“I have always found that no opponent is very dangerous if you can keep a left hand sticking in his face, get in and get out, and prevent him from getting set for a punch.

~ **Jack Britton**, 1923

History is as circular as a boxing ring is square.

Imagine a master-boxer known for his matinee-idol appearance, great legs, and a crowd-pleasing willingness to mix it up. Legions of Spanish-speaking fans north and south of the border would picture “Maravilla, Sergio Gabriel Martinez. The English translation of “Maravilla is “the Marvel –and the description could just as well conjure up memories of the “Boxing Marvel Jack Britton. Britton, any boxing historian would tell you, was a World Welterweight Champion who fought at least 344 times between 1904 and 1930.

The thirty-five-year-old Martinez is a former Argentina Welterweight Champion scheduled to face Paul “The Punisher Williams in New Jersey on November 20th in a contest that the odds makers are calling even-money.

Ninety years ago Britton was also thirty-five and fighting in New Jersey:

FAMILIAR SPIRIT

Celebrated by Jim Jab of the Pittsburgh Press as the “master mechanic of mittdom and the “monarch of maul, Britton faced a man who “towered over him in everything but boxing skill. Despite his age, Britton still managed to “outfeint, outfoot, and outwit his opponent. “The crowd that jammed the big Jersey armory, the Associated Press reported,

…saw Britton give a masterly exhibition of the manly art. Fast with both hands and feet, Jack outfought Mike [O’Dowd] in all but the third and the seventh rounds. Both at the long range and the infighting, the middleweight found the welterweight too much for him. Even when Britton threw boxing to the winds and stood toe to toe with O’Dowd and swapped wallops, Jack seldom came out second best.

Britton’s winging hooks staggered his opponent, and the rare rounds he lost seemed to be times he was resting. When his opponent crowded him, Britton would dazzle the crowd with the skills that earned him his nickname: He’d pick his shots and counter inside. He’d lie back patiently and then explode with combinations to the body and head. Frustrated, his opponent would punch more and connect less while Britton evaded the shots with such mastery that the crowd would break into spontaneous applause. A writer for the New York Times thought that O’Dowd’s frantic punch rate was carrying the fight until his eyes refocused on Britton, who casually “sidestepped, backed away, ducked and dodged the shower of blows.

No accomplishment in his long career gave Britton more pride than his ability to handle Mike

O'Dowd four out of five times. Like Paul Williams today, O'Dowd was routinely avoided back then, but Britton figured that "anyone fast enough to keep him on the move could beat him.

It was his legs. He was known for his legs –even at thirty-five. His trainer Dai Dollings was a New York City transplant who trained marathon runners in Wales. Sergio Martinez is a former professional soccer player and cyclist, and he too is known for his legs –even at thirty-five.

Britton proved to be a brilliant student of styles. And well he should have; his trainer taught the great Ray Arcel how to deconstruct boxers and exploit their every move. "Dollings was a smart trainer, Arcel recalled, "he was a fella who'd study the styles of the different boxers. And of course when I started with him, that was the one thing he inspired me with –everyone's style is different, so you must understand the different styles of your opponents. And we used to make a great study, watching these fellas work.

Britton's long apprenticeship and boxing brain saw him defeat a parade of great fighters and suffer only one knockout when he was still a teenager. It paid off in other ways too. He became as good, the Providence News proclaimed in 1923, as Gentleman Jim Corbett was bad at predicting fights. Britton not only anticipated outcomes, he explained why with an expert's eye. When the World Featherweight Champion Johnny Kilbane met the French contender Eugene Criqui, Britton stood virtually alone and predicted an upset by knockout. The chuckles in the press section were silenced at one minute and fifty-four seconds of the sixth round. World Heavyweight Champion Jack Dempsey was still considered a man-killer that year, and it was a sure thing that he would knock out light heavyweight Tommy Gibbons. Britton predicted that Gibbons' chin would hold up and see him last the distance but lose a decision. He was right. Criqui made his first defense against Johnny Dundee a few weeks after that. Britton said that Dundee didn't have the punch to stop Criqui but that he would win by decision. He turned out to be right again.

Britton would have much to say to his modern mirror image about how to defeat a bigger, younger, and constantly-punching opponent.

Martinez gives up four inches in height and six inches in reach in his upcoming title defense. Williams can sling shots that land from the third row. His stamina pushes the outer limits of human performance and his shots come flying like dishes thrown by poltergeists. Then there's his chin. "You know them fighters with long necks and them long, pointy chins, Charlie Goldman once quipped, "they cost you more for smelling salts than they do for food. Williams has proven to be a rebuke to that stereotype. The durability of his chin is both surprising for the observer and demoralizing for the opponent, at least for now.

By all accounts this fighter presents a torturous set of problems for any fighter today …or yesterday.

WHAT WOULD JACK SAY?

Britton, with an Irish twinkle in his eye, would assert that Williams may have taken his 38th victory against Martinez, but he won't get lucky twice. Luck bows before perfect strategy.

Williams' has tendencies. He has bad habits. For a man who was able to find the flaws of no less than Benny Leonard, solving Williams' style would be easy. Despite an average punch rate of a hundred per round, Williams is prone to become casual about it. He gets a bit detached as if on automatic pilot. The shots come from all angles, but they can be lazy and wide. Many offensive machines in history short-change their defense and Williams is no exception. His judgment of distance is off. When he steps inside he drops his guard, and on the outside, where his long body should dominate, he overreaches. The pressure of Williams has made him both formidable and feared but it comes with a cost. Pressure fighters are usually designed like badgers, short and strong. They try to compensate for physical disadvantages by fighting at taller opponents' chest where their concentrated strength and stunted reach become advantages. They are usually not built like a Great Blue Heron. Williams is. Neither he nor a bird is designed to withstand head trauma.

Britton would remind us that Martinez's style is much like his –it is much like an all-time great fighter's. Watching the first round of their first bout is an eerie confirmation of exactly that. Martinez slides in and out to land shots on Williams and then disappears out of range. He steps off at angles, forcing the taller man to find him, turn, and reset. He drops his arms to his sides. This is vintage Britton.

The old master would also warn Martinez. The last southpaw stylist that faced Williams a second time was demolished in one round. That version should be anticipated on November 20th –the Avenging Williams. He will be as determined and focused as a heron on a shrimp in shallow water. If he is smart, he will spear his man with shots from the shore –where he can reach Martinez but Martinez can't reach him. He will try to stun him and if he does, he will wade in behind well-aimed combinations to swallow him whole. Martinez is going to have to be very careful for the first few rounds.

Britton had a secret to beat his era's Paul Williams: "He used to murder jabbers, he recalled about O'Dowd, "so when I got in the ring with him I just kept going into him all the time, toe to toe, swinging with his swings and he never got started. Ted "Kid Lewis was Britton's arch-nemesis. Twenty-two times they clashed in what became boxing's version of the Hatfield and McCoy feud. It was Britton who got the better of it, though handling the relentless ferocity of Lewis required wisdom. "I would go one round and box him, the next time I would slug him, Britton revealed, "I'd slow him up and in the next round switch and speed all over him. He didn't know where he was.

Martinez must likewise present a study in contrasts. He must be cautious yet aggressive. He must avoid lingering even for a second at mid-range because that is the range where Williams' punches can shock him. When Martinez went down in the first round last December, he got caught at mid-range. He got nailed twice at the end of the fourth while at mid-range. As he tired his legs got flat and that is when the fight got away from him. He must fight him at the two furthest poles: Outside of the perimeter (that is, outside of that wingspan), ready to connect when the overreaching Williams leaves his head hanging out like a nosey neighbor, and in close around the taller man's chest where he can get rough safely.

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Sergio Martinez watches film and formulates strategy with his seconds at training camp. We

just conducted a séance. Jack Britton had secrets to defeat two of his roughest rivals –one widely avoided and physically overwhelming, the other an all-action fellow-great– and he is sharing those secrets. Is Martinez listening?

This much is certain: Maravilla and his legs will have to be near-perfect to triumph. If the ghost of the Boxing Marvel is in his corner, he will be.

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The graphic is the work of Jason McMann of Plymouth, MA. Ray Arcel's recollection is from Ronald K. Fried's Corner Men: Great Boxing Trainers. Britton's predictions were found in Providence News, August 21, 1923; his analysis is in a Los Angeles Times series entitled "My 20 Years in the Ring, from March-April 1923. Charlie Goldman's quote is from George Plimpton's essay "Ring Around the Writers.

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