Written by George Kimball
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NEW YORK --- If Juan Manuel Lopez felt any pressure to perform moments after Yuriorkis Gamboa had blown out Rogers Mtagwa, against who JuanMa had struggled mightily three months earlier, it was not reflected in his methodical domination of Steven Luevano. Round by round, Lopez simply broke down the WBO featherweight champion on his way to a seventh-round TKO to acquire his second world title and set up a likely collision of the two 126-pound titleists.

If greasing the skids for a Lopez-Gamboa bout later this year was the point of Saturday night's exercise at Madison Square Garden's WaMu Theatre, that plan certainly wasn't disturbed by anything that occurred in the ring Saturday night. Lopez and Gamboa both dominated their respective -- and disparate -- opponents.

Anyone who expected Luevano to go quietly would have been mistaken, but the champion, now 37-2-1, isn't quite quick enough to box with Lopez, and lacks the punch that might discourage a foe from marching straight ahead to tenderize his face with combinations the way Lopez did throughout this one. Even when Luevano was able to land a one-two of his own -- and it happened from time to time -- it barely got Lopez' attention. Luevano's face became redder and redder with each succeeding round, and you could almost sense his resistance sapping as the bout wore on.

Early in the seventh, Lopez caught Luevano with a right uppercut that sent him reeling backward toward the corner, where a left, a right, and another left to him on the floor. Although all three punches landed, it was the middle one, described by Luevano as a right hook, that did the damage.

"I'd been blocking that punch all night, but then he got one through and look what happened," said Luevano afterward. Although he had made the count and indicated his willingness to continue, Luevano was taken into custody by referee Benji Estevez 44 seconds into the seventh.

Lopez, now 28-0, said that his goal all along has been to win titles at four different weights, and Saturday's win puts him halfway there. As for Gamboa's showing against Mtagwa, JuanMa shrugged and said, through an interpreter, "It doesn't matter what he did. What happened with Mtagwa is going to happen because of styles."

Which pretty much echoed the opinion Gamboa had expressed earlier. Asked whether their respective performances against Mtawga should make him the favorite in a prospective fight with Lopez, Gamboa seemed to feel that as yardsticks go, this one was pretty meaningless, the boxing equivalent of comparing apples and oranges.

"Different boxers, different styles, different weights," said Gamboa.

Mtagwa, whose surprising performance against Lopez last October landed him in his second straight title fight, was simply overwhelmed in his bout against the WBA champion.

At 122 1/2, Mtagwa was the lightest challenger for this title in 27 years -- since Rocky Lockridge (also 122 1/2) went up against Eusebio Pedroza (also 126) in San Remo, Italy in 1983, and the Cuban champion appeared to regard him with utter disdain, ignoring Mtagwa"s early attempts to land his jab while swatting him almost at will. Mtagwa landed just one of 22 jabs, Gamboa one of 20, but the difference was that Mtagwa didn't land much of anything else, either, while Gamboa connected with almost everything else he threw.

Mtagwa's handlers said later that the plan had been to just survive the first three rounds in much the manner he had survived the first six against Lopez -- the difference being that this time he got caught and clocked and the game plan went out the window. Gamboa had floored Mtagwa near the end of he first round with a sweeping left.

Mtagwa withstood that one, but then in the second a right-left-right combo sent him toppling over again, and when he got up this time his legs seemed distinctly shaky. Gamboa then walked him across the ring to Mtagwa's own corner, where he landed a left and then appeared place his right glove atop the Tanzanian's head and push him straight down. It was a tactic that in other circumstances might have elicited a warning, but in this case Steve Smoger seemed to feel it offered a pretty good excuse to stop the one-sided fight, and when he did, it didn't exactly set off howls of protest from either the crowd or the Mtagwa corner, since at that point everybody had seen quite enough.

The win advanced Gamboa's record to 17-0. Mtagwa is now 25-14-2. His next bout probably won't be for a title.

In the early stages of his pro career, John Duddy registered so many first-round knockouts -- seven in his first nine pro fights ---that a man could have been forgiven for believing that "KO1" was the Irish middleweight's middle name. His knockout of hapless Juan Astorga, a Mexican-born Kansas City resident, in the principal supporting act underneath the featherweight title doubleheader, marked the first time in nearly four years (Shelby Pudwill on St. Patricks Eve of 2006) that Duddy put away an opponent before a round-card girl could make an appearance.

That Duddy, who came into this one not having stopped an opponent in his last six fights, dispatched Astorga at 1:55 of the opening stanza may have less signaled an abrupt return of his punching power than it had to do with the abilities -- and the stones -- of his opponent. Astorga seemed apprehensive coming into the ring, and from the moment the bell rung appeared to be looking around for a soft place to land.

So anxious was Astorga, in fact, that a minute into the fight he sunk to his knees and took an eight-count from Wayne Kelly -- apparently without being touched. (Trainer Harry Keith said that Asturias' first trip to the canvas was a delayed reaction to a glancing blow to the temple. Looked more like one of those anchor punches to us.)

Not much later Duddy trapped Astorga in a corner, where he hurt him with a left-handed body shot. Duddy followed that one up with a right, which missed, and a left uppercut, which did not. Astorga crumpled to the canvas and probably wasn't going to get up anyway, but by the time the count reached four Kelly had wrapped him in a protective embrace and was struggling to pull his mouthpiece out. His record is now 14-4-1.

Duddy (28-1), told the crowd afterward that "the old John Duddy is back.

"I hope yez got a good taste of that tonight, because there's gong to be more of that to come this year," he promised.

The Irishman, who hopes to maintain a contending position that would put him in a title bout later this year, is scheduled to next perform at Cowboys Stadium on the March 13 Pacquiao-Clotted undercard, but don't expect to see him against a top middleweight. Duddy's advisor, Craig Hamilton, said that Duddy's next opponent would be, well, somebody a lot like Juan Astorga. (In fairness, Hamilton said this three days earlier, before he had actually seen Astorga "fight.")

Duddy could hardly have been pleased to learn earlier in the day that Billy Lyell, whose own trainer described him as "a B fighter" when he upset the Irishman in Newark last year, had slipped into the challenger's role in an IBF title fight next Saturday in Germany. (Champion Sebastian Sylvester had been scheduled to defend against Pablo Navascues, but when the Spaniard failed a doping test Sylvester's promoters were left scrambling. (Since the first American offered the fight, Philadelphian Derek Ennis, tried to improve the $50,000 offer and never heard back from the Germans, it can probably be reasonably inferred that that's exactly what Lyell is getting -- which is not to suggest that it isn't a wise move on his part.

Jorge Diaz, the undefeated (10-0) featherweight from Jersey City, made short work of Tommy Atencio, who traveled all the way from Denver for a fight that lasted less than a minute and a half. Diaz floored Atencio with a straight right and, and although he was able to bounce right back up from that one, the instant referee Kelly turned him loose, Diaz unleashed a left to the body that looked as if it had sawed the opponent in half. Atencio (4-4) was counted out at 1:27 of the first.

The opponents in the other early undercard bout were apparently grown from a hardier strain than Atencio, as five imported victims managed to last until the final bell in their bouts against local favorites. Or perhaps matchmaker Brad Goodman was just looking to get the opponents some rounds.

One of them, South Carolina junior welter James Hope, appeared to have Long Islander Chris Algieri in some serious trouble at least a couple of times in their six-rounder, and probably deserved better than Waleska Roldan's 59-55 mark. Billy Costello and John McKaie had it a closer at 58-56, but the result was still unanimous in the hometowner's favor. Algieri improved to 10-0, while Hope fell to 4-3.

Polish-born New Jersey welterweight Pawel Wolak didn't exactly struggle in his bot against his

Baltimore opponent Ishmael Arvin, but probably didn't frighten away prospective future opponents with an essentially lacklustre performance. Wolak (now 26-1) carried the issue 80-72 on Costello's card, 79-73 on those of McKaie and Alan Rubenstein. Arvin is now 15-2-4.

Brooklyn light-heavyweight Will Rosinsky (10-0) unanimously outpointed Kansas City's Markas Gonzalez (7-3), with Costello scoring the one-sided bout 40-35, McKaie and Rubenstein 40-36.

Long Island welterweight Tommy Rainone upped his pro mark to 12-3, pounding out a unanimous decision over Gerardo Prieto (6-8) of Provo, Utah in their four-round prelim. Rubenstein had it a shutout at 40-35, while Roldan and McKaie 39-31.

Size mattered in the curtain-raiser, in which Philadelphia cruiserweight Garret Wilson (7-3) was giving away just three pounds but dwarfed by nine inches in height, couldn't win a round in his bout against undefeated 6' 6" Puerto Rican Carlos Negron (7-0). All three judges (McKaie, Roldan, Rubenstein) scored it 60-54.

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TOP RANK BOXING
WaMu Theatre at Madison Square Garden
January 23, 2010
FEATHERWEIGHTS: Juan Manuel Lopez, 125 1/2, Caguas, Puerto Rico TKO'd Steven Luevano, 126, La Puente, Calif. (7) (Wins WBO title)
Yuriorkis Gamboa, 126, Guantanamo, Cuba TKO'd Rogers Mtagwa, 122 1/2, Dodoma, Tanzania (2) (Retains WBA title)
Jorge DIaz, 126 1/2, Jersey City, N.J. KO'd Tommy Atencio, 127 1/2, Denver, Colo. (1)
CRUISERWEIGHTS: Carlos Negron, 181, San Juan, P.R. dec. Garrett Wilson, 178 1/2, Philadelphia, Pa. (6)
LIGHT HEAVYWEIGHTS: Will Rosinsky, 173 1/2, Brooklyn, N.Y. dec. Markas Gonzalez, 172, Kansas CIty, Kans. (4)
MIDDLEWEIGHTS: John Duddy, 160 1/2, Derry, Northern Ireland KO'd Juan Astorga, 159 1/2, Lee's Sumitt, Mo. (1)
JUNIOR MIDDLES: Pawel Wolak, 154 1/2, Debica, Poland dec. Ishmael Arvin, 154, Baltimore, Md. (8)
WELTERWEIGHTS: Chris Algieri, 140 1/2, Huntington, N.Y. dec. James Hope, 141 3/4, Rock Hill, S.C. (6)
Tommy Rainone, 148, Plainview, N.Y. dec, Gerardo Prieto, 147, Provo, Utah (4)
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