

Unfavorable vote for The President - Boxing's Ike Ibeabuchi

Written by Tim Graham

Monday, 01 November 2004 18:00

o this is what passes for excitement in the heavyweight division these days: four bouts, featuring three retreads, two quickly fading bores and three neverwuzzes.

That said, I'm looking forward to Don King's show Nov. 13 in Madison Square Garden. Sad, but true. There's not much else out there for the big boys.

Andrew Golota will try not to implode in a title fight for the first time in his career, taking his latest shot against the ubiquitous WBA champion, John Ruiz. Quadragenarian Evander Holyfield will hope to extend his career against Larry Donald, one of those fighters you're not sure if you've ever seen fight. IBF champ Chris Byrd, who hasn't looked convincing in years, will face Jameel McCline. Hard luck Hasim Rahman will attempt to end Kali Meehan's 15 minutes of relative fame.

Then, in a battle of one-hit wonders, WBC champ Vitali Klitschko (known for almost beating somebody good) is scheduled to fight Danny Williams (famous for beating somebody who used to be good) Dec. 11 in Las Vegas.

The man who should be known as the best heavyweight in the world, meanwhile, woke up this morning in a jail cell, just as he has for roughly 1,500 straight days. He will do so again tomorrow morning and every morning thereafter for the near future.

His nickname was The President, but save your ballots; he won't be a candidate to fight any time soon.

Ike Ibeabuchi is a symbol of wasted dreams, squandered money and time forever lost. He is serving five to 30 years inside the Lovelock Correctional Center in the Northern Nevada desert for battery and sexual assault.

Many had mixed emotions when Ibeabuchi's parole eligibility was pushed up to Dec. 12. Oh, how we would love to see him back in the ring, plying his wondrously destructive skills in the ring. The Nigerian mammoth is 20-0 with 15 knockouts. In his last fight he obliterated Byrd 5 1/2 years ago, something no other boxer has done. Ibeabuchi also was the first to defeat David Tua.

Ibeabuchi, only 31 years old, would've buoyed what is fast becoming the worst heavyweight era, but the tradeoff for our pugilistic enjoyment was returning an unstable element back to society.

No matter what decision was made, I was going to be happy with it - and equally disappointed, depending on whether I thought as a boxing fan or a civilian.

I wrote a lengthy story on Ibeabuchi's situation right before his hearing this summer. I had the

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pleasure of sitting down with him for a few hours in the prison's visiting area one sun-baked Sunday morning. I had been looking forward to the interview for months because it took me that long to arrange it. Ibeabuchi reached out to me last year about writing a tell-all story about him; he had liked an ESPN.com column I wrote about him around the time of his arrest. Nevada prison administrators denied my request for a face-to-face meeting, so I went through the visitor approval process -- Ibeabuchi had to invite me by sending out application forms -- and I saw him as if I were a family member or friend.

Prison regulations prohibited me from bringing in a notepad or pen, much less a tape recorder. I was nervous about conducting an interview without any materials, but once I passed through the metal detectors and automatic gates a guard provided a pencil and some paper scraps. After all, there were board games to be played, and I might need to keep score.

At the time of our meeting, I would have predicted Ibeabuchi's release next month. He had so many factors working for him. He already had been given clearance by a psychological evaluation board. He received Nevada Community College credits in psychology, philosophy, business math, personal finance, English and computer technology. It was clear by what I saw he was well liked by the guards.

The biggest friend to his cause was adviser Sig Rogich, a Las Vegas ad agency executive and crisis-control specialist with a direct line to Nevada Gov. Kenny Guinn and George W. Bush.

Rogich worked on Ronald Reagan's presidential re-election, was a member of George H. W. Bush's cabinet, served as U.S. ambassador to his native Iceland and is an adviser to the current president. Rogich has earned the current President Bush's prestigious Ranger title by raising more than \$200,000 for the campaign.

Rogich also helped Guinn get elected. The governor appoints every parole board commissioner, and they were the ones to decide this summer whether Ibeabuchi could leave prison this year.

But those close to Ibeabuchi were justifiably nervous about our interview. They knew he was capable of insensitive and undiplomatic commentary that could sabotage his parole chances. His English is remarkable, but many of his notions don't translate very well from a cultural standpoint.

Inmate No. 71979 hadn't spoken to a reporter in years. He was engaging and forthright, alternately intense and charming. He didn't avoid a single question, not about that young boy he nearly killed in an apparent murder-suicide auto accident years earlier in Texas, not about the additional rape accusations that arose after his arrest, not about the literal demons he repeatedly told others he saw. He offered philosophical musings on his life.

It was clear, however, his time behind bars had given him plenty of time to justify every troubling situation that had befallen him. The contrition was dwarfed by the excuses. He offered no apologies, saying he was misled and misunderstood.

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As one would expect, he made several bizarre statements in trying to defend his deeds:

- "I feel women should bow to me. I have a great ego in going after women. I'm not a person to rape a woman because I'm of the belief she should want to be with me. If she doesn't want to be with me, I don't want to have sex with her."
- "I have had sex with escorts many times. It's no strings attached. I paid with checks and credit cards. ... It was a guilty pleasure. When we have secrets, God has a way of telling you 'I saw what you did.' I thought I could get away with it, but God had to make my little secret public."
- "How can I have the audacity to rape someone I'm paying to have sex with? In Nigeria I wouldn't be in prison for what I did. The system here (in the U.S.) makes sure someone gets punished whenever a woman cries. This was a call girl, an escort."

My story didn't even mention how he told me of his hope to marry an American woman quickly upon his release so as to avoid deportation.

The parole board denied Ibeabuchi's release even though the victim didn't testify. The verdict apparently wasn't even close because he won't be eligible for parole again until December 2007. Three years was the maximum amount of time the parole board could make him wait.

Needless to say, Ibeabuchi blamed my story, which appeared on ESPN.com, for his denial. The timing clearly was not in his best interests, but he wanted me to interview him, and one of his attorneys facilitated the meeting. Ibeabuchi also was the one who informed me of Rogich's involvement, something he probably should have kept to himself in a presidential election year. The last thing Bush would need is a Willie Horton scandal, even if by extension.

I eventually received a letter:

Tim Graham, you bastard!

You misrepresented my opinion on women in your article, when you promised me that you would be TRUTHFUL.

You caused me my parole, you son of a gun!

I don't ever want to see you again!

Now, you're attacking SIG'S abilities! Of course, We all know who Sig is. Why sing it to the public?

Again, I don't ever want to see you again. Consider yourself warned!!!

And as I folded the letter and placed it back in its envelope, that disappointment I felt about not being to see Ibeabuchi back in the ring for a few more years quickly abated.

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He'll stay in prison a few more years. We're probably better off that way.