

Ebbs and Flows and Taylor-Wright

Written by Bill Knight
Sunday, 18 June 2006 19:00

Ebbs and flows ... flows and ebbs ... lefts and rights and rights and lefts that can alter an exchange, alter a round, alter a decision. These are things that make a good fight great.

We love our blood and guts, our knockdowns and knockouts here in the U.S.

Saturday night's Jermain Taylor-Winky Wright battle in the beautiful city of Memphis' FedEx Forum offered little blood, no knockouts and not even a single knockdown. It was hardly Arturo Gatti-like. But it was good. It was very, very good. Few fights can match the way this one ebbed and flowed. The two champions exchanged rounds, one after another, building the suspense to the very end.

With 180 seconds to go, it was anyone's fight. With 90 seconds to go, it was anyone's fight. With 30 seconds to go, it was still anyone's fight.

In the end, perhaps Wright, the ultimate road warrior, made a tactical error. He thought he had this fight, just as did De La Hoya and Whitaker and who knows how many other fighters in the history of this game. But if the history of this game tells us anything, it tells us to never, never, never take a round off.

Wright came forward all night, from opening bell through the 10th round. In the 11th, he was still busy, still active. But he began to move a little more. In the final round, he danced.

And when 12 rounds were all logged in, when lefts and rights and maybe even a noggin or two had left both men looking as if they were in a fight — go figure — it was all dumped into the laps of the trio of judges.

Chuck Giampa scored it 115-113 Taylor. Ray Hawkins scored it 115-113 Wright. And Melvina Lathan scored it 114-114. Few times has a draw seemed more fitting. And who could argue with any of the three scorecards? This fight was that close, had that many ebbs and flows. Giampa and Lathan gave the final round to Taylor. Perhaps Wright could have taken this fight with one more good round.

This was such a good action fight, not the boring, cautious affair that some expected. Neither fighter ever led by more than a round. Neither fighter had to make a stirring comeback. It was that close, that much tit for tat, that much immersed in the fascinating, fist-banging, face-beating ebbs and flows of this chess match in that squared off jungle.

You might want a more concussive display, more of a Castillo-Corrales 1 ebb and flow. But you could hardly ask for more drama. And the action was good ... always good.

The first punch of the fight, an errant left hook by Taylor that caught Wright's arm looked as if this might not be such a display. Taylor's first bomb of the evening looked tight, poised and

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powerful, as if it would be only a matter of time before he imposed that power on Wright. But Winky Wright is a defensive wizard, the Ozzie Smith of the ring, and he had no worries.

Wright walked right into this fight, walked right into Taylor's backyard and right into everything Taylor had to throw. Wright's journey is well documented now. He could get nothing here in the U.S. So he took his show on the road, fighting in foreign lands 20 times (12 of those in France). He has almost always fought his fight in someone else's backyard. He remains unaffected.

And so Wright moved forward.

Most of these rounds were close enough to spark debate.

Round one was probably Taylor. Rounds two and three probably belonged to Wright. Round four was Taylor again, leaving them at square one after four. Round five was vintage Winky Wright but round six was probably Taylor again. Still even at the halfway point. Taylor might have taken round seven but a busier Wright probably took round eight. Presto. Still even. Round nine was confusingly close. But Wright probably regained the lead. Round ten flowed back to a stronger Taylor.

Bang. Boom. Ten rounds and nothing has been decided. Smack even.

The championship rounds are obviously what make championship fights and championship fighters. Wright almost certainly took round 11. Then it all funneled down to that final 180 seconds, the 180 seconds when Wright decided to pull out his bicycle.

The final round was probably the least active round on that summer evening in Memphis.

It left the door open. It left questions. And you never, never, never want to do that.

As HBO commentator Lennox Lewis so aptly said, "You have to make these (holding up a pair of big fists) your judges."

Wright was bitterly disappointed, leaving the ring immediately after the decision was announced. He called it another Vargas, referring to his last loss — all the way back in December, 1999 — when Fernando Vargas got the nod over him.

As usual, Emmanuel Steward supplied expert commentary for HBO. This time, though, he supplied it from Taylor's corner ... which made it all the better. Serving as Taylor's trainer, the legendary Steward was right on the money — alternately encouraging and being dead, solid honest with his fighter.

After round four, Steward told Taylor, "You're starting to bust him up now," offering needed encouragement. After a very good round five for Wright, Steward said, "You're down on points. We know that." After a strong round six by Taylor, Steward offered, "Beautiful fight." After round seven, both corners were offering encouragement, both Steward and Wright trainer Dan Birmingham telling their men they were breaking the other guy down. After the startlingly close

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round nine, Steward encouraged, "You're winning the fight. You won that round." After the frustrating 11th round, Steward chided and encouraged his man almost simultaneously: "That (the 11th) might have cost you the fight. You've got to go out and win this round."

In the end, Steward fiercely demanded "You've got to keep this fight in the center of the ring."

It was entertaining, probably even more entertaining than Steward's usually astute work as HBO's expert analyst. And, as always, Steward was dead on. Taylor won the fight in the middle of the ring. Wright won it along the ropes. Surprise, surprise. A draw.

Naturally, just as the two warriors differed in the ring, they also differed in their opinions when the dance was done.

"I give it up to Winky Wright," a gracious Taylor said, his left eye swollen shut. "He's a great fighter. It was the jab. He has a great jab. I couldn't see anything (in the 12th). He was running, like he thought he had the fight won."

As for getting against the ropes, Taylor explained he was trying to counter. But ...

"He was so fast I couldn't get it off. I was clearly winning the fight in the middle of the ring."

When HBO's Larry Merchant asked Taylor what he thought of Wright's final round strategy, he said, "What's he doing? He's [been] winning on flurries. I would have kept fighting. If he wanted the title so bad, he should have kept fighting. It's what I would have did. Fight all 12 rounds. I'm going to fight, fight all 12 rounds. It's what I do."

And it is what every fighter should do. Always. Always.

The disappointed Wright adjourned to his dressing room. He finally told Merchant, "I won that fight. Jermain was throwing some big shots. But I picked them off."

When asked about the final round, Wright said, "In the 12th round, he didn't do nothing. If I didn't do nothing and he didn't do nothing, then how did he win."

Perhaps there was the tiniest of differences. Taylor, despite his vision problems, was trying to do something.

Taylor, who retained his trio of middleweight championship belts, said he would be glad to give Wright a rematch. Wright, though, still stinging from the disappointment, said, "I don't want no rematch."

That would be a shame.

These two men — outstanding fighters, outstanding warriors and consummate professionals — gave us all something a little bit special Saturday night. They would almost certainly furnish yet another great, great show.

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Perhaps it would be hard to duplicate the intricate ebbs and flows of Saturday night's Memphis melee.

But it certainly would be fun to see.