

ERIE PENNSYLVANIA

SAT MARCH 8



THE FIGHTER VERSUS THE WRITER

My experience going round for round with the former champ

“Don’t worry. I’m not going to kill you,” says Johnny Bizzarro moments before the bell rings, signaling the start of the first round. We meet at the center of the ring, touch gloves, and proceed to dance around each other. Ever since I first saw Rocky Balboa single-handedly end the Cold War with his victory over Ivan Drago in Rocky IV, I have wanted to step into the ring and go the distance. Right now I am, and I think I’m about to regret

it for two reasons: because I don’t have the body for boxing and because my opponent, who is staring me down from the other side of the ring, does (plus he holds three different championship belts in the junior welterweight division).

Johnny Bizzarro has been a boxer since the age of 12, and the sport runs through his blood. He is from a family of boxers, ten to be exact, who have made mercilessly pummeling an opponent into sub-

mission their sport of choice. He has won the International Boxing Organization Continental, the International Boxing Council Intercontinental, and the 2001 World Title. Early in his career, Tony Danza (as in Taxi and Who’s the Boss) managed him. He currently owns and runs Johnny’s Sports Bar on 16th and Pittsburgh.

“The jab is your most important move in boxing,” he says before sending a right jab my way. I man-



age to avoid the blow, although I'm sure if this wasn't a friendly match he would've made contact, and I would have been down for the count before we even hit the one-minute mark. Outside of my appreciation for the Rocky series, my knowledge of boxing doesn't extend much further than catching the occasional pay-per-view on HBO. I underestimated how exhausting a sport it is, requiring me to use nearly every muscle in my body just to avoid getting my face reconstructed. At this point I am panting and wheezing, but determined not to let it slow me down (I think I hear Johnny getting tired too, although it could just be my own desperate breathing echoing back into the empty gym).

By the time we reach the 30 second warning for the first round, neither of us has landed a punch (although I'm sure I am the only one trying), and we are both slowing down. We agreed to go for two rounds, and I am already questioning how I will survive another. Johnny is fast, sending a barrage of punches at me. I have managed to block a couple, but it is now very apparent that I would've been out of this match by now if he wasn't having pity on the inexperienced kid in front of him. As I change my stance to use my right hand to block, he makes a quip about me switching to south paw (I hope that what I consider my mean left hook will ultimately be my secret weapon).

It doesn't prove any more helpful as he manages to thwart every attempt and the first round comes to an uneventful close. Retiring to our corners, I keep my eye on my opponent (pretending I actually know how to study his every move in some attempt at finding a weak spot).

Erie has a long standing-history with boxing. Johnny's father Lou and Uncle Johnny are still the only brothers in the history of the sport to separately compete for the same title. Lou Porreco served as Lou Bizzarro's longtime promoter, including during his fight for the Lightweight Championship of the World here in Erie on May 23, 1976. According to Lou Bizzarro, Erie can be considered a fighting town, because it has seen a lot of good boxers come out of it. I'm just not one of them.

The bell rings after what felt like a millisecond of rest, and we are thrown back into the fight, touching gloves in the center of the ring again. My determination to land one punch has me starting this round with hyperactive intensity. I am moving around Johnny, throwing jab after jab with no success. My eagerness must have left my defense down, because Johnny finally makes contact with my face. It's more of a stinging pain than a throbbing pain. I'm not gushing blood everywhere, and I'm not going to need our graphic artist, Mike, to "cut me" in order for me to continue the match. Now

that I've been hit, however, all I want to do is return the favor.

When I hear the 30-second warning sound, I know it's now or never. As I charge Johnny with every ounce of energy I have left, all I can envision is the invisible crowd that had gathered at the small gym chanting my name in the hope I pull out a victory. I attempt to unload everything I have on Johnny as he expertly continues his precision blocking. Then I have my vindication, I land one poorly aimed hook (my secret weapon prevails!) squarely against his shoulder. In my eyes that is enough, and, soon after, the bell sounds.

As we shake hands to show our good sportsmanship, I can't help thinking about how this underdog went the distance. My body hates me right now, and it feels as if my chest got hit with a brick (maybe Johnny managed to get another shot in during the heat of the moment), but I survived. I may not have emerged victorious, but then again neither did Rocky the first time he went toe-to-toe with Apollo Creed (or the less impressive Clubber Lang). This match was never for a championship belt. Hell, I'm probably not even going to get the respect of my coworkers. It was all for me, and as I exit the ring (and Johnny presumably heads back to his bar) I throw my gloves in the air and proclaim "Yo Réna! I did it!"

*EL

