

Hands of Stone, Marvelous Marv, and Billy D

Written by Paul Beston, Special For TSS
Friday, 08 November 2013 12:42



Long ago—November 10, 1983—you had to leave home if you wanted to see a big fight live. The only alternative to being ringside was watching a big-screen broadcast in arenas, theaters, or auditoriums, in what was known as closed-circuit television.

I caught the Amtrak from Stamford to Providence, where my brother Pete, one year older, was a freshman at Providence College. We would go to the Providence Civic Center to watch Roberto Duran, the Hands of Stone, take on Marvelous Marvin Hagler for the middleweight title in Las Vegas.

We had been Duran fans for years, captured by the ferocity of his fighting style and also,

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strangely, by his refusal to observe rudimentary standards of sportsmanship—a quality we never admired in anyone else. Had Duran come along when we were older and less in need of outlaw heroes, we might have disliked him. The past June, we had listened to radio updates on 1010 WINS, as Duran separated Davey Moore from his future in eight brutal rounds in Madison Square Garden and won a piece of the junior middleweight championship, his third world title in as many weight classes. We found an old dropcloth, spread it out on the floor of our garage, and wrote Roberto Duran's rules in heavy black letters. We hung it up on the chain-link fence by the high school football field for the whole town to read in the morning.

The Moore win was Roberto's redemption for the No Mas fight of November 1980, when he quit in the eighth round of his rematch with Sugar Ray Leonard. He'd won acclaim as an all-time great when he beat Leonard in their first fight for the welterweight title. Now the shame of No Mas—an event [still debated today](#)—sent Duran spiraling downward. He gained weight, lost his edge, and started losing fights, too. Most boxing people wrote him off. Now he was on top of the world again, fighting for a fourth world title and a \$4 million payday against Hagler, who would earn about \$8 million. It was Hagler's first big-money fight. Leonard had retired the year before, and Hagler hoped to replace him as boxing's superstar. Pete didn't like Duran's chances, and I wasn't so sure myself. All I knew was that he had to box; he couldn't go rushing in against Hagler the way he had against Leonard. Hagler was a natural 160-pounder; Roberto was coming up from 154, and before that, 147, and before that, 135. I thought he could frustrate Hagler, unless Hagler just blew him away. That's what'd he'd been doing to everyone else—Alan Minter, Fulgencio Obelmejias, Tony Sibson, Mustafa Hamsho, [William "Caveman" Lee](#), and Wilford Scypion.

I got a cab from the train station to the Providence College campus, where the door to Pete's dorm room, in Stephens Hall, was open, with people coming in and out. Among them was one of the tallest people I'd ever seen: Ernie "Pop" Lewis, a freshman forward on PC's basketball team. With him was a freshman guard named Billy Donovan, who reminded me of Richie Cunningham. Pop and Billy spent most of their time on the bench. Basketball at PC had fallen off a cliff; the golden days of the fifties and sixties, and the culminating glory, a 1973 Final Four appearance, belonged to some other time. College sports were an empire now, and the Friars were vassals in the powerhouse Big East Conference.

Everyone wanted to talk about the fight.

"Hagler will kill Duran!" one guy with a thick Massachusetts accent said.

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“Two or three rounds at the most.” His loyalties were clear: Hagler was from Brockton, Rocky Marciano’s hometown, though he spent his childhood years in Newark, until the 1967 riots destroyed the tenement he lived in with his mother. Before the mayhem ended, 12-year-old Marvin and his mother crawled on the floor of their apartment to avoid getting sprayed with bullets through the windows.

“Duran has never been knocked out,” someone else said.

“Hagler hasn’t fought anybody.”

“Duran is a quitter,” another guy said. “I saw him against Sugar Ray. Who quits a fight?”

“He didn’t quit, that fight was fixed,” said still another. The boxing expertise in the room was used up quickly.

From what I saw of it, Providence was bleak, or “gritty” in the preferred euphemism. The city had endured a long economic decline and was rife with mob influence. Its mayor was soon to be convicted of assault and forced from office. Only the Capitol building’s impressive dome suggested a future. The decade-old Providence Civic Center looked like just another generic indoor arena (it is known today as the Dunkin Donuts Center, or the Dunk). But it was packed with fans, and their loyalties seemed curiously split. Hagler should have had a New England advantage; he had even fought in the Civic Center earlier in 1983, stopping Scypion in four rounds. But Duran fans were out in force, as always. They roared every time his face appeared on the giant screen.

It became clear right off that Roberto had a plan: to wait on Hagler and counterpunch. Hagler didn’t like being the guy who had to lead, and so he went after Duran only in mid-gear. Duran stood back, letting Hagler come to him, sneaking in right hands when he could. Some got through. Hagler did best with his jarring southpaw jab, but he didn’t seem quite himself. I told myself that Duran had won three of the first five rounds, though they were all close.

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“He’s outboxing him,” I told Pete, who was unconvinced.

The sixth round changed the fight. Hagler’s cornermen, Goody and Pat Petronelli, offering gentle criticism—“You’re a little tight, Marv”—sent Hagler out to be more aggressive, and he pounded Duran at close quarters with uppercuts. Duran had long been an unheralded defensive fighter, blessed with reflexes and judgment that allowed him to move his head in anticipation of punches—sliding and slipping, mimicking the punch’s trajectory to lessen its impact. Now it seemed like Hagler couldn’t miss that head. The Civic Center sounded like a Hagler crowd now. It looked like Duran might go.

Duran was breathing with his mouth open, and he kept shaking his arms out like someone who had just lifted weights. For the first time, he’d been outmuscled—not undone by speed, the way Leonard had mastered him, but by brute force. A sustained assault might finish the job, but Hagler didn’t launch it. He won the rounds—7, 8, 9, 10—building a huge lead but keeping his pilot light on simmer. The fight’s outcome now seemed clear; it lacked only a conclusion.

Then in the 11th, Hagler danced away from Duran as the crowd booed. In the 12th and 13th, Duran saw opportunity in Hagler’s swelling left eye and nailed Marvin again and again with his best punch, the straight right. From where we stood, Duran was still well behind, but if he won the last two rounds, who could say?

Only now did Hagler grasp that Duran could not hurt him and that his title was at risk, and only now did he fight as if he remembered the bitterest night of his career: the 1979 draw in Las Vegas with then-middleweight champion Vito Antuofermo, in which Hagler didn’t do enough to hold off Vito’s late charge. Antuofermo kept his title on a draw. Here he was, at the scene of the crime, letting a much more formidable foe in through the out door. Some old remembered terror must have crept into his heart. It was time to fight.

Hagler spent the 14th and 15th rounds bludgeoning Duran, who could do little but hold and throw out the occasional right. Marvin’s jab and uppercuts dominated both rounds completely. Duran was so weary it was almost inspiring watching him stay upright. We knew he had lost and started walking out before the decision was announced, but the judges made it absurdly close: 144-143, 144-142, and 146-145 for Hagler. Duran led on two cards after the 13th round. Hagler hadn’t turned up the octane a moment too soon.

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It surprised me that Marvin and the Petronellis were so ill-prepared for Duran's tactics. They seemed caught off-balance again in 1987, when the unretired Leonard fought Hagler the way everyone knew he would—circling and moving. The Petronellis were rock-solid people, but as strategists they didn't rate with the sages Duran, Leonard, and Thomas Hearn brought with them most of their careers: Ray Arcel and Freddy Brown, Angelo Dundee, and Emanuel Steward. And great as Marvin was, he was not an instinctive fighter like Duran or Leonard. He could not decode spontaneous messages. Marvin was a striver; he was always respected, often admired. Ray and Roberto were creators; they were loved or hated.

Back at Stephens Hall, I drank beer and listened to college talk, now shifting from sports to girls. The traffic in and out of the room continued. Pop Lewis and Billy Donovan came in to get the lowdown.

"Was it a fair decision?" Pop asked. We assured him that it was.

"Duran is tough, though," Billy Donovan said, shaking his head. "15 rounds with Hagler. Tough guy!"

On this everyone agreed.

The next summer, we tried to watch Duran fight Thomas Hearn at home, on a temporary cable channel. They called it pay per view. The video feed went out, but the audio came through, enough for us to hear something that sounded impossible: Duran getting knocked around the ring. Hearn vaporized him in the second round with a right hand. That seemed the end of the line, but Duran kept coming back, winning his second-greatest victory in 1989 against the powerful middleweight champion Iran Barkley. He was 38 when he finally got his rematch with Leonard, losing in a dreadful fight for which, curiously, he brought no fire. For 12 rounds he trailed after Leonard with the enthusiasm of a man forced to walk around the block for exercise. He kept fighting until age 50, quitting only after suffering serious injuries in a car accident.

Hagler blasted out Hearn in an epic battle in 1985, finally achieving the stardom he had

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sought. But Leonard beat Hagler in their still-disputed superfight, the capper of a decade of battles between what George Kimball called the [Four Kings](#) . Marvin moved to Italy to pursue an acting career, became fluent in Italian, and [rarely came back home](#) . He saved his money. No glamor, no shortcuts, no excuses: he lives the way he fought.

Pete and I were in our junior and senior years at PC in 1987, when the Friars became the most improbable Final Four team in NCAA history. They got there under the leadership of a 34-year-old coach named Rick Pitino, the heroics of point guard Billy Donovan—they called him Billy the Kid or Billy D—a smothering full-court press, and a band of ace three-point shooters, including Pop Lewis. The Friars played their home games at the Civic Center, but whenever I went there, I always thought about Duran and Hagler first.

Providence looks much better today than it did in 1983, though I'm not sure it's much better off, given Rhode Island's financial and economic woes. Billy D is the head coach at Florida, where he's won two NCAA titles and become one of the highest-paid coaches in the country. He was always a striver, but somewhere along the way he became a creator. That happens about as often as fighters like Duran and Hagler come along.

As for me and Pete, we did some striving of our own, but we're never more than a nod away from the two teenagers who scrawled a message on a banner in the middle of the night.

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brownsugar says:

Very boring and disappointing fight...Hagler had a bad habit of thinking too much against boxers instead of turning up the aggro.

Brad says:

Great article. I love this fight. Most fans love Hagler-Hearns because of the obvious action. To me, Hagler-Hearns is a really dumb fight. Nothing was learned. Two very, very talented poker players pushed their chips all in on the first hand. Yeah, that's exciting, but ultimately "dumb."

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Duran-Hagler was two great fighters trying to out think each other. Non-dumb fighting if you will. Hagler, the natural counterpuncher, assumed Duran would come at him, which is also what he wanted. Duran, knowing that he couldn't brawl with the bigger Hagler, used his boxing skills and really created the blueprint on how to beat Hagler (which Leonard would use 4 years later). Duran exposed Hagler. Hagler didn't like to force the action and when he tried to he was open to lead rights. A sucker punch. Duran landed them all night long. Hagler knew Duran was smart and setting him up (he says as much between rounds to his handlers). In the end, the 15 rounds got Duran. But what a great night, and great fight it was...loved those days when boxing was taken to a very high level.

Brad says:

"very boring and disappointing"...really brownsugar? To me this was boxing at the highest level. You can have the Gatti-Ward, Hagler-Hearns, Foreman-Lyle Toughman Contest Brawls that non-boxing fans eat up. Give me two talented, smart fighters, fighting smart fights.

brownsugar says:

I appreciate the fact that you liked the fight Brad... But for me Hagler was not his usual destruct and destroy self. He was biting off faints and anticipating too many punches that were never thrown by the Wiley Duran... I was very disappointed.

DaveB says:

Very good writing. I love personal pieces like this. An excellent article.