

Kostya Tszyu still a man on a mission

Written by Patrick Kehoe

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My colleague Steve Kim tells us that Sharmba Mitchell has been active, contesting 5 fights in 22 months, while world jr. welterweight champion Kostya Tszyu has been out of action, plagued successively by Achilles tendon and rotator cuff injuries. In boxing readiness comes from engaging in actual fights, not sparring sessions. So, logic dictates an actively engaged top level fighter takes out an atrophied, formidably skilled champion.

And he may be right.

Then again, there are other variables central to understanding this contest of jr. welterweight stars. No question that Mitchell feels himself the top boxer in the division. A rangy, quick handed, moving target purist, brimming with competitive based confidence, Mitchell believes he's finally come to the point of securing an authentic world championship, not just a title belt; for Tszyu is the consensus champion at 140.

Since their February, 2001 rugby-light seven rounds, Mitchell's performance standard in that fight has improved. Some ring scribes have gone so far as to suggest that take away the collapsible knee, Mitchell might well have settled this melancholic tryst in Mandalay Bay back in 2001. Tszyu, the other guy in the ring that night, has heard this comment off and on for years and cannot for the life of him understand where people get this idea.

He won't readily admit it, but, that's one of the reasons he's keen to get Mitchell back in the ring. Only the subject of Zab Judah bites at the champ more than Mitchell.

Clearly, Mitchell has topped up his sparring sessions this time out, having put in fire-fighting rounds with Steve Forbes and "Sugar" Shane Mosley. His left knee fully functioning, his counter punching agility on the counter should – he believes – hold out this time against an onrushing (yet older) Tszyu.

Well, Tszyu may be 35, but that only makes him one year older than Mitchell. The Tszyu camp like to refer to the youthfulness of his father and the 'good genetics' the men in his family enjoy. And despite the 22 months out of the ring, Tszyu really may have benefited from his enforced absence, not to mention that Tszyu only fought one fight in 2002 – a masterpiece against the threatening Ben Tackie – the year before he dismissed Jesse James Leigh in January, 2003. With 32 total pro outings, it's not like Tszyu suffers from chronic states of ring rust. He's a periodic fighter and always has been during his pro career. Battling some frustration and at times boredom, Tszyu never lost the desire or the professional commitment to box again.

He's always been grounded and game, able to prioritize and refocus like a Carlos Monzon or Felix Trinidad.

In fact, during his 'absentia' Tszyu has kept a close eye on 'his' division, from Sydney, Australia. A sensitive and proud man, Tszyu has not appreciated Mitchell's comments

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characterizing his injuries as “suspect” or “excuses” and his attitude to fighting a rematch, as something the pony-tailed one wanted to avoid. The gentleman prizefighter in Tszyu takes these ‘trash talking’ jabs very seriously and very distastefully. He files away perceived slights to his character; and he uses it as fuel to train.

Frankly, Team Tszyu don't believe that Mitchell has the overall physical strength to keep Tszyu off balance or at bay for the limit of a twelve round exchange of best practices. Taking into account his long lay off, Tszyu has worked overtime on how he intends to cover the ring, stressing his ring coverage and the analytical geometry of the fight to come.

If anyone is motivated to win this fight, you might want to consider that Tszyu has not had the best fortune with his ring earnings over the last 4 years. Managerial squabbles and some short ended promotional ventures have drained Tszyu's retirement resources. Thus, the concerted pressure that Team Tszyu have put in lobbying Jay Larkin at Showtime for a pay per view vehicle to cap his career. To get to that long awaited bonus pay off mega-bout, Tszyu knows he has to trash Mitchell first.

Ripping up Mitchell feels like a guilty pleasure in the making for the champ.

The basic career math for Kostya Tszyu comes down to the number three. Hopefully, within the triangulation of money, belts and historical fights, Tszyu can justify himself, once and for all, before retiring. Suddenly, history has become a buzz word. Hopkins, De La Hoya, Trinidad, Tarver and certainly Tszyu have all become conscious of everlasting life after boxing, halls of fame, video archiving, record books and the inestimable marking of indelible memory for their generation of fans.

A meticulous planner, Tszyu knows that Mitchell doesn't represent just another outing. He knows to beat Mitchell in a definitive manner sets the table for what he hopes are fights against Cory Spinks, or Arturo Gatti or Diego Corrales; you fill in the rest of the best as proxy ballots.

All Tszyu wants is his last, best, chance to make a statement. In the way he did against Zab Judah, when it seemed 4/5 of boxing writers were calling that one for Judah.

Tszyu knows most of the US press are looking favorably on Mitchell; they think Tszyu's a fizzled, if not a spent, force. Time, injury and Mitchell's ability to hit and move will be making that abundantly clear on November 6, in Phoenix. Or so goes the emerging consensus.

All Team Tszyu can do is keep to their game plan and have their guy at his best. They really do think that Tszyu has more than enough of his best 'stuff' to take Mitchell from off that rhetorical high horse they see him being hoisted onto.

Anyway, they love pretension in their opponents, false bravado and can't miss attitudes of self-importance. Helps the kids from down under play to their strength as underdogs, who come on late, destroying dreams of grandeur of kings in the making.