

Mansour and Rodriguez Aren't the Kind To (Get) Cut and Run

Written by Bernard Fernandez

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Anyone who ever has been punched in the mouth probably understands that a boxing ring isn't the safest place in the world. But there are places that present a far higher risk of physical danger.

Like anywhere behind prison walls, for instance. Or even on the street outside a pizza joint in Scottsdale, Ariz., if the hour is late enough and those encountered are spoiling for trouble and possess a lethally sharp object and the willingness to use it.

Jimmy Malone, the hard-boiled Chicago cop played by Sean Connery in his Academy Award-winning performance in 1987's *The Untouchables*, summed up the pecking order of weaponry when he informed an on-screen assailant that it is never wise to bring a knife to a gunfight. If that logic holds true, it usually isn't what you would call a fair fight if someone is wielding a shiv or a switchblade against an opponent armed only with his fists.

Put it this way: It is always preferable to be jabbed than stabbed.

Just ask heavyweights Amir "Hardcore" Mansour and David "El Nino" Rodriguez, who appear in separate bouts of an NBC SportsNet-televised card Saturday night at Resorts Hotel-Casino. The 41-year-old Mansour (19-0, 14 KOs) takes on former college and professional basketball player Kelvin Price (14-1, 6 KOs) in the 10-round main event, while the 36-year-old Rodriguez (36-0, 34 KOs) faces veteran Darnell Wilson (24-17-3, 20 KOs) in an off-TV six-rounder. Both men have relinquished important and sizable chunks of their careers to cuts and/or incarceration, and both are hurrying to make up for lost time before however much of the windows of opportunity that remain open for them slam forever shut.

Like Tony Ayala, Ike Ibeabuchi and Clifford Etienne, fighters with seemingly bright futures who wasted all or most of their pugilistic potential while locked away in penal institutions, Mansour, a 5-11 southpaw with a big punch and a history of attracting the wrong kinds of attention from judges wearing black robes, knows that being sentenced to long stretches of his life behind bars can prove to be a death sentence if prison protocol is not observed.

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The Wilmington, Del., resident with strong Philadelphia connections – he is promoted by J Russell Peltz, managed by Joe Hand Sr. and trained by Howard “Moses” Mosley and strength-and-conditioning coach Danny Davis -- shook his head when told of a story often recited by IBF light heavyweight champion Bernard Hopkins, the most famous and accomplished ex-convict now plying his trade inside the ropes. Hopkins has spoken of how, as a teenager convicted as an adult on a strong-arm robbery charge, he sought out the toughest, meanest con in the yard, decked him with an overhand right and knocked out several of his teeth, the purpose of which was to send a message to other inmates that he was not someone to be messed with.

“Where I was incarcerated,” said Mansour, who has spent a total of 16 years, 7 months as a guest of various correctional institutions, “if you did something (like what Hopkins described), they would kill you. You wouldn’t get away with nothing like that these days because the baddest dude in the yard would have about 50 guys that he could look at a certain way and they would bum-rush the guy that had hit him with knives or whatever.”

Asked if improvised weapons are easy to procure in prison, Mansour said it depends on the prison, and the prisoners. But he’s experienced and endured stuff that makes what viewers see on programs like *Scared Straight* seem more like the kiddie pabulum doled out on *Barney & Friends*.

“There are plenty of fights,” he explained. “I just got a call the other night from a friend of mine that’s in Louisiana. I was incarcerated with him in Coleman, Florida. They shipped him out just recently from Coleman to Louisiana. He told me about a guy that just got killed.

“When I was in Coleman, there were a lot of guys just getting tore up. Beaumont, Texas ... They shut that prison down because there was so many murders in there. There are fights all the time in prison.”

Makes you wonder how anyone ever is released unharmed, physically, mentally or spiritually. Mansour, who is ranked No. 15 by the IBF, said that just surviving day-by-day is a challenge to those who aren’t tough enough to handle the lifestyle.

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"I was in prison when I started boxing," recalled Mansour (whose birth name was Lavern Moorer). "I was a juvenile and my crime was so severe they (convicted) me as an adult. I was 17 and I came back to the tier every day with a bloody nose. I was sparring with big men, grown men, who had no problem with beating up on some kid just starting out.

"Around 1994, they did away with the boxing program because of cost-cutting. But they still had the heavy bags, the rings. You could still train, but there was no more actual competition. It wasn't the way it was when (former light heavyweight contender) James Scott was getting nationally televised fight at Rahway (a New Jersey penitentiary) behind prison walls."

Which is not to say that some of the fights were, as they say, unsanctioned. He said the path taken to get to this point by the 6-7 Price, who played college hoops at Southwestern Louisiana (now the University of Louisiana at Lafayette) and then as a pro in Australia, the Philippines and Venezuela, as well as in the Continental Basketball Association and the United States Basketball Association, is nothing compared to what he was obliged to endure.

"Nobody, and I mean *nobody*, is going to get in that ring with me and deny me of goals I've been working half my life to get," Mansour said. "Look, I didn't grow up playing basketball. I didn't grow up playing football. I grew up fighting. That's what I do. I done been in 10-by-10 (foot) cells with men with knives who tried to hurt me. Ain't nobody gonna get in the ring with me now, with gloves on, and deny me of anything this sport has to offer.

"Look, man, I know I blew a lot of opportunities. A lot of opportunities blew by me. This is not something I'm going to let get away from me, not now. I know who I am and what I've done. But you can't get stuck in the past. It is what it is. Nothing can change it.

"Anyone who winds up in prison as a result of his own doing is gonna wish that he had done something different. It's the same with me. OK, so I'm 41 now. But when you look at me physically, I rate with any heavyweight in the top 10 for looking the youngest, the fastest, for having the best physique, for hitting the hardest. I still got enough time to achieve my dream, my mission, of winning a world title."

Mosley, who, like Davis, has spent time working with Hopkins, agrees that Mansour has a chance to score big not only in the ring, but in life.

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“God works in mysterious ways,” Mosley said. “God has given Amir a gift and turned him completely around. When Amir first came to me, I had about 12 amateur kids I was working with in the gym. Some of them were doing bad. They didn’t have the things they needed. Amir bought them (boxing) shoes and trunks. He talks to them and tells them what’s gonna happen if they do things the wrong way, and what can happen if they do things the right way. He’s become a role model for those kids, and they look up to him.”

Rodriguez, who recently was signed to a promotional contract with Kathy Duva’s Main Events, is for the most part a handsome man from El Paso, Texas, with one extremely obvious identifying mark: a jagged scar that runs from his left ear to his lower lip. No one with padded gloves could possibly have inflicted such a wound, but someone with a knife could, and did.

“I was rated in the top 15 by the WBC,” Rodriguez said of his life before the attack, which occurred in January 2012. “I was on my way. I was still kind of celebrating after my most recent fight (a second-round stoppage of Byron Folley on Dec. 3, 2011) and I guess I was in the wrong place at the wrong time. I got into a confrontation with six men. I should have known at that point that I needed to just go in the other direction. But I don’t really back down from anyone; I’m a fighter.

“As I stepped toward them, they scattered. But I turned my back on them, which I shouldn’t have and they – one of them, anyway – came forward and slit my throat. I lost two pints of blood. My friend, who came to my assistance, got stabbed (on the arm) as well. We both bled out.

“The only thing I remember is waking up in the ambulance. It’s still very blurry to me. I don’t remember what the guys looked like or anything. Maybe if I underwent hypnosis or something, I would. But maybe it would seem even more horrific if I did remember more.”

Rodriguez almost died that night. But the attack – the assailants have never been identified or caught -- drained him of more than a sizable percentage of his blood. It almost removed his will to live and to function as he had before his face was reassembled with an astounding 369 stitches.

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“You could see right through to the neckbone,” he said of the gaping wound. “I was a goner. They didn’t expect me to pull through. I was in a coma for three days. I snapped out of it, but it took me about a year and a half to even decide what I wanted to do again. I had had a very traumatic experience. I didn’t know what to do with my life at that point. It took a special friend to get me out of bed, to take me to the gym and get me to restart my life.

“I wasn’t really looking to resume my career; I just needed to get active again. It didn’t take long, though, before I decided that (boxing) was what I wanted to do. I didn’t want my story to end that way. I wanted to end it on my terms.”

Duva said she believes that Rodriguez can and will continue to build upon his flashy record, which admittedly has been fashioned against mostly second-tier opponents, the kind represented by a journeyman like the 39-year-old Wilson.

“David is a guy that we at Main Events have had our eyes on for a very long time,” Duva said. “He fought on an undercard with Evander Holyfield in Texas (Holyfield scored a 10-round unanimous decision over Lou Savarese on June 30, 2007, in El Paso while Rodriguez stopped Rick Dyer in two rounds) and since that day I hoped our paths would cross again. Happily, they did.

“We’re talking about someone who is a unique personality and a huge puncher. David Rodriguez is everything that people want to see in a heavyweight.”

In addition to Mansour-Price, the co-featured bout in the last fight card of 2013 to be televised by NBC SportsNet is a 10-round light heavyweight matchup of Ryan Coyne (21-1, 9 KOs), of St. Louis, and Lionell Thompson (14-2, 9 KOs), of Buffalo, N.Y. Coyne is rated No. 8 by the WBA and, like Thompson, is hoping to better position himself with a victory for higher-visibility bouts with some of the bigger names in what has turned into boxing’s hottest division.

Also off-TV – unless a couple of quick knockouts in the Mansour-Price and Coyne-Thompson fights free up time – is the heavyweight matchup of two-time former cruiserweight champion Steve “USS” Cunningham (25-6, 12 KOs) and Manuel Quezada (29-7, 18 KOs).

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brownsugar says:

Its tragic that Mansours career was side tracked...most recently (severaby years ago) by associating with a known exfellon who owned a weapon and was accused of distributing drugs. This activity constituted a paroll violation.....41 years old is an ancient age to be mounting a comeback... I hope he can earn enough money to transition into another means of income.