

Ward v Gatti

Contributed by Daniel Cann
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Mohegan Sun Casino, Uncasville, Connecticut

In all the years I have been a follower of the sport of boxing (over a quarter of a century and counting) there has never been a contest of such drama, intensity and courage as shown in the Arturo Gatti versus Micky Ward contest held at Uncasville, Connecticut on 18 May 2002. No title was at stake and to be honest none was needed, this was for that most important commodity of all: self respect. In an age where the proliferation of so called world titles with over half a dozen governing bodies and seventeen weight divisions to choose from Ward versus Gatti could have been held in any era, in fact it would not have been out of place were it held at the Roman Coliseum!

When the light-welterweight match was made both boxers were known and respected in the trade as battle hardened, solid professionals, known for their bravery and toughness. Gatti was a possessor of underrated boxing skills and Ward had perhaps one of the best digs to the body in modern boxing.

Both were susceptible to injury (who isn't?) particularly cuts. Ward had the reputation as having the better chin and Gatti had perhaps a slight edge in power. The form leading up to the match was fascinating. Ward at the age of 36 and with a career that began way back in June 1985, six years before his 30 year old opponent, was now in the 'veteran' stage of his career.

Gatti was 34-5 with 28 inside, attesting to his punching power but also to his vulnerability. Gatti had been in some real wars in his career, notably he was horrifically cut and battered by Angel Manfredy in eight rounds in 1998, two back to back losses to Ivan Robinson followed that same year and despite taking part in most boxing magazines 'Fight of the Year' there were calls for Gatti to retire. But Arturo 'Thunder' Gatti was probably one of the most bravest and tenacious boxers I have ever seen and 'give up' was just not in his vocabulary. He strung together a few wins before losing to the then hot property Oscar De La Hoya before winning impressively, thrashing former IBF champion Terron Millett before the Ward contest.

'Irish' Micky Ward was 37-11 with 27 wins by knockout or stoppage. Ward of Lowell, Massachusetts was considered the 'dangerman' of the light-welterweight division with a cast iron jaw and a vicious body attack that saw off opponents like Shea Neary (for the WBU title where Ward had to travel to London, England), Reggie Green (where Ward, behind on points, won with just 20 seconds remaining) and Alfonso Sanchez. Emmanuel Augustus had been beaten on points and Ward's record boasted big names like Vince Phillips and Zab Judah on it. His last fight before facing Gatti was a controversial technical loss to Jess James Leija. Ward was an experienced and respected honest pro and had a strong following.

Former IBF super featherweight champion, Gatti had changed trainer and employed the wily ex pro and world champion, James Buddy McGirt who seemed to instil more discipline and skill together with the (Montreal born) Jersey City fighter's raw courage and determination.

Ward at this stage was vastly experienced having fought nearly every style in boxing imaginable. He had a few tricks himself, being able to switch stances from orthodox to southpaw with ease. That his vaunted left hook to the body finished off many tough men of the division showed he had plenty to offer.

Both men were full of mutual respect for each other prior to the hotly anticipated fight, a rarity in modern boxing where 'trash talking' is the norm. Here were two pro's who had seen and heard it all before and were past shouting insults at opponents. Neither man would get psyched out by anyone, instead Gatti commented 'He's a tough fighter and I respect him a lot, but I have every tool to make this an easy night.'

Ward perhaps put it best when he said 'We're just two guys who are going to fight to win. There's no bad blood between us. Win, lose or draw, I will shake Arturo's hand when it is over.' This Corinthian spirit and sportsmanship was severely lacking in contemporary sport and it was refreshing as well as welcoming to hear these words from two of the toughest protagonists of the hardest sport of all utter them.

On to the fight itself and the crowd of around 5,000 that packed the Mohegan Sun Casino as well as those tuning in on television were treated to an absolute classic. The fight began with Ward opening with a fast left hook, but Gatti wary and respectful of the power in Ward's favourite shot ducked. The opening seconds of the round showed a loose jab and move performance from Gatti while a stiffer more upright Ward stalked looking for openings.

A left-right from Gatti suddenly opened a cut over Ward's right eye. The injury began to flow freely and it was a shocking set back especially as only ninety seconds had elapsed. Ward showed his character by coolly coming forward but it must have been a shocking moment for him. The round closed with Ward still in pursuit while the elusive Gatti kept landing one-two combinations.

Between rounds Al Gavin, Ward's cutman did a sterling job of controlling the flow of blood from the long diagonal gash over the right eyelid. Things did not bode well for Ward; he had potentially nine more rounds to go and had to cope with a nasty cut this early.

The second round saw Ward jolt Gatti with a well timed punch and there was desperation about his work as he must have realised that he was perhaps on borrowed time. Gatti kept using his speed to keep him out of danger, not allowing Ward to get in close to do his inside work. The Canadian kept firing fast salvos, some of which strayed so low they hit Ward on the hips.

A sizzling left hook from Gatti in the third round seemed to stop Ward in his tracks. He needed something to turn the tide and fast. Micky showed his frustration as he shook his head after missing with one shot. His nose was now bleeding freely as well as the cut over his eye. Finally he had success with a vintage hook to Gatti's lean body. Ward poured it on and Gatti looked hurt and troubled. At last the fans from Lowell had something to shout about.

Things really started to heat up as Gatti fired right back, landing his own left hook. A stiff right landed on Ward's body and the two whaled away with both hands. Ward's eye was bleeding freely again. The round ended and it was clear this one was going to be yet another war for both men no matter how long it lasted.

The fourth round brought more cheer to Ward and his supporters as he tagged Gatti with a decent right early in the round. Gatti was now noticeably dropping his hands and he landed some more (unintentionally) low blows. Ward slammed back with a big right and both men traded left hooks. This was more Marquis De Sade than the Marquis of Queensberry!

With just under a minute to go Gatti crashed in a left-right-left combination then threw a blatantly low left. Ward understandably grimaced and staggered on unsteady legs. Referee Frank Cappuccino, a long servant of the game, quite rightly gave Ward five minutes to recover from the fowl blow, ruling that there had been no knockdown and taking a point

off Gatti. The round shortly ended after the recovery time and in the interval before the fifth Ward snarled 'I'm ready to go!'

Gatti landed some more fast low blows to start the fifth. Three shots did land on Ward's face. Ward did not stop advancing and trying, he was trying to close Gatti down and corner him. Gatti suddenly stopped retreating and landed fast left-rights but was stunned by a nicely delivered short right from Ward as if to say 'I'm still here.'

Ward was bleeding freely again but totally defiant. He took many fast left jabs but kept on his man, hurting him with a well timed shot to the liver. It was Gatti's turn to grimace. Ward then amazed the crowd and television audience by displaying hand speed that few thought he possessed as he opened up on his hurt rival. His fists were a blur as a brilliant barrage of punches backed Gatti up.

The seventh saw Ward remorselessly moving forward his features set in concentration and defiance. Gatti briefly returned to his boxing and moving tactics before mixing it up with Ward again. Both were understandably tiring now and I don't know many boxers who would have been able to maintain the same pace as they were. They wrestled and fought inside to close the round.

The pace had slowed in the eighth and Gatti was landing the heavier shots now. Blood continued to stream down Ward's face and he looked in a bad situation yet again. Gatti's flurries were fast and Ward was unable to get set until late in the round a fantastic five punch barrage from the Irish-American wobbled Gatti. A mighty trademark left hook to the body nearly finished Gatti along the ropes but the bell sounded.

Then came ninth round. What can you say about the ninth? It has to be simply one of the greatest and most exciting of any boxing match in the sports history and I include the first round of the Hagler versus Hearns fight. It was three minutes of the most unrelenting and furious action ever seen in a boxing ring.

The fortunes of both fighters ebbed and flowed. Somehow both men kept coming back from the brink after shaking each other up with some monstrous punches.

Both of Gatti's eyes were now swelling and as he ambled unsteadily around when Ward found that shot that he had been looking for all night, a huge left hook to the Canadian's body sent him down on his knees on the canvas. He was doubled over in agony as Cappuccino tolled the count and it looked doubtful whether he would beat it. Amazingly Gatti showed tremendous courage in stumbling back to his feet although he still looked unsteady. As Ward went on the attack again Gatti was still bent over, Ward unleashed more bombs.

With two minutes still remaining in the round Gatti began to fight back! The crowd got to its feet roaring its appreciation for these two brave, almost superhuman warriors. Gatti slugged away and suddenly it was Ward who was in trouble! Ward lurched badly and looked very vulnerable himself. Ward fought back bravely out of a corner and Gatti seemed to ease off.

Ward then nailed Gatti with a massive right uppercut which had Gatti looking shaky! This was unbelievable stuff. This was only supposed to happen in Hollywood films. Ward was still groggy but he fired another combination that had the badly hurt Gatti flinching and twisting on the ropes. At one point Gatti turned away and it looked like he was about to surrender to Ward's relentless attacks. Suddenly he fired a left hook that missed to show he was still in it and the bell sounded to end an amazing, savage and almost unbearably exciting round.

Everyone who had watched the fight all over America the next day were asking each other 'Did you see that ninth round?'

Famous trainer of champions Emmanuel Steward working for television said 'I don't know if my heart can stand any more of this!'

Jim Lampley the main commentator said 'One of the three greatest minutes I have ever seen.'

Veteran commentator Larry Merchant said of the ninth 'I'm humbled by the punishment these men take.'

We are talking about hardened journalists and commentators and one of the most experienced fight trainers here and all three of them were overawed by the ninth round. It was that special. I urge any true fan of boxing to try to see the whole contest or at the very least visit YouTube and watch the ninth.

The tenth and final round started with the entire crowd on its feet screaming and cheering with many throwing imaginary punches in the air. Gatti was exhausted and at one point even looked like he may not come out for the round.

He somehow managed to throw some long looping body shots at his chasing tormentor. Ward chased and threw punches whilst his opponent looked out of swollen eyes. Both were pretty marked up with Ward still bleeding, but the ace cut work of Al Gavin had kept him in the fight together with his incredible heart.

In the closing moments of the round both men stood toe to toe and slugged it out to the final bell. The crowd were ecstatic at the end and the decision that Ward had won on points was greeted with cheers. The knockdown and the point deduction had cost Gatti dearly. The scores were 95-93, 94-93 and 94-94 in favour of Ward. It was his most famous and most hard earned victory.

This contest had absolutely everything: amazing action, unbearable drama, exceptional skill, raw courage, discipline, conditioning and above all sportsmanship. Both men saluted the others courage at the end. It is rightly regarded as an all-time classic.

The two met again in a rematch which this time saw Gatti win on points in a clever, slick points decision, flooring Ward in the third round for a count. Their third and final contest saw Gatti again win on points. Neither of the rematches lived up to the original meeting but the two men's names will forever be linked in ring folklore.

After retiring from the sport in 2007 a highly respected and much loved fighter Gatti tragically died on 11 July 2009 in a hotel room in Brazil whilst on holiday with his wife. He died in suspicious circumstances and it has still not been determined whether his death was a suicide or a murder.

Ward retired after his third epic encounter with Gatti after a distinguished and tough career. He had won the respect of many in boxing for his heart and tenacity, hanging tough with some of the best names in boxing. A film of his life starring Mark Wahlberg is due to be released in late 2010 and he remains an example for younger boxers to follow.

Ward and Gatti...If you are a true fan of boxing then you will know all about these two great fighters.