

“And there was boxing, wrote Louis Golding in 1940, “Thank the Lord, despite the thousand barriers, there was boxing. For I have been a boxing fan just as much as I have been a ballet fan and for similar reasons...

Golding, a British novelist and essayist, was yet another writer who found inspiration in the Sweet Science. Famous in his day if largely forgotten in ours, he attended the fights when he had nothing to celebrate as much as when he did. What he found there was something great and intimate. “And beautiful, too, he wrote, “not less than painting or dancing or drama. The spectacle of two battle-ready men was magnificent to him, “Greek athletes, they were, “molded in bronze to last for all time. Other sports fans may prefer other sports, he granted, such as “tennis or swimming or cycling, but they all fall short in terms of human performance. “The training that boxing involves, he said, “makes the male body as perfect as it knows how to be.

Fighters stand like sculptures under the lights for tense moments. “And then –and then, their great moment comes, Golding beamed, “Then the moment snaps and they move.

The moment snapped Saturday night. When it did, two athletes at the top of their game moved toward ring-center. Sergio Gabriel Martinez quick-stepped forward and made a half-hearted attempt to touch gloves. Paul Williams galloped in and made a whole-hearted attempt to land a right hook. Tall and lean and mean, Williams sought to establish mastery by resolutely refusing to concede space. Martinez and a pair of perfect legs created space. He stepped backward and circled with grace and rhythm.

“It is in the nature of their movement that one will often find, in first-rate boxing, Golding observed, “the quality of ballet, almost as vigorously controlled within the framework of its own patterns. Replace the chattering HBO commentators with classical music and the Martinez-Williams replay becomes rather like a ballet, a pas de deux. One pursues, the other is coy. The controlled aggression of Williams complements Martinez’s dazzling virtuosos. The virtuoso disrupts the movement by sliding back and then in at angles, accompanied by hooks that cut the air and passados thrusting high and low. At times he slips a glove around Williams’ waist and they embrace. The punches of both are executed in textbook fashion. Errant blows demonstrate that this is not choreography, though even those are not wanting for elegance.

“Maravilla Martinez’s performance was an inspired one. The ghost of the “Boxing Marvel Jack Britton seemed to be with him; and a curious artifact that turned up during a post fight interview confirms that notion. It was a notebook. The Martinez camp kept it out of the hands of inquiring reporters but acknowledged that its pages contain handwritten strategies to defeat Williams. It must be brittle and yellow with age. It must be Britton’s. After all, Martinez operated precisely the way Britton said he should. He had to be a study in contrasts to deal with the all-action opponent. And he was: Martinez fought at opposite distances –outside of Williams’ wingspan and inside of it, at his chest. He looped punches over Williams’ arms and threw short straight ones in close. He retreated loosely and attacked with gritted teeth. He led, and he countered

Shazam!

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when Williams led.

Williams fought as expected –and that was his mistake.

He never gave a second thought to anything except imposing his will. “I felt good, he said afterwards, “and was gonna make it a tough fight. He wouldn’t change a thing. “I wasn’t gonna try to box him or nothing, he said, “If we fight him again, I’d do it the same way. Manny Steward believed that Williams was fighting a perfect fight. Manny Steward –and this is rare– was wrong. A boxer’s style should complement not only his disposition but his physicality. Williams is junkyard dog tough with a motivation beyond the kind typically found in other athletes. The desire to excel is too sterile a description for what he feels. When Martinez landed hard shots throughout their first bout and continued to land them in round one of the rematch, Williams’ eyes burned and he retaliated instantly. He either has blind faith in his chin or he didn’t give a damn about getting hit. His come-forward, defense-be-damned, high-volume style reflects his motivation.

His motivation is wrath.

The insistence on trench warfare may match his disposition, but it is an affront against his physicality. Tall and gangly boxers should operate behind their reach. By maintaining distance between them and their shorter opponents, they stay relatively safe. This style complements their physical advantages and with proper punching mechanics, it enhances them. Punches cracking like whips at range are perhaps the most lethal that a boxer can develop –and only a certain body type can develop them. Williams has been shunning what he has and what he is because anger distorts better judgment. He is pretending that he can defy nature with his present style and his trainers have been complicit.

He has been a good fighter with great luck.

Luck bowed to perfect strategy. Martinez saw that Williams tends to drop his right hand. He tested that theory early by sliding to his right as Williams advanced, then tossing over a left. It landed well enough for him to make a mental note that confirmed his written notes. Williams continued to commit errors common to offensive machines by single-mindedly marching into the danger zone without his guard. Meanwhile, Martinez locked in his plan and diverted attention away from it by sliding in the opposite direction and varying his shots.

At 2:02 of the second round, the linear Middleweight Champion of the World executed his plan. Captain Marvel, cape and all, seemed to join the Boxing Marvel to lend Maravilla a bolt to match his brains. Williams misjudged his distance, dropped his right, threw a left, and his royal aspirations ended that second. Martinez had skipped rightward to leverage and launch an overhand left, simultaneously turning his head to ride the incoming left, just in case. And then –Shazam! Williams was struck by lightning and collapsed face first to the canvas.

It was déjà vu. In 1919, Britton scored the only knockout in his series with Ted “Kid Lewis. It was a shock, a ‘Shazam’ that foreshadowed Martinez’s exclamatory feat. The relentless Lewis, like Williams, was known for his ability to take a punch. No one expected a stylist to knock him

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down, never mind out. “Britton, declared the Youngstown Daily Vindicator, “edged in close and ripped rights and lefts to the body. He “measured his distance accurately, and a long right swing caught the Englishman flush on the jaw. That right was a mirror image of what Martinez threw Saturday night. It was a picture-perfect punch.

After the smoke cleared, Ted “Kid Lewis and Paul Williams lay on their respective faces; separated from their senses and by nine decades. Deafening crowds stood and lauded the artistry of two boxing marvels:

Sergio Martinez was jubilant. A crown glimmered atop his head as he was hoisted up onto a second’s shoulders shouting “Argentina! Argentina!

Jack Britton was more restrained. He hurried over to where the referee stood swinging an arm over his collapsed rival, and mimed the count.

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The graphic is derived from the art of Alex Ross, with alterations by Jason McMann of Plymouth, MA. Louis Golding’s quotes are from his book, *The World I Knew*. The post fight interviews of Martinez and Williams were conducted by Rodney Hunt for Goossen Tutor.

Springs Toledo can be contacted at scalinatella@hotmail.com.