

## April Showers . . . But it's Not Rain HBO Sprinkles on Us

Written by Jake Donovan  
Sunday, 03 April 2005 18:00

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One thing that can be said about boxing on HBO: when they are on, they are REALLY on. Other networks offer an occasional gem, but HBO is second-to-none when it comes to producing the classics year after year.

But 2005 hasn't exactly been a year in which the "Network of Champions" has given back to the fans. While the boys across the street at Showtime have finally nailed down their 'first Saturday of each month' format, HBO has struggled through the first quarter to offer a healthy mix of competitive action. In fact, save for the superb March 19 pay-per-view card, HBO has yet to offer the fans any more than a series of showcase bouts. The foreseeable future doesn't promise to offer much more than that.

For years, HBO has lashed out against the various sanctioning bodies. Not all of the fighters agreed with their stance. But one that seemed to despise the alphabets as much if not more so than the boys on Sixth Avenue was **Marco Antonio Barrera** - so much so that he told the WBC what to do with their belt shortly after defeating archrival Erik Morales back in June 2002.

But times have changed; apparently so has Marco's heart. Having once again defeated Morales in a thriller last November, Barrera elected to hold onto the hardware this time around after lifting Morales' WBC super featherweight crown. In fact, he has even decided to honor his mandatory, as he prepares to make the first defense of his title against WBC #1 contender **Mzonke Fana** next Saturday night in El Paso, Texas.

It's hard to question Barrera's decision. He has never been shy about seeking out the best, and is just a few months removed from yet another career defining – and resurrecting – win. There are far worse fighters to fight than Fana at this stage of his potentially Hall of Fame career.

What's not hard to question is how HBO decided this bout was to be worthy of pay-per-view status (\$39.95 suggested retail price), or how they decided that it is reasonable to demand that the fans shell out their hard-earned cash for the second time in a span of twenty-two days. They apparently did not learn their lesson from the fourth-quarter of 2004, when they took a bath on two of the three pay-per-view shows they had scheduled in a five-week span.

Then again, the powers-that-be blamed such woes on the poor state of the heavyweight division, which garnered a grand total of 240,000 PPV buys during that span (November 13 Night of the Heavies and December 11 Vitali Klitschko-Danny Williams netting 120K buys apiece). It was the Klitschko-Williams debacle that led to the declaration that the heavyweight division was in dire need of a facelift, and that we the fans needn't worry about being subject to anymore heavyweight pay-per-view shows in the near future.

Well, HBO has made good on that promise. Though they failed to mention the alternative, which would be their next three non-PPV dates featuring the so-called glamour division.

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Leading off the less-expensive heavyweight brigade would be Wladimir Klitschko, who headlines an April 23 card on the Network of Champions. Wladimir is not a champion, you say? Well, you would be right. But he was originally slated to face one in **Chris Byrd**, the current IBF titlist. HBO and Don King had proposed a rematch that called for Byrd - the champion - to travel to Germany to face Wladimir - the challenger - who has been knocked out in his last two HBO appearances, and barely escaped with a technical decision over **DaVaryll Williamson** on Showtime last October.

Naturally Byrd refused, instead suggesting that perhaps he has earned the right to call the shots. True, Wladimir holds a win over Byrd, but that loss was also the last of Byrd's career to date. The same cannot be said for Wladimir, who hasn't even fought his way back into any feasible top ten lists, much less EARN a world title fight.

But HBO didn't seem too interested in recent history. Instead, they thanked Byrd for his time, and quickly showed him the door. Meanwhile, **Sergei Lyhakovich** was brought in to face Wladimir in what was to be an IBF elimination bout. Funny how that worked out that way, and even more hysterical that HBO once again finds itself aligned with the alphabets.

When passport problems prevented Lyhakovich from flying to Deutschland, Byrd's name once again resurfaced. But it served as little more than a whisper, as **Eliseo Castillo** would instead be named as the opponent of choice. Rumor now has it that Castillo may not be taking the trip, either. If so, **Leo Nolan**

has been suggested as the backup plan. Neither Nolan nor Castillo can be found in the IBF top 15, which would raise the question of how such a fight with Klitschko can be sanctioned by the organization. But before that gets asked, perhaps HBO should answer how any of these bouts are deserving of a primetime slot, which they claim are few and far between these days.

Oh, did we mention the possible co-feature? That would be 7'2" sideshow **Nicolai Valuev**, who will appear, at the very least, in "highlights." Most boxing fans would probably prefer to see rising undefeated middleweight prospect

### **Arthur Abraham**

, who is scheduled to appear somewhere on the undercard. But then, that would be giving the fans what they want, or at least what they deserve to see.

One week after HBO shoves Wladimir's comeback down our throat, we are offered a title fight at Madison Square Garden. The good news is that the press tour has already and will continue to feature the always-quotable **James Toney**, who is challenging for a piece of the world title that night. The bad news is it comes against WBA titlist

### **John Ruiz**

. While Ruiz is as nice as they come outside the ropes, he is considered by many to be perhaps the least watchable heavyweight titlist in recent memory, if not of all time.

There are several points of interest in this bout, but none of which really add up to anything positive. A Toney win would run Ruiz' record to 0-2 against former middleweight champions. It

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would also make Toney a four-division world champion, but would also take away from any remaining significance surrounding **Roy Jones'** own win over Ruiz. Roy's win made him the first former middleweight champ in over 100 years to win a portion of the heavyweight crown. A Toney win would make it two times in a little over two years.

A Ruiz win would simply mean that he'd still be champ and lives to hug another day. It would also give him his fifth successful title defense spanning two reigns. As insignificant as it may sound, he would actually join **Lennox Lewis** (14) and **Evander Holyfield** (7) as the only two heavyweight champs in the past fifteen years to do so. That either speaks volumes of how dismal things are in the heavyweight division these days, or it legitimizes Ruiz as a formidable champion. A quick survey based on any debate on a message board or around the water cooler suggests the heavyweight division does not benefit either way.

Even ignoring all the intangibles surrounding such scenarios, the fight itself figures to have already peaked in terms of entertainment value. The press conference in NYC this past Tuesday featured insults, fistfights and promises of an unforgettable night of boxing on April 30. You're not alone if the phrase "two out of three ain't bad" seems applicable.

For HBO, two out of three for the month of April would be music to their ears. Judging by the track selection, they appear to be tone deaf.