

Malignaggi-Judah and the Subway Ride Home

Written by Thomas Hauser
Monday, 09 December 2013 00:00



Paulie Malignaggi would have been more appreciated in an era other than his own. Yeah, I know; he wouldn't have beaten Henry Armstrong. But in an earlier era, he would have been honored by media and fans alike for the pride he takes in his craft, his willingness to go in tough, and doing the best he can with the tools he has.

I met Paulie several days before his pro debut in 2001. Since then, I've written tens of thousands of words about him. I've been in his dressing room in the hours before and after some of his biggest fights, wins and losses. We've talked and shared meals together away from the spotlight. I've always gotten an honest answer from him. There's no slipping and sliding and avoiding the truth. We don't agree on everything, but we listen to each other's opinions with respect.

Several years ago, I wrote an article about Paulie meeting my then-85-year-old mother. The article quoted her as saying, "Paulie is adorable; a little cocky, but as cute as can be."

The next time I saw Paulie, he told me, "Tell your mother I think she's cute but a little cocky."

On December 7th, Paulie fought Zab Judah at Barclays Center in a bout that was marketed as a fight to determine which man deserved to be called "the King of Brooklyn."

Judah has been fighting professionally for half of his thirty-six years. Like Paulie, he has shown a willingness to go in tough en route to a 42-and-8 record with 29 knockouts. Paulie entered the bout with a 32-and-4 ledger.

Zab's history suggests that he's more effective and dangerous in the ring when he feels that his opponent can't punch. Paulie has two knockouts in the past ten years.

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I didn't want to be at ringside for the fight.

I have no quarrel with Golden Boy Promotions for making the bout. It was a competitive match-up between two world-class boxers. I had no quarrel with either fighter. They treated each other with respect during the build-up to the bout rather than acting like confrontational idiots (which we see too often in boxing these days). I just didn't want to be there.

In 2006, Paulie fought a prime Miguel Cotto at Madison Square Garden on the eve of the Puerto Rican Day Parade. He was cut from a head butt in round one, knocked down in round two, suffered a fractured orbital bone, and still won four or five rounds depending on which judges' scorecard one looked at. Paulie has permanent nerve damage in his face as a consequence of that fight.

I've been at ringside when two fighters were beaten to death, I won't be overly dramatic and say that I had similar concerns for Paulie. I don't go to fights expecting a tragedy. But I knew that Zab would hit Paulie in the head with the same certainty that I know a person who walks in the rain without an umbrella will get wet.

"Blood is not the scary part of boxing," Hamilton Nolan has written. "Blood is an annoyance, a split lip, a split eyebrow, lending a vivid bit of color to a fight, but taking little physical toll. Far more scary is the thought of the unseen damage being inflicted inside one's skull. Blood is cleaned up with a rag and some Vaseline and adrenaline and stitches and a scar. Brain damage is not cleaned up, ever."

"How old is Paulie?" my mother asked me the day before Malignaggi-Judah.

"Thirty-three."

"He's smart; he's good-looking. Isn't there something else he can do to support himself?"

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“He’s a commentator for Showtime and Fox Sports 1,”

“Then why is he risking his health like this?”

“For the money.”

“And what if he ends up like Muhammad?”

Professional obligation brought me to Barclays Center on December 7th. The annual meeting of the Boxing Writers Association of America and the kick-off press conference for the January 30, 2014, fight between Victor Ortiz and Luis Collazo were scheduled on-site for late that afternoon.

Ortiz’s last fight was a loss to Josesito Lopez that ended with Victor choosing not to continue after nine rounds despite the fact that he was ahead on all three of the judges’ scorecards. That choice seemed eminently sensible since his jaw was dangerously and painfully broken.

At Barclays, several members of the media asked Victor if that made him a quitter. He handled the questions with grace. When the press conference ended, I went over and told him, “Anyone who says you’re a quitter, eff ‘em. You were the only one with enough sense to stop the fight that night.”

Paulie arrived at Barclays Center at 6:45. I wished him well. Then I left the arena and went home.

It’s a half-hour subway ride from Barclays to my apartment on the upper west side of Manhattan. The train was half-empty when I got on. I took a seat and was alone with my thoughts.

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I met Paulie at the final pre-fight press conference for a July 7, 2001, HBO doubleheader. Paulie was slated for the non-televised undercard. He sat through the entire press conference and hardly said a word. He seemed shy.

The subway moved through Brooklyn toward Manhattan. A drunk got on at the Borough Hall stop, bottle in hand. When the train reached Clark Street, he started spewing racial epithets. Other passengers moved away from him toward safer areas of the car.

“Very few people in the media challenge you face-to-face,” Paulie told me once. “Most of them do it from behind the protection of their computer screen. It used to bother me when people in the media wrote negative things about me. I’d say to myself, ‘These guys are experts. Some of them have been writing about boxing since before I was born.’ Then I realized that a lot of the writers and even some of the network TV guys don’t know shit about boxing. All they do is criticize and shoot their mouth off.”

The drunk got off the subway at 14th Street.

“A fighter can always talk himself into fighting one more fight,” Paulie told me over pizza several days after his split-decision loss to Adrien Broner this past June. “I’m not stupid. I know that.”

I arrived home at 7:30 PM and turned on the television. Auburn was leading Missouri 59-42 in the closing minutes of the SEC championship game.

At eight o’clock, I switched to Showtime. There would be seven fights on Showtime and HBO over the next five hours. Sakio Bika vs. Anthony Dirrell was up first; then Erislandy Lara vs. Austin Trout. At 9:45, with Lara and Trout in snooze mode, I switched to HBO. Matthew Macklin looked like a fighter who has seen better days in outpointing an overmatched Lamar Russ. James Kirkland vs. Glenn Tapia was a great fight for two rounds and a brutal beatdown for four more. After Kirkland disposed of Tapia, I switched back to Showtime.

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Malignaggi and Judah were in the ring.

The fight began.

Paulie controlled round one with his jab. He was the faster, busier fighter. In round two, he tripped over Zab's leg while spinning away from a punch and his glove touched the canvas. Referee Mike Ortega mistakenly called it a knockdown. That error registered as a three-point swing on the judges' scorecards (from a 10-9 round in Malignaggi's favor to 10-8 for Judah).

In round three, an accidental clash of heads opened a small cut above Zab's left eye and a more serious cut on Paulie's left eyelid. Now one could envision the fight being stopped because of the cut, going to the judges' scorecards after an abbreviated number of rounds, and Judah coming out on top because of the incorrectly-called knockdown.

But Paulie controlled the rest of the bout, working behind a stiff jab, straight right hands, and occasional hooks to the body. He put everything on the line and initiated the action throughout, while Zab fought with the purpose of a man in a sparring session.

Paulie was faster than Zab had thought he'd be. And perhaps another factor was at work. Zab has a good "boxing IQ." It's an edge that he brings into most of his fights. This was one of the few times that he'd been in the ring with a fighter who could outthink him.

Malignaggi gave Judah a boxing lesson. One could argue that he won every minute of every round. Certainly, he showed that he can still fight competitively at the elite level. The judges rewarded him with a unanimous decision.

I'd prefer it if Paulie stopped boxing and concentrated on his commentating career. But I know that he won't. Now that he has beaten Judah, another big-money fight awaits him. It will be big-money because the opponent, whoever it is, will be a top-echelon fighter who's skilled at inflicting pain and physical damage.

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I'm glad Paulie won on December 7th. And I'm at peace with myself for choosing to not be at ringside to see it. Television cosmetizes the violence of boxing. And watching at home, one doesn't feel the blood lust of the crowd.

Thomas Hauser can be reached by email at thausen@rcn.com. His most recent book (*Straight Writes and Jabs: An Inside Look at Another Year in Boxing*) has just been published by the University of Arkansas Press.

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amayseng says:

Good read, I miss nyc, the subway, one thing about nyc and the subway, no one talks to each other every one is in their own world so to say. people come and go, on and off, barely a word or conversation.

My sisters found it funny that as a tourist I was asked near a dozen times in a few days directions here to there in the subways or the streets. guess i have one of those faces where i know where i am at. however, i was lost daily for the most part haha..

zab is done. had nothing to offer.

SouthPaul says:

Funny subway story, Amayseng. I recently went to Chicago and rode the train/subway system from the airport to the hotel. I too was lost but a homeless man helped me in exchange for a few bucks to buy dinner. But what I noticed on that ride was how everyone looked so miserable. No smiles, no hellos. Lmfao. Btw, that homeless man told me his life story as we took the ride together and he randomly mentioned attending Thrilla Of Manila while stationed in the Philippines. Claimed it was the most exciting time of his life. That story alone was worth the trip to Chicago...

Radam G says:

WOW! Attending anything in the P-Islands will stand out as "the most exciting time" of 90 percent of the vistor's' lives. We Pinoys are all dat and a bag of chips and some lemonsade washing down some balut. OOPS! I musta' fo'got! Tuba -- home-made coconut wine -- will wash that balut down better. Hehehe!

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BTW we have a metro rail in Manila for you U.S. mainland subway riders. Holla!

amayseng says:

[QUOTE=SouthPaul;41028]Funny subway story, Amayseng. I recently went to Chicago and rode the train/subway system from the airport to the hotel. I too was lost but a homeless man helped me in exchange for a few bucks to buy dinner. But what I noticed on that ride was how everyone looked so miserable. No smiles, no hellos. Lmfao. Btw, that homeless man told me his life story as we took the ride together and he randomly mentioned attending Thrilla Of Manila while stationed in the Philippines. Claimed it was the most exciting time of his life. That story alone was worth the trip to Chicago...[/QUOTE]

Good story, you are right they look miserable...Maybe years of riding the subway does that to one.

Sad to hear of yet another person from the military ended up homeless. the statistics are staggering...

Crazy how he went from witnessing the Thrilla at one point in life to being homeless. Life is harsh...

RG loves him some Phillipines...haha...just playin RG

Bernie Campbell says:

First of all lets clear the steel air! How long have you been riding the trains! Somebody mumbeling or yelling racial epitahs in the air! You sure he didnt take acception to the fragrance you were emanating! people drink on the train cause they are fearfull of being robbed! Fearfull of being profiled by "you know the types" as being the next Gold Medal Winner in equestrian sports, son of Kong or Gotti, or a caucasian Sidney Poitier! No one talks! I agree, Andy Griffith and Soupy Sales decendents are selling scratchoff and lotto tickets! Your too young to remember, "kill the guy with the ball" today its just the opposite! Trains! Nobody looks, unless there Mexican! Girlies either fall asleep or pretend there in wonderland! Geeks with no hudspa try to test your knowledge!

Whadda conglomeration! The center of the world! Why does Zab shave his eyebrows/ Why does the Magic Man keep changing his mane! Brooklyn? Sh...! You gotta come to Forest Hills!

amayseng says:

True Bcamp I am prob too young, 35.

The friendliest people in nyc are blacks of all ages and old white people. I am white. Arabs and oriental, not so friendly.....maybe the language barrier, maybe not.

Does Zab really shave his eyebrows or are they gone? I wondered that too.

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Paulie changes up his hair because he is a talley/playa.....Im a talley too so I say that with no racism, even though its cultural...

SouthPaul says:

Lmfao@ Bizzaro Bernie's rant.

Amayseng

The homeless vet mentioned being approved for section 8 and was a couple weeks away from moving into a small apartment.

The Shadow says:

Bernie Man is back in full effect!! LMFAO @ "take acception." A clever focker, you, hahahaha.

brownsugar says:

[QUOTE=Bernie Cfor bell;41097]First of all lets clear the steel air! How long have you been riding the trains! Somebody mumbeling or yelling racial epitahs in the air! You sure he didnt take acception to the fragrance you were emanating! people drink on the train cause they are fearfull of being robbed! Fearfull of being profiled by "you know the types" as being the next Gold Medal Winner in equestrian sports, son of Kong or Gotti, or a caucasian Sidney Poitier! No one talks! I agree, Andy Griffith and Soupy Sales decendents are selling scratchoff and lotto tickets! Your too young to remember, "kill the guy with the ball" today its just the opposite! Trains! Nobody looks, unless there Mexican! Girlies either fall asleep or pretend there in wonderland! Geeks with no hudspa try to test your knowledge!

Whadda conglomeration! The center of the world! Why does Zab shave his eyebrows/ Why does the

Magic Man keep changing his mane! Brooklyn? Sh...! You gotta come to Forest Hills![/QUOTE]

I been looking something a little different to read at next weeks poetry slam... thanks BC.

amayseng says:

[QUOTE=SouthPaul;41111]Lmfao@ Bizzaro Bernie's rant.

Amayseng

The homeless vet mentioned being approved for section 8 and was a couple weeks away from moving into a small apartment.[/QUOTE]

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Good to hear.

I honestly try to respond to Bcamps rants, it is almost like solving a math word problem in which I am guessing at the equation. I have no idea if I am making sense or adding to his madness...ha