

Omar Sheika Gets Yet Another Title Shot

Written by Scott Yaniga

Thursday, 02 December 2004 18:00

For Omar Sheika, Paterson, NJ's erstwhile super middleweight contender, it seems indeed that hope springs eternal. The always crowd-pleasing, 27 year-old scrapper, winner of his last three bouts, is set to challenge Jeff "Left Hook" Lacy for his International Boxing Federation 168-pound diadem on Saturday, December 4th at the Mandalay Bay arena in Las Vegas.

It will mark Omar's third shot at championship gold and the tough Palestinian-American is hoping that the third time is a charm. "I am thankful for the opportunity for a shot at the world title. At the same time, I am anxious to go fight a good champion, and I am looking forward to fighting Jeff. I am in the best shape of my life. I am sure he is, too, and it is going to be a terrific fight," said Sheika at the recent press conference held to publicize the Showtime broadcast card.

In what should be an interesting mix of weights and styles the Top Rank-promoted card will also feature World Boxing Council lightweight champion Jose Luis Castillo defending against Joel Casamayor, and heavyweight hopeful Samuel Peter taking on perennial heavyweight "name" Jeremy Williams for a meaningless IBF-sanctioned continental title.

Sheika lost his first attempt at a championship when World Boxing Organization titleholder Joe Calzaghe halted him in a pier-sixer back in August 2000. Sheika was in trouble but still trading with Calzaghe when the referee halted matters in the fifth round due to the facial damage Omar had suffered in the previous rounds. Sheika reeled off three wins after the loss and then found himself in 2001's Fight of the Year when he and Thomas Tate went at each other that October. After knocking Tate down twice in the second round, Omar's sensitive mug again betrayed him as a massive swelling over one of his eyes forced the ring doctor to end the fight, awarding Tate a hard fought TKO win in round four. Omar impressed enough with his guts and will in that loss to actually garner his second shot at a title the following September.

Eric Lucas, then the World Boxing Council's 168-pound kingpin, gave Omar a boxing lesson over the twelve round distance in that 2002 fight with Sheika's idleness over the prior eleven months seemingly taking its toll on both his conditioning and reflexes.

Following that disheartening performance Omar hooked up with New Englander Scotty Pemberton in what turned out to be one of 2003's best action fights. In fact, if it weren't for the little matter of the third and final installment of the immortal Gatti-Ward trilogy that same year the Sheika-Pemberton tilt would have been a cinch for FOTY honors.

The return bout, held in January of this year was a disaster for Omar, who somehow managed to turn certain victory into a stunning defeat for himself. After decking Pemberton with a huge right hand in round two, Omar failed to follow up his advantage and let Scotty clutch the rest of the round. Again, in round six, Sheika stunned his man sufficiently that the referee administered a standing eight count (which ran counter to the stated rules of the bout). By the end of the round, however, Sheika looked winded and was dropping his hands, allowing Pemberton to

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fight his way not only back into the fight, but also into an eventual stoppage win in the tenth round when Omar was decked for the first time in his career and was virtually out on his feet upon arising.

To his credit Omar trained hard after that loss and has beaten Etienne Walker, Manu Ntoah and James “The Harlem Hammer” Butler who, with his recent arrest for the murder of the brother of Fox Sport’s Max Kellerman, has bigger problems these days. Omar took a split decision from Butler in that fight held in August, but once again let his man off the hook when he had him in trouble, which will be a dangerous habit to repeat against a dangerous puncher such as Lacy.

It can be argued that Omar does have a certain name value in an otherwise drab super middleweight division and that he possesses a huge fighting heart, but I don’t know of any contemporary fighter who has garnered three shots at a title belt with so little merit. How many fighters have you heard of that get three title opportunities for not only losing fights (see Thomas Tate above), but for beating second-raters and other non-ranked journeymen?

I go back with Sheika to that February day in 1997 when Omar and his amateur trainers Nettles Nasser and Al Velasquez walked into the offices of Big Fights, Inc. in New York City to seek the managerial knowledge of Bill Cayton and Steve Lott. I had a passing knowledge of Sheika’s capabilities during his Simon Pure days in New Jersey, as Omar was one of the state’s most celebrated amateur boxers, possessing a fast set of hands, some wonderful combinations and, most importantly, a mean streak a mile wide. He was certainly more of a pure boxer in those days than the rather reckless, face-first slugger he has morphed into in his pro career.

Cayton, the master of promotion, set out to make his young charge a household name in televised boxing. He worked out a deal with Brad Jacobs, then the major domo of boxing on USA’s Tuesday Night Fights, to showcase Omar’s career with an opening bout segment created solely for Sheika called “Just 4 Starters.” It would be the first time that USA would open its boxing show with a four round prelim bout, but the lure of the deal for Jacobs and his network would be the unfettered access to the huge and unique Big Fights library of boxing films and videos which, it was rumored, that ABC Sports paid Cayton \$1.0 million per year NOT to show on home television throughout the 1970’s and 80’s. It was rumored that a rival network had tried to make a deal with Cayton to lease the library to show against the live boxing shows that ABC Sports ran in those decades, resulting in ABC paying a kind of “protection” fee to keep the valuable and rarely seen footage off the airwaves.

It was a great deal for both the USA network—who broadcast some rarely-seen boxing footage to their delighted audience—and Sheika as the “Just 4 Starters” segment featured Omar in seven televised fight cards over the next five months, making him one of the best known preliminary fighters in the history of televised boxing coverage. It helped that Omar also had a talent for knocking his early foes out quicker than you can read this sentence. In fact, Sheika set a Tuesday Night Fights record by knocking out Sean Sample in 0:49 of the first round at Madison Square Garden’s Theatre on July 29th, 1997.

Omar quickly went to 14-0 and had signed a promotional agreement with British promoter Frank Warren to appear in several bouts in Great Britain. Things went well the early part of

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1998 as Omar took on two Brit fighters, taking them both out in four rounds, but quickly soured in July of that year when Omar lost a stinker of a hometown decision to journeyman Tony Booth, a 28-44-7 pug who just had to be related to the sole arbiter of the decision, the referee.

Sheika went back to work and won his next six matches, the last of which was a tough majority decision over future light heavyweight champion Glen Johnson, who was recently seen knocking Roy Jones, Jr. out cold on HBO. That fight served as the springboard for his exciting but ill-fated title shot against Joe Calzaghe that August. In the meantime Sheika had dumped both Kevin Rooney, who managed to instill at least a modicum of defense into his ring style early in his career, as well as the Cayton/Lott tandem that had poured thousands of dollars into his development as a contender.

In this fight against Lacy I look for Omar to go out headhunting from the first bell, which may be his only hope, as "Left Hook" is not known to be a quick starter. Omar had better hope he lands first and hardest because Lacy has real dynamite in his mitts and will undoubtedly cause Sheika's fragile facial derma to suffer some damage as the rounds roll on. A fifth round TKO for Lacy is the call in this one.

In the other bouts look for Jose Luis Castillo to upset the oddsmakers and score a decision win over Joel Casamayor. Castillo gave Floyd Mayweather, Jr. all he could handle in their two title fights and has met the much stiffer competition. The heavyweight bout should be all over before most fans get into their seats with their nachos and beer, with young lion Samuel Peter—the latest Duva boxing hopeful—getting off quickly with a knockout blow against a weak-whiskered Jeremy Williams, who was one of the few men actually knocked out by Brian "The Danish Pastry" Nielsen.