

Why I Like Lacy by KO2

Written by Michael Woods
Friday, 03 March 2006 19:00

Writer/reporter Thomas Friedman wrote a book called "The World Is Flat: A Brief History Of The 21st Century" in which he presents a persuasive case that technological advances in transport and communication have made the world "flat," or rather, a smaller place. On this shrunken playing field, it's no great feat for a startup company to get a hand up on the competition by outsourcing their call center to India, for example, where they don't have to pay US-level wages. Thus, their bottom line and prospects for growth are improved.

And you say to yourself, what dime-store bookworm blog have I stumbled on to? Hold on, and I'll tell you what this has to do with boxing, and Joe Calzaghe.

In about five years, the majority of championships will be held by fighters from outside the US. The trend is already apparent – especially in the lighter weight classes – and nothing should change that burgeoning development.

Upper echelon American athletes can expect to be better compensated, with less chance of catastrophic injury when they choose a sport like hoops or football, rather than pugilism to make their mark. But that day isn't here now. Non-Americans still need to come here to make the largest mark on the sport, the paying public and their legacy.

Joe Calzaghe has never bothered to do that. Why should he?

He shouldn't, if he's content to be a big fish in a smaller pond.

But he wasn't in that mode in July 2002, when promoter Frank Warren announced that he and Don King were in accord for a November Bernard Hopkins/Joe Calzaghe showdown.

Joe's fans were beside themselves. His boasts, that he was a pound-for-pound rock star, and that he was the best of Britain, after Naz and Lennox were downed, would be proved out. Right?

Umm, not so fast.

David Telesco was going to get a crack at Calzaghe, but that fell through. Once again, a credible opponent couldn't come to terms with Warren, so a less credible foe was chosen. Telesco was 23-3, and two his losses were early in his career, while another was to Roy Jones.

To be fair and balanced, there are people that will say Telesco priced himself out of a handful of title opps, so quite possibly the case here. But the step-in for Telesco was a clear drop in caliber, as was so often the case as Calzaghe amassed his 40-0 mark. Miguel Jiminez, a Puerto Rican with a record built on soft-touches, was chosen for the Aug. 17, 2002 WBO title defense. Warren was predictable in his pre-fight hype: "This is a tough fight for Joe," the promoter said. "And there can be no slipups."

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Joe fans who may have preferred a tougher opponent were mollified by the promise that Hopkins was next on Joe's dance card. And if Hopkins blew it off, Calzaghe's fans knew, then probably Roy Jones would accept the challenge. That summer, RJJ promised Calzaghe would be a victim in 2003.

So Calzaghe handled Jiminez, better known to high rollers as a fulltime doorman at the MGM Grand in Vegas than as a fighter, with predictable ease, winning every round. But he didn't look scintillating in doing so.

No prob.

Roy blew away Clint Woods on Sept. 7, 2002, and made noise about Joe being next. The Big Test looked inevitable.

Not so fast.

Jones instead wanted a taste of the world of heavyweights. He pursued a heavyweight title fight, which he secured with John Ruiz (March 1, 2003).

Hey, Woodsy, you forgot about Bernard, I hear you say. What about him? Sorry, I forgot. Hopkins' deal with Showtime, Calzaghe's net, fell apart. So that match became incompatible. But, I hear you say, money talks and bull**** walks, Woodsy. If people all wanted a deal done, allowances could be made. Alliances could be forged for a one-shot deal, right?

Nope. The Big Test would have to wait.

Thomas Tate was to be the next Calzaghe WBO defense. But by now, we all know that he didn't actually fight the Welshman. Remember, a lesser stand-in always got the call? In this case, it was Tocker (not Tucker) Pudwill, after Tate busted an eardrum.

That wasn't Warren's fault, or Calzaghe's, of course. But a message could have been sent when Tate fell out. Warren and the Calzaghes could scour the lands and find a similar level, or even stronger, opponent. Instead, they tapped Pudwill. Hey, tickets got sold. That's the name of the game, right? And whispers were spread that maybe Calzaghe was under-enthused, so maybe an upset would ensue.

Upset did ensue. Stomach upset. Pudwill stank up the joint on Dec. 14, 2002 and gave Calzaghe (TKO2) no competition.

Come early spring 2003, Warren and Calzaghe weren't hoping for Hopkins anymore and instead set their sights on Howard Eastman.

Didn't go that way, as usual, so Byron Mitchell was snagged. Not a Hopkins level choice, but he was no Pudwill at the time. Though he had just come off a loss to Sven Ottke in March. Hey, wouldn't it have made to challenge Ottke? Yes, it would have. But it didn't happen.

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Mitchell had a hard time making weight, but the fight finally happened. It was June 28, 2003 and it was a thriller, if quite brief. Mitchell stunned Calzaghe with a vicious right that sent him to the canvas early on in the second round. He rose, battled back, and stopped Mitchell later in the same round.

It was now high time for Calzaghe to grab a career-definer. He'd been dropped, so he was perceived as vulnerable. But he'd also roared back to grab victory from defeat's hungry jaw. It was time for one of the big boys. It was time for Warren to put network alliances aside, maybe take shorter money for a shot at an American legend. It was time...

...for Mger Mrktchian.

Who?

Hey, I agreed with Friedman on the "shrunken world" theory, but even with the Internet and all, Mrktchian was and is still an unknown in the division. An Armenian who fought mostly in Russia, he succumbed to Calzaghe on Feb. 21, 2004 (TKO7) in Wales. It was going to happen in December, but Calzaghe contracted the flu.

Same song, similar dance.

Sven Ottke had been the desired opponent this time, but Warren said he turned down a deal.

After the Armenian, rumored partners included Glen Johnson, then the IBF light heavy beltholder. Oh, and also the Jones/Tarver winner. None of the above panned out. Who's fault was that? That depends on who you ask. But Markus Beyer, the WBC titlist, also tuned down a Warren offer to fight Calzaghe.

Joe was being dodged like he owned Liston's fury, Tyson's uppercut, Frazier's hook and Jones' speed.

But Johnson actually did take the bait. A date was set for June 2004. Warren, however, had trouble finding a suitable foe for Ricky Hatton, who was also to be on the card.

Then that impediment dissolved but another appeared. Calzaghe's bad back flared up a week before the June 12. Oh, and there was the arrest the week before. Calzaghe and his estranged wife Mandy had a row and the constables appeared.

Johnson called Calzaghe a "pussy" for pulling out and the Welsh star countered back. He said Johnson was the "pussy" and said he'd "lick" him.

I'm not making that up. Maybe they use different terminology over there...

The licking session never came off, though, and instead Calzaghe met Kabary Salem on Oct. 22, 2004. Hey, wait, I forgot the template I set up here...

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Antonio Tarver was the notable potential challenger to flirt with Calzaghe this time. But that fight didn't happen because blah blah blah...

The Egyptian journeyman Salem took Calzaghe 12 rounds, and floored him in the fourth. After Calzaghe talked up his forthcoming plans. "I really need to move to light heavyweight," he said. "I do believe the big fights will happen."

He didn't.

They didn't.

Unless you consider Mario Veit rematch a biggie.

That one came off on May 7, 2005. Clint Woods flirted with Calzaghe and a bout with Brian Magee before Veit got the gig.

Calzaghe looked good in the TKO (6) win but why wouldn't he have looked good? He'd already blasted the guy out in a single round four years prior.

In the summer of 2005, the Lacy/Calzaghe entree started heating up. Lacy broke down Brit Robin Reid on Aug. 6, and called out the Welshman.

It looked certain. Warren was saying all the right things, Calzaghe's divorce trauma had faded. All systems were go...for Calzaghe to fight Evans Ashira.

He needed the rounds, he said. Even with his history of injuries, be it back, hands or elbows, Calzaghe and Warren thought it wise to engage in a warm-up bought prior to a November 5 matchup with Lacy, the heavy-handed Floridian with a filthy left hook in his arsenal.

So what happened?

What do you think happened?

It was predictable as an episode of Gilligan's Island. Calzaghe broke his left hand in a points win. "Nobody is more frustrated than me," said the lefty afterwards.

It was a fractured metacarpal. But really, wasn't it a fractured brain?

The man is semi fragile and 33-years-old. Why take a chance?

The Ashira fight defies conventional wisdom and as a strategic gambit is indefensible.

Whatever.

The Big One is at hand.

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The Career Definer happens tonight.

All the postponements, cancellations and fantasy matchups are all forgotten if Calzaghe takes down the heavily hyped left hooker, Lacy.

But I can't shrug off the assembled bungles, excuses and missteps that plagued Calzaghe up to this day, the day he says he's clamored for since 1997.

Can you shrug off the bungles, HBO analyst Max Kellerman?

"He's declined enough now that Lacy's very dangerous," Kellerman says. "Three years ago I would have picked Calzaghe, but now it's different."

So why, Max, do you think Calzaghe hasn't come to our shores and tested himself?

"Europe is a self-contained world," he says. "In a third-world country you need to get out and make your mark. In Wales? Not so."

Al Bernstein doesn't think Calzaghe has ducked hard fights and The Big One.

"I don't think he's deliberately taken the easy road," says the Showtime analyst. "He kept saying he wants to go to the States but he has never found the appropriate way."

Bernstein makes an astute analogy when asked if perhaps Calzaghe could have come to the States to prove his worth, or taken on a top level foe in the UK.

"I have to commend him for staying at home with his family," he says. "But many Hollywood stars choose to live somewhere else, but they ply their trade there. Alan Alda commuted from NY during MASH. Calzaghe lives in Wales but that has never precluded him from getting on a plane."

Larry Merchant, the HBO poet/analyst, doesn't completely dismiss the contention that Calzaghe has ducked The Big One. "But maybe he's like a thoroughbred," he says. "He needs a big event to get excited."

All those busted deals. All those spurned offers. Was it Warren's fault? Did he want to keep his cash cow away from the slaughter? Could he have sweetened the pot on several occasions and secured Calzaghe one of the Big Fights the Wales icon said he wanted? Probably. But Calzaghe likes his cozy home in South Wales. He could have told Warren to get it done if he really, truly, desperately craved The Big One. He could have told Warren that he'd take less so Hopkins, or Ottke, or Johnson, or Michaelczewski or Roy would just do it. That never happened, to my knowledge. Calzaghe never said, 'Screw it, Frank, give them what they want. I want A Test. Give me The Big One.'

The Big One is here. But now Calzaghe is 33, with a history of fragility on his resume. He takes on a challenger that has some oversized balls, one who isn't afraid to take a plane to bring the

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pain. Jeff Lacy is a tad over-hyped and credit for that belongs to promoter Gary Shaw, who has landed him a high-profile fight in which he's likely not going to get whacked around, even if he is outboxed by a legitimate veteran talent. Lacy has fought journeymen-level competition on his rise, and may well not be ready to seal the deal with the vastly more experienced Welshman. If that vaunted left hook hasn't hit home by the fifth round, how does he proceed, against a crafty lefty?

I'm picking Lacy tonight, though, bolstered by that old adage: actions speak louder than words.

Joe Calzaghe, whether it's because he likes Welsh home cooking, or whether his promoter didn't want to see his revenue stream dry up, hasn't demanded The Big Fight, The Big Test, The Career Definer, until now. It could be argued by a first year law student that he's even avoided The Big One. That doesn't bode well for the Welshman.

Lacy KO2.

(Special thanks to ESPN The Magazine writer Tim Struby for insight and material.)