

Magic Man Needs Another Trick

Written by Frank Lotierzo

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He calls himself the "Magic Man," but Antonio Tarver is one lackluster fight away from being most remembered as a one trick magician in my mind. That trick was knocking out undisputed light heavyweight champion Roy Jones with a lottery punch in the second round of their rematch.

It was just 11 months ago (May 15, 2004) that Antonio Tarver shattered Roy Jones' mystique and confidence with the only solid blow he landed in the fight. In Jones' next fight he was knocked out by Glen Johnson in the ninth round. Watching Jones fight against Johnson, it became obvious he hadn't recovered psychologically from being knocked out by Tarver.

Seven months after beating Jones, Tarver took on Glen Johnson. The fight with Johnson meant more to Tarver than it did to Johnson. Tarver-Johnson was for much more than the championship between the Roy Jones conquerors. Supremacy of the light heavyweight division was at stake, especially for Tarver, who was thought by many boxing observers to be the class of the light heavyweight division since beating Jones. Johnson probably never expected to be in that position before fighting Jones.

Tarver had been yapping since the majority decision in his first meeting with Jones went against him, that he, not Roy Jones, was the best light heavyweight in the world. On December 18th, 2004, to quote former light heavyweight great Archie Moore, who said before fighting Cassius Clay in 1962, "The empty wagon is the one that makes the most noise." That may not totally apply to Tarver, but as Johnson-Tarver II approaches, his wagon doesn't possess what he believes is rightfully his, the light heavyweight title. Something he's been declaring his since November 2003.

Tarver has been a much touted fighter since he turned pro after winning a bronze medal at the 1996 Summer Olympics in Atlanta. Despite getting a late start at almost 29, there was plenty of ballyhoo surrounding him during the infancy of his career. To go along with that, Tarver was articulate and media savvy, which served him well.

Just as it is with any other fighter, Tarver must be judged on his accomplishments inside the ring. When fight fans think of Tarver, his knockout of Jones is what identifies him most. When placing Tarver's career under the microscope, his loss to Johnson in his next fight takes some of the glow off the Jones win.

Last December Tarver gave up his WBC and WBA titles to fight Johnson. With both fighters scoring knockout wins over the perceived best fighter (Jones) in the division in their previous fight, alphabet title belts and sanctions meant nothing to boxing fans. Tarver knew he had to beat Johnson to be considered the best light heavyweight in the world. With Johnson winning a close 12-round split decision, he, not Tarver, would have had total bragging rights as the top light heavyweight in boxing - something that has to be a major let down for Tarver coming off his knockout against Jones.

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Luckily there was a rematch clause in the contract and Tarver (22-3) will get another shot at Johnson (42-9-2) on June 18th at the FedEx Forum in Memphis. After beating Jones, Tarver kept a high profile and could be seen doing commentary or sitting ringside at most major fights. That hasn't been the case since he lost to Johnson.

Tarver has recently been quoted saying "I feel like I have to take it out of the judges' hands next time, because even when I'm champion I cannot get a decision. I'm looking forward to it (fighting Johnson again). I eagerly anticipate my rematch so I can quiet the critics. I'm extremely motivated. That's when the best Antonio Tarver shows up. Now I have an opportunity to build myself higher," Tarver said. "The sky is the limit. People still view me as the champ and so do a lot of people in the game."

I can only speak for myself, but I haven't talked to anyone in or out of the game who refers to or thinks of Tarver as the champ. I certainly don't and would question anyone who does. Tarver, who is very likable and easy to root for, never has been able to accept a decision that went against him. He cried robbery after not getting the nod in the first fight with Jones. Why would anyone expect him to accept the loss to Johnson? If Tarver was honest with himself he'd realize he faded down the stretch and was outworked by both Jones and Johnson. That's why he didn't get the decision in both fights.

Shortly after Antonio Tarver knocked out Roy Jones, comparisons were being made between him and former light heavyweight great Michael Spinks. They both have long and lanky builds and used their jab to set up their power shots from outside. Since the Johnson fight, those comparisons have come to a screeching halt and should have never been made in the first place.

With Brad Jacobs, who runs Jones' Square Ring Inc. with Roy, saying to the media, "I wouldn't write off a (Jones) comeback at this point," coupled with Johnson, Tarver and Jones having been born within eight weeks of each other, it's realistic to think we'll be seeing them paired against each other a couple more times. For Tarver to get back control, while having some bargaining chips at the negotiation table, he has to beat Glen Johnson convincingly in their rematch.

At the press conference announcing the rematch with Johnson, Tarver said "I'm 2-0 with two knockouts in rematches. I've trained hard for this fight knowing that it would take place. So I'm just ready to right the wrong that was done Dec 18."

He better. Or he'll be remembered as boxing history's only "one trick" magician.