

Gary Stark: "Boxing is just part of the plan"

Written by Robert Mladinich

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Promoter Lou DiBella will put on his annual "Season's Beatings" Christmas extravaganza in the Grand Ballroom at the Manhattan Center in New York on Thursday, December 15th. As usual, an enthusiastic crowd is expected to be there to cheer on the five New York stalwarts appearing on the show.

They are junior welterweight Dmitriy Salita, 23-0 (14 KOs); junior welterweight Edgar Santana, 15-2 (10 KOs); junior featherweight Gary Stark Jr., 12-0 (6 KOs); super middleweight Curtis Stevens, 9-0 (8 KOs); and "Punchin" Pat Nwamu, 10-1 (3 KOs).

All are very popular, well-established prospects with large local followings. Stark, for example, has fought three of his last four fights in New York. His busy, crowd-pleasing style has left his fans clamoring for more. On Thursday he will square off against Jose Hernandez, 8-2 (4 KO), of Atlanta.

A native of Brooklyn who now fights out of Staten Island, the 25-year-old Stark loves the pressure of competing at home. "It's a great feeling to fight in front of all of your friends and family," he said. "With every combination I throw and every punch I land, I know they are cheering me on to victory."

Unlike many of his contemporaries, Stark, who is nicknamed "The Kid," started boxing relatively late. His first competitive tournament was in the 1999 New York Metros tournament where he advanced to the finals. That same year he also reached the finals of the New York City Golden Gloves.

That was the last year that Stark would come in second locally. In 2000, he won titles in both of those tournaments and, with only 13 bouts to his credit, made it to the finals of the Eastern Olympic Trials. He finished his amateur career as a three-time New York City Golden Gloves champion and was ranked fifth in the country by USA Boxing.

"I was always around boxing, from the time I was five or six years old," said The Kid, whose father, a former amateur standout named Gary Sr., is of Guatemalan and Jewish descent. Stark's mother is Puerto Rican.

Although the young Stark was around boxing, he didn't always cotton to it. His first love was always baseball, and he played second base for Kingsborough Community College in Brooklyn. However, once he realized he'd have a better shot at a pro boxing career than a pro baseball career, he donned the gloves for good.

"Once I gave up baseball, I became totally committed to boxing," said Stark. "Now boxing is my life."

He is also committed to establishing a second career in the entertainment industry. He is

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assisted in that endeavor, as well as boxing, by Damon Dash of Roc-A-Fella Records. Stark recently got a modeling assignment that appeared in Playboy magazine, and was also featured on New York's Emmy award winning WB 11 morning news program in early December.

"I have a lot of plans for the future," said Stark, who has fought professionally in New York, New Jersey, Minnesota, Tennessee, Florida, Maryland and Alabama. "Boxing is just part of the plan."

Stark has no shortage of other positive people in his life, including retired NYPD detective Tommy Dades, who was instrumental in the arrest of two retired New York City detectives for committing numerous murders for the mob. Dades' work on that case resulted in him being interviewed on "60 Minutes."

Dades is a trainer at the Park Hill Boxing Club on Staten Island, where Stark Jr. and Sr. work out regularly. "The Kid is something special," said Dades. "He's going a long way. He works hard, has patience, and surrounds himself with good people. A year or two from now, you're going to see him on HBO. He's that good."

As difficult as it is becoming an East Coast junior featherweight sensation, The Kid is undeterred. He saw Junior Jones do it, and he is convinced he can do it too.

"Things will fall into place," he said confidently. "All I got to do is keep fighting and winning."

Stark has been out of action for a few months because of an injury he incurred in training. However, he is raring to go in what he is certain will be his first fight back on the road to a glorious future.

"It is a thrill to be fighting again," he said. "Unfortunately this Christmas the only holiday colors my opponent will see are black and blue. I've been training hard since my last fight in June and I know I will be ready for this fight."

The Manhattan Center is located on West 34th Street, just off of 8th Avenue in Manhattan. The doors open at 6:00 P.M. and the fists start flying at 7:00 P.M. Tickets range from \$40 to \$150. Contact DiBella Entertainment at 212-947-2577 for tickets or further information.