Written by Charles Jay
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And so we come to one of those situations where we can really enjoy the challenge. It's called, for lack of a better term, "handicapping on the blind," as now we have trotted before us a challenger for Marco Antonio Barrera's newly won WBC 130-pound title - Mzonke Fana - who may be "The Rose of Cape Town" but represents a seed that has never been planted here in the United States.

So what do we do when we've never seen one of the contestants?

Well, we can still punt.

One might suggest that horse races are handicapped every day by people who are looking at nothing but the *Racing Form*, perhaps we can engage in the same thing here by viewing boxing's equivalent of past performances: the fight-by-fight records.

To an extent that's true, I guess, but we still won't get a full picture; not enough details; and no accounting for the intangibles.

You know, matchmakers, who are in their own way also handicapping, insert opponents sight unseen for their "house" fighters all the time. They utilize whatever is at their disposal - records, physical stats, a network of contacts, word-of-mouth - in making their evaluations.

We try to do the same thing, as much as we possibly can.

At least we know one of the entities. Barrera is one of the better fighters around today; there is very little question about that. He's got a great work ethic, is tough as nails, durable, and has demonstrated that he can win by blowing out his opponent or by taking a more scientific approach. His list of vanquished foes includes Prince Naseem Hamed, Johnny Tapia, Paulie Ayala, Kennedy McKinney, Erik Morales (twice), and many others. There are few mysteries about Barrera; most of the questions have been sufficiently answered.

Of course, no one should take for granted that because somebody is the "known quantity," it makes for an automatic win; many a 'capper has been victimized by the unknown who has made the big step and displayed what didn't seem to be there before.

So it would not be unreasonable to say that this fight is less about how good Barrera is and more about what Fana is capable of doing.

It is abundantly clear from looking at Fana's record that he has never faced anyone remotely comparable to Barrera before. The clear advantage in terms of experience and accomplishment, and the apparent edge in sheer ability, will probably be too much for the South African to overcome. Indeed, he is given little chance by the betting world - at Olympic Sports and Diamond Sports International, Barrera is -1800 to win, with +1200 (12/1) coming back on

Fana; Pinnacle Sports has it -1700/+1300 for Barrera (For conversation purposes, these figures can be interpolated to express Barrera as a 15/1 favorite). The numbers are wider at William Hill (-2500/+900) and Bet365 (-3333/+1000), as it doesn't appear they wanted to post this fight as a serious offering.

That Barrera is a sizable favorite is no big surprise. The question in this fight does not really involve whether Fana is going to win, but whether he will in fact be overwhelmed. And that's where propositions come into play.

The over/under for this fight has been established at 8.5 rounds. In each of four online sportsbooks we surveyed, the over is favored. At Olympic Sports, the over is -130, with a takeback of +110 on the under; Pinnacle Sports has the over favored at -121/+101, although their numbers have a tendency to fluctuate. Diamond Sports International lists the over at -125/+105, and World Sports Exchange has you laying a number both ways, with the over at -120 and the under at -110.

Can Fana hang in there long enough to go some rounds?

Well, his fight-by-fight listing does tell me some encouraging things.

For example, while his roster of opponents may not have any brand names on it, Fana clearly has not followed the same blueprint as other less-than-deserving mandatory title challengers, who have feasted on losers all the way up the ladder. In fact, he's been going up against winning fighters virtually from the beginning. From his sixth pro fight forward, his foes have had a cumulative record of 224-28-17. While those guys might not have been quite as good as their record indicated, it still tells me Fana hasn't been overly protected, and is not one of those guys whose career has been fraudulently built against out-and-out stiffs.

He's no stranger to the weight division, having fought the last eight years at 130 pounds. This is in contrast to Barrera, who made his junior lightweight (or super featherweight, if you prefer) debut in his last fight, the decision win over Morales. He has received pretty good sparring from main eventers Lehlo Ledwaba and Silence Mabuza.

Fana has been the full twelve-round distance a total of ten times. That indicates he's a hard guy to get out of there, and that he's most likely encountered a lot of different situations in his career. Also, since what we know about Fana is that he likes to exhibit movement, he probably doesn't run into major stamina problems.

One of those 12-round efforts, the last fight on Fana's slate, told us something too; something that could support both sides of the argument. In a title eliminator against a puncher named Randy Suico, Fana suffered knockdowns in the second and third rounds, and gutted it out in the face of a vicious onslaught in the final stanza. In between, he outboxed Suico, who himself had not encountered topnotch opposition. He showed a lot of guts, but would Fana be able to escape against Barrera?

Those past performances, as we see them on paper, are probably not enough to rely on. To

gather some useful input to answer our questions, we may have to get closer to home - Fana's home, that is.

It is not unusual for a fighter's countrymen to be overly excited enough about his title challenge to overstate his chances. It may in fact be what is happening with regard to Ricky Hatton and his junior welterweight championship tilt against Kostya Tszyu. But in South Africa, the case appears to be precisely the opposite.

Fana's promoter has expressed his anger at the South African media, which is terming this a "mission impossible," for suggesting that the challenger will get badly hurt in this fight. David Isaacson of the *Sunday Times* has written that if Fana comes away with a win, it would be "among the biggest shocks in boxing history." At his Hall of Fame induction last year, Stanley Christodoulou, the longtime South African referee and judge, specifically named a couple of South African boxers he thought could win world titles, and Fana was not one of them.

Deon Potgieter, South African correspondent for *The Sweet Science*, wrote about Fana, "I think he'll be lucky to see the fifth round. It could even end in the first two if Barrera lands." That's potentially bad news, since it's a good bet Barrera will land. Grant Germanus, a South African-based manager, said, "The key for Fana is to get on his bicycle and not stop moving for twelve rounds, because if Barrera catches up to him, it will be good night."

I would echo Germanus, in that Fana is going to have to do his best to keep Barrera at bay with the jab, and stay out of the Mexican's range, just to get to the ninth round. From what I understand, however, he does have fast hands and an educated jab - good enough to befuddle any opponent who is too lazy to step under it and counter him. "The jab of Mzonke is unique," says South African junior bantamweight star Hawk Makepula. "That's how he is going to frustrate Barrera. Take my word for it."

But one thing Fana has had to constantly work on in the gym is to use the jab as a precursor to rapidly moving out of harm's way. Too often he has had the tendency to throw a jab, and then just stand there. And that will be deadly against a champion who possesses the total package.

You might expect that for someone who has just come off a big fight a little more than four months ago and is undoubtedly eyeing big matches to come, complacency will be a problem. But if early quotes were any indication, Barrera was on his guard, well aware of his opponent's abilities. "He is too good to simply be outboxed," he told a reporter. "I plan to attack to wear him down."

If Barrera were to decide to go into "boxer" mode, it would most likely serve to prolong the fight. If he decides to be more of the aggressor, it means cutting off the ring, throwing meaningful punches to the body, and testing Fana's chin, which nearly failed against the inexperienced Suico. The South African has plenty of heart, but in only his second fight away from home and in front of a fiercely pro-Barrera crowd, he'll be caught standing too much, and with just eight knockouts in 24 career fights he doesn't punch hard enough to keep Marco away from him.

Sure, Fana can run, but he won't be able to hide from the artful Barrera, who will catch him

sooner rather than later. If I can get a takeback price on the fight going less than eight and a half rounds (like the +110 at Olympic), I'd be inclined to grab it.

(All information is for news matter only, and is not intended to promote the violation of any local, state or federal laws.)