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THE LIVES THEY LIVED

Arturo Gatti: On the Ropes

By Carlo Rotella

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When a boxer is badly hurt by a punch, ingrained discipline may keep him on his feet, but his body goes loose and his guard slackens. He drifts in an undersea dream while his opponent accelerates to a blur, pressing to finish him off. Spectators call out in a confusion of mock-triumph and mock-agony with each blow: “Oh! . . . *Oh*!” The bout suddenly becomes supercharged with purposeful velocity, plunging steeply downhill toward a knockout. The end seems imminent, inevitable — but not when the fighter in trouble was Arturo Gatti.

Gatti, a competent technical boxer who threw aside technique to descend into brawling, became a star by mounting improbably melodramatic comebacks after having been beaten to the verge of unconsciousness. He seemed to become most fully himself — or most fully the heroic character that fans, promoters, networks and reporters made of him — when he was hurt. It was as if he lived a special, extra life during the recurring time-stretched interim between a fight-turning blow and the finish.

I tried to keep my distance from the sentimental blood cult surrounding Gatti, the adherents of which regarded his insistence on taking a beating as some kind of warrior virtue. I tried to bear in mind that many of his most stirring moments resulted from his failure to attend to the rudiments of defense and movement, that he was like an outfielder who has to dive to make game-saving catches because he gets a poor jump on fly balls. But his fights were so exciting that they overwhelmed my skepticism and drew me in.

LIFE IN THE PUNCH BOWL
The boxer at a gym Vero Beach, Fla., in 2005.
Al Bello/Getty Images

From ringside in Atlantic City in 1997, I saw all but the last shred of sense leave Gatti's body when Gabriel Ruelas caught him with an uppercut. Gatti's face, whipped around in my direction by the blow, was screwed up into a tight little bunch of features, eyes squeezed shut and mouth pursed clumsily around the bulk of the mouthpiece. He lurched across the ring, pursued by Ruelas, who hit him with abandon but could not put him down. Gatti somehow recovered and fought back; I saw his body come back to life as full consciousness re-entered it. In the next round he poleaxed Ruelas with a left hook, the same punch with which

Gatti knocked out Wilson Rodriguez in 1996 after Rodriguez had pounded both of Gatti's eyes nearly closed and staggered and floored him with punches he couldn't see coming.

In his most celebrated round, the ninth of his first bout with Micky Ward, in 2002, Gatti twice appeared to be done for — gutted by a body shot, then cumulatively battered into near-defenselessness — but he weathered both crises and returned fire, giving Ward a chance to prove that he, too, could take it. Gatti lost that fight by majority decision but won two brutal rematches in a trilogy widely hailed as one of the most thrilling of all time. Neither fighter was among the best in his weight class when they fought, and the only title at stake was an imaginary one: champion throwback to a myth-historical golden age when Irish and Italian dreadnoughts stood toe to toe to swap giant-slaying blows. Even Ward, a stone bruiser, thought Gatti, who had the advantage in speed and defensive skill, was foolish to trade punches with him. "But he was a real tough guy, and he was his own man," Ward told me, "and he thought banging with you was the way to show that, even if moving was the better way to win the fight."

Gatti, who retired in 2007 with a record of 40-9, won championship belts at 130 and 140 pounds and will be voted into the International Boxing Hall of Fame, but he does not rank among the all-time greats in any division. He will be remembered as a premier "action fighter," a terrific draw and a popular favorite, especially in New Jersey, his fistic home turf. (He was born in Calabria, Italy, and raised in Montreal.) He will also be remembered for the manner of his passing. On July 11 he was found dead in his underwear in a rented apartment in Porto de Galinhas, Brazil, apparently strangled with the strap of a purse belonging to his

wife, Amanda Rodrigues. The marriage had been rocky; they went to the seaside resort with their infant son to attempt a second honeymoon. The Brazilian authorities first accused Rodrigues of murdering her husband as he slept after a night of heavy drinking, then declared that Gatti had contrived to hang himself with the purse strap.

Gatti's friends and family, dissatisfied with the official account that exonerates Rodrigues, are pursuing their own investigation. They, like many of his fans, dismiss as ludicrous the notion that he could ever give up on life. On the other side, those who do believe that he killed himself can cite his evident craving for damage, his appetite for his own blood. Rumors and theories will continue to circulate and, because he left millions in ring winnings and two contradictory wills, the affair will play out in court.

Part of the appeal of Gatti's all-out fighting style was that he and his opponent typically settled their encounter beyond all doubt in the ring. But his mysterious death — was his final opponent Gatti himself, his wife or a third party? — has left the end of his story in the hands of the judges, whose decision will feel unsatisfactory. It will fail to do justice to the heroic character who is forever, in memory, returning from the brink of destruction and about to land the decisive shot that settles things once and for all.

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