

Man in the Middle

Written by Deon Potgieter
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While the boxing world primarily knows this past weekend's International boxing hall of fame inductee, Stanley Christodoulou, as a referee and a judge, he has affectionately been referred to and regarded as Mr Boxing in South Africa for close on forty years. No other man wielded more power and influence in the sport in South Africa than Christodoulou over that time.

Besides building a distinguished career as a referee and judge, being one of only three men to officiate in over 100 world title fights in all 17 weight divisions, he was at the helm of the South African boxing commission up until the turn of the century. As an executive member of the World Boxing Association, he was also instrumental in a number of South African fighters receiving opportunities to fight for world titles. Amongst them was the first black South African to win a world title, Peter "Terror" Mathebula, who dethroned Tae Shik Kim in 1980 in Los Angeles to win the WBA flyweight crown, Brian Mitchell, who stopped Alfredo Layne in 1986 to win the WBA junior lightweight world title and went on to successfully defend it 12 times, and Piet Crous, who outboxed Ossie Ocasio for the WBA cruiserweight world title. Crous, incidentally, lost the title in his second defence to another International boxing hall of famer, Dwight Muhammad Quawi.

Christodoulou was first introduced into the sport in the early 1960's by former universal bantamweight world title contender and empire champion, Willie Toweel. It was through Toweel's encouragement that Christodoulou judged his first fight and he has never looked back since. Although he has been the man in the middle of many great world title matches and has officiated in bouts featuring the likes of Evander Holyfield, Lennox Lewis, Marvin Hagler, Roberto Duran, Thoma Hearn, Aaron Pryor just to name a few, his first world title fight is one he will never forget.

In 1973, Christodoulou was asked to step in as a replacement referee for the bantamweight world title bout between Romeo Anaya and Arnold Taylor in Johannesburg.

"It was a tremendous honour," says Christodoulou, "to be able to referee my first world title fight in my own country was very special and hell what a fight it turned out to be."

Both boxers went toe-to toe for the majority of the fight. Taylor stunned Anaya in round three and dropped him for an 8 count in round 5. Following three brutal rounds in which neither fighter gave an inch, it was Taylor's turn to visit the canvas in round eight, as Anaya caught him with his vaunted left hook. Taylor groggily returned to his feet only to be dropped again with another vicious hook. Somehow finding the strength to stand up Taylor tried to clinch, but Anaya brushed him away and moved in for the kill. Before Anaya could land, however, Taylor sunk to his knees and Christodoulou correctly ruled it a legitimate knockdown as a result of the accumulative punishment he had taken.

To the disbelief of Anaya, Taylor again rose at the count of 8 and managed to survive the rest of the round. Taylor's trainer was about to throw in the towel, but picked up his robe by accident,

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the delay allowing Taylor to be saved by the bell. In round nine the tables turned again as Taylor stunned Anaya and had him in serious trouble on the ropes when the bell brought relief to the world champion. In round ten three successive hooks by Anaya had Taylor down. Again he found the strength to rise to the occasion and battle the champion back. Rounds 11 –13 saw the men continue to pummel each other and by round 14 Taylor could hardly see out of his right eye. Fuelled on by the chants of his home crowd, Taylor caught Anaya with a left hook , “I could see he stiffened up” said Taylor after the fight. “Then I put everything I had into my right to his jaw. It landed pingg! And I felt the shock of the blow running up my arm, through my body and down my legs. I jumped way up in the air and didn’t even watch him fall.”

Taylor danced around the ring shouting ,” He’s gone, he’s gone.” Christodoulou kept shouting back at him to get into the neutral corner, but Taylor was overwhelmed with excitement and convinced he had won. “Anaya was never going to get up,” says Christodoulou, “but I wanted everything done right so only took up the count once Taylor went to a neutral corner.

It was unbelievable throughout the fight both boxers’ fortunes fluctuated. They both had tremendous guts and heart to stay in there. It was sensational in every respect. I could not have asked for a better first world title fight.” The Anaya – Taylor fight is still rated as one of the best bantamweight fights of all time and given his professional handling of the bout, Christodoulou was set for what has turned out to be one of the finest refereeing careers in the history of world boxing.