Written by Thomas Hauser
Tuesday, 25 October 2011 19:23

Drivers see them all the time. They're bumps in a roadway (typically painted yellow, three-to-four inches high, six-inches-or-so deep) designed to reduce the speed at which cars are driven. Think of Nonito Donaire as a finely-tuned Porsche with Bob Arum revving up the engine for a test drive toward super-stardom.

Donaire is charismatic in and out of the ring. The WBC-WBO 118-pound champion is on virtually every pound-for-pound list. His record is 27-and-1 with 18 knockouts (the loss came ten years ago in his second pro fight). In the age of Manny Pacquiao, it doesn't hurt that Nonito's nickname is The Filipino Flash.

On October 22nd against Omar Narvaez at Madison Square Garden, Donaire hit a speed bump. He didn't careen off the road, but it slowed him down a bit.

Donaire was born in the Philippines on November 16, 1982; the third of four children. "We were poor," he says. "We weren't starving, but lots of times we were hungry. If there was a chicken to

split up, it was an occasion."

Nonito's parents emigrated to the United States when he was eight years old, bringing his younger brother with them. Nonito and two older siblings stayed behind with their grandparents.

"My grandfather called me 'midget' because I was tiny," Donaire remembers. "As a kid, you take that very seriously. I thought I was nothing. I was an extra mouth to feed; that's all. I grew up in the streets and got picked on a lot because I was so small. I'd fade away into corners and try not to be noticed. I tried to befriend everyone so I wouldn't have to fight. No one saw the fighter in me, including me."

When Nonito was ten, his parents brought him to America.

"I remember very vividly looking out the window of the plane right before it landed in San Francisco," he recalls. "It was night. I saw all the city lights and wondered, 'What is that? Fireflies?"

The transition to life in America was hard. Nonito spoke Visayan; not a word of English. When he was eleven, his father put him in an after-school boxing program to keep him off the streets.

"I worked hard at it because I wanted my father to be proud of me," Nonito says. "I remember walking to the ring for my first fight. I was so scared, I pissed in my pants. I literally pissed in my pants. But the moment I got hit, I wasn't afraid anymore. That's what courage is; facing your fears and giving your all, no matter what. When I got hit, it was like another person took over my body. I had to defend myself and the courage came out. I scored three eight-counts and won the decision. After I won, my father smiled and gave me a hug. That was the first time in my life that I felt special."

Donaire has an exuberant personality and an enthusiasm for life. He loves to talk. His mind darts back and forth. He's easy to like.

He's also a gifted impersonator with innumerable accents and dozens of characters in his repertoire: Robert DeNiro in Taxi Driver ("You talkin' to me?") . . . Mel Gibson in Braveheart ("They may take our lives, but they'll never take our freedom!") . . . Bruce Lee in Enter the Dragon ("Boards don't hit back!") . . . He could do stand-up comedy and be a success.

But Donaire's most obvious gifts are as a fighter. He's blessed with great athleticism and explosive punching power. Make a single mistake against him, and your night can be over. He also has a good boxing mind that is currently being honed by trainer Robert Garcia.

"I pay attention to detail in everything I do," Nonito says. "A friend of mine drinks beer and always moves his glass in a circle. I've noticed that. When we sit down together, I know what he'll do. If I know what my opponent's habits are, everything in the ring becomes like a slow motion chess match to me."

Donaire has two signature victories to his credit. The first was a one-punch knockout over

then-undefeated Vic Darchinyan in 2007.

“Against Darchinyan, I fought with anger because I felt that he had disrespected me,” Nonito says. “When I knocked him down, I was hoping he’d get up so I could hit him again. After the fight, he said it was a lucky punch that knocked him out; but I don’t believe in lucky punches. When I get hit, it’s because my opponent did something right and I made a mistake. When I hit my opponent, it’s because I did something right and he made a mistake.”

Donaire’s other signature win came against Fernando Montiel in February of this year. Again, one punch made the outcome a foregone conclusion. Montiel rose from a brutal knockdown but was unable to continue.

“The punch I knocked Montiel down with was the best punch I’ve ever thrown,” Nonito says. “The respect I have for him, that he got up and wanted to keep fighting; it’s hard to express the respect I felt.”

Donaire is good, and the consensus is that he’ll get better. “I’m always learning,” he says. “And a lot of what I learned came from studying Bruce Lee. Watching him taught me that, every day, I can become better and go beyond what I already am; that there’s always another lesson to learn; that I have to be dedicated and do things right to succeed in life.”

“I love boxing,” Nonito continues. “I love the beauty of boxing, the purity of boxing. I give my whole being to the sport. Being a great fighter isn’t about belts. To me, greatness is the smile you leave on people’s faces and in their hearts, the way you inspire them. I want to win belts; I want to make a lot of money. But I hope that, a long time from now, people smile when they think about me as a fighter and that I inspire them to want to be the best at whatever they choose to do in their life.”

After Donaire knocked out Montiel, he was on the verge of stardom. Then Golden Boy tried to lure him away from Top Rank. Nonito was told by third parties with their own interests in mind that Top Rank (which had been building his career and still had him under contract) was keeping him under wraps to advance its own economic agenda with Manny Pacquiao. At one point, Donaire signed a contract with Golden Boy. That led to legal action and an ugly war of words.

"Facts are facts,” Top Rank CEO Bob Arum declared. “He’s not a pay per view fighter. Filipinos don't support him. When we put him on pay-per-view, we did no buys. When he fought Montiel, it was all Mexicans. He has not connected with the Filipinos. I don't think the Filipino people like him and that is largely because of his wife [who reportedly was advocating for Golden Boy]. She criticizes the way Jinkee [Pacquiao] dresses and she’s all tarted up. Jinkee dresses like a lady."

That led to a self-righteous rebuttal from Golden Boy CEO Richard Schaefer, who raged, “Nonito Donaire and Rachel Donaire are first-class people. They really don't deserve this sort of vicious and uncalled for attacks from Bob Arum. Bob Arum may be angry that they left him, but such is life. There is no reason for these idiotic comments. Bob Arum's true colors came out, and they always will. That's just the kind of person that he is. If Bob Arum thought that he still

had [a binding contract] with Nonito and he was making these comments, then wouldn't that make him an even bigger idiot? You just don't say these kinds of negative things. That's just a low-life who does that; and that's what Bob Arum really is."

A contract extension heals all wounds. The war was resolved when Donaire signed a contract that binds him to Top Rank for a minimum of four more years. Top Rank can further extend the contract if certain contingencies occur.

"It went out of control," Arum said after peace with the Donaire camp had been restored. "I should know with all my experience that it's self-defeating to carry on battles like this through the media. I apologized to Rachel, which is more than most politicians do when they say something wrong. I apologized sincerely and she accepted my apology. We're all on the same page now."

With the hostilities at an end, Arum began planning for the future. "You can't be a superstar if you have only a regional following," he noted. "You can have a regional base or an ethnic base. But to be a real superstar, which means that you generate a large number of pay-per-view buys whenever you fight, you have to have a much broader following."

Toward that end, Top Rank brought Donaire to New York for the east-coast media exposure that would accompany his fighting in The Big Apple.

"Our goal is to make him a superstar," Arum said during a pre-fight conference call. "We think that Nonito is such a great exciting fighter and such a pleasing personality that, as he rises in weight, he will become a major superstar in the sport."

"Donaire is telling us that he wants to go up in weight and fight the toughest guys out there," Top Rank director of public relations Lee Samuels added. "He wants to fight Mikey Garcia. He wants to fight Juanma and Yuriorkis Gamboa. I said to him, 'These guys are good and they fight back.' Nonito told me, 'No problem.'"

But first there was the matter of Donaire defending his belts against Omar Narvaez in The Theater at Madison Square Garden. The good news for boxing fans was that Narvaez was undefeated (35-0-2) and a "champion." The bad news was that the Argentinean was 36 years old, lacked power (19 knockouts in 37 fights), was moving up in weight, and had won his WBO 114-pound bauble in one of those contests for a vacant title.

Donaire said all the right things in the days leading up to the fight. "Narvaez is a tremendous fighter. He has a great heart. He knows how to win."

At the final pre-fight press conference, people were throwing around the names of Argentinean fighters like Carlos Monzon and Sergio Martinez. Perhaps the most relevant name from a promotional point of view was that of Carlos Baldomir, who came into Madison Square Garden as a prohibitive underdog against Zab Judah in 2006 and emerged with the WBC welterweight crown.

But the truth of the matter was that Donaire-Narvaez had been put together as a showcase for Nonito with Narvaez as a sacrificial lamb.

The Theater was close to sold out with 4,425 fans in attendance. The fight began with Narvaez fighting cautiously and Donaire biding his time, waiting for his opponent to make a mistake. The fight continued with Narvaez fighting cautiously and Donaire biding his time, waiting for his opponent to make a mistake. And the fight ended with Narvaez fighting cautiously and Donaire biding his time, waiting for his opponent to make a mistake.

In sum, it was like a twelve-round sparring session with few solid punches landed. Narvaez, a clever boxer, was there to survive and spent the entire night in a defensive shell. Each of the judges scored the bout 120-108 in Donaire's favor. This observer's scorecard read 118-110.

The encounter didn't do much to advance Nonito's ring career, but it didn't damage it much either. He was in the ring with a fighter who knew how to protect himself. And Donaire already has good highlight-reel footage from his earlier knockouts of Darchinyan and Montiel.

As for the future; Arum proclaims, "We fully intend to make Nonito a pay-per-view attraction. It's silly to guess how long that will take. It will come when it comes. And it's silly to compare Nonito with Manny Pacquiao. They're both Filipino, but Nonito has lived in the United States since he was ten years old. Every fighter is different. Top Rank will promote Nonito as his own person in his own way."

In other words; the issue isn't whether Donaire will be "the next Manny Pacquiao." Pacquiao (like Muhammad Ali, Sugar Ray Leonard, George Foreman, Mike Tyson, and Oscar De La Hoya) is a one-of-a-kind phenomenon. The issue is, "How big can Nonito become in his own right?"

We still don't know how fast and how far the car can go.

Thomas Hauser can be reached by email at thauser@rcn.com. His most recent book (Winks and Daggers: An Inside Look at Another Year in Boxing) was just published by the University of Arkansas Press.

Comment on this article

Radam G says:

First! Nonito Donairey Jr needs to let the bullspit about his being a poor child GO! Poor by who standards? A child, in the Philippines, with a mother who is a school teacher and a father who is an officer in the military, is not PINOY POOR, PERIOD! JunJun does not know Da Manny's type of "POOR!" Maybe JunJun is talking about he was a poor child compared to American standards. Besides, a Filipino poor family could never afford to immigrate to the "Promised Land" of America. Any way! Enough of that! Some will never come out of their reality distortion and be completely and truthfully thankful to their parents, and "But by The Grace of God, there go I."

NDJ is beginning to lose his edge. In his latest bout, his performance was like a ship in the ocean dead. He needs to Pinoy fight. And quit trying to become a slick, quick, gingerbread boy from da-hood sight. Trying to be something else, NDJ will lose it all. It's time to go back to Pinoy Time and what his father taught him and make all these suckas fall. The GOAT Ali and Da Manny were not and are not conventional fighter, nor is NDJ. Holla!