right hand did the damage.

Two middleweights consecrated the evening and winked at Michael Jackson with a three round Thriller. After this his second bout since the KO loss to Arthur Abraham in Germany, Elvin Ayala (20-3) paused during his post-fight interview and thoughtfully offered that “boxing …is a lifestyle”. Eddie Caminero (5-2) put Ayala to the test. True to his nickname, he dispensed thunder on loan from Thor from the opening bell. The presence of Micky Ward in his corner proved symbolic.

To the roaring crowd it appeared to be a brawl, but they were only half right. The more experienced Ayala was punching hard and often, but with more purpose. Maneuvering behind a mid-range jab, he was investing in the future with body shots. Caminero fought like it was personal, like there’s no such thing as tomorrow or the next round. He’s a hedonist living for the moment. In the second, he proved himself an anarchist too when he nailed Ayala low. The brief respite following that seemed to have been just what Caminero needed to shelve dubious doctrines and take up geometry. Suddenly there’s the hope of Lawrence, MA using angles and delivering short shots to the ribs. Ayala even took a wicked left hook that sent his head halfway down his left arm.

Alas, the rally didn’t last and the rear ends from Lawrence were planted in chairs again while Ayala demonstrated how a well-timed jab can tame any beast, wild or not.

In the third, Caminero went down from a right uppercut. He got up. A left hook, right hand deposited him back to the canvas and the referee stopped the fight. He got up and went down again. He got up again. I couldn’t help but notice that even as his legs gave way, the fire in his eyes said something else. Ayala saw the same thing: “He’s game. He’s a strong guy.” The problem as the victor saw it was that he “tried too hard.” Eddie cut right to the chase: “My balls are too big for my own good.”

Elvin Ayala is now gunning for John Duddy. After that he’s looking for middleweight champion Kelly Pavlik and an eventual rematch with Arthur Abraham. The traffic light on his road back turned green at the Roxy.

But what’s next for the vanquished?

Whenever a new pugilist like Eddie Caminero suffers a knockout, the question is always the same: Can he come back from it? It is a question that probes the mystery of that individual, a mystery that he answers under the garish spotlight of a boxing ring when he is under fire again and his body screams surrender. It looks good for Caminero. His approach to boxing between the ears exceeds his approach between the ropes. For him, it’s therapeutic: “If I have a bad day at work, I come in the gym and take it out on someone, and I don’t get arrested.” He stands straight and looks his interrogators in the eye, accepting his knockout loss as a byproduct of his style. There is no apology, no shame in his parting words:

“It’s a learning experience. I gotta keep myself tighter.”

Such is the truth of optimism. Eddie goes down, he gets up. He won't allow a foot to get stuck in the mud of past misfortune like so many –he's looking forward. He will take the experience for what it is, put it in his gym bag, and continue on. Echoes of Theodore Roethke's "The Waking" go with him:

This shaking keeps me steady. I should know.
What falls away is always. And is near…
I learn by going where I have to go……

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