

Winky Wright's Year of Reckoning

Written by Patrick Kehoe

Sunday, 16 January 2005 18:00

Ronald Wright has been the standard-bearer, fistic force of the often transitional division, the jr. middleweights, for a decade. He's braved and battled, besting many of the division's top class contenders, beginning with a brilliant boxing performance against then highly prized Andrew Council, and a knife edged victory over WBO jr. middleweight champion Bronco McKart. Having toiled mostly in France and Germany for the three years prior to those break out wins, Wright stubbornly campaigned to differentiate himself from the other contenders at 154; his sheer willingness to fight on the road, adapting to surprise challenges made him a go-to-fighter of notice.

Undefeated British hopeful - by way of Guyana - Adrian Dodson was crushed by Wright, who seemed with that December, 1997 win, to certify his top form as a world class fighter. Expectation follows upon diligent competence and by 1997 'Winky' Wright was consistently making good on his quiet confidence. A ranging fighter with punctuating pop on his combination punching, a guy who was effective on the counter or working on the inside, Wright was versatile and confident. At least he tried his best to look and act confident.

When he was beaten on points by Harry Simon in August of 1998, surrendering his WBO jr. middleweight title in a controversial bout held in South Africa, Wright suddenly had to face up to more than his first career loss or even a title fight defeat. Even those who felt that Simon was ceremoniously gifted the decision and Wright had deserved the judges professional discretion, the result highlighted pre-fight criticism that maybe 'Winky' Wright didn't have the mental toughness to go with all that ring talent. Aspersions were seemingly justified critiques, when Wright followed up the Simon fight, coming up short over the championship rounds against the division's other young gun, Fernando Vargas, on December 4, 1999.

And yet from defeat is often sown the seeds of ultimate success. We now understand more fully how Vargas, caught later for steroid enhancement, might have managed to overcome Wright physically down the stretch. Was Wright simply a victim of unethical manipulation, branded unfairly as a fighter who didn't have the intangibles, that crucial x-factor for taking championship rounds? If we factor in Wright's subsequent performances, we may then see the transparency of our question. Wright, having endured the disappointment and stigma of having lost his first legitimate super fight to Vargas, reacted by moving past his failure, dispensing with rationalizations and founding the era of his final evolution.

Nine months after the Vargas loss, Wright simply outclassed a game Bronco McKart over 12 rounds, retooling his long range combination hitting and fine tuning his body punching from inside positions. At 29, Ronald Wright was more fit than ever, his rhythmical punching endurance becoming, for the first time in his career, a signature characteristic, to the point of a dominating advantage. He didn't have to pretend to be the boss at 154, he knew he was. Fighters from Felix Trinidad to Oscar De La Hoya, who had bounded up from welterweight, strategically avoided fighting Wright. He'd become the ultimate big risk with medium reward fighter of his era. Pleasant, mild mannered in public, honestly differential to opponents he

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generally respected as fellow professionals, Wright had no biographical wrinkles. Being branded the rugged nice guy put a damper on his economic viability and none of the 'big names' could be convinced or embarrassed into taking up the challenge of 'Winky'.

Wright had to content himself with beating former champions such as Keith Mullings and annexing 'minor' title claimants such as Robert Frazier, defending against no-names like Jason Papillion, Juan Carlos Candelo and even rehashing against McKart yet again in September of 2002. His patience tested year after year, legendary fighters moving off to middleweight, it seemed a fruitless strategy to camp out at 154, even with the IBF crown, acting the role of a champion remaining in the mix of elite fighters and ultimately trusting in the laws of averages as measured over time. For who was going to come calling?

Finally, the overflow from the Forrest, Mayorga, Mosley wars at welterweight sent the beaten and humbled 'Sugar' Shane Mosley into Wright's port of call. And his first vested, HBO certified rivalry-of-a-kind came to pass. What beating Mosley twice - once with authority and once almost despite himself - did for Ronald Wright was allow Team Wright and his promoter Gary Shaw and manager James Prince to sell the fiction of Wright as a fighter of market bearing relevance. He beat Mosley, thus he's a legitimate boxing star, well worth 5 million for his services; that's the current self-invested linear logic coming out as Team Wright and Felix Trinidad's brain trust and Don King spar over just what to pay the 'other fighter' in this case that means Wright. What is 'Winky' Wright worth as a subcontracted fighter in relation to the overwhelming reality of such a promotion: namely that Felix Trinidad and his cross over demographic star power will supply almost all the voltage this fight can and will generate.

Fighters with belts have to try to appear imperial, no matter the status of their economic viability. The great Donald Curry, in 1985 when everyone thought of him as a superlative talent, couldn't understand why he wasn't being paid like a Roberto Duran or a Sugar Ray Leonard or a Thomas Hearns. Being the best in your division doesn't mean you are a media star, he was told at ringside after stopping Colin Jones in Birmingham, England. You can substitute Winky Wright after the Mosley rematch for Mr. Curry, the general comparison holding sufficient currency.

Everyone in boxing knows who the star is in a fight between 'Winky' Wright and Felix Trinidad. The essential question will come down to how much Trinidad wants Wright as his next opponent, Wright and no one else but Wright. Is Wright the perfect pre-Hopkins opponent in terms of preparation logistics? Certainly he is. Thus, what leverage does that give Team Wright? More than one might, at first, suspect. The fact that Don King is fouling up a deal for the signing because he's demanding, of Wright's future ring services, his famous 'options' clause is just business in the age of King.

Ironically, Wright himself must now look to the middleweight division, if he hopes to maximize his late-career earning potential. At just under 5'11", most boxing analysts believe that Wright's final departure from jr. middleweight up to middleweight will be a non-issue. And he must play out the bluff of his being a critical player in the upper echelons of the sport. Not that bluffing one's position, for advantage, ever put Don King off his relentless course of action: exploiting domination. The contention of Winky Wright as a super-somebody in world boxing because of belts obtained and Shane Mosley overcome, that, Team Winky are trying to hold out as

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common sense necessity. Necessity here meaning the payment for his services being valued between 4 ½ to 5 million; the five million offered in 2004 reduced now to a post-Mosley 'slap in the face' 2½-plus million.

Not that this is passing state secrets, but surely it's obvious that no one, outside of Florida, really believes Winky is worth anything more than what Team Trinidad, HBO and Don King happen to bottom-line him to be worth. Fighting Trinidad is, except for Oscar De La Hoya, all about Trinidad. That includes Bernard Hopkins, their mythical rematch still a burning hypothetical, suspended by a webbing of intermediary events and career decisions now being hotly debated, pointed and counter pointed in Cupey Alto, Philadelphia, New York City, Los Angeles and Miami.

Winky, the nice guy, comes in as a sub-contract-able item for Trinidad's pleasure; being a nightmare of an opponent and holder of a 'universal' recognition as a world champion is beside the bottom line point.

To paraphrase Don King: Only in America and only in boxing.

Still, leverage is one thing, needing big fights to make big dollars and leave big footprints is also on the table now and forever more for Ronald Wright. 2005 will say a lot about Wright or end in December leaving us with little left to say about him, maybe for good.