

Laila Ali Keeps Women's Boxing Stuck in Neutral

Written by Jake Donovan

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When it was first announced that Laila Ali was turning pro, the news came with the promise that it was not intended to be offered as a novelty act. Having been tucked away for over a year just so she could fine-tune her game, her handlers insisted that she would be more than just the daughter of The Greatest, more than just another (very) pretty face.

Five plus years later, she has proven that she can fight. What her handlers have yet to prove is their belief that this can be more than just a gimmick.

So it comes as no surprise that her latest fight comes against yet another no-hoper, as she prepares for Cassandra Geigger this weekend (Friday, February 11, 2005, live on ESPN2 from the Phillips Arena in Atlanta, GA, 9PM ET/6PM PT). Despite teasing fans with the possibility of a future Ali vs. Ann Wolfe showdown, we instead are forced to watch "She Bee Stinging" take on Wolfe's leftovers. Geigger is coming off of a decision loss to Wolfe three months ago, the latest in a three fight losing streak for the former toughwoman contestant.

If it were up to Ali, it would be hard to believe that she prefers the present course on which she is traveling. A self-proclaimed throwback, Laila talks and fights with the full awareness of the name she carries, even if her relationship with her world-famous father isn't what she would like it to be. In the past, it didn't matter who the opponent was; we were guaranteed to see the best that Laila had to offer.

Along the way, something changed. Perhaps it was the aftereffects of her all-out war with Jacqui Frazier-Lyde three-and-a-half years ago, which in itself was sold as a gimmick that developed into arguably the most thrilling women's bout of all time. Going in, the bout was billed as Ali-Frazier IV, as if to suggest that the daughters of boxing's most famous trilogy were worthy of adding to the legacy. Little did anyone know, including those involved in making the fight, that the bout would leave such a lasting impression, as the two went toe-to-toe for the entire eight-round fight. Ali relied on experience to outlast the seemingly tougher yet less polished Frazier, herself a full time lawyer/part time fighter, in taking a majority decision.

Talking off for a year in order to reload, Ali returned to the ring on the eve of Lennox Lewis-Mike Tyson and was extended the distance for the second straight time, and for the third time in her eleven fight career. Some would chalk it up as a learning experience; apparently her handlers – starting with husband/manager Johnny Yahya McClain – saw it as grounds to hit the panic button.

Ever since the back-to-back decision wins, Laila has reeled off for eight straight wins inside the distance in running her record to 19-0 (16 KOs). She has picked up world titles in the super middleweight and light heavyweight division, defeating recognizable names like Valerie Mahfood (TKO8, TKO6) and Christy Martin (TKO4) along the way. To some, the Ali-Martin fight was as close as women's boxing will come to the passing of the torch. Martin played a similar role in the mid 1990s, though without the added benefit of having a world-famous father having

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done it all some thirty years before her. What Christy and Laila did have in common was the unfulfilled promise that a superfight would be made with an archrival in the same weight class.

We're still waiting for Ali's long-discussed but yet-to-be negotiated bout with Ann Wolfe to materialize. For Martin, the arch nemesis she managed to keep missing out on was Lucia Rijker. While Martin was wooing crowds on Mike Tyson undercards, Rijker was steamrolling her opponents on cards that led to Oscar De La Hoya's meteoric mainstream rise. For years promoters on both sides (Don King for Martin, Bob Arum for Rijker) promised that the two would indeed collide in a woman's bout for the ages. However, so much time elapsed that Martin had already started fading, and apparently stopped training, while Rijker was bumped off marquee fights for a prettier face in the crowd: Playboy model Mia St. John.

Fittingly enough, instead of a Martin-Rijker super lightweight showdown in the late '90s, we were "treated" to Mia St. John moving up two weight classes to challenge Martin in a December 2002 PPV event. Not all that impressive as a featherweight, very few gave St. John any chance of being competitive, much less winning that bout - Martin included, as she once again showed up severely out of shape for what was the closest she had ever come to being involved in a superfight. Mia actually wore the weight well (no surprise, as she wears anything quite well) and watched her stock actually soar in offering the gutsiest performance of her career. Sure, she dropped the decision, but nobody even expected her to last the distance.

Nor did anyone expect Martin to last the distance when she agreed to move up three weight classes and challenge Laila in August 2003. Unlike St. John, Christy made sure not to ruin anyone's predictions, as Laila pummeled her from the opening bell en route to forcing Martin to take a ten-count while on a knee only four rounds into their alleged superfight.

Fittingly enough, Wolfe appeared on that card and managed a unanimous decision over twice-Ali conquered Mahfood. Based on Wolfe's performance that night, people began anticipating a showdown with "Brown Sugar" - who many contend is better than Ali and is in fact the best pound-for-pound women's fighter on the planet.

A year after the mayhem in Mississippi, Wolfe's name stayed in the mix. Only now Laila had set her sights on two new targets: the light heavyweight title and a possible showdown with undefeated middleweight Leatitia Robinson.

Ali accomplished one of those goals last September, as she dominated a hopelessly outclassed Gwendolyn O'Neill inside of three in the very same arena where she will be facing Geigger Friday night. Robinson appeared in the co-feature, becoming the latest lady phenom to conquer Valerie Mahfood, as Leatitia scored a unanimous decision.

Just when it appeared that phase two of Ali's revised plan would materialize, we were presented with another showcase card. Robinson will appear on the card, but in a separate bout against yet another Laila victim in Monica Nunez, who offered against Ali nine of the most uninspiring rounds to ever take place between the ropes in what was the co-feature to the Danny Williams-Mike Tyson PPV card in Louisville. Instead of facing Ali, she is being showcased as the co-feature against someone Laila finished pummeling a few months ago.

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Instead of Ali facing Ann Wolfe, she is fighting in the main event against an opponent "Brown Sugar" pummeled a few months ago.

Lost in the shuffle through all of this is Lucia Rijker, who never managed to get invited to a superfight over her own. Ironically enough, her assistance in getting Hilary Swank in fighting shape for her Oscar-nominated role in Clint Eastwood's "Million Dollar Baby" may very well serve as the greatest contribution yet to women's boxing.

There is still time for Laila Ali to change that. Some believe that perhaps the burden is too much, that all she wants to do is fight and not have to worry about carrying women's boxing on her back. But when you talk to her long enough – and one sentence is all it takes to understand and appreciate her sincerity – you know that she wants more. She has the name, the look and the talent. All she needs to do is sit down her handlers and quote Swank's Maggie Fitzgerald: "I don't want pity. And I don't want favors."

All the fans want is one meaningful fight to materialize.