

## Jennings and Hart Bring Cheesesteak Flavor to Top Rank's NYC Card

Written by Bernard Fernandez  
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Saturday night's HBO Boxing After Dark card in The Theater at Madison Square Garden is headlined, and appropriately so, by the 12-round matchup of WBO junior lightweight champion Mikey Garcia (33-0, 28 KOs), of Oxnard, Calif., and challenger Juan Carlos Burgos (30-1-2, 20 KOs), of Tijuana, Mexico.

"We are proud to be presenting Mikey Garcia once again," said Top Rank founder Bob Arum. "We believe Mikey is the next big superstar in boxing and in 2014 that will become evident."

If Garcia is show himself to be that guy, he first will have to get past the very tough Burgos, no easy task.

But there also will be significant interest in Philadelphia, 115 miles to the south, in what transpires on a cold and snowy night in a New York ring as two of that celebrated fight town's brightest hopes for the future will be featured in separate bouts. How they fare there, and in the near future, will go a long way toward determining whether they are truly worthy to fill the big footprints left by the long line of legendary Philly fighters who went before them.

The more immediate chance for a breakthrough to the uppermost reaches of boxing goes to 29-year-old Bryant "By-By" Jennings (17-0, 9 KOs; *seen above in image by Carlos Suarez Jr. of Fight Images* ), who is ranked No. 4 at heavyweight by both the WBC and the IBF, No. 5 by the WBA and No. 13 by the WBO. Bryant, a three-sport star (football, basketball and track) at Benjamin Franklin High School who didn't even take up boxing until he was 24, squares off against fellow unbeaten Artur Szpilka (16-0, 12 KOs) of Krakow, Poland, who is ranked No. 14 by the WBC. Should Jennings continue to impress in his first appearance on HBO, he could soon find himself at or near the front of the line for a shot at WBA/WBO/IBF/IBO heavyweight ruler Wladimir Klitschko (61-3, 51 KOs), or maybe the winner of the expected rematch of Bermane Stiverne (23-1-1, 20 KOs) and Chris Arreola (36-3, 31 KOs) for the WBC belt recently vacated by Wlad's brother and Ukraine

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presidential candidate Vitali Klitschko.

“Within this year, 2014,” Jennings, who is co-promoted by Gary Shaw Productions and Antonio Leonard Promotions, answered when asked when he will get a chance to fight for a world title. “Of course that’s my goal. I would say tomorrow. But that’s just our expectations. It’s not a promise. It’s not on paper.”

Jennings’ trainer, Fred Jenkins, has worked with former WBA super welterweight champion David Reid and three-time world title challenger “Rockin” Rodney Moore, so he believes he has an idea of how high his latest protégé can rise.

“From the beginning, I knew he was a superstar,” Jenkins said of the impressively muscled, 6-2, 223-pound Jennings. “The more he moves into position, the more guys are going to try to duck him because he can end someone’s career. He’s that type of fighter.”

Unlike Jennings, who came to boxing late and shot to prominence almost out of nowhere, super middleweight prospect Hart (11-0, 10 KOs) is, as the son of 1970s middleweight contender Eugene “Cyclone” Hart, the carrier of a proud tradition for his family and his city. And, at 24, he might have even more long-term upside than his larger homeboy, Jennings.

Like Jennings, Jesse Hart – who is promoted by Top Rank – hopes to be at least in the conversation for a shot at a world title before 2014 gives way to 2015. But the 6-3 slugger, who obviously has inherited his father’s penchant for delivering spectacular knockouts, believes the winning of a bejeweled belt might only be the beginning of more wondrous things to come.

“When we first sat down, (Arum) said, ‘I want you. You’re going to be a superstar. You have what (Oscar) De La Hoya had, what Floyd Mayweather has,’” said Hart, 24, who takes on rugged journeyman Derrick Findley ( 20-11-3, 13 KOs) in a scheduled six-rounder. “I was, like, wow. Then he asked me a question: ‘Who’s the first Mexican-(American) fighter that was on a Wheaties box?’ I said, ‘I don’t know, who was it?’ He said, ‘Oscar De La Hoya. That’s how big I want you to be. You have all the qualities to be a megastar in the sport of boxing. I’m going to let you reach those heights.’”

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Lest anyone accept Arum's rosy vision of Hart's future without reservation, please remember that the Top Rank honcho also predicted that another of his Philly fighters, now-retired junior middleweight Anthony "The Messenger" Thompson, would become the greatest Philadelphia fighter of all time, and that the biggest boxing match of all time would pit De La Hoya against Dana Rosenblatt. Neither of those grandiose projections came anywhere near to crossing paths with reality (De La Hoya never fought Rosenblatt, who failed to fulfill Arum's giddily optimistic predictions), but in this instance, the still-unranked Hart just might have the goods to live up to his promoter's more excessive hype and hyperbole.

Hart will have done right well if he even approaches the boxing accomplishments of his dad, who now serves as his son's trainer. "Cyclone" Hart posted a 30-9-2 record with 28 wins inside the distance from 1969 to '82, but that mark is deceiving; there was a time when nearly everyone expected him to soar ever higher than he did. The elder Hart's promoter, J Russell Peltz, once described him as "the best one-punch knockout artist I ever saw in person," and in 2003 The Ring magazine had him at No. 61 in its list of the 100 greatest punchers of all time, a subjective compilation that was generously dotted with Philly fighters: Matthew Saad Muhammad at No. 24, Bennie Briscoe (34), Joe Frazier (39) and Leotis Martin (68) also made the cut.

Jesse Hart already has come up short in one way when measured against his father, who began his pro career with 19 straight KOs. His failure to put away Steven Tyner in a four-rounder on Dec. 8, 2012, meant the loss of a friendly bet with Cyclone, although no money exchanged hands.

"Me and my dad made a bet when I first turned pro," Jesse said with a smile. "I said, 'Dad, I think I can pass 19 straight knockouts. I think I'm going for 22 straight.' He looked at me and said, 'All right, the bet is on.' Then in my fourth or fifth fight (it was his fifth), I hurt my hand in the first round. I dropped the kid, but it went the distance.

"Ever since then, I feel the pressure's been off (to keep the knockout string alive). I know I put my foot in my mouth."

Which is not to say that Jesse has stopped thinking about knockouts, or making bold predictions of them. He now has reeled off six in a row and, who knows, maybe he still can get those 20-plus consecutive putaways. He's certainly thinking about making Findley his seventh straight such victim in this latest runs of KOs.

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"I'm pushing for the knockout," he admitted. "He survived in there with (Andre) Ward, with (Andre) Dirrell, with Curtis Stevens. To separate myself from those guys that never knocked him out, I got to knock him out."

And if it does go down the way Hart imagines, it very well could be with his signature punch, the left hook, which also was Cyclone Hart's preferred calling card.

"My dad taught me how to throw it," Jesse said of the hook. "It's just a punch that everybody here (in Philadelphia) honed. Bernard Hopkins, he inherited it from other Philly fighters. I think I inherited it just from being in Philadelphia. When you got greats around you, you're going to pick up certain things. My dad, in my opinion, had the best left hook in the business. You could say it's in my blood."

Hart stopped and looked around the Joe Hand Boxing Gym in the Northern Liberties section of Philly, whose walls are adorned with oversized posters of the city's more renowned fighters, including, among others, those of his father, Gypsy Joe Harris and Georgie Benton. He said he hoped that someday posters of himself and Jennings would someday hang there, too, or in some other gym where Philly's rich boxing history is continually written.

"These guys paved the way for myself and Bryant Jennings," Hart said. "Philadelphia is the boxing capital not just of the United States, but of the world. If somebody else claims to be great, he probably came here and stole something from us."

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Jennings I a decent novice... Be interesting to see how far he goes.