

Thoughts in the off-season

Written by Patrick Kehoe

Tuesday, 26 December 2006 19:00

Our thoughts this time of year tend toward reflection, trying to summarize and evaluate the events that made up the fabric of another year now dimming, rain washed, snowbound, closing. In boxing, as with every year, titles were won and lost, fighters and their cadres push toward lofty goals of money and fame or find themselves victims of irrational daring or unforgiving naiveté, the promoters and managers of record and notice preening or repositioning based on events beyond their economic manipulations. And as with each calendar year, there are rights of passages predicted, legends in passing and legends passing, the blight and might and matter of the sport continuously repopulated yet holding itself back, mindful of the sentiment for former moments of glories, champions just yesterday the blushing ring warriors of ultimate regard; time does that to all things mortal, memorialized.

When a true giant of boxing's storied past dies – for those who love the nostalgic grip that boxing lore exerts – memory connects into the present, arteries of feeling open up for imagination's coursing. In this year, 2006, featherweight champion, boxing legend, Willie Pep died on November 23rd. "Boxing really is supposed to be about hitting and not being hit... this is the idea of the game... like being an artist." Has any boxer ever had a nickname more befitting the style of his in the ring performance than Willie Pep – Will-o'-the-Wisp! Born near Hartford, Connecticut, on September 19, 1922, Pep managed to make fashionable deft defensive jitterbugging boxing with slash and dash all-around effectiveness during the era of Joe Louis, Ray Robinson, Beau Jack and Ike Williams. When Pep curved into view, snapping out punches, he was already gone, just beyond the range of counter measures; that's where Pep the boxer jived and jilted, thriving just beyond the range of furious returns.

Mostly, his opponents were left frustrated, their best right hands glancing off shoulders, left hooks pushing along the clouds of ringside cigar smoke. His small body radiated energy most all of his life as if the atomic structure of his body was in discharge. A man of his time, a Depression Era kid at heart, Pep gave away money to family and friends almost as fast as he could fight to earn it; he did buy a house and clothes for his parents, cars were purchased and given away. "I was a soft touch." He'd seen America close to starving and wanted everyone to bask in the glory that his ring royalty, his speed and agility won him. Just consider that from his professional career debut in 1940 until October, 1948 he tallied a record of 134-1-1. In black and white, a hero of another century another wartime, boxed to keep in condition instead of training camps, a featherweight king during the eight division ring world of boxing past, a phenom who made it over the long haul call him a champion: Willie Pep.

Speaking of legends, we can discuss Erik Morales in the past tense, unapologetically, if not officially. No, Erik Morales has not yet officially retired. But we know the man and we remember the talent, the trials, the triumphs and the titillating moments he made happen in the prize ring, for his fans, for all of us who love the stealth and steel of championship encounters. It always seemed Morales was fighting to become a champion or defending as a champion his belts of honor and labor. It didn't matter if a championship contest was even officially sanctioned; just to have the matured Morales in a ring meant that the highest form of the sweet science was about

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to be assaulted, presented, and contested for assets monetary and heroic. When Morales battled Marco Antonio Barrera the entire conceptual frame of boxing became clear, the tradition and challenge of what it means to be a great fighter on display, the dramatics self-defining.

Though in his last four years as a professional, Morales drifted toward the expedience of a ring banger at the expense of discipline boxing, we who remember the best of Morales admire the memory of the Tijuana fighter as a master boxer with big clout. Two years ago I asked Morales if he felt he'd lost his patience in the ring, the patience to box and slowly let his fight plans adapt to the opponent. At first he delayed responding, then he said, "I feel I am still patient and can do what I have to do... in the ring you have to fight according the circumstances and it depends on what works for you." I will always remember that pause, because it had the sound of an echo, the echo of memory tolling. He had indeed lost the patience to box and fight situationally, driven by the compulsion to be marketable late in his career. His occupation as a promoter of fights in Mexico and his decade long battle with his weight finally altered the essential balanced perspective his best boxing was born of. Late in his career, Erik Morales tried to merely combat, fighting to enflame the passionate engagement of the fans that had for so long loved him as fighter, a champion and a man.

For those boxing fans who missed it, Joe Mesi's now 4-0 in his 2006 comeback run since being out of boxing for two years following his medical suspension after the March 12, 2004 Vassily Jirov victory at the Mandalay Bay in Las Vegas. And that makes his career slate read 33-0 (26). Statistics can indeed be misleading; one only need examine his six-round unanimous decision win over a 3-7 Stephane Tessier at the Uniprix Stadium in Montreal in June to see just how perilously close to absurdity has the Buffalo heavyweight's career careened. Even the telegraphing, amateurish Tessier was able to get home with right hands to Mesi's jaw time and again. For the entire six rounds Mesi pushed his punches, lumbered into position and generally puffed his way to the decision nod. Good thing that Tessier, holder of one career knockout, has the hitting prowess of Mike Myers. Do we need to add that Tessier lost his next three fights in a row, nine in a row and counting for the now 3-11 (1), 34-year-old, 5'10" terror from La Belle Province?

One can only wait with apprehension what looms in the near term future for the likeable Joe Mesi in even a mediocre heavyweight division.

Speaking of retirements that should be made official, either by moral persuasion or an act of divine intervention if necessary, Roy Jones seems destined to fight again in 2007. Why? Call it the necessity of ego or because he can, because he can afford to indulge himself against reason, again all the signs of intelligibility that for over a decade marked his every more in the ring and outside of it. Just ask Ray Leonard; leaving the bright lights of personal notoriety and that which brought you to the attention of the world, well, that's difficult. Even when your health is at risk? Seem so. And every boxing fan cannot but be amused or alarmed at the ironies of seeing the once trauma averse Jones playing the daredevil just when his ultrasonic reflexes have vanished, his willowing speed power ratio has been degraded by time itself.

It's all so bizarre, this dance with indifference, as if his stardom is disposable, as if he's now paying the price for the ingenious exploitation of his tailored career by walking into the lion's

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den. The notion of Roy Jones, now 37 and counting, hanging on to go from Prince Badi Ajamu to whomever, Antonio Tarver, Glen Johnson, etc., seems an exercise in pointless melodrama. Besides, aren't those men of metal moving in the shadowland of big time boxing? Aren't they close to being finished as well? Tarver couldn't even get up enough jam to force feed his famous left hand down the throat of Old Man River Bernard Hopkins. And Glen Johnson certainly fought credibly well against Clinton Woods losing over 12 rounds in September, but, Jones, Tarver and Johnson has the ring of a Senior's Tour about it, ya, ok, a Champion's Tour. Let it go Roy; you were the man and you made the real money. Enough already! If Hopkins wants to dangle his mask of menace in the face of Calzaghe or Kessler or, for another time, Taylor, let him have his perverse fun. You certainly had yours. And back then you were untouchable, a genius of unorthodoxy. But that was long ago and far away, a fighter's lifetime ago, during your prime, back when you called yourself RJ and everyone could see who that was.

You have to wonder if former lightweight title holder Paul Spadafora will weather well in the coming seasons. The same could be said of Marco Antonio Barrera; you have to wonder if he learned something about a fighter's mortality during his rounds with Rocky Juarez. Did he see his phantom self easily evade Rocky's punches that were landing on him, driving him onto the ropes, his body a shell less and less responsive to the directions of mind and will. One thing is for sure if he's going to remain active and a champion in spirit then he must bravely do what his old nemesis Erik Morales did, face up to Manny Pacquiao for a second time. Barrera's first experience was not as successful as Morales' was and so we understand the danger of such a challenge. Then again, what would his career mean if he were avoid that rematch; making money merely. Who would believe the great Marco Antonio Barrera capable of such an evasion? So, the dye is cast. And everyone who loves boxing is waiting for the official particulars. After De La Hoya and Floyd Mayweather Jr. conclude their business, the road will be clear, the drumbeats relentless. For what other fate awaits Barrera the boxer, Barrera the legend?