

Inactivity Will Defeat Kostya Tszyu

Written by Steve Kim

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Does anyone remember the 1995 NBA Playoffs? That was the year that the Houston Rockets, led by the incomparable Hakeem Olajuwon would sweep the Orlando Magic to win back-to-back titles.

But the defining play of that post-season involved Michael Jordan, who after a year-and-a-half sabbatical from the game—during which he left the NBA to become the Mario Mendoza of the minor leagues—had returned to help lead the Bulls to another championship.

In the sixth game of the Eastern Conference Finals, the Bulls and Magic were locked in a tightly contested battle. In the waning moments of a close game, Jordan brought the ball up with the Bulls trailing—it was exactly the type of situation that 'His Airness' had defined himself by.

But this wasn't a finely tuned Jordan, this was a Jordan who had come off the back roads of America, taking 18-hour road trips as a member of the Birmingham Barons. Jordan's jumper in his return wasn't quite as accurate, his first step not as explosive, but even more importantly, those intangible, innate skills that can't be measured—like his ability to anticipate things before they occur—had dulled in his time away from the court.

As he dribbled the ball into the front court, Nick Anderson would sneak up on him like New York City pick-pocket and steal the ball—and the momentum—away from Jordan and his Bulls.

Eventually the Magic would win the game, and the series, to move onto the NBA Finals.

In the aftermath of his embarrassment, Jordan would eventually get his basketball legs back and regain his stature as the dominant force in basketball, leading the Bulls to another three-peat in the following years.

Which bring us to one Kostya Tszyu, who is one of the most accomplished prizefighters of this past generation. After a highly decorated amateur career, he would eventually become the undisputed jr. welterweight champion of the world, on his way to winning 30 of 31 professional fights.

Throughout his career he has defeated such respected luminaries as Zab Judah, Jesse James Leija, Oktay Urkal, Ben Tackie, Julio Cesar Chavez, Diobelys Hurtado, Rafael Ruelas, Jan Bergman, Jake Rodriguez, Roger Mayweather, Sammy Fuentes, Hugo Pineda, Juan LaPorte and Sharmba Mitchell, who he faces in a rematch this Saturday night in Phoenix, Arizona.

Tszyu, back in February of 2001, would defeat Mitchell via seventh round-TKO, as the slick southpaw from Maryland had to call it a day with a bum left knee. It was a close and entertaining fight with both fighters getting in their licks. It seemed that Tszyu was coming on strong, but you were left wondering just how much better Mitchell could have fought with a healthy set of wheels.

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The return bout should be another closely contested match-up between the two best 140-pounders on the planet.

But it says here that Mitchell will gain revenge on 'the Thunder from Down Under.' And it's not so much what Mitchell will do, but it will be more about what Tszyu hasn't done in 22 months since stopping Leija.

And that's fight.

Since his win over Leija in January of 2003, Tszyu has been beset by various ailments that have kept him out of action. In fact, he's had two scheduled rematches with Mitchell postponed in the past year.

And while Tszyu has been rehabilitating various injuries, Mitchell, to his credit, has simply gone out and taken care of business. Since his own knee injury, he has fought eight times, and from the last time we saw Tszyu, Mitchell has fought fives against decent-to-good opposition, downing: Carlos Vilches (TKO4), Ben Tackie (W12), Lovemore Ndou (W12), Michael Stewart (W12) and Moises Pedroza (KO2).

No, he hasn't beaten any world beaters or anyone near the level of Tszyu, but there is something to be said about activity and staying sharp. Yeah, sure, Tszyu will tell you that during this time he has stayed in the gym and stayed in shape—and we have no reason not to believe him—but ask any trainer or fighter and they'll all tell you the same thing.

There's nothing like a real fight.

You can work till the sun goes down in the gym and spar thousands of rounds, you simply cannot replicate a real fight.

It's one of the immutable laws of boxing.

And no other sport is as dependent on timing and precision as 'the sweet science.' And in Mitchell, who possesses great speed and quickness, Tszyu is facing a fighter who is fighting at the highest level of his career.

And now for the rematch he's healthy.

But it will be what Tszyu hasn't done in 22 months which will eventually be his ultimate downfall.