The last time boxing appeared at Yankee Stadium, Larry Merchants sideburns were a lot longer. It was 1976, and HBOs poet laureate was present as a columnist for the NY Post.

Chaos swirled outside the Stadium, but he doesnt recall it being looking like a scene out of The Warriors, as many do.

No, his typewriter wasnt swiped by rampaging youths, as other presspersons were.

There were long lines outside the stadium, Merchant says. There werent enough cops outside and there was some lawlessness and disorder.

On Saturday night, Miguel Cotto (from Puerto Rico)-Yuri Foreman (from Belarus, by way of Israel, now lives in Brooklyn) will run on free HBO, and Merchant wont be working it; instead Jim Lampley will call the action, with Max Kellerman and old hand Roy Jones chiming in with analysis. So Merchant hasnt studied up on the tangle between the Puerto Rican icon nearing the end of the line and the rabbi-in-training like he would have were he working it. I think Cotto is a substantial favorite but I dont have real opinion on it, he says. One factor will be Cotto at 154 pounds. And the other guy is a difficult opponent. Im curious about it. Its close to a pick em.

Merchant recognizes the importance of having a card on such hallowed ground as Yankee Stadium. This will be a throwback to when boxing was an ethnic sport, and tribes were finding their own champion. The fight evokes the old days and shows that from time to time, boxing can still make it happen. Outdoor fights are always associated with boxing. When boxing was big, it was as big as all outdoors. Having a fight here, it shows that the sport can capture our attention, and its still relevant in that way. The message is: boxings not as big as it once was, but time to time there is a big event to care about. Yeah, the reason for doing this isnt sentimental. Its getting much more attention than if it werent in a stadium. Theres really no other reason than Arum is going to make about four times as much money than if he had it in the Garden.

The Pacquiao-Clottey fight in Cowboys Stadium, and Calzaghe, Hatton and the Klitschkos filling stadiums sends a message to the gravediggers who always want to put the sport six feet under, Merchant thinks.

As for that Ali-Norton scrap, the third in their so-so trilogy, the analyst says that the air wasnt filled with overflowing drama going in. There was a certain amount of uncertainty and drama close to the fight. It was not a great fight, from pure entertainment value, and knockdowns. But it was dramatic, it was Ali at Yankee Stadium. and they hadnt had a fight since the June 1959 Patterson-Johansson fight. (Ingemar stopped Patterson in the third round; Floyd won the rematch a year later, and the third clash, in 1961 as well.) Norton was a bad matchup for Ali. He was a big, strong, athletic guy who was tough to fight, if you werent a big puncher, he had problems with big punchers. His swarming style was geared to upset what Ali could do.

We could see Foreman being the Ali on saturday, keeping the fight at a safe distance, with Coto as Norton, plugging forward aggressively.

--Merchant will work the Aug. 10 Chad Dawson-Jean Pascal bout.

--Merchant isnt as keen on a Klitschko-Haye showdown as I am. I think thats a PPV attraction, but he doesnt. I dont think so. Its a fight in Europe but how do you promote is here?

--Merchant understands, more than I do, why the July 31st Juan Manuel Marquez-Juan Diaz fight will run on PPV. I dont see it as a PPV fight, he does, because he gets it that its all about making money, bottom line. Larry made the good point that the PPV route will enrich the fighters much more so than they would be paid if the bout was on HBO. You cant blame the fighter or the promoter, he says. I agree on the fighter part. The promoter part, not as much. I say its wise to leave some money on the table, sometimes, not try to wring every last buck out of hardcore fight fans. Especially since, not sure if Richard Schaefer has received the memo, Main St is still hurting, and isnt swimming in excess discretionary funds....Grow the sport by letting more people see solid fights, not by narrowing the viewing base by putting any truly competitive clash on PPV, thats my take.

SPEEDBAG By the way, Norton is still alive and kicking. His book BELIEVE Journey From Jacksonville, was released on October 27, 2009. If you would like a copy please go to www.kennorton.com or to www.amazon.com. Hes 66, and has had a myriad of health issues, but we chatted on the phone last week, and he impressed me. He harbors no bitterness towards Ali, even though he may have deserved to go 3-0 against the Greatest of All Time, instead of 1-2. I asked Norton what he did technically that gave Ali fits, and he said that it was more a state of mind that aided him. Reading material by personal-success guru Napolean Hill (b 1883-d 1970, author of Think and Grow Rich) gave him the confidence to attack formidable mountains. He realized that Ali was boxing back then, that he was likely to get the nod if a fight was close, and he was OK with that. At the time, he wasnt so sanguine; press accounts at the time mention him crying in the ring after Ali got the unanimous decision at Yankee Stadium. Norton/fight fans can in fact get an up close look at the legend. Hes having a 67th birthday bash, with proceeds going to charity, on Friday, July 23rd in Illinois.

---Talked to Nate Campbell. he said a pinched nerve in his hip, and that hampered him in his last fight, against Victor Ortiz. He hurt the hip in camp, but felt he had to go through with the fight. Hes now going to a physical therapist to try and solve it. He said he will keep on fighting, but will go back to 135. I wouldve stopped me, I like Ortiz, but he wouldnt engage with me, that was a smart fight, Campbell said. I wouldnt stand there and swap with me either.