

The War at 154: Ouma and Jantuah Ready to Battle

Written by Jake Donovan

Thursday, 27 January 2005 18:00

The occasion is rare in boxing that a co-feature bout is the more anticipated fight than is the main event of any given fight card. The chances are even slimmer that such would occur with WBC super lightweight champion Arturo "Thunder" Gatti in the main event. That should give you an indication of just how potentially explosive many figure to be the IBF junior middleweight title fight between champion Kassim "The Dream" Ouma and Kofi Jantuah.

For those who tune in this weekend (live from Atlantic City on HBO, Saturday January 29, 9:45PM ET/6:45PM PT), it should figure to be a case of two for the price of one, with Gatti prepared for a potential shootout with Jesse James Leija in the main event. Past Gatti fights on HBO usually offered co-features that were intended to be fun, but never all that significant. This time, HBO hits a daily double, as Ouma-Jantuah has the potential to not only outdo Gatti-Leija in terms of action and excitement, but may ultimately result in determining who is the best fight in the junior middleweight division.

I know, I know... Ronald "Winky" Wright already established such status last March, and confirmed it in November. But let's keep in mind the following: Wright gave up his IBF title last year; he has already expressed that he has little interest in a fight with Ouma; and he is now slated to move up to middleweight in taking on former three division champion and modern day legend Felix "Tito" Trinidad in May.

Where that leads to is, as far as several are concerned, Ouma and Jantuah filling the potential void. Both fighters certainly will agree, even alluding to such in their reasoning for taking on what is easily the biggest risk of their respective careers.

"People keep asking me, 'Kassim, why are you taking a fight like this for your first title defense,'" the always enthusiastic Ouma (20-1-1-1NC, 13KO) told TheSweetScience.com in an exclusive interview earlier in the month. "I say now what I always tell them: if the so-called real champion doesn't want to fight me or anyone else in the division, then it's up to somebody else to take the lead. I've been taking tough fights while waiting for Winky, and I'll continue to keep taking them until everyone says I'm the best in the division."

The hard-hitting Jantuah (28-1-0-1NC, 18KO) was certainly pleased to hear such news.

"I know that a lot of fans get tired of hearing fighters running their mouths about fighting the best, but then taking soft touches," explains Jantuah, who will be fighting in his first world title fight this weekend. "Fighters like Kassim and me are a different breed, though. When I say I want to be the best, then I go out and find the best. Kassim was the best that was willing to fight me, so to me, he's the best. Until we fight, that is. Then I will prove to be the best."

If they are not the best, then both have been proving for quite some time that they are at least among the best leading contenders. They each boast a record with only one loss, and the loss for both came in rare form.

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Jantuah suffered his lone defeat three and a half years ago against welterweight contender Manuel Gomez. Seemingly on his way to a comfortable points win, Kofi went into cruise control mode, and wound up getting caught with a show stopping left hook for the first and only knockdown suffered in his eleven-plus year career. The setback was a huge wake-up call for Jantuah, who vowed after that night that he will never lose again.

“The Gomez fight taught me that I should never, ever take any situation for granted. It was a lesson I learned early in life, and always followed. But for some reason, I forgot to take that into the ring with me. Getting caught was the perfect reminder, though. I took some time off after that fight, to get my head back on straight. I’ve been sure to be alert at all times ever since, and you see the results.”

The results fans have seen ever since are a string of opponents who have not seen the final bell. Since the stoppage loss, Kofi has knocked out seven straight, including his blink-and-you-missed-it destruction of Marco Antonio Rubio last September, as the lead-in bout for the Bernard Hopkins-Oscar de la Hoya pay-per-view show. It was that win, his last fight to date, that had the industry buzzing. One fighter in particular was impressed, and knew that their paths would collide soon enough.

“The moment Kofi knocked that cat out, I remembered thinking to myself “I’m going to have to fight him after I win my title,” recalls Ouma. “Sure enough, we get to talking a couple of months later. Only about five minutes, but we mainly talked about fighting each other. A couple of weeks later, HBO comes knocking, saying they have a slot for me. Already knowing the answer, I decided to ask anyway – “Who against?” They tell me Jantuah, and I told my manager to get me the contract so I can sign it.”

Sign away he did, and with barely anytime to celebrate his title winning effort over Verno Phillips just two weeks after Jantuah’s thirty seconds of fame, Ouma was set to make his first title defense. But more importantly to him is the fact that he is making his HBO debut, which is chief among all reasons why he was so eager to accept the assignment.

“I laugh how people trip on having to fight tough fights. I could care less. I don’t look for them; they just find me. The difference is, I don’t run away from them. HBO knows this, which is why they wanted me on their network. With TV dates not being as available as they used to, I had to jump on the opportunity. It’s a small window of opportunity, so you have to take advantage the moment you see the window cracked open. But besides that, it’s just another fight. It’s not like I haven’t been in tough before.”

Such is true both in and out of the ring. His childhood was spent serving in the military for his native Uganda, from where he is currently exiled. Having fled the country while fighting in a tournament as a teenager, Ouma eventually headed to the states. A man without a home while stateside, Kassim went from state to state, looking for work as a sparring partner and hoping to eventually turn pro. After serving as a sparring partner for notable fighters such as Zab Judah among others, Kassim turned pro in 1998, not even twenty years old.

Like Jantuah, the lone loss of his career came in almost fluke-like fashion. Coming in careless

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and playing to the crowd, Ouma foolishly exposed his chin, and got caught by unheralded Agustin Silva early into their 1999 fight. Ouma never recovered, getting dropped twice more before being stopped via the three knockdown rule. Like Jantuah proved after his loss, Ouma also insisted that the circumstances under which he lost were one and done.

“I acted like a clown, and paid the price big time. I still like to have fun in the ring, but I know now that one stupid mistake can cost you the fight at any given time.”

He hasn't made too many mistakes since then, having gone unbeaten in thirteen straight to date. Only a technical draw to James Coker in 2001 and a stoppage win-turned-no contest on ESPN2 eighteen months later prevents Kassim from boasting a baker's dozen worth of wins since the knockout loss. What makes the streak all the more impressive is that, where Jantuah has won against less than notable opposition, Ouma has all but cleaned out the top of the heap during his run. Alex Bunema, Michael Lerma, Verno Phillips (2x), JC Candelo and Kuvanych Toygonbayev head an impressive list of contenders all sent to bed by “The Dream”, who contends that he is thankful for his managers having him matched so tough through the years.

“I always told my handlers, I don't want any soft touches. If I am going to do this, I have to know that I can either go all the way, or else find something else to do. I know one day that the money will come. Once it does, I can then rest my head, knowing that I truly earned it. Until then, I'll settle for respect.”

Come Saturday night, all he and Jantuah will have to settle is who will emerge as the leader of the division once all is said and done.