

HOUSTON CHRONICLE

MEMORIAL ★ SPRING BRANCH

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BOXING

Savarese thinking title time is now

■ At 41, former contender aiming for one last shot

By PETER LIM
CHRONICLE CORRESPONDENT

Former heavyweight contender Lou Savarese will take on Matt Hicks, 10-1 (10 KOs), at the Houston Grand Plaza Hotel on April 5.

The fight, to be staged by Rock Solid Promotions, will be Savarese's second since coming out of a three-year retirement.



SAVARESE

In January, Savarese, 45-6 (37 KOs), knocked out Travis Fulton in the third round in front of a sold-out crowd at the Houston Grand Plaza.

During his roller coaster career, Savarese, 41, did battle against some of the biggest names in the heavyweight division with mixed results. He burst onto the world stage in 1997 after going toe-to-toe with George Foreman for 12 rounds only to lose a narrow decision.

On the plus side, the Spring Branch resident knocked out former champions Tim Witherpoon and Buster Douglas when both boxers were past their primes. In the minus column, he was knocked out by Mike Tyson in just 38 seconds in 2000 and lost a lopsided decision to Michael Grant a year earlier.

Money was not the overriding factor in Savarese's decision to lace on the gloves again. He had invested the millions he made in the ring into residential and commercial properties, many of which are concentrated in Houston, and they quickly began to pay dividends.

"Listen, money can't hurt. I've got two kids," Savarese

NEXT FIGHT

■ **What:** Lou Savarese, 45-6 (37 KOs), vs. Matt Hicks, 10-1 (10 KOs)

■ **When:** April 5

■ **Where:** Houston Grand Plaza Hotel

■ **Info:** Savarese, 41, is a former heavyweight contender spurred to get back into the ring by what he sees as the weak state of the heavyweight division and the chance for a title shot.

For more information, visit www.rsboxing.com.

said. "But things have been pretty good. I've been pretty blessed and pretty lucky in real estate."

In between business deals and spending time with his family, Savarese had also taken on several acting roles. Standing at a muscle-bound 6-feet, 5-inches, he was custom made for certain parts. His latest role was of a killer in a horror flick *Knock Knock*, scheduled to be released later this year. He also played Depression-era heavyweight champion Max Baer in *The Cinderella Story*, the docudrama version of *The Cinderella Man* that starred Russell Crowe.

Despite enjoying comfortable retirement, the love of the sport finally caught up with Savarese. Scripted, choreographed action in front of the camera simply could not replace

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ON THE WEB

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FOOD NEWS

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SAVARESE: Open chance for belt spurs fighter to come back

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the allure and adrenalin rush of competitive boxing. And unlike most retired prizefighters, he had kept himself in decent shape and did not balloon more than 30 pounds over his fighting weight. He realized full well the dangers involved in resuming his pugilistic career, but decided to make a comeback regardless.

"In baseball or basketball, if you lose you're not getting hurt and you're not getting bloodied," Savarese said. "This is a blood sport and it's risky, but I enjoy it."

The secondary reason behind Savarese's comeback was that the heavyweight division is exceptionally weak at the moment and all four titleholders appear quite beatable. Savarese is only one of many aging former contenders coming out of retirement to seize upon the opportunity to win a major belt.

"You look out there and you see a glut of heavyweights coming back," Savarese said. "You go your entire adult life wanting to be heavyweight champion of the world. You look out there now and it can be attainable."

Savarese cites fellow New Yorker Shannon Briggs as the prime example of a faded former contender who found himself at the right place and time. Behind on points and thoroughly exhausted, Briggs

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—LOU SAVARESE
Heavyweight boxer, 41

somehow found the strength to knock out Sergei Liakhovich in the final seconds of the final round last year to claim the WBO version of the heavyweight crown. Savarese and Briggs traded punches numerous times in New York gyms early in their careers.

"I sparred with Briggs. We had a heated sparring session and I knocked him out, but nobody talks about that," Savarese said. "I'd like to fight the guy. He gets very tired quickly. He's going to try and get me out of there early but I think I can get him in the later rounds."

As for the other titleholders, all fighters from the former Soviet Republics, Savarese is less

impressed with their strengths than he is eager to exploit their weaknesses should he face any of them in the ring. Nikolay Valuev holds the WBA belt, Oleg Maskaev claims the WBC title and Vladimir Klitschko owns the IBF version of the crown.

"Valuev is so stationary, I just see myself doing real well against him. I've always fought big, tall guys real well," Savarese said. "Maskaev, I've sparred with him I don't know how many times. He's a nice guy and a tough guy but he's very beatable. He can be taken out."

"Klitschko's a tough fight for anybody," he added. "He's always in shape. But it's so bizarre because he's been knocked out so many different times."

With the mileage of over 50 professional bouts under his belt, Savarese is well aware that his days as a prizefighter are numbered. He feels, though, given the state of the heavyweight division and with the right strategic maneuvering, he retains enough star power and punching power to make the final stretch of his career the one that really counts.

"I know it sounds cliché, but I don't want to do this for a long time," Savarese said. "That's why I'm picking and choosing my fights. I'd like to try and make it to the title in 16-18 months if I could."