

Donaire Finally Standing Tall After Sitdown Strike

Written by Bernard Fernandez
Monday, 13 July 2009 19:00

As acts of civil disobedience go, the sit-down strike by brothers Nonito and Glenn Donaire at the 2000 U.S. Olympic Boxing Trials in Tampa isn't quite on a par with Rosa Parks' refusal to give up her seat to a white man on that bus in Montgomery, Ala., in 1955.

When it happened 9½ years ago, I compared the Donaaires' protest against the frequently unfathomable politics of USA Boxing – their father, Nonito Sr., coach Robert Salinas and family friend Jaquin Gallardo also plopped themselves down in the center of the ring in a five-minute show of defiance – to the scene in Animal House when the Delta frat boys learn they've been expelled from Faber College.

"I think this situation absolutely requires a really futile and stupid gesture to be done on somebody's part," Otter says.

"And we're just the guys to do it," Bluto responds.

Perhaps, if the Tampa Five had ultimately succeeded in their quest, as did Parks and other seminal figures of the civil rights movement did in theirs, the status of Olympic-style boxing in the United States would have taken a dramatic turn for the better. But the way the real world is, some things are capable of being changed and some apparently aren't. It's all a matter of recognizing which crusades are winnable and thus worth the expenditure of a would-be activist's time and energy.

To wit, a black man now occupies the White House. But amateur boxing in this country remains an unwieldy mess; America now produces Olympic medalists in the ring about as frequently as most people find endangered snail darters in their bathwater, and USA Boxing is again in turmoil after the entire five-person marketing and communications department was dismissed following the recent U.S. Championships in Denver.

Nonito Donaire, 17 at the time of the sit-down strike, is now the 26-year-old IBF flyweight champion. Donaire (21-1, 14 KOs) and will move up in weight against Panama's Rafael concepcion (13-3-1, 8 KOs) on Aug. 15 for the vacant WBA interim junior bantamweight title at the Hard Rock Hotel & Casino in Las Vegas. His sights are focused on the future, not the past.

"I haven't thought about (the sit-down strike) for a long time," Nonito said when I spoke to him a few days ago. "A lot of people didn't know Glenn and me when we were amateurs. When we turned pro, we were nobodies.

"The politics of amateur boxing discouraged me to a point where for a while I really didn't care about boxing. I was offered a spot at Northern Michigan University (where the U.S. Olympic Education Center is located) and a chance to compete for the 2004 U.S. Olympic team, but I was really down on the sport at that point. My idea was to forget about boxing and to go to school. I actually did quit boxing for a year or so.

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“Then I saw Dre (Andre Ward, now the WBO super middleweight champion) and he got me back into it. He and some other people made me realize I had the talent to still achieve something.”

Cameron Dunkin, who manages Nonito Donaire, said the little Filipino-American with the thunderous left hook is “going to be a multimillionaire. I think he’s a top 10 pound-for-pound right now, and he’s only going to get better.”

Dunkin remembers the Olympic Trials sit-down strike as, well, just what Otter said of the Deltas’ sabotaging of the Faber homecoming parade: a really future and stupid gesture. Maybe the Donaies would have been better off just staging a food fight in the cafeteria and getting themselves placed on double-secret probation.

“I thought what they did was really stupid,” Dunkin said. “You’re not going to change amateur boxing by doing something like that. You’re not going to change bad decisions. Amateur boxing and bad decisions just sort of go together.

“What’s funny is that the brothers really didn’t want to do it. The guy who made them do it was Robert Salinas. The father told me afterward, ‘I shouldn’t have listened to him. We should have just gone ahead and fought.’ Heck, yeah. Give yourself a chance. You can’t be any worse off than you are just quitting.”

The Donaire family had emigrated to San Leandro, Calif., from the Philippines in 1994. When the Olympic Trials rolled around six years later, the hard-hitting Glenn and slick-boxing Nonito were just a couple of guys who hardly anybody knew about on the national level, and they were competing in a weight class that figured to be dominated by another Filipino-American, Brian Vitoria, who just happened to be the reigning world champion at 106 pounds and USA Boxing’s Boxer of the Year.

There were more than a few observers who believed that Glenn’s brawling attack merited the nod in his matchup with Vitoria, but the “Hawaiian Punch” was awarded a 10-5, electronically-scored decision.

Then, in the 106-pound final, Nonito appeared – at least to these eyes, and to Dunkin’s – to give Vitoria a boxing lesson. By my count, he snapped Vitoria’s head back with at least five punches in the third round. But, incredibly, he was credited with only one point in the computer scoring as Vitoria won, 8-6.

Glenn, 20, was a prohibitive favorite to defeat St. Louis’ Karoz Norman in a losers’ bracket match; had he won, he would have moved on to a bout the next day with Nonito. The winner of the Duel of the Donaies was guaranteed a spot in the U.S. Olympic Box-offs in Mashantucket, Conn., where a pair of victories over Vitoria would have punched a Donaire’s ticket to Sydney, Australia.

Except that Glenn Donaire never squared off against Norman. Instead, he and other members of the Tampa Five protested what they believed to be favorable treatment toward Vitoria. But

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taking a stand on principle only appears admirable in retrospect if it serves as a real agent of change.

“None of the other people have enough courage to do this,” said Salinas, who suggested that a handful of bouts in other weight classes were tilted in favor of fighters conferred with sacred-cow status. “We know this is the wrong way (to make a point), but we needed to do something. (USA Boxing) has a selected few and there’s no way to beat them, so what’s the point in trying? If we lose fairly, fine. But if we lose because of politics, that is something else.”

Gary Toney, then the president of USA Boxing, described the Salinas-orchestrated protest as “tragic.”

“As far as I’m concerned, they were given poor advice by their coach,” Toney said. “One of them probably would have advanced to the box-offs and would have had a chance to make the Olympic team. Why would anyone want to deny a kid that opportunity?”

Well, maybe because there is only so much benefit to slamming your head into on a brick wall before it dawns on you that it might be less painful to simply walk away.

“I thought Glenn beat the crap out of Viloría,” Dunkin recalled. “He beat him bad. He bloodied him, hurt him. That was just a terrible decision.

“And Nonito boxed the hell out of Viloría. But look where he wound up. I’m glad Viloría (who didn’t medal in Sydney) finally won a title (he claimed the IBF junior flyweight championship on an 11th-round stoppage of Ulises Solis on April 19 in Quezon City, the Philippines), but he’ll never be what Nonito is.”

Victims of the entrenched amateur boxing system – like Arthur Palac, a gangly southpaw from Michigan who jabbed Jeff Lacy silly at the 2000 Box-offs, only to lose a horrible computer decision – sometimes are so frustrated they walk away from the ring forever. By his own admission, Nonito Donaire also was on the verge of choosing life without boxing.

That he opted to stick around paid off in the long run, but his path to professional success hardly was without its early ruts and potholes. He was a little guy with no Olympic pedigree, and suitors for his and Glenn’s services did not exactly engage in a bidding war.

“I’m a purist,” Dunkin said. “When I see a guy who can really fight, I don’t care what weight he is, I fall in love with him. And Nonito can really fight.”

Nonito Donaire Sr., however, preferred Jackie Kallen’s pitch to Dunkin’s and his sons entered the pro ranks to the sound of Zzzzzzzs, not cymbals. Nor would Top Rank founder Bob Arum back Dunkin’s play at first.

“When I first went to sell the brothers to Top Rank, I was told, ‘Well, if their name was Gomez or Lopez or Garcia ...,’” Dunkin said. “The implication was that Top Rank might have been interested had they been Mexican, but at that time there was no Filipino buzz at all.”

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Which is to say, the Donaires entered the pro ranks before the world at large became aware of Manny Pacquiao and the global introduction of a fast-spreading condition known as “Pacmania.”

Pacquiao was still a seed that had yet to fully bloom when Nonito, then fighting under the promotional aegis of Gary Shaw, captured the IBF flyweight title on a fifth-round knockout of the favored Vic Darchinyan on July 7, 2007, in Bridgeport, Conn. The end came on as sweet a left hook as you’ll ever want to see, a short, compact parabola to the jaw that had Darchinyan going down like a submarine on a crash dive.

Who knew the jab-intensive teenager I first saw in Tampa packed that kind of pop?

“I have a complete collection of Alexis Arguello’s boxing videos, every one of his big fights,” Donaire said of his left-hooking role model. “That’s how I learned to throw a hook, by watching the way Alexis did it, while at the same time watching how he carried himself in and out of the ring. He was a true gentleman and that is how I try to behave at all times.”

Dunkin, by now Nonito’s manager, again offered the new champion to Top Rank, which took him on. Except that Arum and his minions didn’t quite realize what they had at first.

“After I brought the Donaires to Top Rank again, they were signed but they sat around for, like, 4½ months,” Dunkin said.

“At the press conference (to announce Nonito’s bout with Concepcion), Bob said, ‘When Cameron Dunkin brought me this guy, we knew right away he was going to be a star. We signed him immediately,’” Dunkin said. “I just stared. My blood started boiling. I brought Bob a world champion (ital) after (end ital) he knocked out Darchinyan. Gary Shaw is the one who built this kid up. But, you know, Bob has selective memory sometimes.”

Hey, you know what they say about all’s well that ends well. Pacquiao is the hottest growth property in boxing, and maybe the best fighter in any weight class. It’s now fashionable in boxing to be a Filipino or a Filipino-American. There is even a concerted effort to get that oldie-but-goodie, the deceased Bernard Docusen, onto the ballot for induction into the International Boxing Hall of Fame. Nonito Donaire doesn’t have to pretend to be Mexican, if indeed he ever did, to get the attention of his promoter.

“The last time I fought in the Philippines, against Raul Martinez, I didn’t expect so many people,” Nonito said. “There were 15,000 to 17,000 people who showed up. I was shocked by the amount of support that was given me.

“I always believed I would get my recognition. Even when I was supposed to be a steppingstone, taking fights against bigger guys or on short notice, I kept winning. A lot of people say I am where I am because I knocked out Darchinyan, but it was going to happen for me regardless. I truly believe that.”

Should he get past Concepcion – which is highly likely – Nonito figures to continue serving as Pacquiao’s wing man on a Filipino flight pattern that should take both ever higher. Dunkin

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already is anticipating big-money showdowns with Jorge Arce and WBO bantamweight champion Fernando Montiel.

“Bob says Nonito’s going to be the second coming of Pacquiao,” Dunkin said. “His popularity is scary. And as he keeps winning, it’s only going to get bigger and better.

“I think the best is still ahead for this kid. Look, I had Mark ‘Too Sharp’ Johnson, who was phenomenal. I put Nonito in a class with ‘Too Sharp,’ and that’s something I can’t say of most fighters in or around that weight class. But Nonito has a chance to be very special. That’s why I kept trying and trying and trying to sign him. It took years, but finally I got it done.”