

A Few More Rounds

Written by Tim Graham
Thursday, 01 September 2005 19:00

Somebody might want to tell The Cincinnati Kid he's not a kid anymore.

Tim Austin is 34, and the former 118-pound king hasn't fought since looking a little worn against Rafael Marquez 30 months ago.

Yet Austin remains precocious – some might say naïve – with a wide-eyed perspective on a future that's rapidly dimming.

Austin is scheduled to make his return Saturday night in Cleveland, hoping to make up for the two years he lost mostly due to charges he raped a 16-year-old girl under sordid circumstances. A jury found the sex to be consensual and declared Austin not guilty of the crime, if not an incredibly juvenile mistake.

"I'm real tired of the past," Austin said. "I just had to let it go and look toward the future.

"I'm just going to take this fight, put my skills to perfection and show the world I haven't went anywhere and I haven't lost anything. Nothing has changed."

That's not entirely true. A few things have, in fact, changed.

For the first time in eight years Austin won't be in a world title fight. He will be in an eight-round bout against an opponent who has been tougher to locate than Waldo in a mosh pit. The latest update had Austin fighting Marty Robbins, perhaps found down in the west Texas town of El Paso.

Austin's career has plunged from Hall of Fame caliber to facing a club pug off television.

That can be chalked up to his eighth-round TKO loss to Marquez in February 2003. Austin entered the fight with a sterling 25-0-1 record, having defended his IBF bantamweight title nine times. But Austin appeared a tad old that night, and Marquez was too strong. Marquez in the eighth round knocked Austin through the bottom ring rope. Austin somehow managed to get to his feet and continue before referee Vic Drakulich waved off the fight.

"Going into that fight I felt small, did some things an amateur would do to lose weight," said Austin, the 1992 Olympic bronze medalist at 112 pounds. "I thought I could get away with that again, but in the professional game, at a high level, you can't do things like that. I had to learn the hard way."

His performance was the sort that forces a champion to regroup.

The rest of the changes in Austin's life, however, can be attributed to his rape trial.

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He lost his home in suburban Cincinnati because of the steep legal bills and his professional inactivity. He now lives at the spartan Don King training compound in Orwell, Ohio, peculiar in that many boxing observers blame the promoter for failing to land Austin that one big-money fight he deserved.

"It's a mansion for me," Austin said. "Everything I need is here. I have no complaints."

The home Austin lost is where that juvenile mistake took place in May 2003. Newspaper accounts of the incident, citing police reports, state Austin twice had sex with the girl on his couch while his fiancée at the time was upstairs sleeping – and the girl was his fiancée's niece.

Austin disputes some of those details. He claimed during an interview this week he wasn't engaged at the time and had no intention of marrying the woman police described as his fiancée. He said the woman was the mother of his daughter, now 15 years old. Austin also insisted the girl was a friend of his daughter's and not related to the woman.

But he never denied having sex with the girl. His attorney argued that earlier in the day the girl had made sexual comments to Austin and was flashing him.

The girl told the police she woke up on the couch once Austin penetrated her and didn't protest because she was afraid the prizefighter would harm her. She remained quiet when he returned to have sex with her a second time.

"It was hard to deal with on a day-to-day battle, going to court and listening to what was being said, things they couldn't prove, things the victim said," Austin stated. "It was hard to hear.

"But I didn't let them mash me down to make me into a chump."

Austin faced 20 years in prison. Right before his April 2004 trial he rejected a plea bargain on which he would have served five years for sexual assault. The decision turned out to be wise. A jury needed only 40 minutes to clear him.

"The families that had to be involved, I'm just sad they had to go through that," Austin said. "My family probably was more emotional than I was. It was something we had to overcome. My family comes first, and my boxing career comes second. My boxing is coming back just now."

So here he is, back again at 34, seeking lost glory and still searching for that one big payday.

He didn't fight Johnny Tapia or Danny Romero or Paulie Ayala. Maybe those matchups would have made Austin more appreciated in his prime. Maybe those matchups would have helped financially stabilize the kid who grew up in Cincinnati's rugged Over-the-Rhine neighborhood and lost his parents when he was a teen.

"Money go as fast as it comes," Austin said. "I just want to be wealthy with the talents I have. As long as I put the time in, everything will be under control."

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"I don't need to be rich. I just want to be happy. Money don't make me happy. But having some ... that wouldn't be too bad."

Austin, like so many great boxers before him, seems sure he will be champion again. He already is calling out top 126- and 130-pound fighters such as Marco Antonio Barrera and Manny Pacquiao and Erik Morales.

"I'm coming for all those guys," Austin said.

* * *

I'VE GOT MAIL: I'm no psychologist, but based on mail I've received from Ike Ibeabuchi in the past year I think I can make an armchair diagnosis of bipolarity.

I interviewed the undefeated-but-incarcerated former heavyweight contender last summer at the Lovelock Correctional Center in northern Nevada, where he's serving five to 30 years for battery and sexual assault. My subsequent story came out just before his first parole hearing. He was denied freedom, and he blamed the story.

"You caused me my parole, you son of a gun!" he wrote to me in a letter dated Sept. 7, 2004. "I don't ever want to see you again! Consider yourself warned!!!"

Ibeabuchi has written to me a couple more times since then. One letter included a prison photo of himself, with a thin waist and monstrous flexed arms, with the inscription "To Tim ... my buddy."

My latest letter was an invitation to his college graduation ceremony last week. I was unable to attend, but even if I was in the neighborhood I'm not sure I would've gone, given the veiled threats and whatnot.

What's a son of a gun to do?

But all kidding aside, I know Ike enjoys surfing the Internet. I hope he'll read this column so I can pass along my sincerest congratulations.

MORON OF THE WEEK: Jose Sulaiman, never one to miss out on a chance to dry hump a hot topic, is at it again.

The WBC president this week openly called into question Roy Jones Jr.'s neurological capacity to fight Antonio Tarver next month because the former pound-for-pound king has suffered devastating, back-to-back knockouts. Never mind the WBC has no jurisdiction over the bout. Nor does it even have Tarver rated in its top 40.

"The World Boxing Council is deeply concerned about the fight between Roy Jones Jr. and Antonio Tarver, scheduled for Oct. 1 in Tampa, Fla., if Roy refuses to undergo a thorough neurological examination after the knockouts he suffered in his two last bouts," Sulaiman wrote

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in an open letter.

"Roy Jones Jr. has been one of the greatest light heavyweight champions in the history of boxing, and he certainly has a sound financial position that enables him to enjoy a comfortable lifestyle for the rest of his life. Consequently, he should not allow his own pride to push him to risk his health and even his life."

This from the WBC, the same organization that last year made Joe Mesi its No. 1 heavyweight contender after he was medically suspended for brain bleeds.

This from the WBC, the same organization that recently presented to Wayne McCullough (its former bantamweight and super bantamweight champ) an award as "not only one of the most courageous fighters, but also an extraordinary example in his private life" even though he was diagnosed with a brain cyst years ago, continued to fight, had his last bout mercifully stopped by the ringside physician and has indicated he wants to fight again.

This from the WBC, the same organization that incredulously installed Julio Cesar Chavez as its No. 1 junior welterweight contender even though he hadn't fought at that weight in more than two years and had been beaten soundly by erstwhile pet food salesman Willy Wise two fights prior. The ranking allowed Chavez to be massacred by champ Kostya Tszyu.

This from the WBC, the same organization that ordered an investigation into the July 1 ring death of Martin Sanchez in Las Vegas even though the bout wasn't sanctioned by the WBC and, therefore, gives the outfit zero legal right to Sanchez's medical records.

Sulaiman in his letter called Jones "a close personal friend of mine," which shows a total disregard for professional ethics. Sanctioning bodies cannot become chummy with promoters or managers or boxers or networks. It opens the door to conflicts of interest (a la ranking good buddy Chavez No. 1). Sanctioning bodies are supposed to be objective and neutral, a fundamental tenet obviously lost on Sulaiman.

And then there's the decision to turn Jones and Sanchez into some sort of public crusade.

Jose, if you have a problem with Jones fighting, pick up the phone and call your "close personal friend" and speak to him man to man rather than grandstand.

Same goes for your followup press release, in which you trumpeted giving Sanchez's family a check for 26,206.30 pesos. The first rule of charity is to go about it privately. Yet there's Sulaiman's name in bold letters at the top of the mass email, while Martin's widow and son aren't mentioned by name at all.

Instead of being discreet and classy, Sulaiman chose to cry out "Look at me! Look at how wonderful I am! Look how big I am!"

Yeah, you're big. A big tool.

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BURNING QUESTIONS: Anybody else watch the sniping between Floyd Mayweather Jr. and Zab Judah and wonder why promoters don't automatically concoct bad blood even when there isn't any – just for the sake of creating some interest?

Can Shannon Briggs, of all people, actually be the best heavyweight out there? I think he might be. And, if not, he's at least the most dangerous.

Am I the only one who would love to see Mike Tyson fight Butterbean in a four-rounder to determine, once and for all, boxing's biggest sideshow freak?

QUOTEMARKS: "I am still the IBF champion, period. If I were on steroids, I would be cut. Look at me, do I look like I am on steroids?" – deposed WBA heavyweight champ James Toney

"The lion is awake and ready to roar and put the rest of the division to sleep." – heavyweight Owen Beck

"I am not the Cinderella Man but I am living a Cinderella story. I am going to knock this guy out." – Ray Austin on his fight with Beck on Saturday

"We are superior physically. I won't be the first man to lose to a woman. I will get carried out of the ring on a stretcher before I lose to Ann Wolfe. If I lose to her, it will be embarrassing for me." – Bo Skipper, scheduled to fight Wolfe on Oct. 15 in Mississippi

"I have never been hit like that! It should have been illegal for someone to get in the ring and punch somebody like that. That should have been rated X." – George Foreman to CNN/SI on his fight with Ron Lyle