

*It's remarkable how many fight fans have never been to a pro fight.*

## A Fight Fan's First Fight

From time to time, I'm asked why I like boxing. The best answer I can give is, go to a fight and see for yourself. Television covers the sport well, but there's no substitute for live action. Better yet; go to a club fight so you can get close to the ring, feel the action, and see the emotions etched on the fighters' faces.

Lance Kolb is a longtime fight fan. One of his great-grandfathers was Giovanni Giuseppe Terranova, who was born in Italy and fought in the United States under the name "Red Cap Wilson" from 1912 through 1927.

Lance's own early life wasn't a bed of roses. His first crib was a dresser drawer. Thereafter, in his words, "I was tossed back and forth between my parents and foster homes until my mother died from a combination of hepatitis B and drugs. Then I was adopted by a fabulous family and my life turned around."

Kolb, now forty-three, remembers sitting next to his grandfather on the sofa on Saturday and Sunday afternoons, watching fights on television. Sugar Ray Leonard, Marvin Hagler, and Ray Mancini turned him on to boxing. He graduated from Bridgewater State College and spent sixteen years in the military, rising from private to captain.

"There were things I did when I was in the Army that were hard to do and I didn't want to do," he says. "But they were necessary and had to be done." He has never boxed but was trained extensively in hand-to-hand combat.

"They don't really correlate," Lance says. "One is life and death, and the other is entertainment."

Kolb is now responsible for managing the building infrastructure of a large cooperative residence in Manhattan. When there's a big pay-per-view fight, he gets together with a half-dozen friends to watch the action on television.

"I love the one-on-one aspect of boxing," he says. "It's pure. Two guys, no one else, and you have to out-skill and out-will the other guy."

Like many fans, Kolb is ambivalent about the current state of boxing. "I loved watching Roy Jones when he was Roy," Lance recalls. "I thought it was amazing the way Bernard Hopkins put it all together to destroy Felix Trinidad. And it was very satisfying for me when Lennox Lewis took Mike Tyson apart. Right now, I like Kelly Pavlik and Miguel Cotto, but there's no heavyweight for me to root for. Wladimir Klitschko fighting Ray Austin in Germany? Who cares?"

"And the bigger problem," he continues, "is, if you want to see great boxing on television today, you're forced to pay through the nose. The only alternative is to watch films of old fights. No sport can survive without fans; and you can't get fans if it's close to impossible to watch."

Significantly, until last month, Kolb had never been to a fight.

Why not?

"When I was young," he explains, "I never had the money. Now the tickets for a big fight cost a fortune if you want to sit anywhere near the ring. And the way things are, you don't even know when and where the club fights are or how to buy a ticket for them."

As a writer, I benefit from viewing things through new eyes. Thus, on February 25th, I invited Kolb to join me at B. B. King's Blues Club and Grill in New York for the latest installment of Lou DiBella's "Broadway Boxing" series.

"I'm psyched for this," Lance said as we arrived.

B. B. King's accommodates 550 people (sitting and standing) for boxing. It's an intimate atmosphere that accentuates the camaraderie within the fight community. Before the first bell, there was a steady stream of handshakes from insiders like the venerable Lou Duva, ring announcer Joe Antonacci, and New York State Athletic Commission inspectors Felix Figueroa, George Ward, and Mike Paz.

"Seeing a fight in person is very different from watching it on television," Steve Farhood told Lance. "I've never brought anyone to the fights for the first time who didn't love it."

"You hear the punches," former junior-welterweight champion Paulie Malignaggi added.

Then the fights began.

DiBella's goals for the evening were fairly straightforward. He'd make or lose a few dollars. More significantly, he hoped to get some publicity for the fighters on the card who he had under contract and advance their careers a bit.

The first bout of the evening saw local heavyweight Bedarin Toma making his pro debut against Joseph Rabotte of South Carolina. Last October, Rabotte journeyed to New York as the opponent in Tor Hamer's pro debut. He'd arrived with a 2-and-3 record (all three losses coming by way of knockout) and left with four "KOs by."

Against Toma, Rabotte circled constantly to his left, jabbed occasionally, and avoided contact whenever possible. Toma had no idea how to cut the ring off, and the bout was boring. Rabotte won a majority decision, although most ringside observers thought the nod should have gone to Toma.

"It's different without the commentators," Lance said.

"Do you miss them?"

"I'm not sure."

Next up; four rounds, junior-lightweights; Luis Del Valle (4-0, 3 KOs) from Newburgh, New York, against Tommy Atencio (3-0, 2 KOs) from Denver. It's unusual to see two fighters this good go in this tough early in their careers. Del Valle was better and won all four rounds, but Atencio made him work for everything he got.

"It's interesting," Lance noted. "The rounds seem longer when you're watching them in person. And there's more tension."

The rest of the card shaped up as four prospects from New York against four punching bags from around the country.

Fight number three wasn't much. Saddam Ali (a member of the 2008 United States Olympic team with one knockout victory in one pro fight) was up against Ralph Prescott (0-1) from Seattle. A left hook upstairs ended matters in the second round.

That was followed by light-heavyweight Will Rosinsky (5-and-0, 5 KOs) versus James McAvey (2-3, 1 KO). Rosinsky, age twenty-four, is a four-time New York Golden Gloves champion and a graduate of Queens College. He sells tickets. DiBella would love to sign him; but right now, Rosinsky is playing hard to get.

The difference in skill between Rosinsky and McAvey was quickly apparent, with the prospect landing lead right hands and thudding body shots.

"I heard that one," Lance said with a wince.

It was over at 2:43 of round one.

"Rosinsky impressed me," Lance noted. "I'd like to see more of him."

The semi-final bout matched Tor Hamer (3–0, 3 KOs) of Harlem against late-substitute Clarence Tillman (1–1–1, 1 KO) from Henderson, Nevada.

Hamer is a “small” heavyweight (225 pounds). He began boxing in 2004 and compiled a 34–and–1 amateur record, winning the 2008 super-heavyweight division in the National Golden Gloves. Lest one get carried away by that achievement; the last National Golden Gloves super-heavyweight champion to win any version of the heavyweight crown as a pro was Greg Page.

Hamer is trained by Bobby Miles and Shaun Raysor (his amateur coach). After two quick knockdowns that put Tillman on queer street, referee Ken Ezzo appropriately stopped the fight at 1:44 of round one.

Afterward, Lance and I went to Hamer’s dressing room for a quick visit. “Next heavyweight champion of the world,” Raysor proclaimed. “I told you I had a heavyweight,” Miles chortled.

Hamer turned twenty-six years old on January 20th (the day that Barack Obama was inaugurated). How had he felt, watching the ceremonies on television?

“I thought back to a day when I was thirteen years old,” Tor answered “I remember it very clearly. I was in the car with my father. We were driving across the Triborough Bridge. I told my father that someday I wanted to be president of the United States, and he said, ‘It will never happen. You’re black and you don’t work hard enough in school to get good grades.’”

“He was half-right,” Tor added. “I never got the grades.”

We returned to ringside as the bell was sounding for round one of the main event. Light-heavyweight Shaun George (17–2–2 with 8 knockouts) of Brooklyn against Jaffa Ballogou (46–7, 40 KOs).

George is pushing thirty and nearing make-or-break time in his career. In his last fight (on May 16, 2008), he stopped a faded Chris Byrd in nine rounds. Ballogou is from Togo and now lives in New York. He began fighting as a junior-middleweight and is forty years old. In other words, Ballogou has seen better days (and his better days weren’t all that good). George turned him into a human piñata. The fight ended at 1:26 of round one.

“I wasn’t thrilled with tonight,” DiBella told us afterward. “The key guys looked good and I’m happy they won. But I would have liked to have had more of a main event for the fans.”

As for Lance—

“Do you know what I liked most?” he said. “The atmosphere. I would have liked to see a little better quality fight, but the atmosphere was great. The crowd was into it. I love the way the room was set up. And I loved the boxing people; the camaraderie and glad-handing and the way so many of them came over during the night to say hello.”

“Tommy Atencio made it special for me,” Lance continued. “Some of the opponents were just here for a paycheck, but Atencio came to fight. The fans got their money’s worth on that one. After more than thirty years of watching boxing on television, this experience was long overdue for me. I’d come back again in a minute.”

I’ve often said that the difference between watching a fight on television and seeing a fight in person is like the difference between looking at a photograph of a painting in a book and standing in front of the same painting in the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

A similar sentiment was waiting for me when I checked my email the following morning.

“At 4:20 AM, after re-living the moments in my head a thousand times,” Lance wrote, “I realized that the difference between watching boxing live and watching it on television is very simple. It’s like watching a Broadway play verses a movie. Live boxing, like theatre is more real, more raw, and a much grander experience.”