

Fifth Time's a Charm for Buhlalu

Written by Deon Potgieter
Monday, 18 July 2005 19:00

Sikhulule Sidzumo will be rubbing his head for some time following his controversial split decision loss of his South African lightweight title on Friday night at the Centenary Hall in Port Elizabeth. Sidzumo, who was making the first defense of the title he won against Nigel Claasens, was the aggressor throughout the 12 round bout and threw more punches, but still came up short on two of the judges' scorecards.

There were some jeers when Irvin Buhlalu, 11-5-1 (6 KOs), was crowned the new champion, but it was a close fight and, more importantly, a very entertaining one in which the boxers seemed pretty evenly matched. It's not easy to move from the point of enjoying a good competitive match in which both boxers gave of their all to then objecting a close decision. Sidzumo, 12-2-4 (8 KOs), was a little unlucky to not get the nod. One judge gave it to him by 118 to 114, while the other two scored the bout 114-116 and 115-116 for Buhlalu.

From the outset the pattern of the fight was established and continued throughout. The champion Sidzumo moved forward throwing body blows at a tremendous pace. Buhlalu retreated and counterpunched. Both boxers landed big bombs and both had each other in trouble on a number of occasions. Sidzumo would have been en route to a convincing and impressive victory if he had any defense.

Every time he caught the challenger he would throw caution to the wind and Buhlalu would land a well-timed shot to his jaw. This would then send the champion's eyes reeling back in his head and the challenger would take the opportunity of scoring some well placed shots. Once the champion's head cleared he would again move forward and back Buhlalu into a corner.

A flurry of fists would fly and the challenger, who did hold his composure well under the amount of fire he was receiving, would throw out another solid blow and rock the champion. While Sidzumo shaded the early part of each round, Buhlalu impressed the judges by taking the tale end of the rounds. Both showed great hand speed and heart, but the deciding factor was that Buhlalu had a modicum of defense as opposed to the no defense displayed by the champion.

It's always exciting when two guys are prepared to go toe to toe with each other, and perhaps it's that very brutal rawness which appeals to the majority of fight fans. While neither boxer will be remembered for being especially skilled, this fight could be nominated as one of the fights of the year purely for its high entertainment value. The result was up for grabs right up until the last bell – and that's something you don't often see.

This was the fifth time Buhlalu has challenged for a national title and the first time he has managed to claim the belt. He had previously twice unsuccessfully challenged Mzonke Fana when the latter held the junior lightweight title. Although there was talk that Sidzumo had some trouble making the weight for the bout it certainly did not show, and the now former champion should perhaps not blame the loss on his body, but on his overanxiousness. This was his fight for the taking and a little restraint and defense would have gone a long way towards him

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retaining the belt. For the record, I do think he did enough to retain the title, but won't argue the decision.

Many of South Africa's greatest boxers have emanated from the lightweight division, like Olympic gold medal winner Laurie Stevens, Commonwealth champion Willie Toweel, who also fought a draw for the universal bantamweight world title against Robert Cohen, world title challenger Andries Steyn and world champion Dingaana Thobela, to name a few. A characteristic of all of the above boxers was their hand-speed, ability to throw combinations as well as accurate uppercuts. All had tremendous heart. And another key factor they displayed was that they could all avoid being hit. They had good eyes and could anticipate their opponents' blows. In addition to their high levels of skill, they also had tremendous punching power. I'm talking of course about these men in their primes, as with age some of the attributes do fade. Another feature these men shared was their high level of popularity. They were all draw-cards.

Looking at the above qualities, on the one hand it's sad that few current fighters possess them; on the other hand it must remember that all of the names mentioned would feature in most top ten lists of greatest boxers ever produced in South Africa. Thus we can't expect to be continually blessed with fighters of their abilities. One would, however, expect that boxers would learn the fundamentals of protecting themselves in the ring while inflicting punishment on their opponents. While it does make for spectacular crowd-pleasing bouts when boxers throw caution to the wind, those who do are seldom regarded amongst the greatest and even more seldom have longevity in a sport, which is undoubtedly one of the toughest in the world.

While there's no danger that either of the two boxers who contested the national lightweight title this past Friday will ever be regarded in the same ilk as the aforementioned, they did supply a very entertaining bout and one fight fans will recall for years to come.