

Winky Wright's Long Road to the Top

Written by Jake Donovan

Friday, 19 November 2004 18:00

It's been a long and well-traveled journey for consensus world junior middleweight champion Ronald "Winky" Wright. In a career spanning fourteen years and eight countries on four different continents, Wright has won four different junior middleweight world titles but little respect from the boxing powers that be along the way. Yet now at the age of 33, when most fighters are winding down – if not already retired, Wright is now one more win away from the super fights that have seemed to be every bit as elusive as his fighting style.

"It's definitely been a long time coming, no doubt," Wright told TheSweetScience.com "but the first fight with "Sugar" Shane Mosley is just the beginning. I didn't come all this way just to win one big fight and fade. Trust me, that fight eight months ago was a sign of things to come."

If the first fourteen years are any indication of what is to come, then he certainly isn't going away anytime soon. Whereas many fighters today bounce around from one weight class to the next without ever establishing a legacy at any given division, Wright has been a junior middleweight his entire career. Not only that, but he has been in the top ten for well over a decade.

Somehow, he is only now starting to gain long overdue recognition for his career achievements. Oddly enough, at the expense of a fighter who only recently moved up to the weight class himself.

"Man, the critics really trip me out. For years, they dismiss me as boring, and that I'm not worthy of the super fights I felt I was entitled to. Along comes Shane, I beat him in a fight where they had me as UNDERDOG, and now all of a sudden I'm legit? They think, because he's Shane, he's supposed to beat me. Everyone forgot that he moved up to MY division. But it's all good. I've spent my entire career proving the critics wrong, so it was fun to do it one more time."

This time, the critics – and the oddsmakers - now all come to town as believers. Whereas Wright entered the first fight with Mosley as a 3-1 underdog, the books now have him coming in for the rematch as a 2½ - 1 favorite. Perhaps a kneejerk reaction to what transpired in Vegas this past March, though many contend that it is in fact a better reflection of their abilities as world-class fighters in the junior middleweight division. Whatever the case, Winky is now relishing in the rare role as prohibitive favorite in a major fight. Though by no means is he looking past the man he so soundly defeated to get to where he is today.

"Everyone is looking for me to do exactly what Shane did in March – look past this fight and set the sights on the bigger paydays. Shane was fighting me and just knew that he'd win and go on to fight Tito. Instead, he overlooked me, and is fighting to salvage his career. I beat him once, and I know I can do it again. But we don't fight on paper, we do it in the ring. So once I beat Shane, then I can do what I want afterward. Until then, my immediate goal is to win this rematch."

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Eight months ago, Wright's only goal was to win the undisputed junior middleweight championship. What came afterward was extra, as far as he was concerned. After all, the fact that he was finally given the chance to fight for such high stakes was in and of itself a major achievement, considering the road he had to travel just to get to that point.

Having turned pro in Tampa in 1990, Wright managed to keep it close to his St. Petersburg, Florida home for the first few years of his career. In 1993, he signed with the France-based Acaries brothers, and updated his passport soon thereafter, having fought sixteen of his next eighteen fights overseas. Among those eighteen fights was a fight with then WBA junior middleweight champion Julio Cesar Vasquez.

He fought well enough to take seven of twelve rounds on all three scorecards. Unfortunately, he was dropped five times along the way and wound up losing a close unanimous decision. To date, it is the only fight in which he has hit the canvas, but at the time, it appeared as if it would be his only shot at the big time. Wright would go another eighteen months and nine fights fighting overseas in obscurity, before finally returning stateside early in 1996.

His homecoming was a short lived one, though it did result in back-to-back fights on national television. First of which was his second defense of the NABF junior middleweight belt against Andrew Council on the now-defunct USA Tuesday Night Fight series. Council was coming off a huge upset in thrashing Buddy McGirt on CBS some six months prior, but proved to be no match for Wright that night in Norfolk. Wright cruised to a unanimous decision.

The performance was so good, that he was awarded his second world title shot just two months later on ESPN Friday Night Fights, against newly crowned WBO champion Bronco McKart. It would be the first of three times in a span of six years that the pair would square off, and all three fights ended in the same manner; with Wright's arm raised in victory.

Despite having won his first world title – in McKart's hometown of Monroe, Michigan, no less – Wright found himself sans a marquee matchup to turn to. So once again, he updated his passport and headed overseas, defending his title three times in England over the next year and a half before dropping a decision to Harry Simon in South Africa during the summer of 1998.

The bout was initially declared a draw, and Wright left the ring as champion for the fourth time. However, as he was unwrapping his hands in his dressing room shortly afterward, he was informed that due to a scoring error, the decision was changed from a majority draw to a majority decision loss. After twelve hard fought rounds in his challenger's homeland, a simple tap on the shoulder was how Wright found out he was no longer a world champion.

Free of the Acaries brothers after that fight, Winky headed home – or at least to the states – for good in 1999. Later in the year, he received a title shot and a premium TV date on HBO's "Boxing After Dark" in challenging then rising star Fernando Vargas for the IBF junior middleweight crown. Wright made the most of his opportunity, and in the eyes of many, fought well enough to win the title, despite all but giving away no fewer than two of the last three rounds. Instead, the aforementioned rounds proved to be the difference between a second

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world title and the bitter taste of defeat, as Wright was on the wrong end of a majority decision loss for the second time in three fights.

It would be the last time that Wright would not have his hand raised at the end of a fight, as he has rattled off eight rounds since then, hardly losing a round along the way. Two of those wins came against a familiar face – Bronco McKart, who had lost his title to Wright in 1996 and for a while seemed to be the only top fighter willing to face the slick southpaw. Not that it bothered Wright any.

“People always joke about how we just couldn’t get rid of each other, but you know what? Had he won last month (UD12 loss to WBA interim champion Travis Simms), I’d have gladly given him a fourth fight. He gave me a crack at his title when he was barely champ for a minute, and kept coming back for more afterward when nobody else wanted to fight me. Whoever wants to fight me, I fight them. It’s that simple.”

If it were that simple, Wright would have had his money fight shortly after beating McKart a second time. The win earned him the #1 ranking among the IBF rankings, which was supposed to allow him to fight the winner of the unification match between Vargas and WBA champion Felix “Tito” Trinidad. Instead of a lucrative fight in 2001, Wright instead settled for a shot at the vacant title when Trinidad stopped Vargas in twelve, and then defected to the middleweight division soon thereafter. Though the move cheated Wright out of what would have easily been his highest payday ever, he has no problem with fighting him in 2005 should he once again defeat Mosley.

“Like I said earlier, Shane’s in my face now, so I got to get him out the way. Once that’s settled, I’d LOVE to fight Trinidad. I admit, I’m glad he’s back. He looked great against (Ricardo) Mayorga. He boxed great, used his footwork... it’s the best he’s looked in a long time. I always wanted to fight the best. Last time the best moved on. It doesn’t mean I never stopped wanting to fight him.”

Instead of actually receiving the fight of his dreams on pay-per-view, he wound up facing unheralded Robert Frazier on ESPN. Twelve rounds later, Wright was a world champion for the second time in his career. This time, he had a promoter who had his best interests at heart.

“People can say what they want about Roy Jones, but ain’t no other promoter looked out for me the way he did. Every time he fought, I fought. It wasn’t superfights, but he got me the next best thing – exposure.”

Four times in a row would Roy get Winky exposure, with Wright fighting in the co-feature for three of those cards, all of which were carried by HBO and/or its PPV arm, HBOPPV. The first of the three was a third fight with old friend McKart, though the series came to a conclusive and screeching halt when Bronco was disqualified in the ninth round after losing five points for repeated low blows.

After freeing himself of McKart once and for all, Wright fought in back-to-back pay-per-view events employing a new style in an attempt to gain more fans. Whereas critics have unfairly

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cited his style of fighting as boring, Wright opted for a more flat-footed, in-the-pocket type style in successful defenses against Juan Carlos Candelo and Angel Hernandez. Only the plan backfired, as many began suggesting that he was slowing down, and no longer worthy of being mentioned among the division's best. Looking back, perhaps such rumblings is what in fact led to the unification bout with Shane earlier this year.

"I know for a fact that people saw the Hernandez fight and assumed that I was done. What they missed, though, is that dude was barely catching me. I got hit on the gloves and the arms a lot, sure. But they mistook that for him catching me and doing better than anyone expected. But hey, if that's what it took to get in the door, then so be it."

It wouldn't have gotten him into the building had Ricardo Mayorga defeated Cory Spinks a month later. Instead, Spinks revealed that the worst mistake you can make en route to a proposed super fight is overlook a slick southpaw, especially one that is a world champion. Mayorga did exactly that, as he took on the Spinks fight having already agreed to fight Mosley three months later. Those plans disintegrated when Cory served up a boxing lesson, soundly defeating the Nicaraguan in Atlantic City via unanimous decision.

With the superfight out the window, and plans for a third fight with Oscar de la Hoya not looking the least bit realistic, Shane opted for history, and offered Wright a fight to determine the division's first ever undisputed champion. At first, Wright didn't believe it was real.

"When they first told me about the fight, I thought it was a joke. I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw the contract... I signed it and sent it back an hour later."

Along with the fight came a career high payday of \$750,000. After serving up a boxing lesson en route to a wide unanimous decision, Wright now looks at yet another career high payday, in fact more than double what he received for the March fight. Should he win the rematch, the sky is the limit. A far cry from how he envisioned it all playing out fourteen years ago.

"I thought I'd be wrapping it up by now, but you know what, I'll take it. I may be past thirty, but I'm still young at heart. Because of that, I've been able to survive the test of time, and now after all these years have the last laugh. It's all good when everyone gets even in the end."

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