

Pacquiao-Bradley Undercard Has Philly Flavor

Written by Bernard Fernandez
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Mike Jones (left, against Jesus Soto Karass) is one of the new Philly fighters who are trying to make a stamp similar to their 70s era brethren.

Some of the more popular dishes in Manny Pacquiao's homeland of the Philippines are pork menudo, pancit molo, maja blanca, inihaw na liempo and dinuguan at puto. It can be presumed that Pacquiao (54-3-2, 38 KOs), who defends his WBO welterweight championship Saturday

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night against Timothy Bradley (28-0, 12 KOs) at Las Vegas' MGM Grand, chowed down on all or some of that highly satisfying and tummy-filling fare in bulking up from 106 pounds, his jockey-level weight for his professional debut on Jan. 25, 1995, to the career-high 145 he carried for his May 7, 2011, bout with Shane Mosley.

It is on the Pacquiao-Bradley undercard, however, that the taste of the evening's events runs more toward that of a Philly cheesesteak. Two Philadelphia born-and-bred fighters, welterweight Mike Jones and super bantamweight Teon Kennedy, bid for world titles on the televised portion of the pay-per-view slate, while highly acclaimed amateur Jesse Hart, son of 1970s middleweight contender Eugene "Cyclone" Hart, enters the pro ranks, also at middleweight.

Should Jones and Kennedy come back as titlists – Jones (26-0, 19 KOs) will be favored in his showdown with veteran Randall Bailey (42-7, 36 KOs) for the vacant IBF 147-pound belt; Kennedy (17-1-2, 7 KOs), who challenges WBA super bantam champ and two-time Olympic gold medalist Guillermo Rigondeaux (9-0, 7 KOs), won't be – they would join with Danny "Swift" Garcia (23-0, 14 KOs) as world champions, the first time Philly has held that distinction since Bernard Hopkins, Nate Miller and Charles Brewer were simultaneous strapholders in 1997.

"It could make Philadelphia the boxing capital of the world again, like it used to be," Doc Nowicki, who holds a managerial interest in all three Philly fighters on Saturday's card, said of the possibility of a sweep by his guys, and maybe even a more bountiful yield moving forward as America's best fight town (which its citizenry has always believed itself to be) attempts to reclaim some of its 1970s glory.

"With this crew of guys that we have now, and even with some young amateurs we're looking at, it could be huge. We could have four or five guys from Philadelphia that could be world champions *at the same time*. When's the last time that's ever happened?"

The answer is never, although some of Nowicki's optimism is rooted in the current reality of four major world sanctioning bodies and 17 weight classes, an explosion of available titles that have diluted the meaning of the word "champion." Still, making it to the top of the mountain is a notable achievement, even if the summit isn't nearly as high or as difficult to scale as it was in that golden era of the '70s, when Philly at one point boasted four of the world's top 10-rated middleweights (Hart, Bennie Briscoe, Bobby "Boogaloo" Watts and Willie "The Worm" Monroe), not to mention heavyweight Joe Frazier, light heavyweight Matthew Saad Muhammad and bantamweight Jeff Chandler, all of whom held world championships at some point during that

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halcyon decade. The '70s were also graced by such Philadelphia-based contenders as welterweight Stanley "Kitten" Hayward and heavyweight Jimmy Young. Light heavyweight and cruiserweight champ Dwight Muhammad Qawi was from right across the Delaware River, in Camden, which makes him at least a quasi-Philly fighter, if you're giving that designation in accordance with the horseshoes-and-hand-grenades theory that closeness counts.

Not that those very good times, when the Spectrum was the site of bouts that routinely drew screaming crowds of 8,000 to 12,000, are coming back any time soon, if ever. Demolition of the Spectrum was completed in May 2011, and the Blue Horizon, the 1,500-seat bandbox that *The Ring*

a few years ago declared was the best place in the world to watch a boxing match, has been dark since super bantamweight Coy Evans scored a six-round decision over Barbaro Zepeda on June 4, 2010. Most of the big fights involving Philadelphia fighters now take place elsewhere, with Atlantic City Boardwalk Hall – 55 or so miles removed from where the Spectrum once stood – anointed as the closest thing to a home base for those who will never know what it felt like to ply their trade before large, adoring local turnouts. Even the great Bernard Hopkins, long the primary face of Philly boxing, fought only twice in his hometown over the past 18½ years, and just once while defending a world title – a desultory eighth-round stoppage of frightened French middleweight challenger Morrade Hakkar on March 29, 2003, in the Spectrum.

But maybe that is to be expected. How are you going to keep them tied to home when they've appeared in such magnificent venues as Cowboys Stadium, the Mandalay Bay and Madison Square Garden, as Jones has after he graduated from his 10-bout apprenticeship at the New Alhambra (now the Asylum Arena) in South Philadelphia? Philly fighters remain fiercely proud to be recognized as keepers of their city's proud pugilistic legacy, but now they're accustomed to taking their act on the road, most often to glitzy casino sites.

"It's pretty much normal now," Jones, who is rated No. 1 by the IBF to Bailey's No. 2, said of his introduction to brighter lights, much larger audiences and the pressure attendant to rapidly rising expectations. "I've been on some pretty big stages, in fights televised by HBO. I won't go in there all nervous and overanxious because it's a world title fight. The guy across from me will be trying to take my head off, same as it was in South Philly. I got to take his head off before he does it to me."

Although Jones and Kennedy are promoted by Philadelphia-based J Russell Peltz, their appearance in conjunction with a high-visibility event such as Pacquiao-Bradley is hardly a coincidence. Jones, a lean welter whose physique and style -- if not yet his accomplishment level -- are reminiscent of a young Thomas Hearns, was said by Peltz to have "a chance to be a

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megastar” in the spring of 2009, which is why Top Rank bought a chunk of his promotional rights. Top Rank founder and CEO Bob Arum, as is the case with many major promoters, likes to control both fighters whenever possible, and an impressive victory by Jones over Bailey could put his name in the mix for a future big-bucks date with Pacquiao, the lead pony in the Top Rank stable. Some of Pacquiao’s more recent bouts were against Miguel Cotto, Joshua Clottey and Antonio Margarito, all of whom bore the Top Rank imprimatur.

“We saw that possibility a year ago, after the second (Jesus) Soto Karass fight, when Mike came back and proved to the world how good a boxer he was,” Nowicki said of a dream pairing of his guy and Pacquiao.

Kennedy is not under contract to Top Rank, but to secure his shot at the Arum-promoted Rigondeaux he had to agree to a three-fight deal with Top Rank should he pull off the upset. It’s the boxing version of someone, this case Arum, taking out an insurance policy against possible disaster. Even if Rigondeaux loses, Arum still would hold paper on the new champ.

But Kennedy, who is 0-1-1 in his two most recent bouts – a 12-round beatdown by Alejandro Lopez and a 10-round majority draw with Christopher Martin – said he will enter the ring against Rigondeaux with an unencumbered mind, which hasn’t always been the case. He had to bear the burden of being the victor in the Nov. 20, 2009, death match with Francisco “Paco” Rodriguez, in which Rodriguez slipped into a coma with a brain bleed after the fight and was taken off life support two days later. And prior to his scrap with Lopez, Kennedy faced multiple felony charges in conjunction with a shooting. It was later determined to be a case of mistaken identity, and all charges against Kennedy were dropped.

“I really didn’t want him to take that (Lopez) fight because I didn’t think he was focused,” Nowicki said. “So what did he do? He followed the guy around like a little puppy dog, and he lost. In the next fight, Martin probably expected Teon to do the same thing.”

Kennedy said he didn’t expect to get a title shot this soon, but he insisted Rigondeaux will be in for a surprise if he expects to tune up the guy who looked so, well, ordinary against Lopez and Martin.

“I’m in this position now and I’m going to make the most of it,” he said. “(Rigondeaux) is

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well-schooled, but he hasn't fought a fighter like me yet."

Hart wasn't supposed to be in Vegas just yet. He is supposed to be with the U.S. Olympic boxing team, preparing for this summer's London Games. But a double-tiebreaker loss to Terrell Gausha in the 165-pound final of the USA National Boxing Championships squashed Hart's dream and sent him in another direction.

"It don't get no bigger than this," Hart, who was signed by Top Rank, said of his pro debut on a Pacquiao undercard. "I won the Olympic Trials, but I'm on the biggest stage that there is right now. This is what I was born to do. My dad told me that when I was a baby, he put a pair of little boxing gloves in my crib.

"It's not my turn yet, but I look to be in the main event of an event like this in three years. I don't want to just become a world champion, but to put my name in the history books as one of the greatest fighters of all time. I won't stop until I'm better than Sugar Ray Robinson."

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Radam G says:

Yummy! Yummy! I'm down with the Pinoy food info, of course. But that Philly cheesesteak is the quick direction to a myocardial infarction. But I ain't hatin!' Nice piece about the Philly pugilists. Holla!