

*In recent years, Sergio Martinez has become a writer's fighter.*

## **Sergio Martinez vs. Matthew Macklin: Good Fighters, Good Fight**

Sergio Martinez sat on a folding cushioned-metal chair, eating cashew nuts and sipping from a bottle of water. In two hours, he would enter a boxing ring to defend the middleweight championship of the world. Now, in a dressing room above The Theater at Madison Square Garden, he was engaged in quiet conversation.

Trainer Pablo Sarmiento, cornerman Russ Anber, cutman Dr. Roger Anderson, camp coordinator Marcello Crudelle, and manager Sampson Lewkowicz were with him.

The mood in Martinez's dressing room is constant from fight to fight. Organized, professional, relaxed until the final minutes of preparation when it changes to intense concentration.

Sergio held out his bag of cashew nuts to the others in the room. Anber took a handful.

Latin rap sounded in the background; the music of Rene Perez Joglar, who lives in Argentina and is friends with Martinez. Later, the sound would change to Calle 13, Sergio's favorite group.

At 9:30, Dr Anderson put cotton plugs soaked in adrenaline in Martinez's nostrils to constrict the blood vessels. Sergio's nose had been broken and bled profusely in his most recent fight. This was a precautionary measure. Five minutes later, Anderson removed the plugs.

Sergio's hands were wrapped. He gloved up, stretched, shadow-boxed, and hit the pads with Sarmiento.

New York State Athletic Commission inspectors Ernie Morales and Sue Etkin looked on.

Martinez is an athlete. He was about to engage in a high-stakes athletic competition. The difference between winning and losing could equate to millions of dollars in future earnings. The punishment he absorbed in the ensuing hours might damage him for life.

Yet one had the sense that, as a child growing up in Argentina, Martinez faced challenges on the streets that were as formidable as this one every day. Boxing enabled him to escape from a world of deprivation. It's a timeless tale with few happy endings.

"I rule my life by pleasure and necessity," Martinez said five years ago. "The pleasure of giving my life another life; the necessity of giving another life to my family."

And now . . .

"Martinez is one boxing story every aficionado should feel a sense of ownership about," Bart Barry has written. "He is not running for office in the Philippines. He does not have charges pending against him in Nevada. Martinez makes a match with a larger man every time he defends his belts. He gets hit plenty and finishes each defense with a knockout. If there is a downside to having as boxing's middleweight champion of the world a Latino who both looks and fights better than Oscar De La Hoya, it doesn't spring to mind."

Martinez has struggled and fought honorably for what he has achieved in his life. The same can't be said of the people who run boxing's world sanctioning organizations and demean the sport with their sale of tarnished indulgences.

On April 17, 2010, Martinez won a unanimous 12-round decision over Kelly Pavlik to claim the WBC, WBO, and linear middleweight crowns. The WBO soon stripped him of his belt on a technical ruling that appeared motivated by the desire to collect a quick sanctioning fee for a "championship" fight between Danny Jacobs and Dmitry Pirog. But that was of secondary concern to Martinez. His focus was on the WBC title, which had special meaning to him because it was once held by the great Argentinean middleweight, Carlos Monzon.

Martinez was loyal to the WBC, and the WBC betrayed him.

After Sergio defended his title with a dramatic one-punch knockout of Paul Williams on November 20, 2010, the WBC orchestrated a slight of hand that saw him relieved of his title and given the right to fight for an overpriced "diamond belt." That cleared the way for Julio Cesar Chavez Jr (a favorite of WBC president Jose Sulaiman) to fight Sebastian Zbik on June 4, 2011, for what was euphemistically called the WBC middleweight championship of the world.

Martinez wanted his title back. After Chavez beat Zbik, the WBC promised Sergio that, if Julio were allowed to fight an interim defense against Peter Manfredo Jr, the organization would order Chavez to fight Martinez next. On November 19, 2011, Chavez beat Manfredo. Even then, Martinez vs. Chavez remained a pipe dream.

Meanwhile, Sulaiman further angered Sergio with an ugly comment about the treatment of women. After Floyd Mayweather Jr (who pays substantial sanctioning fees to the WBC) was sentenced to ninety days imprisonment as a consequence of being found criminally guilty of beating up a woman for the third time, Sulaiman said that Mayweather should not be stripped of his WBC title.

"Beating a lady is highly critical," Sulaiman decreed. "[But] it is not a major sin or crime."

Martinez is a vocal advocate for the protection of battered women. On December 29, 2011, he declared, "Just a few days ago, Don Jose made some controversial statements in reference to Floyd Mayweather's sentence for domestic violence. I know that he sent an apology, but I have the right to ask from Don Jose a public apology about the insensitive comments that he has said about the violence against women."

Then, in the same press conference, Martinez went further, renouncing the WBC diamond belt "for my dignity, for my pride, and for my manhood."

"Don Jose Sulaiman spoke to me," Sergio explained. "He asked me to move aside and to let Chavez fight Rubio on February 4. I was shocked. From then on, I felt like there was a knife that had been stabbed in my back. Don Jose said that I had authorized his decision. That's an absolute lie. I have not authorized that fight. That fight is the end of a lie. I won't represent the WBC again until they make the fight that is obligatory, the fight which was voted on by unanimous decision to happen at the WBC's convention. I'm not planning on defending the WBC diamond belt anymore. I hate the cowardice that Chavez has taken on in avoiding every day the fight with me."

Six days later, for good measure, Martinez told Radio Belgrano AM 950 in Argentina, "Nobody will forget that Chavez was the biggest coward in the history of boxing."

In response, Sulaiman bellowed like a harpooned seal. In a January 24,

2012, column entitled “Hook to the Liver,” the WBC president wailed, “One of the feelings of sadness that kept me low for a few days was the reaction of Sergio Martinez, who blasted the WBC and me with his uncontrollable mouth when I had always thought of him as a gentleman.”

That same day, Sulaiman told FightNews.com, “As President of the WBC and a close friend of Julio Cesar Chavez Sr and his sons, I wish to emphasize that Julio Cesar Chavez Jr is in no way scared of Sergio Martinez. I know Chavez. He’s a great boxer with power in his fists and he’s a Mexican idol. The bout on February 4th between Julio Cesar and Marco Antonio Rubio will be a great bout full of courage and honor.”

On February 4, 2012, Chavez defeated Rubio over the course of twelve lackluster rounds that Sulaiman called a candidate for “fight of the year.”

“Sergio Martinez has class,” says Lou DiBella (Sergio’s promoter). “Jose Sulaiman doesn’t know what ‘class’ is.”

Meanwhile, Martinez needed an opponent for a March 17 date on HBO. Matthew Macklin stepped into the breach.

Macklin was born and lives in Birmingham, England. But he’s of Irish heritage, which on St. Patrick’s Day was a definite plus as far as selling tickets. He’s articulate, gracious, easy to talk with, and a good story teller.

One of Matthew’s tales involves Billy Graham, who rose to prominence as Ricky Hatton’s trainer and worked with Macklin for four years. Just before Hatton turned pro, Graham wanted to buy a house and went to a bank to take out a mortgage. The bank manager reviewed Billy’s financial records and told him that there simply wasn’t enough there to qualify for a loan.

“You don’t understand,” Graham implored the bank manager. “I’ve got this kid from Manchester. He’s eighteen years old. You have no idea how good he is. He’s going to be a world champion.”

Matthew also has a self-deprecating sense of humor.

“Why did you become a fighter?” he was asked.

“Because I was stupid. And by the time I got smart, I was hooked.”

Macklin came into the fight against Martinez with a 28-and-3 record and 19 knockouts to his credit. His most impressive performance was a June 25, 2011, split-decision loss against WBA middleweight beltholder Felix Sturm. The bout was contested on Sturm’s home turf in Cologne,

Germany. Virtually every observer (apart from two of the judges) thought that Matthew won.

"I beat Sturm," Macklin said afterward. "And I thought I won the fight clearly enough that I was beyond being robbed."

But one learns to be skeptical about a fighter whose best credential is a loss, regardless of how unfair the decision might have been. And Matthew's record was devoid of world-class scalps. As fight night approached, the odds favoring Martinez rose as high as 10 to 1.

Macklin did his best to put matters in perspective. "Sergio is the best middleweight in the world and the real middleweight champion," he acknowledged. "He's a good fighter. And over my years as a pro, I've had some up and down performances. But Sergio is beatable. The media has the habit of taking a guy with a few good wins and a few good knockouts and making him out to be invincible. I expect to win this fight."

Still, Macklin faced a daunting task. He had to get through the early rounds. He had to get through the middle rounds. He had to get through the late rounds. And he had to find a way to win more than half of them or knock Martinez out.

The Theater at Madison Square Garden was sold out for Martinez-Macklin with 4,671 fans in attendance. Matthew didn't just come to acquit himself well. He came to win. There were times when the action was fierce and the outcome of the fight very much in doubt.

Martinez's most effective weapon in the early going was a punishing jab that snapped out like a serpent's tongue and caught Macklin flush before Matthew could react. In round two, a straight left hand propelled Macklin back into the ropes, but it looked as though the champion was stepping on the challenger's foot at the moment the blow landed.

The drama built throughout the fight. Macklin waged a controlled measured battle and was a hard puzzle to solve. After a slow start, he swept the middle rounds and was credited with a knockdown near the end of round seven when a chopping overhand right coming out of a clinch caused Martinez to touch the canvas with his glove. It appeared as though the cause of the "knockdown" was Sergio stumbling over Matthew's left leg. Regardless, after seven rounds, Macklin was up by a point or two in the eyes of most observers.

He didn't win another round.

In the eighth stanza, Martinez picked up the pace, fighting more aggressively. Macklin responded in kind. But the champion's jab and straight lefthand were finding their mark with increasing frequency.

And Macklin was tiring. First in the final thirty seconds of each round; then in the final forty-five. He took Martinez's punches well, but he was taking too many of them. And he was beginning to lose form.

"I figured I was behind by a few points," Matthew said afterward. "If you lose, you lose. Whether you lose on points or get knocked out, you've still lost. I could have played it safe but I was trying to win, so I started taking chances."

Martinez keeps his punching power late. When he goes for the kill, his smile turns to a snarl.

With twenty seconds left in round eleven, Macklin threw an arcing left hook and was floored by a faster straight left hand . . . He rose, wobbly . . . was floored by another straight left . . . rose for the second time . . . and was saved by the bell.

He returned to his corner looking very much like a beaten fighter. At that point, trainer Buddy McGirt wisely stopped the contest.

"He was getting hit with clean shots," McGirt said later. "The only way he could win was by knocking Sergio out, and that wasn't going to happen. There was no reason to send him out for more."

The punch stats showed Martinez outlanding Macklin 183 to 135, with his biggest edge coming in rounds nine through eleven when he landed 56 power punches. The challenger was good enough to test the champion but not to beat him.

"I gave it one hundred percent," Matthew said afterward.

And so he did. Macklin did more than fight a courageous fight. He fought a good one. But Martinez had superior footwork and faster hands. His punches came from angles that were unfamiliar to Matthew. And Sergio hit harder.

The most pressing question now is who Martinez will fight next. One reason he's so entertaining to watch is that, at various times in each of his recent fights, he has looked vulnerable. He starts well and finishes strong, but has shown a tendency to lose the middle rounds. If two hundred years of boxing history is a reliable guide, there will come a time when he is unable to rally late.

Sergio is a small middleweight. He weighed in for the Macklin fight at 157.6 pounds after eating full meals all week. Fighting at super-middleweight would be a mistake. If Julio Cesar Chavez continues to avoid him, there are other opponents (such as Dmitry Pirog and Gennady Golovkin) who could test him at the middleweight level. Several “name” opponents in the 154-pound ranks would also make for an attractive match-up.

In sum, Martinez is beatable. All fighters are. But he won’t go easily. Against Macklin, once again, he did what he had to do to win. For the fourth time in a row, after flirting with defeat, he closed the show with a dramatic knockout.

In the fighter’s respective dressing rooms after the fight, their faces told the tale.

Martinez was largely unmarked as he summarized the battle just won.

“Think . . . Relax . . .”

Sergio slapped his fist into the palm of his right hand . . .

“BOOM! . . . Over.”

Macklin’s face was a different matter. There were ugly bumps and bruises and a gash beneath his left eyebrow that needed five stitches to close. Sadness and disappointment were etched in his visage. So was pride.

“I got beat by a fighter who was better than I was tonight,” Matthew acknowledged. “If you get beat, you get beat. It’s better than being cheated. A month from now, the Sturm fight will bother me more than this one.”