

Sweet and Sour on Saturday Night

Written by Springs Toledo
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Ricky Hatton recently told the Manchester Evening News that he “looks at boxing from a different angle now and it is dying a death compared to the fashionable Ultimate Fighting Challenge.” Paulie “Magic Man” Malignaggi, whom Hatton defeated last year, made similar derogatory comments Saturday night that did no favors for the sport that gave him a name, an identity, more money than he’d ever have earned with the high school diploma he doesn’t have, and a stage to indulge his eccentric tastes of fashion.

Nevertheless, his outburst was only a minor distraction from what really was a career-defining performance.

Boxing has always been the red light district of sports, but those pulling the strings have green eyes, and they are rightfully concerned about profits being eaten away by those bald guys with cauliflower ears who like to kick and grapple. Mixed martial arts offers a spectacle of combat that is more primal in its brutality. Although the level of skill and intensity of training matches that of a professional boxer, the event itself is often more violent with flying knees, elbows, assorted arm bars, and strangulation. The Octagon is simply more barbaric than the ring.

In boxing, sweetness defeats savagery. Saturday night’s card proved it. Almost.

Danny “The Golden Child” Jacobs, 22 years old, has been building a reputation as a puncher after seventeen professional bouts. This is a long-standing tradition for hot prospects routinely fed a dozen or so set-ups whose undeclared expectation is to fall down upon contact. Teddy Atlas has been criticizing this tradition for years now and not without reason. When a prospect has had a wealth of amateur experience, Atlas believes, he is ripping off the public when he faces a parade of moonlighters, glass-Joes, and no-chance Charlies. But Teddy is forgetting something: Boxing is psychological. It is the prospect’s fragile human ego that is being fed. Get a kid to believe in his power and Descartes famous principle moves towards fruition (“I think [I’m a banger] therefore I am”). Get a kid used to winning and you give him something to stand on, an edge. That edge is confidence. Tests come later. Precisely how much later is an open question; as is the line between “building confidence” and “coddling”.

With ten fights in the last twelve months, Jacobs has been fighting at a rate that would impress Fritzie Zivic, but he is smart enough to know that Ishe Smith was going to be harder to chew on than the potatoes he has steadily mashed since his debut. Ishe is a relatively experienced bull; and Jacobs decided to don the red cape of the matador. His pride, however, is not the kind that prevents him from retreating; in fact, the boxer will call it “adjusting distance.” True boxers don’t want to join the Rockettes –if their hands aren’t moving then the event becomes a snore fest, the crowd begins to boo, and future purses risk shrinkage. So Jacobs’ arms moved as frantically as his legs, and he threw bales full of punches to the body and head, though not balefully.

Ishe threw some hurting shots, but seemed tense and angry. He was tired at the end ...all that tension wore him out. His chief second was Eddie Mustafa Muhammad, a great light

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heavyweight from the 70s and 80s. He exhorted him –“stop looking at him! He ain’t got three arms!” With notions of winning becoming bleaker, Ishe began to express his anger in other ways –swearing and posturing. At the end of round seven, Ishe hit Jacobs about three times after the bell but didn’t receive a point deduction. He should have. Oddly enough, in round nine, Ishe threw a shot at the bell and earned a point deduction. He shouldn’t have. Evidently, justice traveled slowly but landed with a leaden fist.

Jacobs’ speed was fair, the force less so, but it was an impressive display of natural talent. Natural talent ain’t skill, and he does need to tighten up on fundamentals. He not only habitually dropped his right hand, he also lingered in the corners and on the ropes enough to invite and receive unnecessary punishment. Danny boy is green. Ishe was landing left hook, right cross combinations that would have sent him from glen to glen and down the mountainside –had his chin been less than it was.

Southpaw Robert “The Ghost” Guerrero’s performance against titlist Malcolm Klassen made Danny Jacobs look like the novillero that he is. Guerrero was a supreme torero (matador) and he disrupted and dazzled Klassen with 1200 punches en route to a unanimous decision. Guerrero contended with a far worse challenge outside the ring when his wife Casey was diagnosed with leukemia in November 2007. She is now in remission. He spent six weeks training at Big Bear, CO, and spent much of that time in existential reflection. In March of this year, Guerrero quit against Daud Cino Yordan and was roundly criticized for breaking a cardinal rule in the warrior code. Luckily for him, he was cut again in the seventh round –an ugly slice an inch outside of his left eye. He was also cut in his previous fight, which he won, but these two cuts called to mind what the ancients called “blood atonement.” Sins are atoned, or washed away, by blood. Make no mistake, to the everlasting boxing god who sits atop a golden stool and speaks thunder through a platinum mouthpiece, quitting the ring mid-fight is a mortal sin.

The sight of Guerrero’s dripping eye should have been encouraging to the South African Klassen. Before the fight he was brimming with confidence and bravado and spoke of the former champion as nothing more than a soon-to-be unconscious launching pad for Klassen’s glory. Guerrero proved that ghosts are incorporeal, but not immaterial. Faced with a complicated array of angles and elusiveness, Klassen was forced to turn and reset throughout the fight. He couldn’t find his man and fought like a predictable bull. The Guerrero victory was almost a foregone conclusion by the 8th round.

The main event featured Paulie Malignaggi (26-3) as a live underdog who promised a lively continuation of the pattern set by Jacobs and Guerrero and a confirmation of the thesis about sweetness overcoming savagery. “Like a matador,” he proclaimed before the bout, “I will control the Baby Bull.” His confidence in himself never wavered although his confidence in getting a fair deal in Texas was lower than the belly of a rattlesnake. After all, Juan Diaz (35-2) was not only the hometown hero; he was also a Golden Boy fighter in a Golden Boy promotion. Even the ring was against Malignaggi –an 18 foot puncher’s ring. The weight stipulation was 138½ and Paulie has been struggling to make 140. Worse still, three of four officials were Texans or had ties to the region –the referee Laurence Cole and Raul Caiz, Sr. and Gale Van Hoy, judges. The Brooklynite looked underneath ten gallon hats and said that “the deck is stacked.” And he was right.

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Paulie is true to himself. After losing to Hatton when trainer Buddy McGirt threw in the towel, he went into a gloomy seclusion. He emerged and fired Buddy. New trainer Sherif Younan has been with him for three fights now and if his instructions Saturday night are indications, the man is an excellent fit. His exhortation between rounds to stay out of the corners and off the ropes, to box from the outside and operate from the middle of the ring is precisely what a pure boxer needs to hear lest he get aspirations. Younan seems to understand Malignaggi's psychology.

Diaz did what Diaz does –he fought aggressively with a high-volume of output and got banged up in the process. Both fighters were cut. Malignaggi was cut over the left eye in round one, while Diaz got an abrasion over his left eye from a right uppercut in the second round and later got a head butt that opened another cut near the first.

In the eighth, Paulie's trunks began to descend. His underwear was white, and thankfully, clean. HBO's Bob Papa reduced Max Kellerman and Lennox Lewis to silence when he said "Boxing After Dark and the moon is coming out!"

In the eleventh, Jack was chasing Jill, though steadily bleeding now. Paulie's purple knee-highs and long fringe shimmied like a psychedelic grass skirt as Diaz bore forward trying to find a home for his left hook and right cross. Paulie fights with his lead shoulder hunched up and his lead hand at hip-level while the other hand is draped across the chest. Someone should dissuade him from this stance. He likes it, but it doesn't like him. Paulie has sloping shoulders. Fighters like Diaz can land the right because his shoulder cannot hunch up enough to block the shot –and he's got a neck like an ostrich.

The fight was close even if it was pretty clear who won. If you were a judge who preferred ring generalship and defense, Paulie was your man. If you were a judge who preferred effective aggressiveness, Paulie was still your man.

Most impressive was the fact that the slickster outpunched the pressure fighter, out landed him, and got more bang for the buck. The last few rounds saw the Baby Bull spending too much time defending his eye and not enough time attacking the leaf in the wind that was stabbing him with a left jab and dinging him with effective though less frequent rights.

It should have been the third declaration of the supremacy of matadors over bulls. But it was not. As Diaz's mother cried and prayed for a miracle from her ringside seat, the most impressive of the night's three matadors listened as the scorecards were read. Raul Caiz, Sr. saw the bout 115-113 for Diaz. David Sutherland of Oklahoma saw 116-112 for Diaz. Gale Van Hoy's scorecard read 118-110, Diaz. Paulie's outspoken concerns were vindicated in front of thousands. He doffed the red cape of the matador and donned the mantle of a prophet. Unfortunately, the predicted woe was his own.

Diaz was gracious in victory and asked the crowd to applaud for Paulie Malignaggi.

Paulie threw a tantrum. "Boxing is full of [expletive]," he hollered into Max Kellerman's microphone, "the only reason I do this is for the payday. Boxing is full of [expletive]!" Exit matador, enter enfant terrible.

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Malignaggi had a right to his outrage, though he would have been well-advised to keep it specific. We all have a general responsibility to malign inept judges and unscrupulous promoters, and cast the malocchio on those increasingly irrelevant alphabet soup organizations with their silly trinkets –but we have just as much of a responsibility to honor the Sweet Science. It transcends them all.

HBO's "Boxing After Dark" almost offered a triple confirmation of how sweetness overcomes savagery in the ring. It's too bad it ended on a sour note.

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