

Zab Judah's Last Chance at Lasting Impression

Written by Jake Donovan

Friday, 14 January 2005 18:00

This is the one where he promises to finally put it all together. The rematch with Cory Spinks (Saturday, February 5, 2005, 9PM ET/PT on SHOWTIME) will reveal the true Zab "Super" Judah, the one that was referred to as "baby Pernell" and "Pernell Whitaker with power" throughout his stellar amateur career. After years of waiting, there is finally reason for Zab to rise to the occasion.

I know, I know... stop me if you've heard this one before.

But talking to the Zab of today, one gets the sense that for the first time in a long time he now finally realizes that he is not living up to his full potential. He also realizes that, especially in today's market, you only get so many chances before you are permanently written off in the public eye.

"The moment I even heard rumors about this fight happening, me and my pops (trainer Yoel Judah) hit the gym and prepared for war," Zab told TheSweetScience.com during a recent exclusive interview. "Ever since my last fight (KO1 Wayne Martell – October 2, 2004), the only thing I wanted was a rematch with Cory Spinks. Nobody else wants to fight me, which is fine because the Spinks fight is the only one that matters to me, anyway. Now I can start off 2005 by getting revenge."

Perhaps it's fitting, then, that his latest – and perhaps last – shot at greatness comes in Spinks' hometown of St. Louis, Missouri, with Missouri of course being known as the "Show Me State." Many critics have insisted that it's high time Zab shows them that he's still worthy of the early hype that surrounded his career. More than just proving the critics wrong, Zab feels that he now has all the motivation he needs to live up to the early press clippings.

"They messed up big time by putting this one in his hometown. When they first asked me where I wanted the fight, I told them I didn't care, so long as it wasn't in Vegas. So when they chose St. Louis... that was all I needed to hear. I already knew going into the rematch that I have to knock him out just to win. With the fight in his backyard, now I know what I have to train for. An early night."

Perhaps not as early as his last fight – a first round stoppage over cannon-fodder Wayne Martell last October in Madison Square Garden. But after dropping a heartbreaker to Spinks and then following it up with a closer-than-expected fight with Rafael Pineda, Judah is no longer interested in allowing his opponents to last the distance or fighting in Sin City anytime soon.

"What bothers me about the fight with Cory is that the eleventh round knockdown took the fight off of the table for the judges. I was winning the round, and simply got caught. No big deal. I got right back up and finished the round and took it to him at the end of the fight. But even putting him on his butt didn't matter, because the judges had me way behind somehow. I didn't think it was a fair decision. Nor was that crap the judges came up with a month later."

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The “month later” fight he refers to is the Pineda fight, which also took place in Las Vegas. Wanting to head into the summer on a winning note, Judah agreed to take on Pineda on very short notice. In fact, it came after he was willing to accept a short notice fight with WBA “regular” welterweight champion Jose Rivera, only to have Rivera to pull out because of the money being offered. Instead, Judah wound up with Pineda, and as the fight wore on, there was little motivation to go full throttle.

“I admit, one major flaw I have is that I get too comfortable in the ring at times. When I got a cat like Pineda, I know it won't take much to beat him, so I get a little lazy and lose focus. My dad was there to let me know that I was slipping, at which point I responded by putting him on his butt. But I knew that fight was just to get me a win, and the Martell fight was for me to end the year with a knockout while waiting for this rematch to pan out. Knowing that Cory is in the other corner, there's no excuse for me to not be focused for this one.”

Perhaps not, but many critics will quickly point out that his penchant for losing focus is not so easy to correct. After all, it has nearly plagued what was once considered a gleaming bright career, one that was jumpstarted by an incredible run in the amateurs, where he racked up numerous Golden Gloves titles en route to finishing with an eye-popping 110-5 career record in the non-pay ranks.

The suspicions started in his twenty-third pro fight. It was also his first world title fight, and his first appearance on Showtime Championship Boxing, having appeared on SET-PPV the year before. And despite cruising to a fourth round stoppage of Jan Bergman, he suffered the first knockdown of his career. It was a flash knockdown that came in the second, but he was able to bounce right back up and take care of business. It wasn't good enough, though, as people suddenly questioned his chin, and mental makeup.

Two fights later, Judah was once again reacquainted with the canvas, when power puncher Terronn Millett dropped Brooklyn's Finest in the first round of their August 2000 encounter. Millett had come to reclaim what he felt was stolen from him – the IBF junior welterweight title. Unfortunately for him, Zab got up and for the next three rounds proceeded to beat the truth into him – that the belt was his and was heading back to Brooklyn with him, stopping Millett in the fourth round of what was Judah's first main event on Showtime.

Subsequent stoppages of Hector Quiroz and Reggie Green would feature moments of disinterest on the part of young Judah. So much so, that toward the latter stages of the Green fight, Hall-of-Fame referee Arthur Mercante, Sr. had to urge both fighters to mix it up, and for Judah to stop clowning. Zab heeded the words of wisdom and blasted out Green shortly thereafter, as if upon request. It seemed to carry over in his next fight, a third round stoppage over mandatory challenger Allan Vester. Of course, on the line in that fight was a potential undisputed showdown with then WBC and WBA champion Kostya Tszyu. The thought of becoming the division's first ever undisputed champion was all the motivation Judah needed in order to take care of business as fast as he did. Ironically enough, it was Tszyu who struggled mightily in his fight; a closer-than-expected points win over then-undefeated but unknown mandatory Oktay Urkal.

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As they say, a win is a win is a win, and a pair of wins on that June, 2001 Showtime telecast meant a November showdown was looming. Zab came fully prepared, giving Tszyu a boxing lesson in the opening round. Holding his own in the second round, Judah was out to prove that he was ready to take over. Then suddenly - it happened.

“Even now, I still can’t explain it. I knew I was in control, I knew I could beat him and take all those titles. Then, you slip up for a second and BAM!”

The BAM came courtesy of a big right hand from Tszyu that sent Judah crashing hard to the canvas. It would be the last punch landed in the fight, but not the last time that Zab would hit the canvas. Determined to prove that he wasn’t hurt, Judah got up immediately after he hit the deck. Unfortunately, his head was not aware that his legs were out of the office, as he stumbled across the ring in a sequence that to this day is still discussed – though mostly in mocking fashion – on boxing message boards throughout the cyber world. Despite having not yet reached eight in his count, referee Jay Nady viewed the dance-like action as cause enough to stop the contest.

Vehemently opposed to the stoppage, Judah then set his sights on the referee, who he nearly choked. Zab also threw a stool at Nady after the bout was stopped. His actions cost him \$75,000, a six-month suspension, and, apparently, a rematch with Tszyu as well.

“To this day, it pisses me off that I never got that rematch against Kostya. Perhaps there’s still time – maybe he’ll either move up to ’47, or will finally come around and fight me should I ever decide to drop to 140. But until I can get that rematch, I will never be able to fully redeem myself in the eyes of the haters. It sucks.”

A few months after his “comeback” – a ten round points win over rugged Omar Weis – Zab decided that his career needed to go into a different direction. Facing yet another trip to the inactive list, Judah put his career on hold, and allowed his promotional contract to run out before signing with Don King. The nine-month layoff was well worth it, according to Judah.

“Having sat out for seven, eight months, I really wasn’t thrilled about having to go that same amount of time without fighting. But the moment me and my pops met with Don, we knew that was the move. And despite what everyone else got to say about him, he’s done right by me ever since I’ve been back in the ring. This will now be my sixth fight in less than three years, and the third time I’ll be fighting for a world title fight.”

The first came against WBO junior welterweight champion DeMarcus “Chop Chop” Corley, though it took for some creative marketing to make that fight happen. While in attendance at a post-fight press conference following undisputed middleweight champion Bernard Hopkins’ defense over Morrado Hakkar in Philly, Corley decided to introduce himself to Judah, letting him know that he heard rumors of Zab talking junk. Judah responded Brooklyn style, cracking one on his jaw, which set off a brief scuffle. Once order was restored, King was quoted as saying, “Well damn, looks like I’ll have to go ahead and make that fight happen for real.”

Living up to his word, King was able to get Judah both the bout and a slot as co-feature to the

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Ricardo Mayorga-Vernon Forrest rematch on HBO. Judah dropped Corley in the third round, but injured his hand two rounds later, and had to settle for a less-than-thrilling, albeit decisive points win.

Fully recovered, and now one quick knockout win later, Judah abandoned the junior welterweight division, having grown frustrated in being unable to secure a rematch with Tszyu, or a meaningful fight against any other top fighter in the weight. Upon moving up seven pounds, Judah would be presented the most meaningful fight in the division – a shot at newly crowned undisputed welterweight kingpin Cory Spinks. But once again, an old “friend” would come back to revisit.

“If there is anything that I could change – and believe me, I definitely plan on fixing it for the rematch – it would be that I got off to such a slow start. Once I got going, I took over big time. But spotting a world champion like Cory three or four rounds made things that much tougher for me, and ultimately cost me. I don't know what I was thinking.”

Whatever it was he was thinking, he apparently changed his mind midway through the fourth round, picking up the pace considerably. Once he got going, he seemingly took over, until he got careless once again late in the fight. This time, it resulted in the first of two knockdowns in the bout. Though according to Zab, everyone knows which of the two knockdowns was the more effective.

“Everyone saw that I wasn't hurt by the shot. He touched me, and then practically pushed me down to the canvas. It was nothing. I got right back up and then went ahead and took care of business in the very next round. In the end, I lost, but now he knows that I'm capable of hurting him. All I need to do is get off to a quicker start this time, and the rest will fall into place.”

Ah, but what will make this opportunity different from any other?

“There's too much at stake for me to come in and make the same mistakes I've made in the past. Besides Cory, Oscar may be coming back to the division. That's huge money right there, and what better way to position myself for the jackpot, than by having all three belts around my waist. Even more so than the money, is the fact that he beat my idol, Pernell Whitaker. So, once I get my revenge here, I can avenge that one for Pete.”

Focus, Zab. Focus!

“Don't get me wrong, though. First thing's first. I got my business to take care of on February 5. Cory is too good a fighter for me to even worry about anything else right now. I'm feeling good, I'm whipping' some ass in sparring, and I'm ready to go. I promised everyone that one way or another, 2005 is going to be my year. Once I do my thing with Cory, everyone else after that can either come get me, or get out my way. But make no mistake about it. February 5 will be the night it all comes together. I know that if I blow this, then that's it. And I'm not ready yet to quit. Not by a long shot.”