

## Stop The Fight!

September was an exceptional month for fight fans on several fronts. Besides the recurring battles of plucky contestants on *The Contender* and *The Ultimate Fighter (TUF)*, we were treated to praiseworthy performances televised by Pride, UFC, and boxing. The premiere fights on each card—Cro-Cop vs. Silva, Hughes vs. Penn, and Arce vs. Makepula—were noteworthy for the fighters’ inspiring display of expertise, as well as their sudden, breathtaking brutality. Each fight began as a battle of skill and will, but then ended all too soon. My objections to the premature endings of these fights were not based on principle, so much as aesthetics. I felt that in a perfect world, with perfect fights, each fight *should* have gone on longer. In reality, however, they could not continue. In other words, it would be great if B.J. Penn didn’t run out of gas, but B.J. Penn ran out of gas.

There comes a time in many fights when the arbitrator must intercede and say “enough”. The question asked by fan and referee alike is *when* do we say enough? It’s a question with multiple answers, and each of the above mentioned fights can serve as illustrations for those answers.

- *The Eyes: Arce & Makepula*

You have never heard of any of these people, because they are small men. Small-sized men, regardless of the size of their fight, are rarely televised, because people rarely tune in to such matches. It’s a shame; miniature men can scrap with a speed and grace often more pleasing to the eye than their bigger boned colleagues.

Jorge “Travieso” Arce is a 27-year-old Mexican boxer who began fighting at 110 pounds in 1996 (I was a skinny 110 pounds *in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade*). Flitting between the 108 and 112 pound divisions for a decade, Arce missed his first chance at greatness in 1999, when he got knocked out by future hall-of-famer Michael Carbajal in the 11<sup>th</sup> round of a fight that Arce had been winning. Since then, the hard-punching, crowd-pleasing Arce has won titles in the 108 and 112 divisions. He seeks a big money fight both to fill his pockets, and to garner the renown achieved by countrymen such as Marco Antonio Barrera and Julio Cesar Chavez. Regardless of whether or not he possesses the skill of his two pugilistic predecessors, Arce is unlikely to attain his goal of riches and fame. At his weight, there are no recognizable fighters for him to pursue. There are other skilled, exciting little men out there—Australia’s Darchinyan, Japan’s Tokuyama—but in order to become marketable, they, like Arce, will have to stop being so damn small.

Arce, obviously an ambitious sort, took a giant step toward being less small when he moved up to a tubby 115 for September’s fight. His foil was South African Masibulele “Hawk” Makepula, who also began his career at 110 in 1996. Makepula narrowly missed becoming a flyweight champion (112) in 2000, when he lost a controversial majority decision to Irene Pacheco, whom you’ve never heard of. Makepula has had more fights at 115 than Arce, but Arce is considered a heavier hitter. Even at this hefty weight, the two men were dwarfed by referee Vic Drakulich, whose upper torso and head disappeared from camera’s view once the fight began. Drakulich looked like Tiny Ron, the giant lab tech in the *Naked Gun* series.

Makepula, a tough, graceful fighter with a decent punch, appeared to win the first two rounds. Arce, looking angry and caffeinated, was the pursuer. Makepula stepped smartly

around the ring to create space for his quick, straight punches. When cornered by Arce, Makepula fought back with intelligently placed body punches that looked effective unless you were looking at Arce's face, which continued to look angry and agitated. In the 3<sup>rd</sup> round, while hitting Arce, Makepula stuck around too long and was delivered a receipt at the hands of *Travieso*. Though he remained poker-faced while being hit by malicious combinations, Makepula's eyes were slowly dissociating from the scene in front of him, like an old man daydreaming about better days. *What was that girl's name? Imelda? Velma? I remember...*

It was an entertaining fight; it would have been an excellent fight if Makepula had taken a better punch, or been able to elude more punches, or if Arce's punches had been a wee bit gentler. I wanted to see more, but it was not to be. Drakulich stooped down from his perch to stop the fight, with Makepula still on his feet, in the 4<sup>th</sup> round. Did he stop it too soon? No. How do I know? Hindsight... when the fight ended, Makepula did not protest. More importantly, how did Drakulich know when to stop the fight? It was in the eyes. The 3<sup>rd</sup> round remoteness of Makepula's eyes, with the succor of Arce's punches, transitioned into 4<sup>th</sup> round vacancy. When a man's eyes are no longer attending to the business in front of him, at least in the ring, his business must be concluded without further ado.

- *Defend Yourself at All Times: Hughes & Penn*

Matt Hughes is almost famous for several reasons. (A) *Exposure*. As a coach on the 2<sup>nd</sup> season of TUF, he was regularly seen by a national television audience. He came off as being straight laced, hard working, and a little mean. He is currently the UFC welterweight champion (170 pounds). (B) *Appearance*. He's a white fighter from the Midwest, which could make him a popular presidential candidate, or just a popular fighter. He's also handsome in a high school jock sort of way. He ain't Oscar De La Hoya, but he's at the top of the wrestling gene pool. (C) *Excitement*. Hughes is a preternaturally strong, skilled fighter who enjoys kicking ass. That's fun to watch.

His partner in September's UFC dance was B.J. "The Prodigy" Penn, a jujitsu practitioner from Hawaii. Penn was a UFC lightweight champion before moving up to fight Hughes for the welterweight title in 2004. In an upset, Penn had choked out Hughes, winning the welterweight title, which he soon abandoned in a dispute with the UFC. Hughes came back to reclaim his belt in this welterweight division that he now dominates, while Penn has been fighting sporadically at various weights for K-1. Penn comes back to UFC to reclaim his belt; Hughes seeks revenge.

Hughes, a muscular, pale farm boy whose staid work ethic gave him a rigid appearance, stood across the octagon from Penn, a tanned surfer whose relatively un-muscled torso and cool demeanor spoke of spontaneity and rowdiness. Indeed, when Hughes, an expert wrestler, attempted to take Penn to the ground in the first round with a single leg takedown, Penn thwarted the move by hopping around casually on one leg. When they did go to the ground later in the round, Penn tied Hughes up in knots by contorting his legs in impossible positions around his opponent's torso and neck. The second round concluded with Hughes narrowly escaping Penn's triangle choke. It appeared as if Penn might possess the loose jujitsu style to defeat Hughes' muscular wrestling.

As with Makepula, Penn's skillful display of the first two rounds had established the promise of a great fight that would last long enough to have shifts in momentum *and* the exciting sensation of tension that accompanies such shifts. But the third round commenced with Hughes on his toes sticking a sharp jab in Penn's face, while Penn unaccountably proffered nothing in return. Be it through overexertion on the triangle attempt or under-assertion in training, B.J. Penn was dead tired. Hughes took him to the ground and moved into side mount. He pinned Penn's left arm under his legs, and constrained Penn's right arm with his left hand, so that Penn was prone directly beneath Hughes' right hand, which naturally proceeded to level itself downward into Penn's skull. Most men in Penn's position would have attempted to seek liberation through a bridging motion, rotating their hips, or simply flopping around like a fish. Penn was a cool customer to the end, and too damned tired to protest, so he absorbed Hughes' skull shots with a mere grimace.

Were his eyes present in the moment? Yes they were. Were the punches causing excessive carnage? I didn't think so; Hughes didn't appear to have much leverage on his punches. So why did referee John McCarthy stop the fight? Penn was no longer defending himself. He had not resisted the jabs to his face, the takedown, the side mount, or the pinning of his arms. Even without proper leverage, Hughes' punches would soon cause sufficient damage through attrition. A probing hammer *will* eventually crack concrete. If you're the referee, why wait for that moment? If you're a fan, why watch it?

- *The Punishment Club: Starring Cro-Cop & Silva, & Featuring Two Big Russians*

There are instances when a fight is stopped even though the losing fighter is still defending himself, *and* his eyes are still focused on the fight, but the punishment being absorbed is gross and excessive. On September's superb Pride fight card, there were two fights that fit this description. Pride's pay-per-view show was the culmination of an open weight tournament that had begun with 16 fighters, and had been narrowed down to 4 semi-finalists. In addition to the tournament, there were several under card fights.

The first semi-final pitted Mirko "Cro-Cop" Filipovic, a 225 pound heavyweight, against middleweight champion Wanderlei "The Axe-Murderer" Silva, a Brazilian competing about 20 pounds above his natural fighting weight of 200. They had fought to a draw in 2002, in a battle so boring that the highlight was the awesome stare down, which spoke volumes about their opposing personalities. The Axe-Murderer fixed his cold blue eyes on his opponent, as if preparing to commit a heinous crime. Cro-Cop, a professional cop turned politician in Croatia, lowered his authoritative eyes upon the Axe-Murderer as if preparing to arrest the lunatic. Cro-Cop, the naturally bigger man, has grown as a fighter since their first fight. A tremendous striker, his weakness appears to be mediocre stamina. Silva, a relentless brawler, would need to take Cro-Cop deep into the fight and wear him down.

When the opening bell rang, Silva resembled the bus in the movie *Speed*, tearing after Cro-Cop as if his survival depended on the velocity of his attack. But Silva has always been a wide-puncher, so Cro-Cop was able to hit him with straight shots between his guard and send Silva to the canvas. Leaning over his fallen foe, Cro-Cop became the

frenzied one, sailing into Silva with left after left after left. Silva's face, which looks swollen *before* a fight, was now a pumpkin piñata.

In an under card fight that night between Russians Aleksander Emelianenko and Sergei Kharitonov, the latter's face had been similarly misshapen after absorbing several knees from the former, and the fight had been stopped. How did that fight differ from this one? A disappointed, clear-eyed Kharitonov protested from his kneeling position, but he didn't look especially sanguine about continuing the fight. Silva's eyes, through the pulpy gore of his face, continued to transmit focused fury and bad intentions. Kharitonov is a fringe contender fighting with no belt on the line. Silva is a reigning champion fighting to reach the finals of a tournament. In short, though the damage sustained was comparable, the stakes were higher for Silva, and his desire to win was palpable.

They say a man's desire will conquer all obstacles. In this case, Cro-Cop's infamous left high kick trumped Silva's desire. It actually knocked him out cold, and left an insanely bloody gash across his right temple. It was thrilling, terrifying, and ugly. It was the kind of beating that ends a fighter's career. In hindsight, who wouldn't wonder if the fight should had been stopped earlier? How about Silva, the Axe-Murderer himself? Up until the moment his face met Cro-Cop's foot, Silva believed that he would prevail. I almost believed him too.