

Boxing Gods Bring Sunshine to Hall of Fame Celebration

Written by Bernard Fernandez
Sunday, 09 June 2013 21:45



CANASTOTA, N.Y. – There is a tale, which might or might not be apocryphal, of the transcendence of the late, great Alabama football coach, Paul “Bear” Bryant. On an overcast, drizzly afternoon in Birmingham’s Legion Field, a Crimson Tide player was injured and lying motionless on the field. A hush fell over the crowd, and Bryant walked out to check on the player’s condition.

Just as Bryant leaned over, someone yelled, “Heal him, Bear!” And at that very moment the rain stopped, the sun peeked out from behind a cloud and the player rose to his feet.

Perhaps there are gods of boxing capable of controlling the elements, or maybe Carmen Basilio, the Canastota native, two-division world champion and pied piper of the International

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Boxing Hall of Fame, was smiling from his celestial perch and making Bear-like magic. But for whatever reason, the IBHOF's 24th annual Induction Weekend – a bit of a misnomer, given that the four-day festivities actually begin on a Thursday – caught a clear, bright and dry break here Sunday, after steady rains for much of the week had dampened the ground, if not the spirits of pilgrims who come here every year to celebrate great fights and great fighters.

If not by Basilio, for whom the earthly bell tolled 10 on Nov. 7, 2012, the overcast skies might have been chased away by one or both of two Hall of Famers who also passed away last year, Angelo Dundee and Bert Sugar, whose cheerfulness and winning ways with the public made attendance for these festivities a must on any fight fan's calendar.

"You couldn't ask for nicer weather," said one fan from New Jersey, who had changed out of his Friday and Saturday attire of windbreaker and long pants, made necessary by mid-50s temperatures, a chill wind and steady rain, into shorts and a T-shirt. "Somebody up there must be looking out for us down here."

There had been a nettlesome school of thought that the IBHOF, first dreamed of in the mid-1980s, made a reality in 1989 by Canastota city fathers and persistent benefactors, and whose first induction class was in 1990, could not be the same with so many of the old standbys gone to their eternal reward. But boxing endures despite whatever adversities are thrown at it, and so it was on another glorious afternoon this picturesque central New York village of 5,000 permanent residents that doubles and sometimes triples in size when the boxing superstars descend upon it.

The 11-member Class of 2013 included former world champions Virgil Hill and the late Arturo Gatti, both of whom were chosen in their first year of eligibility, along with Myung-Woo Yuh; "Let's get it on!" referee Mills Lane; ring announcer Jimmy Lennon Jr. and British boxing writer Colin Hart.

Also inducted – all posthumously -- were Joe Coburn in the pioneer category, Wesley Ramey, Arturo Hernandez and Jeff Smith in the old-timers category, and cartoonist Ted Carroll in the observer category.

The moment in the sun, both literal and figurative, enjoyed by the living inductees was

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heightened by the presence of the usual phalanx of boxing superstars and near-superstars: 91-year-old Jake La Motta, the only attendee from the inaugural Class of 1990, along with, among others, Marvelous Marvin Hagler, Micky Ward, Aaron Pryor, Michael Spinks, Leon Spinks, Tony DeMarco, Pipino Cuevas, Danny “Little Red” Lopez, Gerry Cooney, Earnie Shavers, Carlos Ortiz, Julian Jackson, Iran Barkley, Mike Weaver, Tracy Harris Patterson, Angel Manfredy, Carlos Palomino, Gaspar Ortega, Mike Weaver, Simon Brown, Zab Judah, Simon Brown, Marlon Starling and Basilio’s nephew, Billy Backus, who, like his uncle, became a welterweight champion.

Pryor, a 1996 IBHOF inductee who has come here for 18 Induction Weekends, spoke for many when he described what it means to return to a place that has become to boxing what Cooperstown, N.Y., about an hour’s drive away, is to baseball.

“It’s like a dream that comes true every time I’m here,” said the former junior welterweight champion from Cincinnati known as “The Hawk,” who fashioned a 39-1 record, with 35 knockouts. “You can get hooked. If you come once, you’re probably going to want to come year after year after year.

“To me, it’s one of the greatest feelings you could ever have to come to this special place. I look forward to it like a little kid looks forward to Christmas. The fans here just take you in. They embrace you.”

Pryor believes that a big part of that is location. Like Cooperstown and other non-large-city sites of sports halls of fame – Cooperstown, Canton, Ohio, and Springfield, Mass. – Canastota doesn’t offer so many entertainment outlets that a gathering of former boxers is swallowed up.

“It’s different, it’s special,” Pryor said. “If the Hall of Fame was in, say, New York City, I don’t think it would feel the same. Too many different things to do or see there. Here, it’s all about boxing for these four days.”

Hill, the former light heavyweight and cruiserweight titlist, can relate. Born in Clinton, Mo., he was raised in Williston, North Dakota, which is a long way from Canastota, in terms of miles, but extremely close in its comfortable, rural feel.

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“To me, a city is a place with 45,000 people,” said Hill, whose idea of the big time while growing up was Grand Forks, N.D. But this hick from the sticks, part Native American, went on to post a 228-11 amateur record, win a silver medal at the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics and make 20 defenses of his 175-pound crown.

Then there is Gatti, whose blood-and-guts style made him hugely popular with fans, and whose death in 2009 – ruled a suicide by Brazilian authorities, a decision hotly disputed by his family and friends – made him the central figure in this year’s Induction weekend, even in death.

Gatti’s 40-9 record, with 31 victories inside the distance, isn’t as flashy as that of some Hall of Famers, and even some very good fighters still awaiting their call from the Hall. But he was a fighter’s fighter, backing down from no one, giving no quarter and asking none. His three bouts with Ward, as well as other memorable slugfests with Ivan Robinson, Angel Manfredy, Gabriel Ruelas and others, made him an icon in his pugilistic home of Atlantic City, and with HBO subscribers who drove the ratings up whenever he appeared on the pay-cable giant.

Still, there are those who would argue that Gatti, despite his high entertainment quotient, was not an elite fighter who deserves to walk with the real legends of the ring.

Main Events president Kathy Duva, whose company promoted Gatti throughout his career, acknowledged that Gatti’s enshrinement had raised some hackles among boxing purists, as did the earlier inductions of Ingemar Johansson and Ken Norton. But she quoted Theodore Roosevelt, whose speech at the Sorbonne in Paris in 1910 almost presaged Gatti’s future arrival on the boxing scene.

“It is not the critic who counts, not the man who points out how the strong man stumbled, or where the doer of deeds could have done better,” she said during her turn at the podium. “The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena; whose face is marred by the dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly ... and who, at worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat.”

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Lynch said after the induction ceremonies had ended that he was still bitter that there appears to be no way to reverse the ruling by Brazilian officials that Gatti – born in Italy, raised in Canada and based in New Jersey throughout his professional boxing career – had committed suicide.

“As of now the case is close in the Brazilians’ eyes,” said Lynch. “The detectives we hired and who did so much investigating say it’s 100 percent certain it was not suicide. Someone is responsible for Arturo’s murder.

“But the fact that Arturo never obtained American citizenship means that the FBI can’t look into this for us. It’s just very frustrating.”

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Radam G says:

Great copy and well said about the late, misunderstood, famed Gatti. But my boy Virgil Hill was a silver medalist in 1984, not a gold. Holla!