

By BRIAN ACKLEY
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Count me in. I'm on board. You go, Baby Joe.

Ride the right hand, jump on the jab, hang on to the left hook, but Buffalo's boxing bus is off the back country roads, on to Main Street, heading for Madison Avenue. And Joe Mesi makes a heck of a driver.

His recent 90-second nationally televised demolition of DaVarryl Williamson is to be celebrated. Yet, some skeptics would still rather challenge.

Make no mistake, HBO isn't in the business of broadcasting bad boxing. That Mesi was involved at all – win or lose – was a triumph of his toils. It's significant when the broadcast team is giddier about Buffalo wings than Colonel Sanders. How refreshing. For a change, HBO didn't stand for Help Buffalo Out, or Hand Over Buffalo. Was that our city looking so spiffy and sassy and sophisticated when the cameras panned the night skyline?

It's just plain fun to see our own version of Joltin' Joe rekindle a sport that, like so many things in the past, was central to Buffalo's metropolitan reputation. People forget that Buffalo's boxing tradition is a century old. Trolley rides were 10 cents – one way – to the old Broadway Auditorium when local legends like Jimmy Slattery fought in front of thousands, heck, not for world titles, but New York State belts.

The metaphors are as strong as Mesi's knockout punch. We should all be paying attention. Good plan? Got it. Vision? Crystal clear. Team work? Absolutely. Patience? By the spit bucketful. Hard work? You bet.

It didn't begin in that HSBC ring a few weeks back. The believers were few at the start. Mesi wasn't a boxer for his first few years in the ring. He was a Fuller Brush salesman, trying to convince people that his product could sweep up more crumbs than the next guy's. And, be clear, that's what most people toil for in boxing, crumbs. He banged on doors with barely more than some tattered gloves, asking people to believe. Two, maybe three years ago, his skeptics were right: Mesi was more figment than fighter.

Forget that the list of reasons critics like to point to when analyzing Mesi is longer than his prefight introductions. He's only popular because he's white, they say, that he's articulate, good looking, he's undefeated, that the City of Buffalo is desperate for a winner, that he hasn't fought anyone with talent.

Apologize to no one, Joe.

Boxing lays open a person's soul like no other sport. True, it's taken a lot of people with a lot of faith to get Mesi to this now national stage, but when the bell rings, there is only one person who makes it happen. There are no teammates in the ring, no places to hide, no spots to sit one out.

Boxing's back waters are as murky as Lake Erie on a windy autumn afternoon. It doesn't take much to be pushed from what is always a precarious perch. Too often, people peek under the tent flap simply to see what the boxing barker is selling. The sport can be as much carnival as competition. Why, even though it's square, do you think they call it a ring? It's just in boxing, you don't need three of them to sell tickets.

He'll fight again before the end of this year – and don't dismiss a Mike Tyson matchup sometime in the not so distant future. Joe Mesi's gone from side show to good show. We're all watching now; it might not be long until we all see how it looks from the top.

(Brian Ackley is a columnist for the Weekly Independent Newspapers (WIN) of Western New York. WIN is a consortium of 19 community weekly newspapers in Erie and Niagara counties with a combined paid circulation of 75,000 homes, providing collaborative advertising and editorial support for member publications. For more information on WIN, or to provide feedback on this column, visit our website at www.wnynewspapers.com. Opinions expressed here are those of the author.)