Written by Frank Lotierzo
Friday, 04 February 2005 18:00

The date was September 20, 1996. Can it really be that long ago? The date I'm referring to is the date that former IBF junior welterweight champ Zab Judah stopped Michael Johnson in his pro-debut. I find it hard to believe that Judah is fighting his ninth year as a pro. Wasn't it just a short time ago - which is more like seven years ago - that we were hearing how Judah was Pernell Whitaker with a big punch? I know that's what I recall hearing about him shortly after he turned pro.

It could even be said that early in his career Judah showed promise and the idea of him possibly being Whitaker with a big punch wasn't as outlandish a remark as it is today. I must say that I've been waiting for this guy to show something for quite a while. I now ask myself every time I hear his name if there has been another fighter in recent memory who has been such an underachiever, or who was so overrated based on what was thought to be a flashy style with a little pop. In all honesty, I'm not sure which side I come down on since they both describe his career perfectly.

After fighting in the pro ranks for eight years plus, does Zab Judah have anything close to what could be called a signature fight, at least that he won? As of this writing, what is Judah most known for in the ring? It doesn't take long for the memory to highlight his Trevor Berbick imitation against Kostya Tszyu back in March of 2001. And then of course we can't forget him threatening to go after referee Jay Nady for stopping the fight with one second left in the second round of the welterweight unification bout. And it cannot be glossed over that I actually picked Judah to defeat the fading Tszyu - at least what I thought was a fading Tszyu at that time.

Judah followed the Tszyu bout with a very uninspired decision over DeMarcus Corley to win the WBO light welterweight title. After having Corley down in the third round, Judah stunk the place out and did just enough to win the decision. Despite having a fighter in front of him who looked liked he wanted Judah to take the fight over since he had no intention of doing so.

In his next high profile bout Judah challenged undisputed welterweight champ Cory Spinks. Judah knew going in that Spinks was no puncher, at least not like Tszyu. Wouldn't you think in his second shot at an undisputed title that he'd fight with some urgency? I know I expected it. I'm not taking anything away from Spinks, who is turning out to be quite an overachiever, but he's not out of Judah's league when it comes to talent and skill.

At the start of the Spinks-Judah bout last March, both fighters fought and exhibited the fear and trepidation that all fighters feel. The difference, at least from my perspective, was that Spinks sensed that Judah wasn't going to push the issue, so he began to fight like he had an interest in the outcome of the fight. Maybe someone in his corner said "Cory, you've been twelve rounds with Mayorga. This guy has nothing for you." Maybe it was something like that which made Spinks fight with more urgency than Judah.

Finally after 10 rounds a fight broke out in the 11th and 12th. Spinks dropped Judah in the 11th,

which must have woken him up, leading him to fight back and drop Spinks in the 12th. Only Judah's urgency was too little too late for him to save the fight and take the title. When it was over Spinks was awarded a unanimous decision by the scores of 114-112, 116-111 and 114-112 to retain the title.

Tonight Judah fights a rematch with Spinks with the unified welterweight title on the line again. Spinks is a quality fighter and has skill, but, again, he's not out of Judah's class and is certainly no lock to beat him a second straight time. And in Judah's case, all I can say is he better win it this time or his days as being regarded and promoted as a big-time fighter just may be over.

One of my favorite things to debate and argue regarding the sport of boxing is the "What IF." What IF Monzon confronted Hagler while both were in their prime. What IF Marciano and Frazier met at their peak, or Liston and Foreman crossed paths in their prime? The list never ends. Here's another What IF. What IF Judah loses to Spinks Saturday night? How about that What IF?

It says here if Judah leaves the ring on the night of February 5th and isn't the new undisputed welterweight champ, he's in trouble. In reality, even if he does get by Spinks his reign as champ may not last that long. However, there is an outside chance that winning the title might make him a better fighter, but I wouldn't bet on it. That's why it's so imperative that Judah gets by Spinks this time.

If Judah doesn't beat Spinks, where does he turn? He can't go up to junior middleweight. That division is loaded with some outstanding fighters who are too big and too good for Judah to think he can realistically cut it at the top. And with the talk of De La Hoya going down to welterweight, Judah couldn't hold the title if he had it and defended it against De La Hoya. And if he had to fight De La Hoya to get it, he'd have no shot. Add to that the possibility of Shane Mosley dropping down to welterweight and Judah would really be looking up at the divisions top fighters. The thought of Judah being The Man in a welterweight division that includes De La Hoya and Mosley doesn't exist in my mind - not at all.

If Zab Judah is ever going to win the welterweight title, his best and last chance is tonight in St. Louis against the champion Cory Spinks.

Otherwise, it just might never happen.