

Glen Johnson Lasted the Distance

Written by Robert Mladinich
Friday, 17 June 2005 19:00

Nobody gave Glencoffe “The Gentleman” Johnson any chance of lasting the distance, much less beating the once mighty Roy Jones Jr. when they squared off last September 25 in Memphis. And few people expected him to beat Antonio Tarver when they fought each other on December 18 in Los Angeles.

Johnson shocked the world by stopping Jones in the ninth round, winning a 12-round split decision over Tarver and—after an 11-year career featuring more lowlights than highlights—was overwhelmingly voted Fighter of the Year by the Boxing Writers Association of America.

At the BWAA’s annual awards dinner in Las Vegas this year, Johnson, whose record going into Saturday night’s rematch with Tarver is a deceiving 42-9-2 (28 KOs), showed why he is this generation’s Cinderella Man.

Everyone knows that boxing is quite possibly the world’s toughest vocation, but few people know that better than the 36-year-old Johnson. Although he was on the wrong side of close decisions in numerous countries over the years, he never gave up on his dream of attaining success. What is most noticeable about him is his lack of anger or bitterness toward the powerbrokers that never gave him a second look, and often treated him as if he was a sick old horse.

Simply put, it is hard to find a nicer man in boxing than Johnson. He has an aura of decency and morality, as well as an abundance of self-respect that is so genuine it is sometimes disarming.

“Even after all of the years and all of the injustices, I always believed I would thrive if given the opportunity,” Johnson tearfully said on the night he was lauded by the BWAA. “There were lots of times I thought about giving it all up, but as much as I got knocked down I kept getting back up.”

Johnson is speaking figuratively, because he had only been knocked down a scant few times in his career, and was on the short end of very close and very questionable decisions against, among others, local heroes Julio Gonzalez in California, Sven Ottke in Germany, and Silvio Branco in Italy. He also fought Clinton Woods to a disputed draw in England.

The only person to ever stop Johnson is Bernard Hopkins, who Johnson admits is the best fighter he has ever faced. Hopkins TKO’d him in the 11th round of a July 1997 IBF title fight in Indio, California. “I couldn’t do anything against him,” concedes Johnson. “He did things in the ring that I never saw before. He’s a great champion, and he has only gotten better with age.”

When Johnson traveled to Düsseldorf, Germany, to challenge IBF super middleweight titlist Ottke in November 1999, he was never provided with any tapes of the champion. A local

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reporter, Andreas Lorenz, was so aghast at Johnson's shabby treatment, he actually hand-delivered tapes to the Johnson camp. He felt that Johnson beat Ottke, but was robbed of the decision. It was Johnson's demeanor afterwards that made him a lifelong fan—and friend.

“Normally American fighters are loudmouthed and arrogant,” said Lorenz, who accompanied Johnson to the BWAA dinner. “They're not bad guys, but think they have to act in a certain way. Glen was so humble and respectful, and never said anything negative, even after the loss.”

Less than two years later after the Ottke debacle, Johnson returned to Germany and stopped previously undefeated local hero Thomas Ulrich in six rounds. By that point, Lorenz was hooked on Johnson—as a story, as a fighter, and as a person.

“Thomas was supposed to be the next big thing in Germany,” said Lorenz. “When Glen beat him I felt that good things were going to happen in his career. It was a real feel-good story. I started traveling to all of his fights. The night he beat Roy Jones was magical—for him and for me.”

“I knew I was going to beat Roy Jones, no matter what it cost,” said Johnson. “I knew I was going to beat Tarver, too. I always train hard, and always do the right stuff. I never expect to get anything for nothing.”

The feel-good aspect of Johnson's story doesn't end there. For years he augmented his boxing income by working construction under Miami's gruelingly intense sun. As positive of a thinker as he is, there were fleeting moments when he believed he was destined to do that for a living.

One day a lovely young woman named Jillian walked by a construction site where he was hard at work. She was successful in her own right as a rehabber of properties. She walked by lots of construction sites and always braced herself for the ogling and the catcalls, which she didn't appreciate.

She rarely if ever, made eye contact with the workers. But one day, she says, fate intervened when Johnson started flirting with her. That was more than two years ago, and they have been together ever since.

“He flirted with me, which I usually never entertain, but I quickly realized there was something very special about him,” she said. “I knew nothing about boxing, but as I got to know him better I realized what a hardworking, goal-oriented person he was. Plus, he was so spiritual, and a good friend and a good family man. He's my sweetheart, and I love him a lot. He's just a phenomenal human being.”

Whether or not Johnson can beat Tarver (22-3 18 KOs) on Saturday is anyone's guess. The first fight was so close, many observers thought Tarver deserved the decision. Johnson fought as he always does—steady but subtly frenetic. While Tarver can often be his own worst enemy in the ring, Johnson is the polar opposite.

The big intangible in this fight is whether or not Johnson already did the best he can against

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Tarver. As we've seen by his two fights with Jones, Tarver is smart enough to learn from his mistakes. As close of a call as this bout is, I have to give the nod to Johnson to win another close decision.

I don't know if I'm betting with my head or my heart. Moreover, I don't really care. Johnson is my Cinderella Man, and quite possibly my favorite feel-good story during my 25 years on the boxing beat. In the grand scheme of things, that might mean nothing. But to me personally, it has to account for something.