

Tommy Z Will Fight Regardless

Written by Bernard Fernandez
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You're an NFL fan nervously wondering if the rich players and richer owners can resolve their differences and hammer out a new contract in collective bargaining negotiations whose deadline, by mutual consent, has been extended to midnight on Friday. You want, so very much, to be assured your favorite team will be playing on Sunday afternoons this fall because watching those guys do their thing is a habit you'd rather not break.

Like every other NFL player, Baltimore Ravens safety and special-teams stud Tommy Zbikowski wants the same thing you do. He is sitting on a million-dollar-plus tender offer from the Ravens and, at 26, he realizes most football careers have short shelf lives. He'd much rather play and be paid than not. But that doesn't mean he'll drop what he's doing at the moment should NFL commissioner Roger Goodell and NFL Players Association head DeMaurice Smith appear before the cameras at a press conference, smiling and announcing that a new multiyear deal has been struck and the games will go on as usual.

Even if that scenario plays out, Zbikowski will proceed with his scheduled four-round cruiserweight bout against debuting pro Richard Bryan on Saturday, part of the Showtime pay-per-view telecast topped by the main event in which WBA super welterweight champion Miguel Cotto (35-2, 28 KOs) defends his title against wild-swinging former two-division champ Ricardo Mayorga (29-7-1, 23 KOs).

"Not at all," Zbikowski told me when asked if he'd beg out of the fight should the squabbling NFL factions decide to make nice. "I've put too much time in at the gym. There's no way I wouldn't fight."

In fact, Zbikowski – who is 1-0 as a pro, having stopped Robert Bell in one round at Madison Square Garden on June 10, 2006, when Tommy Z was an All-America safety and punt returner for Notre Dame – hopes to follow the Bryan bout with another couple of fights before he'd be obliged to report to training camp. Oh, sure, he wants to be a part of a winning Super Bowl team as much as any NFL player, but he also wants something else just as badly.

Zbikowski thinks he eventually can become the cruiserweight champion of the world. And it isn't as far-fetched a notion as when star defensive ends Ed "Too Tall" Jones and Mark Gastineau deluded themselves into believing they could be as successful in the ring as they were at sacking quarterbacks. Tommy Z had an extensive amateur boxing background, logging

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70-plus fights before he entered high school.

“Tommy Z is not a freak attraction,” said his promoter, Bob Arum, who is not adverse to using freak, or at least freakish, attractions to spice undercards. “He’s a great attraction. Tommy is well-grounded in boxing. He can handle himself in the ring.”

Fight fans probably are going to be skeptical, at least for a while, of Zbikowski’s pugilistic bona fides, and so are football fans who may think he’s embarking on some kind of stunt. But the 6-1, 195-pound Zbikowski (down from the 214 he weighed for his quickie knockout of Bell nearly five years ago) couldn’t be more serious about demonstrating his capabilities sans helmet and shoulder pads.

“I never thought I’d go as far as I have in football, to be honest with you,” he said. “I thought I’d be boxing a long time ago.

“I think eventually I’ll be judged solely as a fighter, not as someone trying to fight who played football at Notre Dame or in the NFL. It’s not going to happen right away, but it will. I’ll make sure of that.

“For now, I’m going to take things step by step. Regardless of what happens (in the NFL’s negotiations with the NFLPA), I’m going to try to keep fighting as long as I possibly can. If I get through this one with no cuts or injuries to my hands, I’d like to fight the following month, and the month after that.”

Zbikowski understands the deal for now. He understood it in 2006, when he was paid \$25,000 for his pro debut against Bell, an inordinately high purse for a first-time pro who didn’t carry an Olympic pedigree or wasn’t the son of a Hall of Fame-type fighter with widespread name recognition. There’s no way Arum would have paid him that much, or given him pay-per-view exposure in boxing’s Mecca, had he been a football star at, say, Weber State instead of Notre Dame.

With a large contingent of his Notre Dame teammates in the audience that night, Zbikowski entered the ring wearing Fighting Irish-themed trunks and to the familiar strains of the Notre Dame Victory March. Bell, from Akron, Ohio, in turn wore scarlet-and-gray, the colors of Ohio State. The scheduled four-rounder, part of a PPV telecast topped by Cotto’s successful WBO junior welterweight defense against Paulie Malignaggi, was purposefully designed to call to mind the pomp and pageantry of a college football Saturday.

There was, of course, some judicious matchmaking to ensure as much as possible that Arum’s guy would emerge victorious. Bell, who fought only once more after losing to Tommy Z, retired with a 2-4 record, all four of his losses coming inside the distance. As a fighter, his skills were more in keeping with some Division II directional college than of the mighty Buckeyes he purportedly represented.

Zbikowski, who had an open invitation to resume his ring career under the aegis of Top Rank, returned to Notre Dame for his senior season, performed well, was drafted by Baltimore and

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has stuck with the Ravens for five years, albeit as a special-teams standout and backup to perennial Pro Bowler Ed Reed. But boxing remains an itch that Zbikowski increasingly has felt an urge to scratch.

So what does he consider himself to be more, fighter or football player?

“Both,” said the Arlington Heights, Ill., resident. “I need the competition. Growing up, whatever sport I was doing, I loved. But I always missed what I wasn’t doing. When I was playing football, I missed boxing. When I was boxing, I missed playing football. Once you get to college and the NFL, though, it demands so much of your time that you have to choose.”

It has always been Arum’s contention that most judicious consumers purchase pay-per-view boxing more for the main event than for the lead-ins, but that’s not to say that PPV undercards serve no useful purpose. They can be the launching pads for fighters on their way to higher-visibility, better-paying gigs, or they can be novelties to lure in fringe fans that might not be quite so aware of those not-ready-for-prime-time status.

Not that it’s anything he’s apt to brag about now, but Arum, ever the pragmatist, regularly gave PPV slots on Oscar De La Hoya-headlined shows to the “Beauty and the Beast,” otherwise known as Latina hottie Mia Rosales St. John and 325-pound (or higher) Eric “Butterbean” Esch.

“I could put better fighters on those cards and they wouldn’t add anything to the bottom line,” Arum said of his temporarily profitable use of the former Playboy model and excessively fleshy onetime Toughman contestant who came to be billed as the “King of the Four-Rounders.”

Maybe you are intrigued by Saturday night’s Cotto-Mayorga main event, or maybe you are of the opinion that the 37-year-old Mayorga, whose nickname is “El Matador” but whose style is more raging bull, is an over-the-hill, seldom-active (just eight fights in the last seven years), marginally successful (he’s just 4-4 in those seven years, including blowout losses to De La Hoya and Felix Trinidad) fighter who more than likely will be beaten lopsided by any version of Cotto that is anywhere near the top of his form. Yeah, it is sort of interesting that this is a co-promotion of Arum and Don King, who has Mayorga, their first in five years, but once the bell rings it won’t be the two septuagenarian archrivals in there swapping punches.

Hence Arum’s initial plan to include Christy Martin and Zbikowski on the card, a plan which required revision when Martin was forced to drop out last week with an injury incurred in training. In effect, they were to serve as updated versions of St. John and Butterbean.

Martin might be the only female fighter ever to grace the cover of Sports Illustrated, but she is almost 43 and hadn’t fought in two years until she was offered a staggeringly high (for a woman), six-figure purse for a rematch with Dakota Stone. And if you don’t think that wasn’t at least partly the result of her being shot and stabbed by her husband, Jim Martin, in November, you probably still believe in the Easter Bunny and Tooth Fairy.

“Do I think this opportunity with Top Rank would have presented itself (had not the assault occurred)? Probably not, and especially not at this level,” Martin told me prior to her withdrawal

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from the card. "Mr. Arum may have considered putting me on a smaller show, may have given me the opportunity to work my way back to pay-per-view level. But to be honest, everything that happened probably came together in such a way to make this possible."

"She's a very, very smart person," Arum said of Martin. "Her remarks indicate just how smart and perceptive she is. I am not a fan of women's boxing, but I absolutely was taken by her story and her determination to return to boxing after that horrendous incident. She's a real fighter, and an inspiration to a lot of people."

Of Zbikowski, Arum notes that "there is a cachet to Notre Dame," which might explain why he backed another Fighting Irish alum who recently turned pro, Mike Lee, a fighter who didn't play football and whose amateur background is far less extensive than was Tommy Z's.

"I understand 20 or so of his Ravens teammates will be there," Arum said of his renewed fascination with Zbikowski. "Right now, the story does revolve around his status as an NFL player. He's a Pro Bowl special-teams guy."

The always-candid Zbikowski is just as perceptive as Martin, who, incidentally, he holds in high regard.

"I got a chance to meet her when I was in Vegas a couple of weeks ago," Zbikowski said. "She's unbelievable. I checked her out at a workout. She's still got it. What an amazing story. Maybe I got along with her so well, in the little time I spent with her, because there's a lot of similarities in our situations. Fighters understand other fighters. There's nothing like the joy of preparing for a fight, of taking your body to limits that most people can't imagine."

Clearly, Zbikowski does not want to be compared to Too Tall Jones, Mark Gastineau, Butterbean or even Brandon Jacobs, the 6-4, 264-pound New York Giants running back who, like so many other successful non-boxing professional athletes, mistakenly believes he could easily transfer his athletic skills to the ring.

"None of them (football players who have tried boxing, or even talked of trying boxing) have the background as a fighter that I have," he said.

So, what type of training is more taxing on the body, football or boxing?

"My buddy, Jeff Samardzija (a former Notre Dame wide receiver who is now a pitcher in the Chicago Cubs organization), can throw a 90-mph fastball," Zbikowski said. "If anybody charged the mound, he'd be able to knock him out. He's got a wicked right hand to the jaw. But any athlete can throw one punch. That doesn't mean he'd be a good boxer. A boxer can't always rely on one punch."

"If you fight for a championship belt, 12 rounds, that's 36 minutes. A lot of people can't punch for 30 seconds without getting tired, or take punches for 30 seconds, let alone for 36 minutes."

"I haven't boxed for a while, but I still watch fights and keep up with what's going on. I've been

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stuck on watching (Manny) Pacquiao, just because of the type of athlete he is. He's the ultimate anaerobic athlete. As much as going for a four- or five-mile run does for you, it's not the same as fighting. In boxing, you need the type of brute strength that football players have, but you have to make it last for three minutes at a time, not for five or six seconds.

“Without a doubt, boxing training would help football players more than football training would for boxers. Boxing is the ultimate workout for any athlete.”

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