

This is Why We Love Boxing

Written by Steve Kim
Monday, 12 April 2004 21:00

There are a lot of things you could say about the sport of boxing. And not all of it good, mind you. It's corrupt; it's become fractured, marginalized and watered down. And you won't get much of an argument from me.

But at it's best, there's absolutely, positively, nothing like 'the sweet science'. When it done right, with honor and dignity, this sport stands as tall as any other.

And that's what happened this past weekend in Las Vegas at the Mandalay Bay when Cory Spinks defended his undisputed welterweight crown against Zab Judah, and Lamon Brewster took on Wladimir Klitschko for the vacant WBO heavyweight belt.

By no means was this a super fight, one that held the interest of not only the boxing aficionado but the general public. This was strictly a fight card aimed at the hard-core fan. And even then, it was a tough sell. Spinks-Judah, a match-up of quicksilver southpaws, had all the ingredients of being a stinker. You see, putting two left-handers in the ring at one time is like putting J-Lo and Ben Affleck in a movie together; it's a recipe for disaster.

The main event of the night was billed as a 'title' fight but let's be real, it was certainly far from being a true heavyweight championship fight. What is going on now is a mad scramble for positioning in this division that was left with a huge vacuum once Lennox Lewis decided to call it a day. It was also hard to get too excited about this face off because Brewster was coming into the bout a 10-1 underdog.

Brewster, in his two step-up fights against Clifford Etienne and Charles Shufford, had failed miserably. Klitschko, despite his shocking knockout loss to Corrie Sanders last March, was still highly regarded in many circles and held just about every single physical advantage coming in. Also, while Klitschko was afforded the opportunity to work out some kinks in two tune-up fights, Brewster had sat as idle as a car without an engine for more than a year.

But for some reason, I decided to dip into my own pocket (which trust me, folks, doesn't happen a lot) to pay round-trip airfare from Los Angeles to Las Vegas, making both the departure and return within hours of each other, to see this fight.

Why? Y'know I really don't know to be honest with you. If there was one concrete thing I could point to, it was that Brewster is among the first prizefighters that I ever really covered and got to know well. This may have been his last shot at glory. I was curious to see how he would respond to both that and the death of his trainer/mentor Bill Slayton, who had passed away this past October due to cancer.

Also, as part of the working press, I am credentialed. So I figured hey, if I spend about \$125 on a plane ticket (which I did through Orbitz), and I get a press pass, I'm still getting a great deal. The vantage point I'm given is worth at least a \$500 ticket.

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When I arrived at the hotel, there was no buzz. In fact, you could have put up a beehive in the middle of the casino and there still wouldn't have been a buzz. But you never know what could happen, which is why I'm here.

After a long delay in between the last untelevised bout and the beginning of the HBO broadcast, we finally see Spinks and Judah do their thing. From up close you marvel at both the speed, quickness and reflexes of both guys. It's hard not to notice their furrowed brows, revealing just how hard each fighter was concentrating on each other, trying to decipher each others difficult style.

Spinks takes control early, using his natural size and long right jab, he wins the early rounds on boxing and ring generalship. No, it's not Ward-Gatti, but it's not Derrick Gainer multiplied by 2 either. If you can enjoy the craft of boxing and it nuances, it's somewhat entertaining. You see feints, slipping, movement and shoulder rolls. Again, it doesn't leave the crowd roaring in appreciation, but from up close, you see what the craft of boxing is all about.

But when these two do engage in some back and forth flurries, your breath is taken away for a second. Spinks has good hand speed but is in many ways punching underwater compared to his foe, who seems to be going in hyper-speed. But (and this is where the craftsmanship comes in) it's Spinks who is more technically sound and precise, and therefore wins the fight.

In the 11th, with the fight getting close, Spinks would send Judah down to the canvas with a counter left as Judah was pulling out. The victory, it seemed, was sealed. But not so fast, you don't get to bring in Mariano Rivera in this sport. Spinks seemed to be cruising his way to a decision and running out the clock in the 12th, when without a half-minute to go in the fight, a blistering over-hand left would catch Spinks square and send him reeling to the canvas.

Judah's trip to the canvas was a 'flash' knockdown; this was anything but. Spinks was dazed and wobbly as he staggered up, but all he had to do was survive the last 20 seconds or so. Judah jumped all over him. Spinks, using only his instincts, would stand upright and try to fend off Judah.

The bell sounds.

It would be too little, too late for Judah. Spinks would win via unanimous decision. The fight had a steady pace for 10 rounds and finished with a flourish. It was the perfect appetizer to the main course of Klitschko-Brewster.

As both heavyweights entered the ring, it was almost as if they were in different weight classes. Brewster, is a solid heavyweight at 6'2, 225 pounds, but is dwarfed by the super heavyweight features of Klitschko, who goes about 6'5 with a chiseled 245 on his frame.

Early on it looks like a mismatch. Brewster, outside of landing the occasional hard left, would be walking in a line of fire from the rapid 1-2 combinations of Klitschko. I thought coming in, that Brewster had the proverbial 'punchers chance'; but to have that, you have to be able to get in reach and not eat so much leather.

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In the fourth, Brewster would be sent to the canvas when a big, sharp right hand would buzz Brewster right on the chin. It looked like the end was near for the underdog.

But remember, there's a reason why we love this game.

Brewster would survive the last 45 seconds of the frame, helped in part by his take-down of Klitschko that left both men on the canvas.

The bell sounds to start the fifth, and conventional wisdom would state that the end was near for Brewster. It turned out it was the exact opposite. As Klitschko shot out a few jab-right hand combinations, you got the sense that Brewster had steadied himself and would perhaps make a late charge. Instead, he would land a big left hook on Klitschko's chin, and then another one which had the big Ukrainian reeling against the ropes. Referee Robert Byrd would rule that a knockdown since he felt that the ropes were propping up Klitschko.

But as the mandatory eight was rendered, it was clear that Klitschko had hit 'E'. He was flat out of gas, thanks in part to some hard body shots landed by Brewster and even more so, because Brewster was able to take much more than he was able to give. This was something that Klitschko was not capable of doing.

The crowd at this point was going bonkers. Perhaps because they were pulling for the underdog and the Cinderella story, or maybe because they had bet on Brewster at steep odds.

Klitschko tried desperately to tie up Brewster, but as the round ended, Klitschko would flop to the canvas in exhaustion. The round was over, Brewster was already in his corner, Klitschko was still trying in vain to walk over to his. But as he staggered on his two feet, Byrd would call off the fight.

The crowd grew even louder in their hysteria. I looked over to my right and saw the family and supporters of Brewster celebrating, beside themselves. On press row, grizzled vets of the fight scene are excited, stunned by what they've seen.

In the midst of all the pandemonium, I see Brewster and his trainer, Shadeed Suluki, (two Slayton protege's) embracing in the center of the ring. I don't think they could even comprehend what they had just accomplished.

Me? I was excited too (and happy for Lamon). Not that I was cheering for him on press row, that's a no-no. But I can't lie; I'm glad he did it... and as you see him on his knees praying, you have to feel good about what just happened.

Yeah, that's why we love this game.