



Magomed Abdusalamov of Russia was battered in losing a 10-round decision to Mike Perez in a matchup of undefeated heavyweights. Credit Rich Graessle/Icon SMI, via Corbis

A Fighter's Hour of Need

Interviews reveal the events in the 60 minutes after a 2013 bout at Madison Square Garden that left Magomed Abdusalamov with severe brain damage.

By **DAN BARRY** JAN. 8, 2016

On Nov. 2, 2013, Mike Perez defeated Magomed Abdusalamov in a heavyweight bout at Madison Square Garden. This is a reconstruction of the hour after the fight, based in part on the transcripts of two dozen interviews given under oath and conducted by the New York State Office of the Inspector General as part of its continuing investigation into the fight and the operations of the State Athletic Commission.

His undercard loss unanimous, the heavyweight exits. Cocooned by his entourage, he trudges toward his distant locker room, up two dozen steps and down backstage halls the hue of a yellowing bruise. His face is misshapen, his eyes swollen slits, his brain most likely bleeding.

It is nearly 11 o'clock, the crowd of 4,600 already girding for the main event, and the repeated blows to his head will soon exact a toll from which this boxer, Magomed Abdusalamov, [will never recover](#). He is 32, a husband and father. They call him Mago.

Trailing behind is Matt Farrago, 52, a compact man in a dark blazer adorned with a New York State patch. A former middleweight who fought 28 professional bouts and too many amateur fights to remember, he is one of tonight's boxing inspectors — the eyes and ears of the New York State Athletic Commission when two fighters risk cognitive ability for public enjoyment.

Farrago's job is to shadow Mago. Among his duties are to collect the boxer's urine before the fight; observe the wrapping of his hands with protective gauze; inspect his gloves; keep an eye on everything in the ring, down to the proper placement of the spit bucket; look for hints of neurological distress; collect more urine; and stay with the boxer until he is medically cleared.

"Nothing goes on without me seeing it," he will say.

For his vigilance, Farrago will earn a New York inspector's standard pay of \$52. But he is on quasi probation tonight. His bosses have warned him to end his habit of collecting boxing detritus — namely, the sweaty, discarded hand wraps — which he auctions off to raise money for indigent boxers.

Well intentioned, but unbefitting a state boxing inspector, his superiors at the athletic commission say, even as some of the state agency's officials, including its chairwoman, Melvina Lathan, have accepted Christmas gifts from boxing promoters and others. Wine. Jewelry. Fruit baskets.

Farrago isn't interested in hypocrisy right now; he's interested in the forbidden wraps of the evening's star attraction, the middleweight champion Gennady Golovkin. Farrago plans to collect them after the main event and then conceal them in a Corona beer towel. This is a central goal of his night. Those wraps.

Farrago follows the Russian boxer Mago and his Team Mago entourage into a cramped dressing room. Just an hour ago, the thrill of violence in the offing filled the room, with Mago pounding the pads and speaking with his American trainer in the shared language of boxing: Keep your hands up, slip, jab, punch.

The violence is now done, the thrill gone. Mago says his face hurts. Or is it his head?

The boxer collapses into a foldout chair, his hands still encased in protective white wraps. Here is a 6-foot-3, 231-pound vessel damaged by the 10-round bout he has just lost. In the black-blue arena, where tickets sold for \$50, \$100, \$200, \$300, he took 50, 100, 200, 300 punches, many to the head.

Hovering about in the suffocating room are all types: Mago's father, his brother, his trainer, his cut man, his manager, his manager's son. A doctor with a kit in his hand. A boxing inspector with wraps on his mind. The ghosts of the middleweight Willie Classen, who died days after a brutal bout in this arena in '79, and the lightweight Gino Perez, who died days after taking a pummeling here in '83, and whose last words, while he was still in the ring, were:

"Oh, jeez, my head."

A Blood Clot Forms

There have been other [traumatic brain injuries](#), other deaths caused by bleeding in the brain. Now, a blood clot is forming in Mago's skull, compressing space, requiring a relief of pressure before it's too late.

Brain bleeds can be slow to reveal themselves. Doctors in the boxing trade often cite the [death of the actress Natasha Richardson](#), who hit her head while skiing on a beginner's trail in 2009 and appeared to be fine — even joking about her fall — but then lapsed into a coma from which she never recovered.

It is an imperfect analogy. Richardson's death was accidental, and a result of a single blow. Boxing's intent is to render your opponent unconscious, with brain trauma an anticipated possibility.

Mago studies his pulped face in the dressing room mirror. He is not a cursing man, but bad words escape. He is saying his face hurts, or maybe it's his head that hurts. The back and forth between English and Russian confuses things.

His younger brother, Abdusalam Abdusalamov, tries to calm him. His cut man, Chico Rivas — whose tools include Vaseline, Q-tips, and an "eye iron" to cool and reduce swelling — scurries to find ice.

The doctor in the room, Gerard Varlotta, a sports medicine specialist, places his bag beneath a low shelf that he bumped his head against in a prior exam. Another veteran commission doctor, Anthony Curreri, an ophthalmologist fresh from having sewn up another boxer's face — "repairing," he will say — soon joins him.

Varlotta subjects Mago to the King-Devick test, which is designed to detect possible concussions through a reading of jumbled numbers displayed on cards. Using his smartphone as a stopwatch, Varlotta records that Mago performs slightly slower than he did during an earlier administration of the test.

At some point the doctor tests Mago's balance by having him stand and sit. The quick physical exam detects probable hand and nasal fractures, but Varlotta sees no sign of neurological damage.

'Take Him to the Hospital'

Meanwhile, Mago's trainer, John David Jackson, is becoming agitated by what he believes is the wasting of valuable time. What he will remember is his repeated insistence that his fighter — once a proud, seek-and-destroy boxer, now broken — needs to go to the hospital. Now.

Jackson, 50, knows the game. His career ended with a 36-4 record and a couple of world titles, but he is best remembered for the 1994 "Fight of the Year." He had Jorge Castro on the ropes in the ninth round, Castro staggering and all but blind in one eye, the TV announcers saying this title bout should be called — and then, bam, a left hook from nowhere dropped Jackson [into YouTube eternity](#).

Tonight is a different kind of bad. Jackson never liked this matchup to begin with, believing that Mago's opponent, Mike Perez, was much more experienced. And the fight was particularly brutal; probably should have been stopped. Too late now.

"Take him to the hospital," Jackson will remember saying. "He said his head hurts."

But Varlotta will be certain in his recollection that Mago never indicates having a headache, a possible harbinger of neurological damage. Acknowledgment of a postfight headache would be cause enough to summon one of the two ambulances parked beside the Garden.

"I always ask them about head pain and also headache, because everybody interprets that all differently," Varlotta will say. "And boxers that do experience a number of punches, you can get head pain separate from a headache."

Varlotta tells the boxer that his hand and nose do not seem to require immediate attention, and can be taken care of at some other time. Nothing urgent.

The second doctor, Curreri, studies Mago's swollen face. The orbital rim is intact. The pupils are reactive. No evidence of double vision. But there is possible damage to the zygoma, the bone beneath the eye.

Contrasting Accounts of Pain

Curreri will later recall asking Mago if he has any pain in his head. The boxer indicates that his face hurts.

Any headache?

The answer, coming from an interpreter, is no.

But Mago's brother will remember the boxer saying in the locker room that his "whole face was hurting, and everything inside his face was hurting." That "he felt a lot of headaches, big headaches."

Wearing magnifying eyeglasses and white surgical gloves, Curreri sutures a cut around Mago's eye as the boxer leans back in his chair, tears forming, strawberry bruises staining his massive chest and shoulders.

Farrago, the boxing inspector, watches and thinks, in the parlance of boxing, that Mago is "a good bleeder." He snaps a quick cellphone photograph of the private moment, in abuse of his official position.

Curreri instructs Mago to keep the wound clean, perhaps with antibiotic ointment, and to have the sutures removed in seven to 10 days. He confers with the other doctor, Varlotta, then leaves to fill out an athletic commission form, an "accident report," about injuries incurred entirely by design.

Possible fractures to the nose and to the zygoma, he writes. And this: "to hospital."

Curreri will later say that his hospital reference is meant not to convey urgency, but rather to indicate that "the boxer is going to need to go to a facility, which would be the hospital, to get imaging study" — a CT scan at some point. To his mind, this is not an "emergent situation."

15 Minutes of Attention

By 11:14, both doctors are gone. Mago has received about 15 minutes of medical attention in the small room. He is not asked to hang around for further observation. He is not re-examined. Pressure is building within his cranial wall.

Varlotta reports his findings to Dr. Barry Jordan, a neurologist and the athletic commission's chief medical officer, who sits ringside in the

arena, where the tension-filled main event is about to begin. The underdog, Curtis Stevens, taunted Golovkin before their match, and now the champ plans to school the upstart.

In addition to serving as the night's medical supervisor, Jordan has responsibilities that include reviewing the accident reports and determining the length of time before injured boxers can return to the ring. In the case of Magomed Abdusalamov, he scribbles his decisions: 60 days for the facial laceration; "indefinite" for the nasal injury.

Jordan will later say that he interprets Curreri's "to hospital" notation to mean that Mago has been told to have his nose checked out. This is "absolutely not" a matter requiring an ambulance, he will say, adding that at this point nothing suggests "anything neurological."

"If we sent every boxer that had a swollen cheek or a fat nose to the emergency room by ambulance," he will say, there would be "boxers going in the ambulance three and four times a night."

Jordan, who has been involved with the athletic commission for 30 years, is considered a leading expert on boxing injuries, particularly those to the brain. He will say with pride that New York is a national leader in boxing safety, and that if Mago had indicated having a headache, the fighter would have been "out the door," bound for the hospital in an ambulance.

Jordan will also repeat what soon becomes athletic commission lore: that Mago came out at one point to watch part of the Stevens-Golovkin fight — suggesting that the boxer seemed fine after his pummeling. But given Mago's condition, this is highly unlikely. Probably just another ghost.

An Alarming Sign

Back in the dressing room, Farrago, the inspector, announces that Mago needs to give urine before being able to leave. But Mago takes a while to deliver. His brother helps him to his feet and walks him to the shower stall, where he eventually urinates into a cup.

"He was feeling worse and worse," his brother will say.

Farrago becomes alarmed after seeing what he thinks is the cloudiness of blood in the urine sample. "You need to go to the hospital ASAP," he says. "You need to take him to the hospital. Get him dressed. Come on."

As Team Mago hurries to comply, someone asks the boxing inspector how to get to the nearest hospital. Farrago says he doesn't know — such

details were not discussed with boxing inspectors at the athletic commission's prefight "pep talk" — and points to the door.

"Go outside; hail a cab," he says. "Just tell them, 'Go to the nearest hospital.'"

Farrago takes the sealed urine sample to the athletic commission's command post down the hall. No one is around, so he leaves the sample in a bag — even though protocol requires that he hand it to a supervisor. But at least he's collected Mago's urine; another inspector forgot this postfight responsibility entirely, and has left without collecting the urine of the winner, Perez.

Farrago heads toward the arena, where doctors are sitting ringside, but things, he will say, are too chaotic. Golovkin is in the midst of teaching Stevens an eight-round lesson so brutal that Stevens's handlers will refuse to subject him to a ninth.

So Farrago returns to the deserted hallway, still having told no one his blood-in-the-urine news. Curreri and Varlotta will later say that had they known, they would have sent Mago by ambulance to the hospital. A frustrated Jordan will say that Farrago knew where he was sitting and should have imparted the information, but little would have changed. He would have merely noted Mago's need to receive medical clearance before boxing again.

Mago, meanwhile, has been handed a \$30,000 check for his night's labor, but he is struggling to dress himself. His brother helps him into his street clothes, including a blue coat with a hood to grant him anonymity.

"There's your exit," Farrago says, because, as he later explains: "I'm just not comfortable with where to go, which hospital is closest. I don't work Manhattan."

Stumbling Out

About 13 minutes before midnight, Mago and his entourage leave a dressing room that in a couple of weeks will be occupied by a cast member of a holiday musical called "A Christmas Story." His father and brother keep close to ensure that he stays on his feet. At one point he stumbles, as if a leg has gone limp, and leans against a wall.

Out into the yellow-bruise hall. Down the steps. Across the arena floor, a hood shielding Mago's aching, puffed face. Through the doors and into the concrete cacophony of Eighth and 33rd. He takes a knee a few yards from a television satellite truck that has just shared his loss to the world, and now he is vomiting.

“Hold on, brother,” his younger brother says.

Team Mago panics. Two of its members race to find help. A police officer offers no assistance. A Russian-speaking livery driver speeds away. Mago’s distraught father is saying that no one seems to care about his son anymore, and keeps asking, Where is the ambulance?

Finally, a man and a woman on the street bequeath the cab they have flagged down to Team Mago. The boxer is hustled into the taxi, which speeds to St. Luke’s-Roosevelt Hospital as hidden blood seeps.

Back in the Garden’s labyrinth, the boxing inspector, Farrago, lingers. He moved on from boxing to become a medical-supply salesman with a college degree, but he has begun to worry that all those blows he took to the head have finally caught up with him, that he might have what they call dementia pugilistica. There have been hints of memory loss.

But he hasn’t forgotten the wraps. He hustles to Gennady Golovkin’s dressing room to collect those valuable strips of gauze, which the champion has kindly signed. They will someday go for \$350 at a fundraiser for boxers down on their luck.

Farrago also peeks into Mago’s small dressing room. Empty now. But he spots some garbage on the floor: the loser’s discarded wraps.

The boxing inspector picks them up. Who knows? Maybe this fighter Mago will bounce back to become heavyweight champion of the world.

Then these wraps will be worth something.

Despite [emergency treatment](#) at the hospital, Magomed Abdusalamov was left with severe brain damage. The family’s lawyer, Paul Edelstein, filed lawsuits against the athletic commission, its doctors and others, including Farrago (who later helped to raise money for the Abdusalamovs).

The athletic commission — an agency within the Department of State in Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo’s administration — has undergone changes, including the appointment of a new chairman and the institution of new protocols. For example, a boxing inspector’s per-diem compensation has nearly doubled, to \$100.

Abdusalamov and his family live in a friend’s house in Greenwich, Conn. He is partly paralyzed, cannot speak and requires round-the-clock care.