

Cory Spinks' Historic Homecoming

Written by Jake Donovan

Thursday, 03 February 2005 18:00

In addition to winning Olympic Gold in 1976, "Neon" Leon Spinks made boxing history by winning the world heavyweight title in only his eighth pro fight. It didn't hurt that the title-winning effort came against the most famous fighter in the history of the sport, the one and only Muhammad Ali.

In addition to winning Olympic Gold in 1976, Michael "The Spinks Jinx" Spinks made boxing history by becoming the first world light heavyweight champion to successfully move up and capture the world heavyweight title. Not only did doing so make history, but the win actually prevented another form of history from occurring, with long reigning champion Larry Holmes looking to become only the second heavyweight champion ever to register a record of 49-0 had he won.

For undisputed welterweight king Cory "The Next Generation" Spinks, there is no Olympic medal, or even Olympic experience, to speak of. At 5'9 1/2" and 147 pounds, it remains extremely unlikely that he will ever campaign as a heavyweight, much less make history in the division as did his father (Leon) and uncle (Michael).

But in making his fourth welterweight title defense this Saturday night (vs. Zab "Super" Judah, February 5, live from the Savvis Center on SHOWTIME, 9PM ET/PT), Cory will receive an honor neither his father nor uncle were able to experience: participating in a world title fight in his hometown of St. Louis, Missouri.

"It's an absolute honor to be defending my world title in my own backyard," Spinks (34-2, 10KO) had told TheSweetScience.com when he initially received word of his then pending rematch with Zab Judah, whom Cory had bested in their April 2004 encounter. "I keep waiting for the media to give me my full respect, but to know that all of my people back home appreciate me is good enough for the moment."

Appreciation has become an understatement, as a sold out Savvis Center has already been announced for the first world championship card in 2005 for SHOWTIME. With more than 22,000 fans coming out to support their hometown hero, Spinks finally gets to experience the feel of participating in a superfight – something he believes is long overdue in his career.

"I won't lie. When I first heard that Oscar (de la Hoya) and (Shane) Mosley were dropping back down to welterweight, I said to myself 'Why do they have me fighting Zab again, with fights like that out there?' But now I know that it was the right way to go. Get this win out the way with Zab, and then I can make myself even more appealing for when the superfights finally start rolling my way."

Getting Zab out the way is easier said than done. Cory learned that the hard way, even with the impressive, albeit close, points win over Brooklyn's finest last April. Having sprinted out to a three round lead, Spinks found himself in a dogfight midway through, and eventually on the

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canvas late in the fight. Many insisted that had Zab been afforded another thirty seconds, he would have lifted the crown. But as far as Cory is concerned, Zab actually already had twelve rounds to turn that trick and is none too concerned about the additional twelve he is granting.

“If there’s one thing that drives me crazy in hearing about the first fight, it’s the so-called experts insisting that I was lucky to escape with my titles. Man, Zab dropped me at the end of the fight. I got a little too careless and paid the price for a second. What many don’t seem to want to remember are the prior eleven rounds. Obviously I did something right during the rest of the fight, because I still won even with the last round knockdown. But cats in the media are acting like they got cheated or something. I fight everyone, so if they say I need to do this again in order to prove myself, then it ain’t no thing.”

Being able to do his thing in his own backyard is definitely the biggest break in a career filled with struggles and frustration. In his fourteenth pro fight, those who tuned into ESPN on that Sunday night in mid-December witnessed the first of two losses for young Cory. The loss – a narrow split decision - came against then-rising contender Antonio Diaz, though many scoring the bout from the confines of their living room couch considered it a hometown decision for Diaz more so than a loss for Spinks.

Never one to let one bad situation keep him down, Spinks dusted himself off and returned to his winning ways in tearing off sixteen straight. Most of the wins came against “usual suspect” type of opponents, though an impressive points win over Larry Marks on national TV put him in position for a world title shot. By the time he was ready to fight for the title, success and fame were not quite ready to come along for the ride. When then-champion Vernon Forrest passed on a mandatory defense and gave up his crown for a shot at WBC champion Shane Mosley, Spinks found himself updating his passport and heading overseas in facing Michelle Piccirillo in Italy for the vacant title.

As with the Diaz fight, Spinks appeared to do enough over the course of the twelve round bout to take the crown, but apparently not enough to persuade the judges to score against the house fighter. Despite the decision being a unanimous one, the IBF ordered an elimination bout between Spinks and longtime spoiler Rafael Pineda, with the winner to face Piccirillo. Spinks survived the best that the hard punching Pineda had to offer, but was forced to settle for a technical decision when a clash of heads caused a cut severe enough to prevent Cory from being able to continue past the seventh round. Despite the win, Spinks was forced to the sidelines for the rest of the year, in waiting for his skin to heal and for someone to stage the rematch.

Legendary promoter Don King had flirted with the idea of bringing the rematch to the states and staging it beneath the Roy Jones-John Ruiz PPV card in March 2003. The month held up, but not the date. Nor was King successful in keeping the cards on this side of the Atlantic, as Cory was once again forced to travel to Italy in fighting for a world title he believed was his. This time, he left no doubt, giving the Italian a boxing lesson throughout in taking a decisive unanimous decision. Finally, he joined his father and uncle in attaching the Spinks name to a world title. But what was still missing was the respect and notoriety.

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Both were supposed to come in his next fight, an undisputed unification showdown with boxing wild man Ricardo Mayorga. "El Matador" was a 3-1 favorite to jinx Spinks in Atlantic City, in fact the very same town where Michael was blasted out in one by Mike Tyson in what was at the time one of the most anticipated fights in boxing history. But Cory would last a lot longer than ninety seconds, and in fact once again beat the odds, as he gave Mayorga a boxing lesson throughout. Suspect scoring nearly ruined the superior effort, as Cory was forced to settle for a surprisingly close majority decision, even with two points deducted from Ricardo's scorecard for repeated fouls.

With Mayorga heading into the fight as the leading contender for Fighter of the Year, Spinks figured that the win would allow him to catch the wave of popularity that Mayorga was riding at the time. Instead, he seemed to become more despised, as if he killed the sport by proving that skill beats will every time out. Nor did it help his case any when he was forced to climb off of the canvas last April in barely out-lasting and out-pointing Judah. But as the saying goes, that which does not kill you only makes you stronger. The way that Team Spinks sees it, Zab made a big mistake in allowing Spinks to live and fight another day, even if far too many are trying to kill his chances.

"Zab acts like he found gold when he knocked me down. I got relaxed, and he caught me with a good shot. That started all of this controversy. People have gotten off of the canvas before to win a fight. Hell, cats don't even seem to want to recall that Zab himself was knocked down the round before. Zab damn sure don't, because he's acting like all he gotta do is start this fight the way he finished the first one and he's the new champ. But what he don't realize is that by not finishing the job then, he blew his golden opportunity. I never make the same mistake twice. I stepped it up against Piccirillo the second time, and I'm going to step it up and all over Zab this time around."

Cory's longtime trainer and manager, Kevin Cunningham, definitely agrees.

"All this nonsense about Cory being lucky – look, it's no different than the (stuff) he has heard his entire career. Zab (messed) up by not finishing the job. And it's not that he started too late – it's that it took him twelve rounds to finally figure Cory out, if you want to call it that. Yet they act like as long as you pay a dollar, you gonna win the lotto every time out. That's all I heard from them – "we gonna knock Cory out. I dropped him last time, I'm stopping him this time." Shit, I hope they got more of a game plan than thinking one punch will do the trick. If that's their plan, then I'm going to have an easy night in telling Cory what to do."

Spinks knows that matters won't be that simple, though he does anticipate a win and a springboard for bigger and better things.

"Like I said before, if beating Zab AGAIN earns me whatever respect that I have yet to receive, then that's fine. I'm looking for big things to go down in 2005. Let me get rid of Zab, then give me at least one big fight after that. I know I deserve it."

As a packed Savvis Center will tell you, 22,000 St. Lunatics certainly agree.