

Tarver, Forrest, Donaire Rule At Foxwoods

Written by Michael Woods

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A watcher had to hope that at least one upset would unfold at Foxwoods Casino in Mashantucket, Connecticut on Saturday night, with two veterans hoping to land one or two more meaningful money fights and a young gun looking to build up his rep in action.

Unfortunately, for those craving unexpected dramatics from underdogs, neither Danny Santiago, Michele Piccirillo nor Luis Maldonado could upset the proverbial apple cart, and favorites Antonio Tarver, Vernon Forrest and Nonito Donaire notched victories on a card televised on Showtime.

The just-turned 39-year-old Tarver entered with the IBO 175 pound title and a 25-4 (18 KOs) mark in the card's main event. The New York-born Santiago, age 34, came to Connecticut with a 29-3-1 with 19 KOs.

Tarver's was busy in the fourth, even if his throws weren't of the vicious variety early in the frame. He softened the opponent up with lefts to the gut, hoping to get Santiago to drop his hands. It worked. Tarver caught him on the ropes with a combo that dropped him. He took the eight, and went down again, taking uppercuts to the belly, this time for good. Referee Steve Smoger saw enough and waved it off at 2:53. Santiago smiled and patted Tarver's head after the TKO stop.

In the third, Tarver opened with a multi punch combo. Santiago fired some left hooks to the body and he didn't look overwhelmed on the biggest stage of his career. But Tarver turned it up the last third of the round, and hurt his man to the body, and with a straight left that almost buckled him.

There were some boos in the second, as Tarver pawed with his jab. Santiago, though, who looks like he should maybe cut weight and fight at 154 or so, couldn't close the distance. Tarver did throw a peppier jab late, but that didn't stop the fans from booing as he strode to his corner.

In the first round, the southpaw Tarver towered over Santiago, a half head taller than the low profile foe. Tarver started out with a sweat, and tossed some effective jabs and straight lefts.

The Inquisitor, Jim Gray, asked Tarver after what his thoughts were on the crowd booing, and asked him if he felt tentative and slow. The stones on the Inquisitor! Tarver told him that he got the job done, and said he needs some big fish to fry to look get into tip top mode. A fight with Jeff Lacy, and then a showdown with Joe Calzaghe is what Tarver said he's aiming for.

WBC super welterweight champion Vernon Forrest, beset by arm injuries during his peak years, looked to make a late-inning splash with a second-straight semi high profile win. He took down Carlos Baldomir in July, and did the same to Italian Michele Piccirillo at Foxwoods, with a shade less precision than the summer outing.

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The 36-year-old Georgia resident, with a 39-2-1 (28 KOs) mark coming in and the 37-year-old Italian (48-3, 30 KOs coming in) both looked to set the table with jabs in the first. Forrest, the former welterweight titlist, moved forward on the backtracking counterpuncher, and landed a couple left hooks.

Piccirillo looked like he hadn't figured out a workable gameplan against the heavier handed Forrest in the second, and he flinched a few times from Forrest feints.

Piccirillo came forward to start the third, and picked up the pace on advice of his corner.

Forrest landed heavy hits to the body in the fourth but the Italian stood erect, and it looked like this one would likely go the distance.

In the fifth, Forrest ate more jabs, and it looked like the energy level of each man was equal.

Piccirillo is a slick guy, always keeps his feet moving, but he got caught with a right behind the head that sent him to the mat to end the sixth. His eyes were clear and his legs looked sturdy.

Forrest got some cracks off in the seventh, but the Italian's movement, his slipping and his ducking kept him from taking too much punishment.

Forrest tossed a low left and Piccirillo took a breather, as referee Arthur Mercante warned the miscreant to stay on the straight and narrow in the eighth. The fighters tangled a bit after the bell, but everyone stayed cool and headed to their corner.

The work rate was solid in the ninth, for twentysomethings, let alone guys edging to 40. Forrest landed a looping right lead, over a slow jab, that sent Piccirillo to the canvas. He got up and Forrest craved closure. But the Italian kept throwing, and kept moving, steering clear of Forrest's hard throws.

In the tenth, Piccirillo showed no ill effects and while he lost the round in a fashion similar to most of the others, he wasn't hopelessly out of his depth at all.

Forrest landed five clean shots a minute into the 11th, but Piccirillo wouldn't fold. His hands and feet had finally slowed a measure, though. A straight right on the chin dropped Piccirillo hard, and the ref waved off the fight, at 2:21 of the round. He twisted his right ankle when he went down, and he sat on a stool, grimacing, after the stoppage.

Jim Gray talked to Forrest afterwards, and the Viper graded himself a B plus for the TKO.

What's next, then?

Mayorga, Forrest said, or the Mayweather/Hatton winner, Oscar, or Cotto. He's looking for a whale fight, apparently.

Forrest didn't look as sharp as he did in his last outing but that's because Piccirillo has more left

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in the tank than Baldomir.

In the show opener, IBF flyweight champion, the Filipino/Californian Nonito Donaire (18-1, 11 KOs), age 25, took on Luis Maldonado (3-1-1, 28 KOs coming in), a 29-year-old from Mexico.

Both men weighed 111 pounds for the scrap. Donaire took the belt from Vic Darchinyan in July and looked like he was in defense mode with a sharp right in the second. Maldonado started leaking from the left eye here, and went southpaw, and then started leaking from the other eye. Donaire was in full-on stalk mode in the third, and he had a lot to aim for. The right eye kept bleeding, and the Mexican kept switching back and forth, righty to lefty, without too much success.

Both guys came out lefty in the fourth, and then Donaire went back righty, and ate a sharp right hook. The round was tight, with the Mexican closing the gap, and hitting the target more often.

The Cal-ipino is a cool technician for someone engaging in his 20th pro bout, and his ring generalship carried him through the middle rounds. Maldonado ate a harsh straight right that buckled him slightly in the sixth.

A right uppercut/left hook combo sent Maldonado down at the end of the seventh, and he looked a mess. The cut over his right eye wouldn't clot, and it seemed a safe bet that he wouldn't make it out of the eighth.

He didn't; Donaire pressed the issue, and battered the loser around the ring, forcing referee Charlie Dwyer to stop the one-sided affair at 1:16 of the eighth.

SPEEDBAG Bad Chad Dawson told Gray he may be fighting Glen Johnson in April. The undefeated WBC light heavy champ was in the house sizing up Tarver.

--Tarver against Jeff Lacy if Lacy gets past Peter Manfredo, then Dawson, seems like the most likely course.