

The Itch Lingers, And Whispers, And Summons

Written by Michael Woods
Thursday, 08 July 2010 19:00

“Regret for the things we did can be tempered by time; it is regret for the things we did not do that is inconsolable. ---Clergyman Sydney Smith (1771-1845)

Joe Mesi sometimes tiptoes into his daughter Juliet Joelles room at night, and watches the three and a half-year-old slumbering peacefully. She looks so peaceful, so snug, so content. He pulls her blanket up to cover her body, and says a little prayer of thanks.

Six years after his world was turned upside down, and shaken like a martini by a cement mixer, after docs told him he suffered bleeding on his brain from the blows he absorbed during a ten round tussle with Vassiliy Jirov, the 36-year-old Mesi communicates with a higher power his gratitude.

He sends thanks for Juliet, and for his wife Michele, and stepdaughter Hope, and for a fulfilling job selling medical equipment for Stryker, a Kalamazoo, Michigan based medical technology firm which develops and produces medical implants, surgical and imaging technologies.

But there are moments, throughout the day, when the Mesi slips from a spell of gratitude, into a sphere of what might have been. And, what could still be.

His record, unchanged since he took out Shannon Miller in the first round on Oct. 12, 2007, stands at 36-0.

36-0, with 29 KOs.

He thinks about that record, and runs through the sad state of the heavyweight division, which consists of two standouts named Klitschko, and a spate of nonetities. And he gets an Itch. He tries, for a spell, to quell The Itch. To consider the solid living hes making selling equipment for Stryker, and showing surgeons how to implement the gear correctly in ORs, while clad in scrubs. But the image of himself in scrubs fades, and he sees himself clad in shorts, boots, and gloves. Standing across from a Klitschko. Scratching that Itch, that urge that fellow fighters can attest lingers, sometimes far longer than is conceivable, or advisable.

Once upon a time, Mesi was on the fast track to a title shot. Hed been managed skillfully by his father, Jack, and had taken baby steps up the heavyweight ladder. From David Izon, to DeVarryl Williamson, to Monte Barrett. Jirov, a career cruiserweight, was to be a half step up in caliber from Barrett, and the fight was to be presented in Vegas.

No Buffalo style home cooking. No home field advantage. The rugged Kazakh, with a 33-1 mark, would be a hurdle that could be pridefully cited, once traversed.

Mesi got the win on March 13, 2004. But the price was considerable. He was knocked to the

The Itch Lingers, And Whispers, And Summons

Written by Michael Woods
Thursday, 08 July 2010 19:00

mat three times in the last two rounds by Jirov, and barely made it to the final bell. He was granted a majority decision on the undercard to the Winky Wright-Shane Mosley scrap; but all concerned, at least publically, were looking on the bright side after the narrow win. His heart was cited, and HBO would be plowing ahead with their option to show his bouts. I proved my point, Mesi said. Jirovs style was a problem, but Im ready to move up the ladder. Im satisfied with my performance.

Satisfied, but cautious. He went to get an MRI afterward, four days after the battle, and the readings showed abnormalities. The MRIs showed a subdural hematoma, bleeding on the surface of the brain. By April, word had leaked about the brain scans, and his career wasnt on hold, it was on life support. By June, pundit were weighing in, telling him to walk away. Understandable on their part; no one wants to see someone take undo risk in the ring. But Mesi fought that call, after a June MRI showed that the brain bleeds had healed, and he offered evidence from doctors who were of the belief that hed be at no more risk for a lethal brain injury, after suffering the brain bleed, now apparently healed up, than someone who had not been similarly afflicted. He sat before the Nevada State Athletic Commission, and pleaded for his license to be restored.

I dont want to read about him in an obituary, one doctor said, as he gave the thumbs down.

But Mesi kept pleading his case, and fattening the bank accounts of lawyers who headed up his case. He broke down the powers that be in Nevada, and in February of 2006, a Nevada judge ruled that his suspension couldnt last longer than his license.

On April 1, free of irony, he got back in the ring, against Ron Bellamy, in Puerto Rico. I may have something to prove to everyone, Mesi said. But the main thing is I have the opportunity to dictate my own career. If I lose the next couple of fights, Ill go away. I just didnt want to go out on someone elses terms.

In a year and half, he fought seven times, winning all the bouts. His opponents ranged from mediocre to sub mediocre, and for the most part, it was apparent that elements that were in place before were MIA during the comeback. He looked slower, most glaringly. Behind the scenes, Mesi says, he battled the blues. Uncertainty over being able to pursue his passion, he told TSS, kept him in a negative funk for much of the time. In his last fight, to this point, he met Shannon Miller, a limited but willing combatant, in Rhode Island, in October 2007. Mesi won by TKO in the first. But the comeback came to a halt. The passion wasnt present.

He entered into a new arena, the political fray, and while vying for a state Senator slot, told constituents that he was steering clear of the ring while aiming to snag a seat in the 61st District. Am I retired from boxing? No, the Democrat Mesi said. Am I going to box again? Maybe not, he added. I never made any plans to have a teary-eyed retirement press conference.

The Senate race didnt go his way. There was as much, if not more, back-room knifefighting than found in the fight game. His opponent in the primary, which he won, tried to take him down with the assertion that a local billionaire improperly funded him. In the real runoff, last

The Itch Lingers, And Whispers, And Summons

Written by Michael Woods
Thursday, 08 July 2010 19:00

November, Mesi lagged the victor, by a 54-46 margin. Mesi stayed in the arena, and took a post running the Senate majority office. But that stint came to an end last July, when the disgracefully dysfunctional pols in Albany plummeted to new depths. Republicans engineered a coup, to toss the balance of power from the Dems to the GOP, and Mesi had to resign amid the upheaval. He dusted himself back up, and ironically enough, soon found himself selling Craniomaxillofacial and nuerological-related medical equipment for Stryker, a global leader in med tech. The Stryker gear is all stuff that pertains to the ex (?) fighter, who is well acquainted with the facial and nuerological irregularities that the devices service. Ive been doing this nine months, and I really do love it, he says. It keeps me mobile, and helping people, and earning a living. In this Buffalo-Rochester area, I am known by some of the dcotors, who may know about my hematomas, my broken orbital, my fractured jaw.

And yet The Itch remains.

**

The Itch flared up on June 19 in Niagara Falls, NY, , when Mesi checked out Hasim Rahman, a former heavyweight titlist, battling Shannon Miller, the last man Mesi had fought with. Rahman stopped Miller, but in the fourth, not the first as Joe had, and Mesis motor started whirring.

What if?

What if I committed two, three months, was properly motivated by a high hurdle, like a fight with Rahman, or Cris Arreola?

I am happy with what I accomplished, he says. But I could still box. I would. If the opponent were right. The Klitschkos, Arreola, Rahman...those fights inspire me. Rahman and me, we are marketable in this part of the country. I mean, I like Rock, but I was not impressed. Yes, if its the right offer, it keeps me interested.

Mesi doesnt try and spin the past, present himself as a world beater who stands as a tragic example of the cruel nature of fate, of what it can do do to the best laid plans. I think I couldve captured a title, he says. I think i would have been fully accepted as an exciting fighter. But...the story might not be finished.

No, he doesnt think hed get a license, quite likely, in Nevada or NY. An Indian reservation might play host, Mesi says, as he scratches The Itch in his head.

Maybe The Itch cant be serviced full-on with the same efficiency, but Mesi would still love to get both feet back in the boxing waters as an analyst, a broadcaster.

I want to stay close to the sport, he says. I think I can be a great asset. I dont have to box to be that asset. I have a passion, and I can show it being ringside.

The Itch can persist, lingering in a mans mind long after the first grays appear. It can subside, and flare up, like a pesky lower back sprain. The Itch, in fight game terms, is synonymous with

The Itch Lingers, And Whispers, And Summons

Written by Michael Woods
Thursday, 08 July 2010 19:00

hopefulness, unless it isnt scratched, and lingers too long, and becomes something potentially more odious. The man can count all his blessings, tally up the checkmarks of positivity he enjoys, but The Itch is an entity that clings stubbornly, often immune to benign neglect, or the passage of time, or common sense. As one gets older, one typically gains more respect, or at least understanding, for those who seek to service The Itch, in any arena, even if the attempt reads as quixotic. As you get older, you ponder mortality more, and it starts to seep in that, until we get back a report from an afterlife, it looks like well all have just one shot on this plane to do what we want to do.

The risk averse will tsk tsk Joe Mesi as he entertains a re-entry to the most dangerous game, and lobby him to think of Juliet Joelle snuggled safely in her bed. They will urge him to shrug off The Itch, ignore it, bargain with it, banish it with fierce urgency. But it will remain. Most likely it will remain, challenging Mesi, planting seeds of regret, demanding a final reckoning.