

Vincenzo Cantatore Loses to Johnny Nelson

Written by Luca De Franco

Saturday, 26 November 2005 19:00

ROME, Italy (November 26, 2005) – The fight between WBO cruiserweight champion Johnny Nelson and Vincenzo Cantatore had been much anticipated in Italy. Everybody wanted Cantatore to get a second chance at a major belt. His first one, more than three years ago for the vacant WBC title, ended badly: the Italian lost by 10th round TKO against Wayne Braithwaite. That loss didn't seem to matter to Cantatore's fans because they knew that Cantatore had the power to knock out everybody.

Prior to the WBO title fight, Cantatore had a record of 30 wins (27 by KO), 3 losses and 1 draw. He had been Italian heavyweight champion and had tried to win the European title in that weight division against Zeljko Mavrovic, but lost by 4th round TKO. Later, Cantatore choose to compete among the cruiserweights, winning the WBC international and European belts. His most recent performances were a draw against Rudiger May (on June 5, 2004) and a victory against undefeated (31-0) Edson Cesar Antonio (on July 16, 2005). Johnny Nelson's last fight was also against Rudiger May. Like the Italian, Nelson had accepted to travel to Germany to get a good purse. The outcome was different: on September 4, 2004 Nelson won by 7th round TKO.

Indirect confrontations have little or no value in boxing, but they are a good way to compare fighters (Joe Frazier beat Muhammad Ali, who KOed George Foreman who destroyed Frazier. Who was the best?). Johnny Nelson came to Rome with a record of 44 wins (29 by KO), 12 losses and 2 draws. Everybody knew that he could be beaten. That's why the local crowd was optimistic. Besides, Cantatore prepared for this fight with former WBA light welterweight champion Patrizio Oliva. On the other hand, Nelson was so confident about winning that he had already scheduled another defense on April 3, 2006, against tough Enzo Maccarinelli at MEN Arena, in Manchester, England.

What made Nelson so sure about defeating Cantatore? Probably, his many wins were against more famous opponents than the ones defeated by Cantatore. On March 27, 1999, Nelson put down Carl Thompson in 5 rounds to win the WBO title. Nelson defended it 12 times, fighting in Great Britain, Denmark, Germany and the United States. Among others, he got rid of Pietro Aurino by 7th round TKO. A winning streak of 5 years, 5 months and 8 days, was enough to make the fans understand how much Nelson had improved. His losses belonged to the past, when he couldn't even decide in what division to make a career. His first success came as a cruiserweight, winning the British and European titles. In 1990, he drew with WBC champion Carlos De Leon. Two years later, he lost to IBF king James Warring. In 1994/1995, Nelson tried to make it among heavyweights losing to Henry Akinwande and Adilson Rodrigues (twice).

When Nelson went back to the cruiserweight division, he started being successful again; he beat Dennis Andries for the British title, got back the European belt and became WBO champion. However, the desire of heavyweight success didn't vanish. On November 24, 2001, Johnny Nelson won a unanimous decision over Alex Vassiliev to get the little regarded WBU

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heavyweight belt. Considering that Nelson never defended that belt, it is reasonable to think that even the Sheffield-born boxer understood that he never became world heavyweight champion; he just won a fight and got a trophy. Anyway, Johnny Nelson's experience made him a very dangerous opponent for Vincenzo Cantatore – even if the Brit was coming to Rome after 14 months of inactivity.

The fight

During the first and the second rounds, nothing happened. Nelson danced around Cantatore hitting him with jabs that had no effect. Cantatore never hit the target. In the third round, both fighters scored good shots and the crowd went wild. Nelson was always more aggressive and looked more effective. During the interval, Patrizio Oliva told Cantatore to be more bold: *Let him land his right hand and hit him back! Tell him: I'm here!*

In the fourth stanza, Cantatore was more aggressive than ever before. Nelson wasn't intimidated, just the opposite: he threw good combinations and clowned. The crowd started chanting:

Buffoon, buffoon.

In the fifth round, Nelson stayed in the center of the ring without moving; he looked Cantatore in the eyes challenging him and hitting him at will. There was also a short brawl with Nelson grabbing Cantatore and throwing him down in wrestling-style. In the sixth round, Nelson kept standing in front of his challenger while scoring with jabs and hooks. Nelson was so much in control that he kept clowning. During the interval, Patrizio Oliva screamed:

Don't pay attention to his clowning. Every time you hit him, he has a scared expression on his face.

In the seventh round, finally, the fight became exciting: there were a couple of hot moments with both fighters landing heavy combinations. Cantatore's shot were acclaimed by his fans who chanted his name. During the eight round, Cantatore landed good left hooks to Nelson's face and body. The Italian also tried a right hand to Nelson's face that missed, but made the public go wild. During the break, Oliva told Cantatore:

Now you must show him that you are the real champion!

In the ninth stanza, Nelson tried to hit Cantatore with a large right hand, but the Brit missed, lost his balance and went down; the referee made the mistake of counting over Nelson who didn't protest. Seeing Nelson to the mat gave more confidence to Cantatore, who had a strong finish. He landed large right hooks to Nelson's jaw and also some left jabs. Cantatore had good moments in the tenth round and probably won it on all scorecards. In the eleventh round, Cantatore landed a wide left hook to Nelson's jaw. The British visitor was clearly hurt; Cantatore went for the kill and was grabbed by his opponent. While clinching, Cantatore hit Nelson with short rights and lefts to the head. When the referee separated the fighters, Nelson was clearly groggy. At this point a Cantatore's KO win looked possible. The crowd was going wild. During the last round, Nelson avoided the brawl because he knew he was winning on points. Cantatore couldn't hit him properly and Nelson made it until the end of the fight. Two scorecards were for Nelson (116-111 and 115-112), one was for Cantatore (115-112). The TV commentators Mario Mattioli and Nino Benvenuti agreed with the result. After almost every round, they said that Nelson was leading on points. That's why they were not surprised by the two scorecards in Nelson's favor. The crowd, however, was.

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That's the main difference between Italians and Americans. In the United States, if the local fighter gets a partisan judgement, the fans protest. If the foreign fighter wins with merit, he gets an ovation. In Italy, the fans only care about the victory of their own fighter or team (in soccer). The other fighter or team is considered the enemy and must be always insulted. I realize that this may be hard to understand for the U.S. readers, but that's the way professional sports are in Italy. There's no such thing as sports entertainment: in Italy, a sports event is a dramatic one where the only thing that counts is winning (no matter if the local star deserves it or not). That's also why Nelson was always called buffoon by the crowd. Johnny Nelson didn't know that Italians don't like entertainment during sports events. During soccer matches, for example, there aren't any cheerleaders, singers, clowns, actors or dancers. Italians only want to see the game – or the fight – and don't leave their seats from the opening to closing bell.

Cantatore's comments:

Vincenzo Cantatore protested the judges' scorecards on Italian television, using heavy words against Johnny Nelson, his promoter Frank Warren and the judges. In his opinion the verdict was ridiculous. He said that he did what he had to do to win and called Nelson a buffoon. He ended by saying: *Boys, he had to win! They already scheduled the defense against Enzo Maccarinelli.* □

screamed:

robbed us of the victory.

o Oliva said:

Nelson clowned and avoided the fight. He did nothing to defend his title.

It should be said that moments after the verdict, Vincenzo Cantatore got the microphone and told the crowd:

I'm sure that you know I won.

The crowd clapped in approval.

His fans, who were around him,

We know who won. They

Patrizi

Nino Benvenuti's comments

When Cantatore said that he made big sacrifices, Benvenuti replied: *Sacrifices must be done.* In the end, Benvenuti said:

Cantatore had to do from the start what he did in the last rounds.

When Patrizio Oliva said that Nelson was on the waiting stance for most of the fight, Benvenuti replied:

That's what the defending champion usually does. □

The undercard

In the undercard, popular Welsh fighter Enzo Maccarinelli made his Italian debut against journeyman Marco Heinichen. Like his name suggests, Maccarinelli is of Italian ancestry and that's why he was very proud of showing off his skills in Rome. Prior to the fight, his record comprised 21 wins (16 by KO) and 1 loss. He won the vacant WBU cruiserweight title, trashing Bruce Scott in four rounds. Enzo did it in front of his fans in Cardiff, Wales. It was June 28, 2003. He defended the belt five times, always in his country, and became a big local star. Then Maccarinelli decided to follow a bigger route whose final stop should be the WBO cruiserweight

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title. As it was reasonable to predict, Maccarinelli made short work of Marco Heinichen, who had a losing record of 8-11-2 going into the fight. Maccarinelli KOed Heinichen during the first round. Next year, Enzo will have a shot against WBO champion Johnny Nelson.

All in all a huge promotional success

The show was promoted by Vincenzo Cantatore's wife Francesca Minardi and it was a tremendous success. The state-owned network RAI 2 broadcasted Cantatore's match live at 11:15 p.m. The Palasport was packed. According to the TV commentator Mario Mattioli, there were at least 3,500 people in the house. Cantatore credited his own popularity in Rome for this big crowd and thanked the city council for contributing to bring back a world championship fight to the Italian capitol.