

This Time, Barker Had The Winning View From the Canvas

Written by Bernard Fernandez
Sunday, 18 August 2013 15:28



ATLANTIC CITY, N.J. – Yogi Berra, the legendary New York Yankees catcher and master of the malaprop, once observed that you can see a lot by looking.

Newly crowned IBF middleweight champion Darren Barker is from across the big water in London, so he can be excused for not knowing much about the wit and witticisms of an 88-year-old, long-retired American baseball player. But he does know that you can see so

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much more when you're on your hands and knees in the boxing ring than you can when you're flat on your back.

Barker had given WBC middleweight champ Sergio Martinez periodic trouble in their Oct. 1, 2011, title bout in Atlantic City's Boardwalk Hall, but then the magnificent Argentine southpaw felled him with a thudding right hook to the head in the 11th round. The challenger then spent the next 10 seconds looking up at the lights with unfocused eyes before referee Eddie Cotton waved his arms and gave him the rest of the night off, not to mention 22½ months' worth of recriminations.

To steal another notable line from the great Yogi, it must have seemed like *déjà vu* all over again on Saturday night here at the Revel Casino-Hotel, when IBF middleweight king Daniel Geale sent him crashing to the canvas with the single most devastating punch of the night, a perfectly placed left hook to the liver that had the effect of sucking all the air out of Barker's lungs, as if it had been vacuumed.

This time, however, Barker went down on all fours, which afforded him a better, more inspirational view than he had had under similar circumstances against Martinez. As he struggled to catch his breath, gasping in agony, he peered through the ropes and saw the concerned faces of his mother, wife and sister. And although they weren't physically in attendance, he also imagined seeing his baby daughter, Scarlett-Rose, and his late brother, Gary, also a boxer, who died in a tragic car crash nearly seven years ago.

As Cotton -- who again was the referee for Barker's second shot at fulfilling his pugilistic dream -- raised and dropped his right arm nine times, something in the two-time former European middleweight champ's brain and heart directed him to jump up, to beat the count, to give himself another chance to do what he had been unable to do in his only previous trip to this seashore resort town. Barker might have been a mere milli-second from again tumbling into the abyss, but he willed himself to not only survive, but take the fight to Geale, an Australian, in the closing moments of that crossroads round.

Six rounds later, Barker (26-1, 16 KOs; pictured, hands aloft, with promoter Hearn to his right) was awarded a close but correct split decision that caused his small, exuberant group of fans from the United Kingdom to go daffy and his British promoter, Eddie Hearn, to excitedly climb through the ropes and jump up and down as if he were on a pogo stick.

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“I wasn’t sure when Darren went down if he would get up,” Hearn said. “I saw him bite down on his gum shield. But I knew how much (his getting up and going on to win) meant to him ... how much it meant to all of us. Darren was just not to be denied tonight.

“The way he fought back after that knockdown was some of the bravest stuff I’ve ever seen in the ring. It just showed the determination of the man.”

Barker, who went off as a slight 7-4 underdog, was somewhat the busier fighter, as evidenced by punch statistics provided by CompuBox. He landed 292 of 862 blows (34 percent) to 259 of 693 (37 percent) for Geale (29-2, 15 KOs), who was fighting for the first time in the United States. The disparity was a bit wider in power punches, with Barker – who concentrated his attack to the body – connecting on 244 of 582 (42 percent) to 211 of 503 (also 42 percent) for Geale.

Those, however, were not the numbers that were most important. Judge Alan Rubenstein turned in a scorecard favoring Geale, 114-113, but that was countermanded by those submitted by Barbara Perez and Carlos Ortiz, who went with Barker by the respective margins of 116-111 and 114-113. Thesweetscience.com card also had Barker ahead, 115-112.

If there was any controversy – hey, this is boxing, so there had to be at least some, right? – it was that Rubenstein and Ortiz each gave the 12th and final round to Barker, despite the fact that he had eaten several solid shots and appeared to be hurt when the final bell rang.

Barker, by all accounts a truly nice guy, admitted at the postfight press conference that someone or something saved him at his moment of seemingly imminent demise. Maybe it was the sight of his distraught family, hoping and praying that he’d clamber to his feet in time. Maybe it was the fact he had mentally vowed to win in honor of his late brother. Or maybe it was some higher power that had predetermined that, on this night, he would not – could not – fail.

“When I was down on the ground, it was all going through my head – my wife, my family, my daughter,” Barker said. “It made me get up ... Someone picked me up. I’m glad they did.”

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It was a good night for boxing in general as the HBO Boxing After Dark telecast also featured another title changing hands in Atlantic City, with Spain's Kiko Martinez (29-4, 21 KOs) dramatically stopping Jhonatan Romero (23-1, 12 KOs), the IBF super bantamweight champ from Colombia, with a barrage of punches along the ropes in the sixth round. Martinez fired away 525 times, a work rate which, if maintained, would have totaled 1,000-plus punches had the bout gone the distance. Romero tried to maintain a more comfortable distance between himself and the short (5-foot-5) Spaniard, but Martinez frequently was able to crowd him into tight spots from which he could not easily escape.

"It was a great show," said a semi-glum lead promoter, Gary Shaw, whose fighters – Geale and Romero – relinquished their belts. "This is the kind of show boxing needs to keep it at the forefront."

That great show, however, did seem a bit misplaced geographically. Atlantic City is a fight site that usually yields its bigger crowds when there are one or more fighters from the area, or those who at least have established a local following (think Arturo Gatti). The four boxers at the top of the card hailed from Sydney, Australia (9,960 miles away), London (3,588), Cali, Colombia (2,705) and Aliante, Spain (3,928). Together they had totaled one previous appearance in A.C., that being Barker's matchup with Sergio Martinez.

"Obviously, Gary Shaw lives in New Jersey and he has a relationship with HBO," reasoned Hearn. "But it was a strange setup. Still, the people liked what they saw. The spectators were winners as well as Darren."

The Revel, which has been open for business (and business in a flagging economy hasn't been good), was making its debut as a host to a boxing event and wanted to put its best foot forward if more fight cards are to be staged in its 3,800-seat Ovation Hall. But the arena was less than half-full and some of those in attendance no doubt were comped. But kudos must go to the 50 or so Brit diehards who waved Union Jacks, sang (mostly off-key) "Walking in a Barker Wonderland," to the tune of "Walking in a Winter Wonderland," and periodically erupted into chants of "Come on, Darren! Come on, Darren!"

Despite his new title, Barker evidently has a way to go to rise to the national-hero level of, say, Manchester native Ricky Hatton, whose megafight with Floyd Mayweather Jr. at Las Vegas'

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MGM Grand lured 3,900 fortunate ticket-holders and 25,000 screaming Brits to the southern Nevada desert. Barker, 31, will have to build on the foundation he just laid if he is to grow his fan base, on either side of the Atlantic.

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