Written by Michael Woods
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Shame on us keyboard tappers. So much of our interest and energy has been spent in the last couple of weeks on the impending Pacquiao-Mayweather showdown, that we've taken our eyes of some of the tasty clashes that litter the landscape in the coming days and weeks.

TSS tried, without all that much success, to stay focused on the near and concrete future, instead of the farther away theoretical future, at Madison Square Garden on Thursday afternoon. Top Rank held a press conference to tout their January 23 MSG-Theater card, which pits Juan Manuel Lopez, continuing his audition to be Puerto Rico's main pugilistic squeeze following the imminent departure of Miguel Cotto from the scene, against WBO 126 pound champion Steven Luevano; and a clash between Cuban emigrant Yuriorkis Gamboa, who is looking to make the leap from next generation star to superstar of today, and Tanzanian Rogers Mtagwa, who nearly had the crew at Top Rank's hearts exploding when he came thisclose to stopping JuanMa when they battled on Oct. 29.

Ideally for Top Rank and the favored hitters, JuanMa and Gamboa will both leave New York victors, and will then face off against each other in one of the most anticipated young gun vs. young gunfaceoffs in recent fistic history.

JuanMa, though he's 27-0 with 24 KOs, will enter the new year with the most question marks attached to him. Being life or death with Mtagwa (26-13-2 with 18 KOs) wasn't what anyone expected, except maybe the 30-year-old Mtagwa, and perhaps his promotional/managerial team of Joe Parella and Russell Peltz during their most hopeful interludes. The Philly based Tanzanian almost had WBO 122 pound champ Lopez stopped in the 11th and 12th, but instead of backing off, and mixing in some body shots to drop JuanMa's hands, he went headhunting, and was too eager to finish the job. The ultra-underdog dropped a UD, in what TSS-EM sees as the 2009 Fight of the Year. He and manager Parella chatted with TSS before the press conference kicked off on Thursday.

Parella, a Philly guy who's worked as a cutman and manager for the last fifteen years, was forthright in his critique of Mtagwa. "As far as I'm concerned, he can defeat anybody, but against Lopez he defeated himself," Parella said. "That's true," Mtagwa admitted. "We'd tell him, 'Use the jab,' and he wouldn't."

Parella said he brought in the legendary Georgie Benton to work with Mtagwa a while back, and Benton made some sense to the hitter when he asked, "Look at my head, look at my body...Which is bigger?" But the Tanzanian admitted toTSS that he is prone to head hunting, and vowed that against Gamboa, he'll not forget the lesson learned with Benton. Parella shook his head, with a mixture of resignation and amazement at Mtagwa's cajones, which sometimes get him into trouble. "He gets mad if he don't get hit," he said.

Gamboa is speedier than JuanMa, so Mtagwa and trainer "Boogaloo" Watts haven't set on a fight plan for the Cuban. The fighter is pleased, he said, to get the shot at Gamboa, and will be

making the largest purse of his 12-year pro career.* Parella acknowledged that a rematch with Lopez would've been nice, but being a realist, he understands it isn't feasible. He also said he thinks the CalifornianLuevano might be a better style matchup for Mtagwa, but it is what it is. "We're small fish," he said. "How do you argue with Top Rank, or any big promoter?"

The fighter himself showed a refreshing level of realism when he pegged his chances of beating the 16-0 Gamboa at 50-50.

And, he said, he's biding his time for another crack at the Puerto Rican. "I know I'm gonna get him again," he said.

The WBA featherweight champ Gamboa, the 2004 Olympic gold medallist who turns 28 on Dec. 23, has supposedly turned it up a notch in training, according to promoterAhmet Oner. "He's a different guy, from a different planet," Oner promised.

As much as anyone I recall seeing, the 28-year-old Luevano, in street clothes, doesn't look like a fighter. Top Rank's Todd DeBouef, working as host while father-n-law Bob Arum works to hash out a Manny-Mayweather deal in the Phillipines, said as much. He referenced the WBO titlist's pasty skin and unimpressive musculature, but made sure to tell all in attendance that one shouldn't judge the book by the mediocre cover. The 28-year-oldLuevano (37-1-1 with 15 KOs) won his crown in July 2007 against Nicky Cook, and has reeled off four wins and a draw since. His last outing came on Aug. 15, when he got aDQ7 win over Bernabe Concepcion, who was disqualified for landing telling blows after the bell.

Fight fans are curious to see if the lefty JuanMa has learned from his brush with defeat, and wonder how he'll handle the leap from 122 to 126. "People think I underestimate Luevano," he said, "I know how good he is. Steven is not just a steppingstone." The southpaw titlist, interestingly, showed deference and gratitude to the challenger, when he said, "I'd like to thankJuanMa for the opportunity."

HBO will televise the card, on the first Boxing After Dark of 2010.

Check back on TSS tomorrow, for more from the gathering. I chatted with HBO's Kery Davis, and a few other power brokers who gave some hints on what we'll be seeing in 2010.

*--Funny aside. I asked Parella what Mtagwa would be making, and advisor Russell Peltz was sitting in front of Parella. I was seated in a chair, one row behind Parella, and two behind Peltz. When I asked about the purse, I noted Peltz shook his head, side to side, a minute amount. Parella was looking at me, and I don't think saw that, but he was right on board with Russell. "I'm not talking about that," he said to me. Nope, not even off the record. I'm guessing that Mtagwa will get a meaty chunk of change for the scrap, and his guys and maybe Top Rank don't want the specifics out there, so other challengers don't see any precedence being set. Then again, maybe Russell had a crick in his neck, and was merely stretching his muscles...