

Joe Calzaghe: The Dragon That Cried Wolf

Written by David Payne
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To witness WBO super middleweight champion Joe Calzaghe at his pulsating, high-octane best is a breathless, frantic experience. Capable of overwhelming revered contenders, drowning seasoned practitioners in a sea of lefts and rights, and coldcocking mandatory challengers, Calzaghe, it's fair to assume, is a world-class fighter.

Eight years and fifteen defences on from his victory over Chris Eubank, should boxing fans still have to assume? Should Calzaghe's record still need qualification?

The elusive defining fights, whether unification bouts at super middleweight or a profile contest at light heavy, stubbornly refuse to materialise.

For some the wait has proved too long. The large armchair fan base, studiously constructed by promoters Sports Network, and his fledgling reputation in the hard to please US market, are in danger of being lost.

The much maligned internet forums hiss and boo every Calzaghe press release, protesting every claim that "the next fight is the big one" or "next year will be the year." At 32 and in his twelfth year as a professional, should fans be expected to keep faith?

Well, for the time being at least, yes. Calzaghe has the unfortunate distraction of facing his mandatory challenger, German lollipop Mario Veit. Those who saw Veit capitulate inside a round to an arguably peak Calzaghe four years ago will not be scouring Ebay for a spare ticket or scrambling for the remote come May 7th.

Aside from that traumatic experience, Veit also holds the curious distinction of being the only man, as far as I can establish, to win an interim title AND be asked to defend it, despite the "champion's" simultaneous availability and activity. Did I mention the guy Veit beat to "defend" the belt, Kabery Salem, got a shot at Calzaghe before him? Oh the wisdom of the WBO.

Trouble is: manoeuvrings like this are beginning to define Calzaghe's career more than his victories. Only last month, confusion reigned once again as the proposed voluntary defence against Irishman Brian Magee was cancelled the day before the fight.

WBO rules stipulated a voluntary contest couldn't proceed less than 60 days before a mandatory fight. Veit's promoters, Universum, having secured the purse bids to the contest, originally agreed to put the fight back to allow Calzaghe to make a voluntary defence, but then had problems with their TV network (ZDF) and suddenly the window closed.

Before that, challengers as obscure and undeserving as American journeyman Tocker Pudwill have been forced on a frustrated public. Despite being rejected by the WBO ratings committee because he hadn't faced a ranked opponent or even had a ten round fight in the preceding twelve months, Pudwill was allowed to face the Welshman. The WBO looks after its champions.

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Perhaps it's that treatment which appears to engender such loyalty amongst its titleholders.

The question of why Calzaghe is so determined to hang on to his WBO super middleweight belt, when publicly stating for so long that making twelve stone was proving difficult, and with so many opportunities existing at light heavyweight, continues to bemuse. As long ago as August 2000, following his victory over Omar Sheika, Calzaghe commented, "It's no secret that I'm very tight at the weight and it is a struggle to stay there. But obviously I'm world champion at super middle so I've got to stay there for the moment."

During his tenure as "champion," unification fights with fellow belt holders Eric Lucas (WBC), Mikkel Kessler (WBA), Sven Ottke (WBA/IBF), Glen Catley (WBC), Anthony Mundine (WBA), Christian Sanavia (WBC), Jeff Lacy (IBF), Syd Vanderpool (IBF) and Markus Beyer (WBC) have all failed to materialise. The much craved and much needed rematch with Robin Reid was another fight forsaken whilst lesser opponents like Will McIntyre, Kabery Salem, Miguel Jimenez and Mger Mkertchian were all fortuitously accommodated.

In a division often left in the shadows of the classic middleweight and light heavyweight classes, the failure to make more of these fights is hard to accept. For all have been mooted at one time or another and many publicly pursued by Calzaghe.

The disappointment doesn't stop there. Standout champions from outside his division like Bernard Hopkins, Felix Trinidad and Roy Jones have been name checked but never signed, and most recently a fight with Glengoffe Johnson was lost waiting for Calzaghe to be injury free. More renowned or entertaining contenders like Danny Green, Antwun Echols and Scot Pemberton have also been overlooked to the frustration of those who feel Calzaghe would blossom in a motivating fight.

And so four years on from his first round mauling of Mario Veit, boxing fans are asked to believe that this mandatory detour is a precursor to either a September unification with American Jeff Lacy or a step up to face IBF light heavyweight titleholder Clinton Woods. Frank Warren told the BBC that no obvious obstacles stood in the way of the Lacy match: "Joe has called for a unification fight for some time now and Lacy wants the fight, so the ball is now in Joe's court."

Trouble is Calzaghe and his promoters have made grand proclamations before.

Why should fans believe this time is any different?