

Ghost Fights in South Africa

Written by Deon Potgieter

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Years ago while researching a television series which I wrote and directed called “The Fighters,” which covered 101 years of boxing history in South Africa, I was surprised to find that there were many fights people would remember fondly and in some detail, but which in fact never took place.

Since then I have continued to meet people with memories of these “ghostly” boxing matches. Most can’t remember how the fights ended though. I don’t lure them into the result scenario to mock them, rather to find out how the battles played out in their minds, as this is a great indicator as to who they think would have won had the bouts taken place.

This past week I again encountered a “ghostly” fight when the subject of the superfight between former 3-time world champion Dingaana Thobela and former 2-time world champion Brian Mitchell was raised. Of course these two never did face off against each other in an official fight. It was, however, one of the most talked about, eagerly awaited and biggest fights to never happen in South African boxing history.

It all started in the late 1980s when Brian Mitchell, coming off the fifth successful defence of his WBA junior lightweight world title, was preparing for a non-title fight against Danilo Cabrera. Although Thobela at the time was considered a hot prospect, he was still at the early stages of his career.

“I’m not taking anything away from Brian,” says Thobela’s trainer, Norman Hlabane. “But Dingaana had the tools to beat him. You could see it in the sparring. He handled him easily. I was impressed.”

“My intention was to gain experience,” Thobela says, “but I knew I could beat him. We were the same division, so why not challenge? My intention then became to challenge for a world title.”

Following their first sparring session the talk started about the possibility of a Mitchell–Thobela fight, albeit at that stage a little prematurely.

“He apparently said that he had no problem in handling me in the sparring,” says Mitchell. “But come on. I was world champion. He wasn’t even a national champion. I was just playing with him. It was blown out of proportion by the media. We sparred, but I don’t think he would have beaten me. Why would he have? I’m an undefeated world champion. There’s a big difference between a world title fight and sparring.”

Following this encounter Thobela went on to claim the national junior lightweight title and then set his sights on international honors. At that stage, world title opportunities had been scarce for South African fighters, so much so that only seven local boxers had held world titles in the first one hundred years of the sport’s history in the country. Given the limited opportunities, it was decided to take aim at Brian Mitchell’s WBA junior lightweight world title and turn up the

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pressure in hopes that he would accept the challenge.

“It was never personal,” says Thobela. “I wanted to win a world title. Brian had one, so it seemed like a possible route for me to go and get one. It was never anything against Brian. I just wanted a chance at a world title.”

To add fuel to the growing public interest in seeing a bout between the “Rose of Soweto” and the “Road Warrior,” Thobela was matched against a trio of fighters who had previously fought Mitchell. Mitchell had earned the nickname “Road Warrior” as a result of the WBA’s decision in the late eighties to ban all South African boxers from their ratings pending a change in the country’s apartheid policies. As Mitchell was already one of their champions, they allowed him to continue his reign with the proviso that he may never defend his world title in his home country. This led to Mitchell making all twelve of his world title defenses on foreign shores and thus being dubbed the “Road Warrior.”

Mitchell did, however, have a number of non-title fights in South Africa, and if he and Thobela were to have met at that time, it would have in all probability been in a non-title fight. Mitchell was hugely respected by all races and seen as the man who kept South African boxing alive on the international arena. Thobela was seen as the most promising black fighter to emerge out of South Africa and was rapidly building a following amongst black and white.

“We started fighting guys who had fought Brian, because I wanted to fight Brian,” Dingaana says. “He kept saying that I wasn’t in his league. So by fighting guys that he had fought against, we wanted to prove that I was in that league. Brian would beat them, but I would go to beat them better.”

“We made a point of only taking opponents who gave Mitchell a hard time,” says Hlabane. “Never any of the guys he handled easily.”

The comparisons began: Mitchell W 15 Daniel Londas/Thobela SD 10 Londas; Mitchell W 10 Daniel Cabrera/Thobela TKO 3 Cabrera; Mitchell SD 10 Felipe Orosco/ Thobela KO 10 Felipe Orosco.

Following each of his victories, Dingaana re-issued a challenge to Mitchell. In so doing he hyped up the media to encourage his proposed contest with the champion. While fight fans chanted “We want Mitchell. We want Mitchell,” Mitchell’s promoter, Rodney Berman, was not willing to take the risk of matching his charge against Thobela, so the fight never came off.

However the legacy did not end there

Thobela moved up to the lightweight division to claim the WBO and WBA world titles - and the Mitchell debate was reignited this time by Mitchell himself. Mitchell had claimed the IBF junior lightweight world title by beating Tony Lopez in Sacramento. Lopez then went on to win the WBA lightweight crown and Mitchell was ambling for another lucrative match up against him. Thobela lost a very controversial and disputed points decision against Lopez and Mitchell threw his support on the side of the Lopez decision.

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While the decision was clearly wrong, Mitchell was recast as a villain by the boxing public and accused of putting his own pocket ahead of the bigger picture.

The WBA mandated a rematch between Thobela and Lopez, which Thobela won and talks of a Thobela–Mitchell match were on the table another time, but promotional problems again blocked the fight from taking place.

A few years later Mitchell hung up his gloves and became a trainer. Thobela moved to the Mitchell camp and, behind closed doors, the two South African legends had a few solid sparring sessions. Those present said at least now they had seen the Thobela-Mitchell fight.

The result?

Let's leave that to the imagination and the realm of the "ghost fights."