

## "He's Still The Most Handsome Man, And Everything To Me"

Written by Michael Woods

Tuesday, 24 December 2013 15:29

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Magomed Abdusalamov entered the ring the night of November 2nd at the Madison Square Garden Theater with a brand of confidence not unfamiliar to boxing fans in many fighters they've seen who have called Russia home. His face impassive, eyes locked in, not darting or downcast, indicating the presence of excessive nerves or self doubt. Body language readers would agree this athlete had the look of one possessing a decent degree of certainty, at least, that he'd perform the violent waltz he'd engaged in 18 times prior as a professional since entering the pro side in 2008 in similar fashion to the way he'd done before, in accumulating an 18-0 mark, with 18 knockouts to his credit.

Exactly when Mago, the son of a hard-ass dad who told him he could be a bandit or boxer, but that he'd off him if he chose the life of crime, the brother to three sisters and a devoted younger brother, the husband to a woman who found herself attracted to the burly physique and softer emotional availability when they were put together by family members who reckoned they'd be a nice fit, developed a blood clot in his brain absorbing punishment at the hands of opponent Mike Perez is not a mystery that can be solved.

If you guessed that at the very least, the satanic door to the traumatic head injury which has placed Mago at Manhattan's Roosevelt Hospital where he was brought after complaining of feeling unwell, and vomiting, after losing to Perez in a fight shown on HBO occurred early on, your guess wouldn't be ridiculed by an expert in brain trauma who watched the ten round contest of strength and will at MSG.

Of course, all examinations of these such tragedies are performed within the safe confines of a bubble of hindsight, and the natural instinct to accuse, diagnose, and elevate oneself to a zone of self righteousness which allows a follower of the fight game to sleep with clear conscience. Looking back, it is easy to say that the ref, the cornermen, the New York State Athletic Commission personnel present ringside, the physicians employed by the commission overseeing the contest, that any and maybe all of these folks could have and should have read

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the signs, and saved Mago from his downfall, his immense heart, and propensity for enduring levels of discomfort in the course of combat which would have forced lesser men to utter No Mas.

Certainly, Dr. Rupendra Swarup, the director of Roosevelt Hospital's neurosurgical intensive care unit, who assessed Mago and demanded a Catscan, stat, for the boxer after midnight on Nov. 3, would have preferred that someone had chosen differently, so this man wouldn't have been rendered so stricken, so compromised, that hope is the lifeline his family clutches at, and prayers are what they are asking for in this holiday season.

Mago had been seen by several doctors after losing a unanimous decision to a guy that had a rep as someone who sometimes would coast during bouts, and for that matter, in training camp. Perez didn't coast during the fight with Mago, or, it appeared, during camp, as his pressure didn't cease and the volume of his power punching troubled the Russian-born hitter.

But as the main event unfolded, as Gennady Golovkin exerted his power edge on fellow middleweight Curtis Stevens, Mago's body rebelled against him. His brain signaled that the punches thrown by Perez were not just in a day's work, were not to be absorbed and mitigated over days and weeks, and maybe dealt with decades down the line, but were a clear and present danger to his life.

Sanity and caution were late to the sad party but finally, Mago was ferried to the hospital. Tests showed a clot on the left side of Mago's head, and a traumatic subdural hematoma. Fight fans know that condition is too often a fatal one, and in the early morning hours of Nov. 3, it looked like the inappropriately named "sweet science" would claim another victim, another combatant who gravitated to the ring to test his will and saw the sport as a means to economic stability, if not security.

Was it one blow that resulted in a brain hernia, or an accumulation? Impossible to know, but on the operating table, staff had to remove a portion, on the left side, of this 32-year-old man's skull, to allow the brain to swell. Medical staff wanted to reduce that swelling, performing a decompressive hemicraniectomy to allow the brain to swell, without being squeezed and suffering further damage. The clot was evacuated, the swelling was kept under control, with the administering of hypertonic saline solution being a key element. A cooling catheter also helped keep the swelling manageable. IV medication got pumped into Mago, who lived in Florida after moving from Russia, to decrease his brain activity, to help keep pressure down. Reports in the

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days after the tragedy said that the boxer was placed into a coma, but, in fact, he was already comatose on the operating table. There was a pronounced lack of hope in some circles, of those that knew the brutal true toll the Perez punches had taken on Mago, in the days following Mago's time on the operating table. "He was in very bad shape," Dr. Swarup told me during a visit to see Mago at Roosevelt 46 days after his world jarred off axis. But the man is a fighter. Not was. The same elements that brought him to contender status were and are present now that his first identity is that of patient.

Somewhat miraculously, after docs and close family feared that he'd be unable to bounce back, he did. Not to where he was, but to a place that allows for hope. Twenty days after his near fatal fight, he was woken up. "But this is just the beginning," Swarup told me. "He's going to get better, I'm confident. But he will not be the same. He's going to have neurological deficits."

After detailing portions of Mago's medical journey, Swarup, no fan of boxing, told me he'd be fine if the sport didn't exist. I told him I understood that stance, but asked him to consider a bigger picture. Men like Mago, I told the doctor, aren't built like you and me. He had a desire to test himself to an extreme degree, to fire walk in a realm that we would regard as absurdly self-destructive. The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation, and resign themselves, in between periodic bursts of self-laceration and subsequent heart-felt resolutions to elevate, to an unexceptional existence. The super-majority will live leaving next to no imprint upon this plane, and in 150 years, a name carved on a stone on a grassy knoll will be their sole marking left behind. But the Mago's of the world seek a grander legacy, and are willing to risk much to achieve that. Also, I noted to the doctor, when the times comes--and, I dare say, it won't--that income and opportunity inequality evens out, and persons on the lower rungs are afforded educational and economic footholds afforded to people like me and the doctor, then I will be willing to entertain the push to abolish boxing. But until that time comes, I asked the doctor humbly, please be careful of lobbying for the removal of a path to personal and economic stability and prosperity for a segment of the world population which is in dire need of every single avenue to enrichment. And finally, just know that if boxing is abolished, and the structures, even if they can be wickedly imperfect and sub-sufficient, we have in place are removed, fights will still be held. But they will take place in dark warehouses, they will be run by sociopaths that make today's promoters look like Mother Theresa's, and safety measures, like trained referees and mandatory ambulances, will be nothing but vestiges of an era of supposed barbarism, of pre-enlightenment.

The doctor, bless him, listened intently and patiently, and admitted his eyes had been opened, even if he hadn't been swayed to the opposite aisle. He was still no proponent of pugilism, but at least now he'd heard other sides, and some some merit in the oppositions' defense. But no, I hadn't convinced him, however, and, it must be admitted, I hadn't fully convinced myself. Not when I looked at Mago in that bed. The left side of his skull featured a marked indentation. His

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body--once 6-3, 230 pounds--had shrunk in the six weeks, and wasn't any longer the vessel of a warrior, but rather the remainder and reminder of a previous status which would never again be regained.

But in situations such as these, it is counterproductive to focus on what was. The strides the fighter has made in recent weeks are considerable; as I stared at Mago, his eyes were open, and his right pupil would follow an object held in front of him, like, say, pictures of his three children, age 7, 4 and almost one. He is breathing on his own, and he is holding onto his weight OK, taking in liquid food through a feeding tube. "When he came in, he was almost dead," Swarup reminded me, "and from that point of view he's come a very long way. But forget about boxing, he will never be the same, period."

But back to that optimistic outlook, Mago can move the right side of his body some. And because he's left handed, left-side dominant, the doctor tells me, he has a better chance of regaining the ability to speak.

Boxing runs in the Abdusalamov family, though it looks like the chain has been broken.

"Boxing my life," the brother who virtually lives in Mago's hospital room in the neuro unit, Abdusalam, says to me, "now boxing I no like."

He places his left hand on his big brothers' brow, to check for a fever. Little brother boxed himself, but, he says, he won't ever again lace on a pair of gloves. He looks at Mago.

"I am Mago situation, like, no."

In that halting imperfect but completely comprehensible English, he tells me that back in Russia, he works as a city administrator in the city they lived in, Dagestan. He's been living here at Roosevelt, but will have to go back to Russia, and re-apply for a visa to come back here, at the end of February. And how is he doing, overall?

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"Sad," he says. "Morning, day, night, here. Sleep, no."

Mago's wife Bakanay, staying in Connecticut, in an apartment with the kids, which HBO is paying for, comes all the time, too. The little brother, as he wipes Mago's face with a tissue smeared with moisturizer, tells me the kids have not seen dad. He makes a motion with his hands, to his eyes, the universal sign for crying. Mago's mom and dad, he says, are back in Russian having a hard time dealing with the new reality. Mom is having heart problems, and dad too is being treated for stress. Mom is able to get rest after she gets a sedative shot, he says. And, he admits, mom doesn't even know quite how dire things were, and how compromised Mago is. We communicate more clearly when Abdusalam installs a translation app on his phone.

"Mago very much loves his daughters, he never imagined himself in such a situation," he types, and shows to me. "He always said boxing is his life."

The quality of the devotion the brother shows for the elder needs no explanation or translation. During the almost three hours I spent in Mago's room, Abdusalam showed himself to be an effective caregiver as a squad of nurses. He wiped Purell on a tissue, and wiped Mago's cheeks. Every fifteen minutes he checked his brow, for fever, which has been a persistent issue during the Roosevelt stay. He moved Mago's head, so the big man didn't get locked into a position for too long. He rubbed oil on Mago's feet, and then a bit later cracked his toes.

"He like," the brother told me.

A bit later, he squeezes Mago's left foot, then right foot, then left, doing a reflexes check. "You're a good brother," a nurse says admiringly, stealing my thought. Abdusalamov massages Mago's back, and then tracks his pupil movement, sweeping his right hand in front of Mago's face. On this day, there is progress, as now both pupils are tracking movement. The nurse is pleasantly surprised at the development.

"Mago, he was a good brother growing up?" I ask little brother.

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"Very good brother," the younger man answers. "Brother...friend."

Near the end of my visit, I ask Abdusalam if I can buy him a meal. I appreciate the time he takes with me, the patience he has with me, and admire the resolve and uncommon decency he displays.

"I OK," he says, turning down the gesture. "Thank you. I cannot leave brother for a moment."

On Tuesday, Dec. 22, word comes that a bed has opened up at the Helen Hayes Hospital in West Haverstraw, NY, a well-regarded rehab for people in Mago's position, and that Mago will be moved there, either today or tomorrow. Wife Bakanay is present for the possible transition day. I ask her how she is holding up, how she is feeling.

"Hopeful, optimistic," she says in Russian, as translated by a nurse. "I'm hoping he will recover and am in good spirits, with lots of hope."

Bakanay has no love for the sport of boxing, understandable as it is pugilism which has made it so she feels unwilling to come clean with her kids about dad's condition. "I told them he has a fractured hand, and is in the hospital," she says.

As a holiday gesture of goodwill, Bakanay says, she'd be grateful if fans of the fighter put in a good word to whatever Almighty they choose to believe in for his recovery. "I want people to pray for him," she says.

The 27-year-old tells me how she and the boxer came to meet. It turns out they were matched up, as two families thought they'd be a good pairing. They were.

"I like him right away, I was very attracted to him," she says. "Handsome man. Strong."

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There's no delicate way to communicate this brutal truth, that a man who had dreams of winning title belts and building a considerable trove of winnings to sustain his family is now unable to walk or talk. The indentation on his skull is jarring to eyes not used to seeing the carnage of traumatic brain injury up close. But Bakanay stares at Mago and doesn't see what I do: "Even in this condition, he's still the most handsome man, and everything to me."

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### **brownsugar says:**

There is nothing more precious in life than your first love,..... get well soon Mago.

### **spit bucket says:**

I'll pray for him. A hard story to read but a wonderful piece. I'll be thinking of Mago and his family today. He is surrounded by people who love him... the most powerful medicine. I think he's going to thrive and live a full rich life. Merry Christmas Mago & family. Nothing but the best for you from here on out.

### **amayseng says:**

Yep prayers for Mago will continue to be sent as the man remains a father first. Hope he recovers well and has a normal and good life.

This is yet another wakeup call. When does a corner pull the plug? the ref? doctor?

ward vs gatti could have been pulled 145 times. such a tough situation.

However it is the responsibility of the corner to look after their fighter, they know him

intimately. this sport can be heart wrenching at times.

### **DaveB says:**

This saddens me so. I can't express my emotions in words at this time.

### **teaser says:**

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he is blessed to be surrounded by people who love him ...he must be a special person to be loved so much ...God bless him and them...be the best you can be as always Mago..... kudos to HBO for the financial assistance

### **kidcanvas says:**

all the best to Mago. this was really well written .good job !

### **Radam G says:**

Ditto all the above posters. I agree with single word in every post. Holla!