

Gatti vs. Leija a Throwback Fight

Written by Rick Folstad

Tuesday, 07 December 2004 18:00

They should hold this fight in a saloon, someplace where the guys who wear hard hats, drink beer and work 50 hour weeks building skyscrapers can slip inside the door and get the best seat in the house.

It should be a cold place where it's gray and wet most of the winter, the kind of hard place where the day doesn't end until the whistle blows.

Jesse James Leija and Arturo "Thunder" Gatti are a couple of blue-collar guys who decided early on that fighting for a living was better than loading trucks or digging ditches or tending bar. They realized that fighting might be a way out, that if they were good really good they could make the kind of money some of the B actors in Hollywood make.

So far, both have made enough to buy just about any house they want in the old neighborhood. They can drive Jaguars instead of old pickups, and they can walk into any bar on any street and buy everyone in the house a drink if that's what they feel like doing.

When Gatti (38 6, 29 KOs) defends his WBC junior welterweight title against Leija (47 6 2, 19 KOs) on Jan. 29 at Bally's in Atlantic City, it will be like one of those Friday night fights you used to watch in black and white on the tiny Magnavox. Step back and squint at the picture and these guys will remind you of Jake LaMotta and Archie Moore and Sugar Ray Robinson and Carmen Basilio, guys who always came to fight and expected to still be there at the end.

Gatti and Leija don't say a lot. They don't call each other names, make threats or try to steal center stage. They don't boast or beat their chests or make silly predictions or throw chairs at each other to sell tickets. The box office doesn't need the help. These two could walk into a church at midnight and suddenly pack the place. They do whatever they have to do to get ready for a fight, then they do whatever they have to do to win it.

"It's going to be a great night of boxing," Leija said at a recent press conference at Bally's promoting the fight. "We sparred in Houston in 1991. Everyone thought Arturo was going to be a star, and he is. Arturo is a good man in and outside the ring."

That doesn't mean Leija plans on being a nice guy. This isn't a garden party. Like he said at the press conference, he's played the spoiler more than once, derailing the best laid plans of such hot prospects as Hector Camacho Jr., Francisco Bojado and Juan Lazcano.

"I've been fighting for 17 years," he said. "And like I told Bojado, I'm coming to fight."

For a giant killer, Leija isn't a big guy. He doesn't knock people out as much as he wears them down, robs them of their heart.

As for Gatti, he's the bigger name in this fight, the guy everyone pays to see.

Gatti vs. Leija a Throwback Fight

Written by Rick Folstad

Tuesday, 07 December 2004 18:00

"I am going to win on January 29," Gatti said at the press conference. "There is no doubt about that. Leija is the wall and I'm going to climb it. I have a lot of respect for Jesse James. He is a gentleman outside the ring."

And a 12 round headache inside it.

"When I sparred with Leija, I learned that I could hang with a world champion," Gatti said.

Bally's might not be a neighborhood saloon, but it's fine for both fighters.

"I'm undefeated in Atlantic City and I'm going to keep it that way," Leija said.

"I love Atlantic City," said Gatti, who has won his last four fights there, including two wins against Micky Ward. "Atlantic City has been very good to me."

These guys have treated Atlantic City pretty good, too.