Isaac “Angel” Hlatswayo was crowned South Africa’s boxer of the year for 2005 on Friday night and I can’t help feeling that he received this honor for what it’s hoped he will still achieve in the ring rather than his actual performance of 2005.

Certainly a boxer with tremendous potential, as stated in an earlier column, he did not have the greatest year, although he did maintain his undefeated status and he did claim the IBO lightweight world title in an exciting yet somewhat controversial win over Cassius “The Hitman” Baloyi.

Whether the faith placed in him by the panel of seven who decided the winners in this year’s boxing awards are deserving may be revealed sooner than one may expect. Hlatswayo has been billed to face Argentinean Aldo Rios, 41-3 (9), on February 25 at Carnival city in Brakpan.

Rios himself held the IBO lightweight world title in 2004 when he caused a shocker by stopping Jason Cook in three rounds to claim the title. Rios was a late replacement for South Africa’s Phillip Ndou, who was to have faced Cook. Ndou announced his retirement following a loss at the hands of Hlatswayo.

Rios was subsequently stripped of the title for failing a drug test following his impressive win. Not a noted puncher, Rios is known as a cagey fighter with good hand speed. His three losses are all in world title outings. In 1999 he lost a points decision to Stevie Johnston in a WBC lightweight clash. In 2001 he unsuccessfully challenged Artur Grigorian for the WBO crown, and in 2003 he was stopped by Ricky Hatton in ten for the WBU junior welterweight title.

Another factor which could count in Hlatswayo’s favor in this one is that except for the Cook fight which took place in England, all of Rios’s wins were contested in Argentina.

Prior to making this match, Hlatswayo’s promoter Rodney Berman tried to sign Zahir Raheem, who holds a win over Erik Morales, but was unable to secure his services. Rios is seen as a good test and does enjoy a level of respect on the International arena. The low knockout ratio could be a deceptive one, as many fighters do carry a stinging punch, but do not finish off their opponents. Former two-time welterweight world title challenger Harold “The Hammer” Volbrecht, 47-5-2 (14), was such a boxer. “I loved boxing so much that I wouldn’t want it to end,” says Volbrecht, “If I saw the guy was in trouble I’d let him recover a bit so that I could carry on fighting him.”

In 1980 he put up a sensational performance against the legendary Pipino Cuevas for the WBA world title and was even up on one of the judge’s scorecards when he was stopped in five. In 1987 he fell just short in another bid to claim the WBA crown when he faced Olympic hero Mark Breland and was stopped in seven rounds. Volbrecht holds the South African record of making nineteen successful defenses of his national welterweight title, which he held for thirteen years.

In other action SA super middleweight champion Andre Thyse, 19-4 (11), who is trained by Volbrecht, meets German Jurgen Brahmer, 26-0 (22), on February 4th in Dusseldorf for the vacant WBC international super middleweight crown. Thyse, also a former Commonwealth champion, has previously challenged Markus Beyer for the WBC world title as well as Danish king Mikkel Kessler when the latter still held the WBC International title. He also unsuccessfully challenged Brian McGee for the IBO crown. Brahmer previously won the WBC International title with a points win over Omar Eduardo Gonzales in 2002, while being remanded in prison. He was stripped of the title as he was unable to defend it and served three years. Returning to the ring in 2005, Brahmer showed that he has not lost any of his punching power and stopped Roman Aramian in October and Henry Porras in November. Given his high KO ratio and Thyse's cast iron jaw and incredible heart, this could be a very entertaining affair.

While Thyse doesn't boast with the most devastating punching power, his blows are deceptive and he does have the ability to wear his opponents down. Although 36, Thyse only turned pro when he was 29 so is not as ring worn as some would expect. Brahmer, however, is only 27, so he does have the advantage in that category. Thyse is slightly taller and has a high level of experience.

Silence Mabuza, who challenged Rafael Marquez for his IBF bantamweight world title late last year in a fight which was stopped on cuts in the fourth round, is eager to get back in the ring with the champion. Mabuza has been slated to meet Ricardo Vargas in the US late March in an official eliminator for the IBF title. Vargas unsuccessfully challenged Marquez for the title prior to the Marquez-Mabuza fight.

There is high local expectation on Mabuza to become an International superstar and this weighs heavily on the charismatic fighter. Mabuza believes he has a destiny to fulfill and the pressure to perform is bubbling furiously below the surface. Seldom have I seen I fighter so eager to get in the ring. Come fight night, Vargas will have his hands full.