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Journal Title: DoubleTake

Volume: Issue: 18 Month/Year: Fall 1999 **Pages:**
18-21

Article Author: Rotella, Carlo

Article Title: "Hurt: A Boxing Suite"

ILL Number: -13823779



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Hurt

A boxing suite

BY CARLO ROTELLA

When I first started going to fights, I always half-expected somebody to call them off. Even now, when I have spent enough time at ringside and in gyms to make boxing familiar and sustaining, I still surprise myself once in a while with the realization that nobody is going to intervene. Usually that moment of rediscovery occurs when a fighter suffers a bad cut, or during an obvious mismatch in which the better fighter hurts the other but cannot finish him. I catch myself watching for someone—the referee, people in suits rushing up to the ring with legal documents in hand—to stop the fight prematurely, because we in the crowd can easily figure out in our heads the calculus that the fighters are doing the long way, showing their work. Fighters are conditioned not to give up, but sometimes I think I can read in the set of a hurt fighter's head and shoulders the wish for a third party's miraculous intervention to spare him further damage, even if that means losing the fight and the chance to know whatever secrets the balance of it might have held.

Maybe I should save my compassion. A mismatch can even out; a nasty-looking cut may have little effect; a fighter in trouble can work out of it. More than one hurt fighter has come back to win after his blood, sprinkled on my notes and shirt, has stimulated my fugitive impulse to see the fight called off. When that happens I feel a secret meddler's guilt: had the fight been stopped when I wanted it stopped, he would have had to cope not only with hurt but also with the defeat I wished on him. After winning—in the ring with his hands still taped but his gloves taken off, with well-wishers and functionaries all around him—a fighter looks especially satisfied to have persevered in difficult circumstances. He strikes a pose for a ringside photographer—fists cocked, chin down, faint smile—and one can see that in this moment,

anyway, he has the hurt banked inside him, like a bottled genie. For next time.

SPADAFORA VS. ANDRESKE

Lightweights. 6 rounds.

November 21, 1996. Erie, Penn.

A young, undefeated lightweight from Pittsburgh named Paul Spadafora was wearing down his man. Spadafora had a body like a blade, narrow and tempered. His close-cropped dark hair and his tattoos—a blue image of a chain dancing around his neck, and the word SOUTH curving across his flat stomach over the image of a paw—suggested Spartan self-denial edged with stylish self-regard. After a round and a half of coping with Spadafora's measured pursuit and rib-rattling body punches, Spadafora's opponent, Mark Andreske—a red-faced, dirty-blond customer from Bay City, Michigan—knew he was out of his league.

Ruefully settling into the marathon of lasting out the fight, Andreske tried to counterpunch and move, but Spadafora cut off the ring and bore in on him. Forced to give ground, Andreske found himself cornered with his back to the ropes. Spadafora hunched his left shoulder in a feint and then shifted his weight smoothly to deliver a right hook to Andreske's gut, just above the armored point of his left hipbone. It made a complex sound—a stiff crack layered into a bass thump, with the crispness of something breaking and the resonance of depths plumbed. Andreske kept his guard up and his chin tucked over his left collarbone, but the rest of him seemed to flow around Spadafora's gloved hand even as he shrank, hurt, from the blow. Spadafora was finding and making regions of softness in his opponent's hard-trained abdomen, and was setting each of them aglow with deep, lasting pain. Spadafora considered for a moment, weaving gently in front of Andreske, then produced a well-practiced copy of the previous attack: he feinted a left and then put another leg-driving, weight-shifting, gracefully arcing right in the same spot. As the two of them worked through the logic of the match—the one finding ways to deliver doses of force, the other husbanding his body's eroding integrity—I was thinking of Andreske's

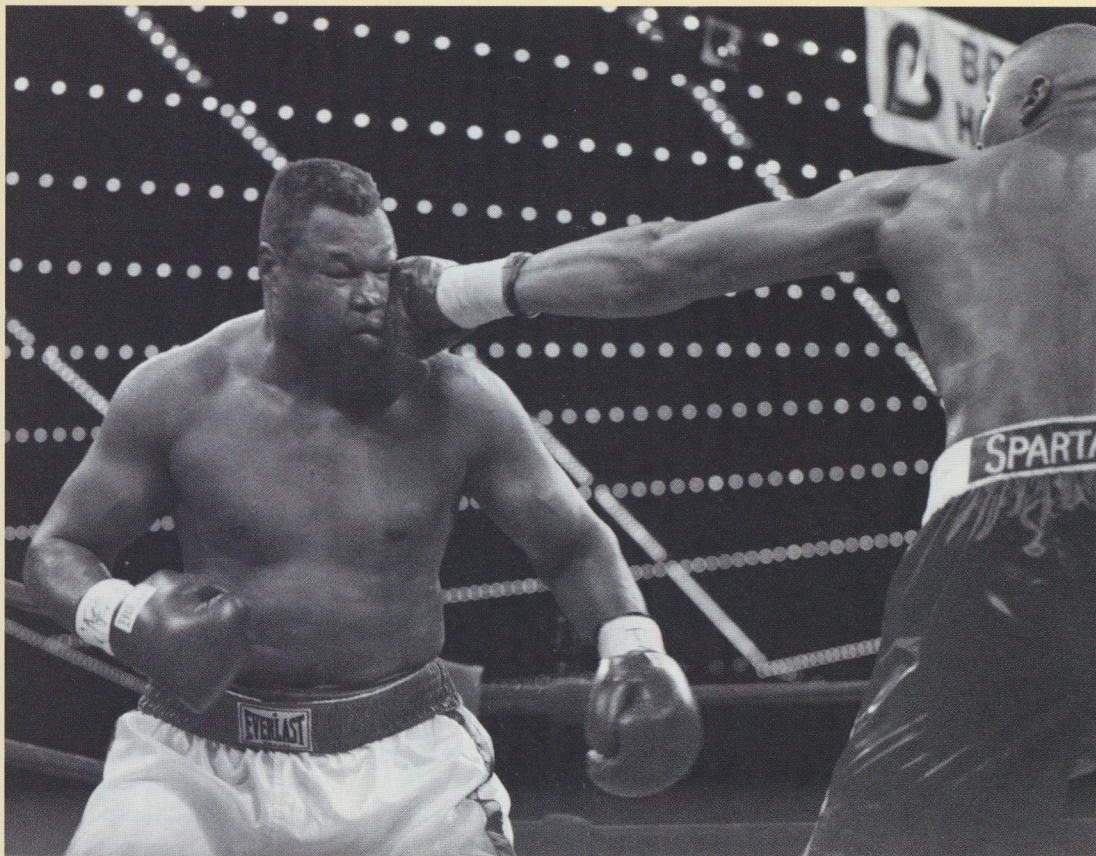
internal organs rolling and bruising in the lightless sea of his insides, like submarines bracketed by depth charges in old movies.

The most common image of damage in boxing is of blows to the head, which throw off the balance and scramble the wits both immediately and over the long haul. When a fighter stands up under a barrage of blows to the head, the damage does seem to be visibly accruing. But there are also many cases, especially in mismatches, in which a punch or two to the head ends it quickly, and what looks like a catastrophic event—the fighter collapsing as if poleaxed, with his legs going one way, his arms another, and his wits a third—is in fact a kind of salvation, because the fight is over.

Body punching, though, is different. Once in a while one sees a fighter floored and finished by a body shot early in the fight, but usually such damage accumulates more gradually. Only after an opponent's energy drains away and his guard comes down will a dedicated body puncher finally turn his attention to the undefended head; then the denouement is soon reached. But in a fight between equals, or when the superior fighter is a good body puncher but not an adept finisher, body punching develops over the course of what seems like a very long time indeed.

Watching a body puncher at work, one feels with special force the sense of damage being done—life-changing, soul-altering hurt. The cruelty of it proceeds in part from the fact that the damaged party, if he is diligent and courageous, is significantly responsible for his own suffering. Because boxers devote such effort in training to hardening their middles against punishment, it takes a sustained attack to break them down. Having in his brief, undistinguished career done hundreds of thousands of situps and run thousands of miles, having learned to stay on his feet when hurt and to get up when knocked down, Andreske had ensured that the first ten or fifteen body punches would not finish him. He had guaranteed himself several rounds of punishment before reaching the moment of collapse. If he caught a few breaks and landed a solid punch or two, he might even last out the fight.

He did not. He lasted through the third and fourth rounds, punching less often and



Larry Holmes vs. Maurice Harris,
July 29, 1997

grabbing for Spadafora when he could. Spadafora showed flashes of awkwardness and inaccuracy as he tried to move his punches up to the head, so there was no quick finish. In the fifth, though, he knocked Andreske down with a body shot, and after Andreske took his count and got up, Spadafora knocked him down again. The second time Andreske went down, he spun wildly into the ropes, his body loose and open. He rose again, game, but the referee stopped the fight. It was, by the book, the right time for him to stop it. Directly after the first knock-down would have been too soon, since when Andreske got up he had been able to sustain his guard and throw punches. Some part of me, though, had wanted the fight stopped just after the moment in the second round when Spadafora's two rights to the body had told all of us everything there was to know about the beating to come.

GRAFFIUS VS. VEGA

Junior middleweights. 6 rounds.

April 11, 1997. Allentown, Penn.

The locally prominent lawyer who promotes the fights at the Days Inn in Allentown also announces the action for the

regional cable-television service. On fight night he wears a tuxedo; the TV lights impart a rich shine to his black pompadour and beard. As a matchmaker he tends to err on the side of caution, bringing in gawky, flailing, custard-bodied fighters to be summarily slaughtered by his stable of hometown men. Despite the presence in nearby Easton of Larry Holmes, one of the most accomplished technicians ever to hold the heavyweight title, the Lehigh Valley crowd of racecar devotees, hunters, and high school wrestling buffs shows little interest in the finer points of boxing and is content to watch specimens of local manhood perform what amounts to bayonet practice on semi-animate mannequins imported for the purpose. Sometimes, though, the lawyer makes a mistake and brings in a live one, which creates the possibility for a local fighter—and perhaps an attentive spectator—to learn something.

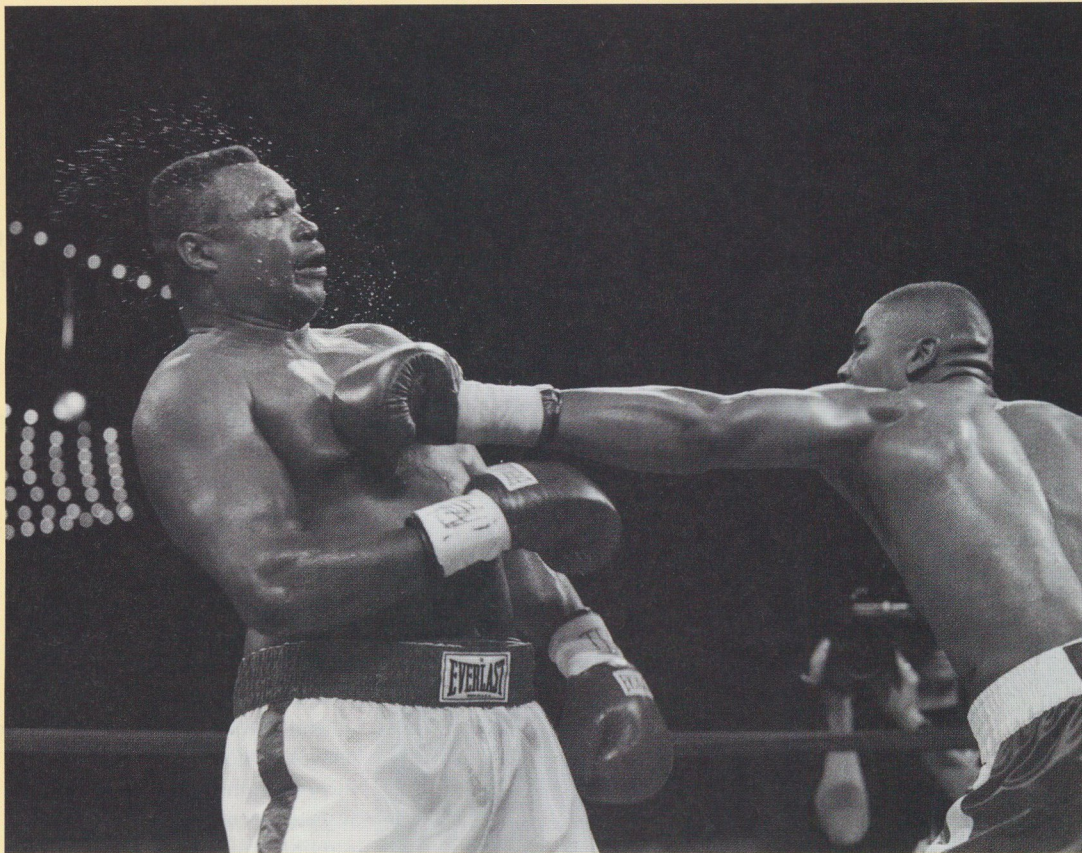
I had never heard of Jeff Graffius, but the fact that he was fighting out of Pittsburgh gave me some hope of a good match. In my experience on the Pennsylvania mill-town circuit I've learned that Pittsburgh fighters tend to be competent and hardy, a good combination. The matchmaking lawyer, hunting for an opponent to feed to the local

hero Mike Vega, had probably seen only futility in Graffius's record of thirty losses and just eight victories. But Graffius had fought the state's most talented fighters at his weight, a much better class of opponents than Vega had seen, and there was always a chance that Graffius had discovered something about his craft in all that fighting.

When the fighters got up in the ring I was further encouraged. Graffius was a friendly-looking, unexcited guy with a blond crew cut. He had a broad neck that flowed down into rolling shoulders, a deep chest, thick arms and thighs, and tapered calves; everything was joined in a balance of motion and power, without the fuss of cabled veins and pebbled musculature that comes with fanatic iron pump-

ing. He did not seem to have any seconds attending him at all. The bald, mild-looking gentleman arranging the bucket in Graffius's corner had worked the corner of another fighter, from Maryland, earlier in the evening, and appeared to be working for Graffius as a courtesy or a convenience. Graffius punched the air a couple of times, swung his head to loosen his neck, and pronounced himself ready to go. He had the equanimity of a man with a broken-down car who is prepared to walk a hundred miles or to hitch a ride with malign drifters if necessary to get where he needs to go. He had lost thirty fights, but nobody was going to hurt him.

Vega, meanwhile, was bounding around the ring, flicking jabs, kneeling in a neutral corner to pray for a moment, winking at a friend in the crowd; he was already into the faking and twitching he would employ during the fight. He had a tight, rangy body, drawn even tighter by prefight nerves. Even his hair was taut; it looked like wire. (Once I had seen him knock out a patsy from New York in the first round. The man, struck by Vega's first solid punch, went to sleep instantly in midair, his chin on his chest and his feet dangling as if from a hammock, then crashed to the floor in the worst way:



Larry Holmes vs. Maurice Harris,
July 29, 1997

with Graffius. The click presented Vega a key to the limitations of Graffius's style. If in a rematch Vega learned to disturb Graffius's balance by jabbing just when Graffius paused before launching (Larry Holmes, sitting at ringside, could have showed him how to do it), and if Graffius never learned to throw combinations, Vega might well win. The evening held a lesson for Vega to consider, bound up with the shame and the hurt of a public beating in front of a hometown crowd.

HOLMES VS. HARRIS

Heavyweights. 10 rounds.
July 29, 1997. New York, N.Y.

An hour after the fight was over, as security men herded out

first his spine struck, then the back of his head, with a whiplashing crack.) Vega was a head taller than Graffius but was so lean by comparison that it was hard to believe they were in the same weight class.

Once the fight started, Vega jabbed furiously, changing directions as he circled the ring, doing everything in double time. Graffius, patiently advancing, was like a man driving posts in bee-filled woods. He came on, gloves high to absorb Vega's punches, trying to get within range to deliver a hard double jab with his left. When Vega's moving and jabbing disrupted this advance, Graffius would shake his head, stop, and start again, unhurried. They went around like this for most of the round, until Graffius managed to land a jab that sent Vega backward a half step toward the ropes. Graffius paused for the shortest of beats to establish the correct spacing between them—one could almost sense a click as he fell into the maneuver's familiar rhythm—and then threw his first overhand right, a steer-killing blow to the temple. Vega went to his knees with a look of contrition on his face and then pitched forward, as if fainting in church. He got up unsteadily and began circling again; Graffius resumed stalking him.

That established the pattern of the fight,

which, surprisingly, lasted the full six rounds. Graffius toiled through Vega's increasingly desperate punches, never hurrying, never altering his approach, never acting as if he knew he could knock out Vega by hitting him twice instead of once. Vega, for his part, learned to weather blows that seemed to be leaving craters in his head and body. He aged visibly, changing with the knowledge of what he would have to go through to last out the fight. He learned to recognize the click as Graffius got his spacing in order, and to duck forward under the arc of the overhand right, but then Graffius, who had hurt his right hand, switched to left hooks and belted him just as hard with those. Vega was down again in the fourth and fifth rounds but lasted until the end, to great applause. Each time he went down it seemed to be the end—in the fourth, especially, when Vega crashed down puppetlike on his side—but each time he hoisted himself up and wearily resumed moving and feeling for the beat that preceded Graffius's next bomb.

Even though the fight resembled the demolition of a building, and even though Vega lost every round, it was never impossible to imagine him finding a way to cope

stragglers and as a cleanup crew raised echoes in the Theater at Madison Square Garden, Larry Holmes sat on a folding chair and talked shop. His voice had lost most of the touchy, suspicious edges that normally animate his interviews; all the energy he had spent and the blows he had taken had worn it smooth and almost tender. He was saying that he and his wife, Diane, who was sitting next to him, had come into New York to do business: he had a fight at the Garden; she had to buy merchandise for the lingerie store she owns in Easton, Pennsylvania, where they live. Holmes said, "I like to come with her, buy some lingerie." The audience of male reporters laughed nervously, but he insisted, smiling, "No, I mean it, man. It's business; I like doing it." They had converged on Holmes in a half circle, craning forward to take notes and passionately stretching microphones toward him like officers attending a general in one of those big nineteenth-century battle paintings. Their laughter managed to communicate both eager respect and a certain impatience to steer Holmes back toward familiar territory: *So, champ, did the kid hurt you?*

Holmes, who was the best heavyweight in the world in the late 1970s and early 1980s, looked all of his forty-seven years.

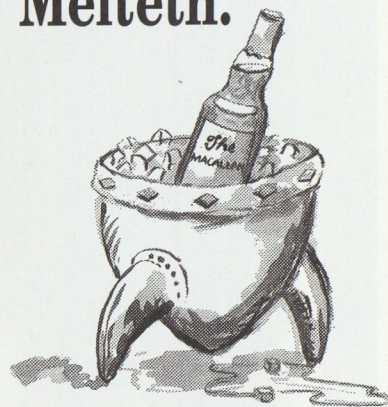
He had gone ten rounds with Maurice Harris, a twenty-two-year-old of moderate accomplishments who had hit him often and with feeling. Holmes's nose and eyes had the ripe, dewy look that indicates fresh punishment. There had been a moment near the end of the fifth round when Holmes, nailed with a right hand, looked hurt, but in his long career he has learned to gather and manage himself until his legs return to him, which they did in this case. Even though Harris had not shaken Holmes's redoubtable self-possession, the almost universal ringside consensus when the final bell rang was that Harris had carried at least six rounds and deserved the victory by decision. The judges, however, awarded a split decision to Holmes. After their verdict was announced, and as good-natured boos rolled down from the largely pro-Holmes crowd, everyone tried to figure out if the judges had been swayed by Holmes's hard right hands to the body, by the ex-champion's impressive aura, or (as the more conspiracy-minded suggested to their neighbors) by a deal supposedly being cooked up to match Holmes against George Foreman in a big-money battle.

Holmes was larger and slower than he had once been; he now punched less and got hit more. Watching him wait and wait to throw a punch, his partisans twisted in their seats and became short of breath as he let openings in his opponent's defense present themselves only to close up again, unexploited. But he was not a figure of pathos. There was something measured and elegant in his movements as he pursued Harris around the ring that night, something that said, "Don't go far, son, I've got a beating to give you." Reflecting on the fight, Holmes regretted that he had not been able to administer the beating in full, and he acknowledged it was a close contest that could have been awarded to either man, but he was not in anguish about the tainted victory. Judges had snatched away from him much bigger fights—most famously, the two controversial title bouts against Michael Spinks that broke Holmes's string of forty-eight victories without a defeat—and he was confident that he deserved finally to win a close one. "A hard day at the office," he called it, and seemed satisfied to take his bruises and his money home to Easton and leave it at that.

Harris, of course, was not at all satisfied. He had left earlier, sporting an angry red mark under his left eye, after telling the clustered reporters that he had been robbed. As Harris told it, the judges had pitied a doddering Holmes. "The man was slow, you know?" he said. "Slow and old. He only landed about three jabs that I could count that were flush in the whole fight." The young man was feeling the double hurt of hard punches and an opportunity unjustly lost. Faithfully mimicking Holmes's defensive elegance and long jabs, turning himself into a younger and smaller Holmes, Harris had outboxed perhaps the last of the century's great heavyweight stylists. Growing more confident as Holmes tired, Harris had felt himself coming of age as a fighter and building a rosier moneymaking future, but when the fight was over the judges took it away from him. He had a right to be aggrieved, but it seemed ungracious to fault Holmes for being old instead of accusing the judges of being blind or crooked.

Once Holmes left there was no reason to stay. It was past midnight. Outside the Garden there was a small knot of fans around Floyd Patterson, who had been a heavyweight champion in the 1950s. They had interrupted him while he was getting into his car, which was running, with the door open, at the curb. Still trim in his sixties and sporting his old flattop haircut with the little flip in front, he patiently signed the proffered scraps of paper. At the time, Patterson chaired the New York State Athletic Commission; soon, though, he would be obliged to step down from the post, because his memory and other mental functions had become seriously impaired. A hard-working, smallish heavyweight who fought well past his prime, Patterson had taken his share of beatings, most notably from Ingemar Johansson, Sonny Liston, and Muhammad Ali. He carried decades of damage with a straight-backed, courtly air of decency, perhaps all that was left of his once-celebrated passion to perfect his body and his fighting craft. As the fans around his car dispersed, the last of them said, "Good night, Mr. Patterson." The Chairman smiled, asked them to please call him Floyd, and said good night in the gentlest voice heard in or near the Garden that night. ■

The Iceman Melteth.



A CHEQUE DRAWN ON THE BANK OF ICELAND

accompanied by a request for six bottles of The Macallan Malt Whisky, started a *lively debate* at the Distillery the other day.

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