

## Lucia Rijker vs. Christy Martin: The Long Road to Nowhere

Written by Jake Donovan  
Saturday, 30 July 2005 19:00

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Saturday night was supposed to be somewhat of a breakthrough for women's boxing. The long-awaited showdown between Christy Martin and Lucia Rijker was to headline a Showtime-PPV card in Las Vegas. Instead, Rijker suffered an injury which postponed the bout, if not scrapping it altogether.

The significance of the bout was that it was the first which would feature two fighters in their natural weight class. The past few years have offered "superfights," but in name only, with one of the contestants forced to skip a few divisions.

Christy Martin moved up three weight classes to face Laila Ali at a catch weight of 162 pounds two years ago. The result was a massacre; the much bigger Ali walking through the fleshy Martin in scoring a fourth round stoppage.

That previous winter, Martin was on the favorable end of a catch weight fight. This time it was featherweight ornament Mia St. John who agreed to skip three weight classes in order to make the PPV fight happen. To her credit, St. John put up a much better fight than expected, surprisingly extending Martin the distance in dropping a decision.

The common denominator in all of the fights has been Martin, which was why it was so important for this fight with Rijker to finally happen. True, she is as much to blame as anyone else for the fight having long been a mythical matchup. But she is also to be thanked for whatever notoriety women's boxing has gained over the years.

It was over nine years ago that "The Coal Miner's Daughter" graced the cover of *Sports Illustrated*.

The shot was taken shortly after her grueling points win over Deidra Gogerty in March 1996. The main event was Mike Tyson's title winning efforts in a rematch of Frank Bruno, but the heart, blood and toughness displayed by the ladies nearly stole the show that evening.

The fact that *Sports Illustrated* paid any attention at all was significant in its own right. By that time, SI's coverage of the sweet science was limited, and rarely flattering. Martin making the cover served as a much needed boost in the mainstream market for boxing overall, but specifically women's boxing.

All she needed was a rival.

She wouldn't find one amongst Don King's never-ending stable; at least not one who stood a chance of beating her. The name Andrea DeShong was often mentioned, though often in the form of a question. She was the only fighter to have defeated Martin in the ring at the time. She was also retired since 1990, and was 34 years old by the time the boxing world became familiar with Martin.

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King lured her out of retirement, in hopes of turning spare change into a worthwhile investment. The plan was to build up her record as well as anticipation for a rubber match with Martin. DeShong made a difficult plan even more complicated by dropping a decision in her first fight back. She eventually received her fight with Martin – after going 4-3-1 in her comeback, and agreeing to fight her on a mere two weeks notice.

Approximately two hours before the bite heard ‘round the world would occur, Martin-DeShong III opened up the June 1997 Evander Holyfield-Mike Tyson II pay-per-view show. Martin overcame some early rough spots to take over and eventually stop DeShong in seven. The bout developed into such a mismatch that Martin actually stopped her on the strength of four jabs.

The fight was the last time that Martin would be the object of affection for fight crowds. A disputed decision win over Isra Girgrah two months later in Madison Square Garden was met with a chorus of boos. Girgrah was dropped early, but finished strong enough to offer the perception that she was the victor.

Despite the win, Martin was seen less frequently in the coming years. Perhaps it was Tyson’s eighteen month suspension which limited her opportunities. Whatever the case, her future fights were limited to the non-televised portion of Don King marathon cards. Martin was no longer in demand; it was time for a fresh face to emerge.

Rival promoter Bob Arum believed he had found the answer. Former kickboxing champion Lucia Rijker turned pro five days after Martin’s bloody brawl with Gogerty. Seven fights into her pro career, Lucia received the breakthrough of a lifetime. Arum added her to Oscar De La Hoya’s pay-per-view fight with Hector Camacho in September 1997.

The timing was perfect – her opponent was Andrea DeShong, three months removed from her seventh round stoppage loss to Martin. Rijker wound up stopping DeShong in three. More impressive than her performance was her Adonis-like physique. Women’s boxing was considered somewhat of a novelty, with fans commenting more on the ladies’ looks than their hooks. With Rijker, it was still about looks, though not in a fashion sense. Her body chiseled and technique sound, Rijker LOOKED like a fighter women’s boxing could rally around in the march to respectability.

All she needed was a rival.

With Martin and Rijker both campaigning as junior welterweights, it only seemed natural that the two would eventually clash.

Guess again.

Martin, her popularity already waning, did nothing to improve her Q rating in deflecting questions regarding Rijker. When the media and fans began to ponder a matchup between the two, Martin never offered a direct answer. She instead insisted that someone “check Lucia’s pants to confirm that she’s a woman” and also accused her of steroid use. Perhaps it was just Martin’s way of getting under Rijker’s skin. Most interpreted it as Christy deliberately avoiding

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her.

Whatever luster remained on such a fight was removed when Martin dropped a decision to Sumya Anani late in 1998. Oddly enough, Christy's loss seemed to have a greater effect on Rijker's career than it did to her own. Without a rival to attach her name to, there was no longer interest in a woman who could actually fight. The slots Rijker would normally land among Top Rank pay-per-view cards were filled by Mia St. John. The former Playboy model-turned boxer was the perfect complement to Eric "Butterbean" Esch as opening novelty acts for future Top Rank pay-per-view shows.

The two actually squared off in 2000, though unofficially. Martin was preparing for a fight with Belinda Laracuenta on the undercard of a March 2000 pay-per-view card. Four days before the fight, she and Lucia found themselves at the LA Boxing Club, where spectators had gathered to witness an open workout held by then-WBA super welterweight champion David Reid. He was facing Felix Trinidad in the main event, but on that day all talks would be about Martin and Rijker.

How the two came to blows depends on who you ask. Martin insisted that she was sucker-punched by Rijker shortly after completing an interview and looking to exit the gym. Others suggest that Rijker said something to Martin on the way out, which prompted Christy to shove her and thus lead to the scuffle.

As Don King has often said through the years, "Negative publicity is still publicity." The incident wasn't pretty, but it was effective; once again, people cared about women's boxing, or at least the thought of the two perceived best fighters squaring off against each other.

The only problem now – Rijker was no longer fighting. While Martin's career was surviving beneath Felix Trinidad-headlined pay-per-view shows, Lucia remained on the sidelines. Her last pro fight – a third round stoppage of Diana Dutra in August 1999 – came with a bloody nose and busted eardrum. She backed out of a fight scheduled for later that year, and her scuffle with Martin was her only fight between August 1999 and February 2002.

Martin rattled off six wins after her run-in with Rijker, but very few seemed to notice. A November 2001 decision over Lisa Holywene was followed by a year-long hiatus, though nobody seemed to notice.

Rijker did. She staged a comeback three months later, though it almost didn't happen. It took three tries to secure Lucia an opponent – 9-26-1 Carla Witherspoon, who took the fight on eight days notice after one opponent went AWOL and a second one turned up pregnant. Rijker stopped her in four, but also stopped fighting for another sixteen months.

Her exit was met with Martin's return when Christy squared off against St. John in December 2002. Six months later, Rijker was back in the ring, though also once again faced with bad luck. Her bout with Jane Couch was scheduled to appear on a pay-per-view telecast headlined by Lennox Lewis and Mike Tyson in separate bouts. Tyson wound up pulling out of the card, which forced the show to downgrade from PPV to regular HBO. Such meant Rijker's fight would only

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be witnessed by those who arrived at the Staples Center early enough to catch the undercard.

Two months after Rijker pitched a shutout against Jane Couch, Martin found herself in the best available superfight women's boxing could scrape together – a fight against undefeated Laila Ali. Christy moved up three weight classes and still conceded three pounds to Ali, who came down from super middleweight. The fight was about as competitive during as it was taken seriously beforehand, which is to say not at all. The mismatch remains the only time in her sixteen year career that Martin was stopped, as she took a ten-count in the fourth round.

Rijker would resurface in 2004. She scored a decision win in her native Amsterdam, though her return to the ring was not what the mainstream audience was buzzing about. Toward the end of the year, she graced the silver screen, playing the role of villain in the Academy Award winning feature "Million Dollar Baby."

The box office and Oscar success of the movie prompted Bob Arum to search for the perfect encore. It led to the unthinkable; Martin and Rijker signing contracts to finally throw down the gauntlet – this time in the ring.

Playing on the movie's title, the theme for the fight was "Million Dollar Lady." Both fighters were guaranteed a purse of \$250,000, with Arum offering an additional \$750,000 to the victor, who would become the first fighter in women's boxing history to earn \$1,000,000 for a single fight.

Both appeared on numerous talk shows, and also held a national conference call weeks before the fight. Even the timing seemed to be perfect, with "Million Dollar Baby" released on DVD less than three weeks before the fight was scheduled to go down (July 30). Things were going smooth; almost too smooth.

Suddenly, the inevitable occurred: an injury forces the fight to be postponed.

The first sign of Armageddon was the cancellation of the highly anticipated flyweight scrap between long-reigning WBC champ Pongsaklek Wongjongkam and thrill-a-minute mandatory challenger Jorge Arce. The bout was to serve as co-feature, and lend instant credibility to those who viewed the card as a gimmick. When Wongjongkam declined on a first time trip to the States, Arce was offered Angel Priolo as a replacement.

When Rijker went down with a torn Achilles tendon, no replacement would be offered. The card, which reportedly suffered a great deal at the ticket booth, was announced as "postponed for a later date." That later date would figure to be no sooner than 2006, regardless of how long it takes for Rijker to heal.

The best thing would be to cancel the fight, and the idea of it, altogether. Public interest dried up a long time ago, and not even an attempted piggybacking of Hollywood's contribution to the sport raised eyebrows. By the time Rijker heals, the momentum will have once again been squandered. People will have already discovered that MDB was far more Hollywood than it was a realistic portrayal of the sport.

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They have already discovered that the chances of this fight ever happening is just as fictitious.