

South African Heavyweights ... Two by Two

Written by Deon Potgieter
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With a dearth of heavyweights currently active in South Africa there will be a lot of attention on the debut of two new prospective talents on Friday night at Nasrec Johannesburg. Jakes Els from Brakpan and Barend Liebenberg from the Free State will be making their debut against each other in a fight which is seen as an indicator of whether either or both could be a savior of sorts for the sport locally. While there is some exciting talent on the rise in the lower weight divisions, it is the heavyweights that attract the masses.

South Africa has produced numerous world-class heavyweights throughout its proud 116 year boxing history. Whereas in earlier times the really outstanding fighters arrived one by one, the past 30 years have seen them arriving in twos. The most memorable and fiercest local rivalry of them all was between Gerrie Coetzee and Kallie Knoetze. As amateurs they met on six occasions, each winning three bouts.

As professionals, their rivalry developed into a feud, both being out to prove just who the best was. Fight fans and the public at large were divided – you were either a Coetzee or a Knoetze man – there was no middle ground. Given their personalities, Knoetze was the more likable, but Coetzee was seen as the better technical boxer, and both attracted the fans with ease.

“We never liked each other,” says Knoetze. “I think it was because he knew how hard I could hit and I knew how fast he was. I’d still be throwing a punch and he’d have hit me twice.”

The late sportswriter Chris Greyvenstein said of Knoetze, “He wielded his right with shattering effect, and if Knoetze added the dedication of a (Rocky) Marciano to this gift from the gods, he could have been the best heavyweight in the world.”

Coetzee and Knoetze met only once as professionals, with Coetzee winning a very controversial points decision. Coetzee dropped Knoetze in the fourth round, but the man who modeled his mouth on Muhammad Ali came back strong in the latter rounds and had ringsiders, as well as television audiences, convinced he had taken the fight. The judges, however, saw it differently.

In 1979 the dream of seeing two South Africans do battle against each other for the heavyweight crown became a real possibility. Both fighters had proven their worth by facing and beating a host of top ten contenders – mostly via the short route. At that stage the WBA world champion Ali was washed-up following his farcical matches with the novice Leon Spinks and decided to relinquish his title rather than face either Coetzee or Knoetze, who would most certainly have inflicted some serious and unnecessary damage on the legend.

Knoetze and Coetzee then met Big John Tate and Spinks in an elimination tournament for the vacant title. “It was what everybody here wanted to see, Gerrie and myself for the heavyweight championship of the world,” says Knoetze. “It was a dream.”

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Knoetze, overwhelmed by the enormity of the occasion, ran out of gas and lost to Tate on an eighth round technical knockout. "Physically I was ready. I could have beaten anybody," says Knoetze "but mentally I was still an amateur. When I got in the ring I was scared."

Knoetze's preparation prior to the fight consisted of numerous functions to satisfy sponsors and, always being a big party animal, the big hitting and charismatic fighter indulged himself more than would be expected of a fighter in training for a fight of this magnitude.

A week after Knoetze's shocking defeat, Coetzee took on Spinks in Monte Carlo. At the time Spinks was thought to be the tougher of the two Americans. After all, Spinks had just gone 30 rounds back to back with "The Greatest." Coetzee showed no respect for this hyped status, however, and scored one of the most memorable knockouts in heavyweight history. Spinks was clearly out of his league and visited the canvas three times shortly after the start of the first round.

A record number of 90,000 spectators flocked to Loftus Versfeld on October 20, 1979 to see Coetzee take on Tate for the WBA heavyweight world title. An uncannily lackluster Coetzee put on a dismal performance and Tate won a very dull 15 round points decision. Coetzee got another shot at world honors against Tate's conqueror, Mike Weaver, a year later. Failing to finish off the job after having Weaver in all sorts of trouble throughout the bout, Coetzee himself was stopped in the 13th round of a grueling and very exciting contest.

Two years later, on September 23, 1983, Coetzee got it right and knocked out Michael Dokes – a man who had never even been knocked down until then – in the 10th round of a pulsating battle for the WBA crown.

The next two heavyweights who set the imaginations alight on the local front were Johnny Du Plooy and Pierre Coetzer. Du Plooy won 196 of 200 amateur fights and scored 17 knockouts in his first 20 fights. Although he never had the gift of the gab, it looked as though South Africa had its next Kallie Knoetze. Both Du Plooy and Coetzer defeated a host of former world champions and name fighters en route to the top, and while everybody wanted to see both men reach the pinnacle, the one thing they wanted to see more was the two men in action against each other.

They met on August 4, 1990 in a bout billed "Once and For All." This was undoubtedly one of the most exciting heavyweight fights I have ever seen and one which puts most heavyweight world title bouts to shame. Du Plooy cut Coetzer with the very first right he threw and had his man down towards the end of the first round. With blood streaming from his face, Coetzer came back with vengeance to drop Du Plooy twice in the second round.

Coetzer went on to earn a #1 contender spot for Evander Holyfield's IBF world title, but was made to fight an eliminator against the #2 contender Riddick Bowe. Bowe hit Coetzer below the belt nine times en route to claiming a controversial 8th round TKO. Coetzer cashed out his career with two big paydayes against Frank Bruno and George Foreman.

The next two South African heavyweights to make their mark on the international arena were Corrie Sanders and Frans "The White Buffalo" Botha. Sanders and Botha met on four occasions

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as amateurs, with Sanders claiming victory every time, including twice via the short route. Sanders claimed the WBO and WBU heavyweight world titles and challenged for the vacant WBC world title, while Botha briefly held the IBF world title and “challenged” Lennox Lewis for the universal crown and Wladimir Klitschko for the WBO title. But his main claim to fame was the impressive showing he put up against Mike Tyson in 1999. While there have been many attempts to match these two, timing and money has always been a problem. Botha has been campaigning in K1 and Sanders is retired until he gets another lucrative offer. Both are of course still willing to get it on if the price is right.

So it is with this history as a backdrop that Jakes Els and Barend Liebenberg will be walking into the ring on Friday. Both are former kickboxers, so they are not totally new to the fight game. There are no other worthwhile heavyweights on the local horizon, unless somebody is grooming them in secret. The above six fighters all managed to earn big bucks in heavyweight boxing, and while some have squandered their earnings, others are living very good lives. History will debate just how good they really were, but there can be no argument as to their being successful and using boxing to better their lives. Whether Els and Liebenberg are good enough to emulate their predecessors remains to be seen – but you can bet a lot of people will be holding their breath in anticipation.