

## IMPOSSIBLE COMEBACKS HOLD THE MAGIC OF SPORTS

Written by Bernard Fernandez  
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The joke is nearly as old as the one-liner in which standup comedian Henny Youngman would tell audiences, "Take my wife ... please.

But no place in the occasionally rough-and-tumble world of hockey has the joke – "I went to a fight, and a hockey game broke out – been more true than in Philadelphia, where the Flyers' Stanley Cup championship teams of 1974 and '75, known in legend and lore as the "Broad Street Bullies, became something of a civic treasure by dropping their gloves and subduing opponents as much with their fists as with their skills. An unapologetic brawler named Dave "The Hammer Schultz didn't score many goals, but he became an icon almost on a par with the real star of the Bullies, Bobby Clarke, a tough guy in his own right. The Flyers of that era made the toothless grin more fashionable than polyester leisure suits.

It has been 35 years since the Flyers won it all, a drought that could well continue as the current NHL playoffs progress, but a less-physical yet no less feisty group of players sidled alongside the beloved Bullies for the enduring devotion of a blue-collar town in which obstinance and a refusal to yield to adversity are perhaps more prized than superior talent.

When the final seconds ticked off of the Flyers' 4-3 victory over the Boston Bruins in Game 7 of the Eastern Conference semifinals Friday night at TD Garden, capping a comeback for the ages, I couldn't help but be reminded of what it is that makes sports the aphrodisiac of the masses. It is the unscripted nature of athletes in competition, the possibility if not the likelihood that victory can somehow be snatched from the jaws of defeat, that keeps fans intrigued. On the ice or in the ring, there are no sure things.

"Our mindset was, if you are going to go down, you are going to go down swinging, Flyers captain Mike Richards said after his team became only the third (of 162) to climb out of a three-games-to-none hole to win a best-of-seven series. And these dinged-up Flyers – minus two of their better players (Jeff Carter with a broken foot, Ian Laperriere with a concussion and broken orbital bone) – did it in crunch time in a manner that was emblematic of the entire series, rallying from a 3-0 first-period deficit to win in the other team's building.

Unlike the Bullies, these Flyers didn't beat the Bruins, the team they defeated in the 1974 finals, with Schultz-like tactics. There weren't any actual fights; their margin of error was too narrow to risk too many penalties. But they were nonetheless scrappy, giving up their bodies to deflect slapshots and provide journeyman goalie Michael Leighton a better chance to protect his net.

"We fought, coach Peter Laviolette said in explaining how a bunch, left for dead more often than the guy in the hockey mask in the *Halloween* movie and all its sequels, could continue to rise like Lazarus.

But the reality is that one team's ecstasy is another's agony. Although the Flyers' impossible

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feat in part exorcised the last vestiges of the memories of the 1964 Philadelphia Phillies, who somehow blew a 6½-game lead with only 12 to play, the Bruins' collapse had to bring back that town's sad memories of all the years when the Red Sox ate the New York Yankees' dust. They were so far ahead that there was no way they could lose, but they did.

"They stuck with it, the Bruins' Milan Lucic said of the Flyers. "They came at us and came at us. They were relentless. They did what they needed to do.

Boxing, perhaps more than any sport, offers the possibility that the impossible is indeed possible. How many times have we seen a fighter teetering on the brink of disaster, only to emerge triumphant by landing one huge punch? It can happen literally at the last second, from deficits that even the 2009-10 Flyers would find amazing.

There are no best-of-seven series in the ring, but the careers of Matthew Saad Muhammad and the late Arturo Gatti are comprised of any number of one-act passion plays in which those never-say-die fighters reached deep inside themselves to find a spark that somehow was kindled into a raging fire. They made the shocking comeback their personal signature, ignoring cuts, swelling and wide disadvantages on the scorecards to believe in the sort of ultimate success that could not have been apparent to most observers.

Saad and Gatti, though, are not alone. Here are just five examples, listed in chronological order, of the instant magic that can turn a seeming beatdown into redemption.

### MIKE WEAVER KO15 OF JOHN TATE, March 31, 1980

As his fighter, Tate, continued to build his lead on all three judges' scorecards, promoter Bob Arum sat contentedly, turning his attention from what was happening in the ring to thoughts of what he envisioned would be Tate's next bout, a multimillion-dollar showdown with the legendary Muhammad Ali. And why not? It was the 15th and final round and Tate was coasting, too far ahead on points to lose unless there was a completely unexpected catastrophe.

In this instance, the catastrophic came in the form of a crushing left hook that sent Tate pitching forward onto his face, unconscious, without even extending his arms to cushion his fall. When Arum looked up, Tate was down and out, and so was the notion of Tate defending his WBA heavyweight championship against Ali. The end came just 45 seconds from what would have been the final bell.

Thom Greer, writing for the *Philadelphia Daily News*, described the knockout shot from ex-Marine Weaver as something that came "crashing against the jawbone just below the right earlobe with the kind of explosiveness that reduces aged buildings to rubble ...

It was 11 full minutes before Tate could be revived, and even then he had to be assisted from the ring by stunned members of his corner crew.

"When I hit Tate flush on the chin, I honestly felt it all the way down the left side of my body, Weaver said. "I felt it all the way to my toes. I knew he wasn't going to get up after that one.

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### SUGAR RAY LEONARD TKO14 OF THOMAS HEARNS, Sept. 16, 1981

Four words from trainer Angelo Dundee summed it up. Through 12 rounds of their welterweight unification bout at Las Vegas' Caesars Palace, Dundee's fighter, WBC champion Sugar Ray Leonard, was losing to WBA titlist Thomas Hearns. Leonard had considerable swelling of his left eye that had begun to puff up in the third round, and Hearns seemed well-positioned to win one of the most anticipated bouts of that or any era.

"You're blowing it, son! Dundee advised Leonard, as if the 1976 Olympic gold medalist needed to be reminded of the tough spot in which he found himself.

But blowing it isn't the same as it being completely blown, not in boxing. Leonard landed a right-left combination that hurt Hearns in the pivotal 14th round. Hearns backed into the ropes, where Leonard unleashed a flurry of blows that prompted referee Davey Pearl to step in.

"I pulled it up from my guts, Leonard said in explaining his frantic rally.

### JULIO CESAR CHAVEZ TKO12 OF MELDRICK TAYLOR, March 17, 1990

As was the case with Leonard-Hearns I nearly nine years earlier, the junior welterweight unification megafight between Chavez, who held the WBC version of the title, and IBF ruler Taylor mesmerized the boxing world. And, like Leonard-Hearns I, the hype proved more than justified; the two undefeated champions engaged in a classic at the Las Vegas Hilton that perhaps would be made more so by the controversial nature of its ending, one that continues to reverberate today.

Taylor, landing the higher volume of punches with rapid-fire combinations, was ahead on points against Chavez, the Mexican national hero whose heavier shots had left the Philadelphian's face grotesquely swollen.

Unsure whether Taylor actually had the lead they believed he did, Taylor's co-manager/trainer Lou Duva told him he needed to win the 12th round. So Taylor went out and again engaged Chavez toe-to-toe, a tactic that had made for a rousing spectacle but perhaps was not in his best interests. It proved to be a critical miscalculation of judgment.

Chavez buckled Taylor's knees with an overhand right with just 26 seconds remaining, and a follow-up right put him down with 16 seconds to go. Taylor arose at the count of five, at which point referee Richard Steele gave him the remainder of the obligatory eight-count.

When Taylor did not respond to his question of "Are you all right?" to his satisfaction, Steele waved his arms and awarded Chavez a technical-knockout victory at the 2:58 mark of the final round.

"I stood still to let (Steele) know I wasn't on queer street ... I was fully conscious and wasn't wobbly, Taylor complained afterward.

Said Steele: "I looked into his eyes and saw a beaten fighter. I saw a fighter that had had enough.

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### JORGE CASTRO TKO9 OF JOHN DAVID JACKSON, Dec. 10, 1994

Give Castro credit for one thing: the WBA middleweight champion from Argentina could absorb punishment like a sponge, taking a volley of punches from Jackson, all the while defiantly signaling to the challenger that he was willing to take even more if that was the price to be paid to continue the one-sided bout in Monterrey, Mexico.

So Jackson, a southpaw, happily obliged, moving forward and landing just about anything he wanted as Castro's face was transformed into a bloody pulp. On several occasions referee Stanley Christodoulou appeared ready to end the massacre, but Castro's attempts to fight back were active enough for him to wait just a bit longer.

Christodoulou's hesitation left open a tiny window of opportunity for Castro, and he squeezed through it in the ninth round. As Castro sagged against the ropes and again was being peppered by Jackson, the nearly blinded champion missed with a wild right hand, which was followed by a devastating left hook that resulted in a knockdown. Jackson beat the count, but he was clearly dazed. Reinvigorated, Castro was teeing off on him when Christodoulou stopped it at the 2:43 mark.

"Somewhere in the ninth round the hand of God touched me, Castro said of the punch he believed to be divine intervention.

Jackson said it was his self-assurance that it was all but over that was the difference. "I got careless, he said. "I got overconfident because I was shutting him out.

### DIEGO CORRALES TKO10 OF JOSE LUIS CASTILLO, May 7, 2005

Few fights have had more pronounced swings in momentum than this lightweight unification spectacle at Las Vegas' Mandalay Bay, in which Corrales, the WBC champion, and WBO titlist Castillo threw themselves at each other with unabashed ferocity.

But Castillo appeared to gain the upper hand once and for all in the 10th round, during which he dropped Corrales twice. Corrales, both eyes swollen nearly shut, was done, finished. He seemed to have nothing left as he arose to face what figured to be Castillo's final assault.

Appearances can be deceiving, though, and Corrales – given a reprieve by referee Tony Weeks when he again disgorged his mouthpiece, apparently intentionally – turned the fight on a dime, connecting with a series of punches that had Castillo reeling, nearly defenseless, before Weeks stepped in.

"I've never seen anybody come back like that, from those knockdowns, Joe Goossen, Corrales' trainer, said of the Miracle at Mandalay Bay. "We were very worried in the corner. But I remember Diego telling me, 'If you stop one of my fights, I'll kill you.'

Bob Arum, Castillo's promoter, was infuriated over Corrales' time-buying tactics.

"Forget the Long Count, Arum huffed. "Twenty-eight seconds. Nearly half a minute. If Jose Luis had spit out his mouthpiece, maybe we would have gotten 28 seconds (to recuperate).