

RINGSIDE REPORT Tyson's Promotional Debut

Written by Aaron Lowinger, Special To TSS
Saturday, 24 August 2013 20:10



Like no other sport, boxing holds onto the narrative of this country itself, serving more as mirror than window upon which to view the changing belly and art of our culture, and it still holds on for dear life.

Back when the country had the money and appetite for unimaginably extensive public works projects like the interstate highway system, the cities and towns of the Northeast that the

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Thruway spines connected were full of boxers; most being either newly immigrated from Europe or black and looking for a way to earn in one fight what they would otherwise earn in a much longer period of time in a factory or onion field.

In 2013, the cities of Upstate New York are half-dead, the factories are gone, and somewhere along the corridor of the I-90, which mimics the Erie Canal in direction and function through the state, a giant boxing oasis in the form of a Native American-operated casino made of fiberglass, steel and earthen materials quarried from faraway lands to host a group of fighters, who themselves, came into the ring from points all over the globe: Arash Usmanee from Afghanistan (by way of rural Alberta's oil fields), Argenis Mendez and Claudio Marrero from the Dominican Republic, Jesus Andres Cuellar from Argentina, Alexei Collado from Cuba (and Mexico and Ireland).

For boxing cred, the Turning Stone Casino offers little else beyond the International Boxing Hall of Fame built on Carmen Basilio's home turf of in Canastota just one Thruway exit to the west, and a roughly 4-hour drive from active boxing scenes in Montreal, New York, Philly, and Boston. There's still, of course, smaller pockets of the sweet science everywhere from Buffalo to Elmira to Jamestown to Youngstown to Niagara Falls to the hamlet of Lodgepole, Alberta where Usmanee honed his craft.

Sure casinos and boxing go hand-in-hand, but having a title fight promoted by boxing's biggest name in Mike Tyson on neutral territory in a town called Verona tells half of the beautiful and sordid tale of pro boxing.

Americans, like boxing fans, are suckers for a good redemption story, and the season finale of ESPN's *Friday Night Fights* is chock-full of them. The main character has to be Mike Tyson, who month-by-month seems to shout back his demons enough to emerge a version of himself closer to the thoughtful and gentle almost-teenager with a comprehensive knowledge of heavyweight history.

The supporting cast had to be lead by Arash Usmanee, who's first crack at boxing's big time resulted in crushing defeat in the form of one of boxing's blue plate specials: an unjust decision that gave him his first loss and the burden of doubt.

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But playing first fiddle to the Afghan's violin has to be the man who wants to knock him out in Mendez. Mendez saw the fight and *wanted* to fight Usmanee for his first title defense at 130 pounds. Mendez had himself been on the side of a suspect decision and gave Usmanee something that took Mendez two years to attain: a shot at redemption.

Hours before the fight, Tyson made a surprise visit to the Hall of Fame, two structures basically built on the on-ramp of Exit 34. Wearing black jeans and a "Pardon Jack Johnson" t-shirt, Tyson was followed by an entourage of equal parts security, handlers, IBHOF personnel and local media. His mood was bright and energetic. Inside the gift shop building, Tyson climbed into the famed ring that was used for fights at Madison Square Garden from 1925-2007 and quickly recalled his three fights in that same ring. He posed for pictures among the memorabilia and cracked the only thing missing was a towel to throw around his shoulders.

Boxing hasn't really recovered from the demise of Tyson's career. Not that it's his fault, but great heavyweights have long transcended the ropes into the area of popular culture, and the slow, depressing fade of Tyson's skills coupled with the nearly 10-year reign of Ukraine's Klitschko brothers in the division have done little good for sport's relevance in the imaginations of an easily-distracted American audience. But Mike Tyson's return to the ring biz, maybe especially bearing all his warts, represents a big PR win for sport in desperate need for a shot in the arm, even with the potential for a record-breaking PPV bout looming three weeks down the road in Las Vegas between Floyd Mayweather Jr. and Saul Alvarez.

The afternoon had all the looks of a great night of boxing. Bulbous and painterly egg-drop clouds hung gently over the onion, potato, and increasingly corn fields of the Thurwaylands. A picture-perfect late summer day just begging for the urban touch of a closed indoor room with spotlights waiting for the telltale red glisten of blood to appear.

There's at least one boxer who definitely won't see blood tonight. Hugo Partida. It was rumored in the press room at check-in that he had an ominous premonition before boarding his passage to Verona, backed out at last moment. In his place, an always game foil from Buffalo named Guillermo Sanchez, he of the 13-9-1 record and at best three-day notice to get ready to most likely be knocked out by Alexei "The Mexican-Cuban" Collado, who in 16 fights has won 15 by KO.

One man who probably was never plagued by Partida's doubts appeared in the night's first fight, a heavyweight six-rounder. In it, a bearded, out-of-shape, and 42-year-old Marlon "Rumblin'

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Man" Hayes fought so loose and sloppy, his shorts started to fall while absorbing blow after blow from the much younger undefeated prospect Dorsett Barnwell. During the his final moments before a merciful stoppage in the third, someone in the sparse and quiet crowd asked if he was drunk. "No, never, I don't drink," the Rumbly Man managed to say with probably too much emphasis between eating Dorsett's power punches.

Tyson, now clad in all white, made his first appearance of the night in the ring introducing "The Mexican-Cuban" (now residing in Ireland) who sported an American flag on his shorts with only about 20 stars in it. By the second round, Collado had the Buffalonian Sanchez backing up into the ropes taking shots to the body.

Collado looked the part, so much so that one ringside observer (none other than former women's champ Leona Brown) encouraged him to start a modeling career before his face got too crooked from boxing. There was little for Collado to worry about, even when Sanchez connected with hooks to the head, there was little power. By the fourth round Sanchez's forty-some hours of preparation started to show. He held out, literally, until a 5th round stoppage after eating about a dozen heavy punches and appearing listless enough for referee Charlie Pitts to rescue him.

A ho-hum match followed between the 20-year-old Virginian Antoine "Action" Douglas and an obviously overweight and slow-handed Edgar Perez, that was remarkable only for Douglas' inexplicable inability to knock the lesser man out despite his mother's unending chain of encouragements from ringside. Douglas easily carried the win by decision.

Ed "The Lion" Parades and Noe "Platanito" Bolanos offered a more even competition in a ten-rounder, but only slightly. Carrying his near-meaningless #3 welterweight ranking from two sanctioning bodies (WBC and WBA), Parades was the busier, more aggressive fighter, knocking Bolanos' mouthpiece out twice. But Bolanos stayed open for business with a sturdy jaw and good action with his left jabs and hooks to the final bell where the judges, along with everyone else with eyes, gave Parades a 9-1 victory.

Closer to the commencement of the live broadcast on ESPN 2, the Event Center at Turning Stone Casino and the stands were maybe a third full. A security guard had earlier told me that about 1,000 tickets had sold and the seating capacity was around 5,000 for concerts. A large sign in the corner reminded us that we were in the "Ultimate Entertainment Destination: Exit 33."

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Then the compulsory national anthem at long last and Mike Tyson made rounds ringside to mug and gladhand with VIP types who all either took pictures of him in the flesh or found away to put a hand on the body that made the man his name (though retired since 2006, Tyson looked closer to fight shape than at least two of the fighters on the undercard).

Any residual boredom resulting from a typical slew of undercard fights dissolved almost instantly the moment Jesus Andres Cuellar and Claudio "The Matrix" Marrero began their co-feature southpaw on southpaw action. Just as it seemed going into the fight, with Marrero's dominant speed versus Cuellar's clawing left hand, it came to be as the two traded hard shots early, with Cuellar taking an early advantage in the fourth round going upstairs downstairs on four nearly consecutive left hooks, stunning Marrero temporarily as Cuellar's corner kept in imploring their man: *Cuerpo! Cuerpo!*

Marrero, who spent much the fight out-boxing Cuellar on the outside when able, got caught with a nasty right hook to the jaw in the sixth and hit the canvass in the ten second aftermath as Cuellar swarmed him. Cuellar kept the pressure on following the eight count, with Marrero looking beat and slipping to the mat in exhaustion. It looked like the ref was inching in to stop the fight in the final seconds as Cuellar gave everything he had into the defenseless Marrero.

In the seventh round, the Matrix launched an immediate body assault on Cuellar followed by two left hooks up top to announce the return of his legs and a war broke out in the corner. The two fighters traded at a furious pace forcing the formerly staid crowd into the action. The Argentine Cuellar's relentless straight-ahead style was reminiscent of his countryman, Carlos Baldomir, and Marrero couldn't find the room to run with Cuellar skillfully cutting the ring down.

Cuellar hurt Marrero again in the 9th with a beautiful right uppercut and cross combination, opening a cut over the right eye. *Again*, Marrero only barely survived the round if not something even more serious. He miraculously lived to outbox Cuellar in the final rounds, finally avoiding the Argentine's inside game effectively. The fighters' corners had their own duel going on; Marrero's became increasingly concerned about Cuellar's rabbit punching, while Cuellar's complained about a series of low blows.

And then at the final bell the ring announcer's microphone went dead. The emergency hard-wired replacement? Also dead. He shrugged into the sudden vociferous feedback from the

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crowd mentioning the obvious, but the producer had the show go on. It was probably a closer fight than the one reflected in judges' unanimous decision for Cuellar, 115-112, 114-113, and 116-111, but it seemed they got it right.

Introducing the main event, Tyson looked exuberant in the corner of his man Argenis Mendez, jumping up and down and clapping. Later he admitted it was a thrill to be back in the ring, saying it made him feel like a child. Mendez's team was sharply decked out in a matching royal blue and neon green jumpsuits, making Tyson in white look all the more like some angel of terror.

The challenger Arash Usmanee was dressed in the colors of his native Afghanistan and carried a flag rarely, if ever, seen inside the ring of a pro fight. At the final instructions, Usmanee clowned a jab step in Mendez's direction, demanding a limp ejection warning from third man in the ring Benjy Esteves Jr.

Evidently, Usmanee was chomping at the bit for the bell, he started throwing punches immediately and never really stopped until the final bell. He was the busier fighter from the jump, just probably not the more effective puncher. A countless number of his strikes were met with an elbow, and glove, or just the climate-controlled air.

Based on Usmanee's trainer Eddie Mustafa Muhammad's incessant barking from the corner, the fight plan was clear: back Mendez into ropes, into corners, work the body to draw Mendez's arms down and outwork him. For some reason, Mendez looked fearlessly comfortable inside Usmanee's trap, expertly slipping in and around punches, blocking the vast majority of shots and trusting that when he countered, it would be with a more decisive blow than the ones he was receiving.

The banter of body language coursed through all 12 rounds. Coming out for the eighth round, Mendez bore the smile of a fighter in command of skills. In between the final four rounds Usmanee declined the use of his stool. Although it was clear that Mendez was landing harder punches when given the chance, every time he did, Usmanee was there to defiantly nod his head along the horizon, letting Mendez know he wouldn't be hurt. Once, Usmanee abbreviated his nod to time the unexpected Mendez with a flush jab. And even in the tenth round when Mendez landed maybe the fight's best right cross on the button that made Usmanee slink back, he recovered a second later and kept coming forward, guided by some invisible inner quality to never relent, never doubt.

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More cynically, perhaps he was guided by the knowledge that his best defense was continuous offense. Compared to Mendez's virtuosic defense, Usmanee's was out-classed.

Much like his torrid twelfth round last January against Rances Barthelemy, Usmanee had more in the tank in the fight's final minutes, even hurting Mendez with about 30 seconds to go, but without a knockout few people ringside thought his last assault would be enough to tip the scorecards in his favor. Mendez was the longer, quicker, and stronger fighter coming in, and even though he walked into Usmanee's brawl, he was essentially no worse for wear. It was athleticism versus courage and most expected Usmanee to be heartbroken (I had Mendez by two points). ESPN's Teddy Atlas had the fight at the fight at 119-109 for Mendez.

Instead, the judges' decision left both fighters in sorrow. One judge had it for Usmanee by two points, but two had it at 114-114 resulting in a majority draw. Neither fighter showed for the closing presser so their post fight comments have to be the final word for now. Usmanee: "It was a very close fight. I was the aggressor. It could have gone either way." Mendez: "I'm really disappointed. It was a great fight, but I'm the champ. I think I won."

In terms of two blood and guts fights, it was a great night for boxing to be sure, but the main event draw is a tough swallow both for the fighters and fans. Maybe tonight's the wrong night to make the tired argument about the serial inadequacy of judging in boxing, but the model is old and seriously flawed.

Then again, maybe it's exactly the right night to make the argument as Mike Tyson promises to bring some fresh energy into fight game. Tyson's post-fight presser was a 15 minute thing of beauty.

His joy at being back in boxing was obvious. There was no bitterness over two of his top fighters meeting unfavorable decisions. Instead, he spoke of his demands that his fighters take hard fights, win or loss. When asked if he had any goals in seeing that boxers get paid better, he demurred, basically saying that if he takes care of business by putting on good fights, the money will come, but dollar amounts for his fighters aren't really a priority.

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He reached deep into his knowledge well of boxing history, connecting these patches of Central New York to John L. Sullivan and mostly-forgotten bare-knuckle champions to his own life as a young amateur riding in beat-up station wagons on the I-90, saying he wanted to put on fights where people cared about the sport, and they cared about in Upstate New York.

He heaped praise on Usmanee: "The gentleman from Afghanistan. . . he represented his country well. This man fought gallantly, he fought bravely, he fought eloquently, he fought classic. Both men were great warriors. Regardless of the outcome, what they did for boxing overcomes their personal feelings. It's bigger than what they believe in, it's bigger than them, their performance tonight. The champion didn't like the decision, the challenger didn't like the decision, but the decision was great for boxing, and that's bigger than all of us."

Tyson criticized the sport for going soft, saying fighters don't want to hurt each other anymore. "In order to be a sensational fighter, you have to have bad intentions. Your objective has to be for his surrender or his total destruction. I don't want to sound like a brutal animal, but this is what makes fighting. We're in the hurt business, and I want my fighters to do this better than anyone in the world."

"That's the name of the game right there: fighting with your life on the line and you don't wanna fight no more but you keep fighting, keep fighting and you don't wanna go no more and you keep fighting." And turning Cus D'Amato's criticism of one-punch knock outs as entertainment and not as fighting inwards and coming close to tears, "I take the credit for being great, but it ain't fighting, it ain't what Ali and Frazier are doing, it ain't fighting!"

He spoke openly and emotionally about squashing a 30-year-old beef with ESPN analyst Teddy Atlas, saying he was a "vicious alcoholic" and how could he expect to be forgiven if he didn't forgive himself. (*Tyson and Atlas, during their reunion, are above, in Tom Casion-Iron Mike Productions photo.*)

It opened a raw nerve, and Tyson admitted that he's been lying about his sobriety, tonight only being six days clean and drawing applause from the assembled for his striking honesty.

Win, lose, or draw, boxing is about the human theater of the fight against fear, against death. Just as A.J. Liebling famously wrote: "The desire to punch other boys in the nose will survive in

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our culture. The spirit of self-preservation will induce some boys to excel. Those who find they excel will try to turn a modest buck by it. It is an art of the people, like making love.”

It's probably too late to wish the industrial age of boxing back in these parts, but tonight there's promise again and forever that boxing's has an enduring future, warts and all.

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Radam G says:

Great piece! And with straight-up legit punching. Later for marshmallow munching. On the baddest lion in jungle, you have to be willing to kill and on dat arse lunching. Too many fighters are wuzzies, Iron Mike was hunching. They don't wanna make waves, so their arses are in living graves. Holla!