

Italy Goes Back On Top

Written by Luca De Franco
Tuesday, 01 August 2006 19:00

During my trips to New York, Florida and Las Vegas, I noticed that old-time Italian champions are still remembered by the boxing community. I'm not only talking about such legends as Nino Benvenuti and Sandro Mazzinghi, but also about some champions that were never too much appreciated in my country. Gianfranco Rosi, for instance, was always criticized by the press. Some of the most famous journalists wrote that Rosi wasn't worth a dime and that he wouldn't have been national champion in the 1960s. Then, I go to Top Rank Gym in Sin City and I see on the wall the poster of Gianfranco Rosi vs. Lupe Aquino. I ask famed trained Jesse Reid and he tells me that Rosi was a great fighter, very strong, well conditioned, difficult to hit and impossible to look good against. Rosi could also punch, as he proved knocking down Reid's kid Darrin Van Horn and outclassing him twice. Maybe it is true that nobody can be a prophet in his own land.

Seventeen years after Rosi's big win over Darrin van Horn for the IBF light middleweight title, the situation has not changed; there are still too many people who write bad things about Italian fighters. According to these so-called experts, there are no good boxers in my country and the industry is on the verge of disaster. An American saying that I like a lot is: Before you talk, you better have something to back it up! In this case, the critics have nothing to back up their claims. The reality is just the opposite of what they say.

In the European Boxing Union's rankings, there are 25 Italians. In the world rankings of the four major sanctioning organizations you will find 8 Italians. We have one interim world champion and two legitimate European champions: Silvio Branco won the interim WBA light heavyweight title last July 27 in Milan, Andrea Sarritzu became European flyweight champion on the same day and location, Simone Maluddrottu is the European bantamweight champion and the only Italian rated in all the major top-ten: WBC #2, WBA #8, IBF #5 and WBO #6. In no other individual sport has Italy so many top-rated athletes.

As for boxing being on the verge of failure, the show held in Milan on July 27 proved that boxing is alive and well. The press-agent hired for the event just released a list of 70 articles published by local and national newspapers. The Night of 3 Crowns was broadcast live on pay-per-view by Mediaset Premium at the cost of 6 Euros (\$ 7,62). Silvio Branco vs. Manny Siaca was broadcast live and for free by national television Italia 1. The official numbers released by Italia 1 reveals there were 1,004,000 viewers at midnight and the network considers it a great result. As a matter of fact, Italia 1 opened the doors for another show next October 8 when the Italian soccer championship will stop.

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That's the problem: every sport is compared to soccer and it shouldn't be. Soccer in Italy is a national obsession, while the other sports are just passtimes. The final of the World Cup between Italy and France, drew a monster rating of 25,666,000 people (85% share of all tv sets in the country) and you must add the millions of Italians who saw the game in the mega-screens put on the main squares of every city.

What really counts is that boxing is successful compared to most of the other sports. Last July 27, at famed Velodromo Vigorelli, about 4,000 fans showed up and you must consider that the city was half-empty because many people had already left for their summer vacation. Only basketball and volleyball draw regularly more than 4,000 paying customers. Rugby can have 20,000 people for the national team against the All-Blacks, but most of the Italian championship games are played in front of 1,000 fans. Radio is not interested in interviewing rugby champions, but they did interview Silvio Branco and Michele Piccirillo before their July 27 fights.

The only thing that boxing needs is space in the media... when the soccer season is on. It makes no sense interviewing a boxing legend in May and publishing it in July... because there's no soccer going on. If boxing could have a weekly page in the major newspapers, the champions would become more popular and the arenas would be crowded every time. There would also be some champions recognized nationally. Today, it doesn't happen: Silvio Branco is celebrated in Civitavecchia and booed in Milan. It's true that most people in the Lombardia region hate the ones from the Lazio region (especially the Romans who are considered a bunch of lazy guys who can never work well or be trusted), but when Francesco Totti scored a goal during the World Cup he had the whole nation behind him. And Totti is from Rome; he became nationally acclaimed because he was always in the newspapers. By the way, even soccer cannot compete with boxing on an individual basis. Our national team won World Cup, our clubs perform well in international tournaments, but our players were not considered good enough to win the Golden Ball (which is the biggest prize for European players) in recent years. On the other hand, our boxers rule the old-continent. In the super lightweight division, the European title is vacant and the co-challengers are Gianluca Branco and Giuseppe Lauri. Besides, Giorgio Marinelli is rated n.6 and Michele Di Rocco n.10. If this is not enough to convince the critics about the high-level of Italian boxers, nothing will.

25 ITALIAN BOXERS IN EBU'S TOP TEN RANKINGS

The European Boxing Union rates boxers in 14 division, since it doesn't recognize minimumweight, mini flyweight, and super flyweight. The European champions and their challengers are rated above the top-ten.

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Flyweight

Andrea Sarritzu – European Champion since July 27.

Giuseppe Laganà – N.5

Bantamweight

Simone Maluddrottu – European Champion

Featherweight

Alberto Servidei – Challenger to European Champion Cyril Thomas

Domenico Urbano – N.3

Super Featherweight

Alessandro Di Meco – N.7

Lightweight

Stefano Zoff – N.3

Super Lightweight

Gianluca Branco – Co-challenger for the vacant European title.

Giuseppe Lauri – Co-challenger for the vacant European title

Giorgio Marinelli – N.6

Michele Di Rocco – N.10

Welterweight

Antonio Lauri – N.4

Michele Orlando – N.8

Cristian De Martinis – N.9

Super Welterweight

Michele Piccirillo – European champion

Luca Messi – N.6

Tobia Loriga – N.9

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Middleweight

Lorenzo Di Giacomo – N.3

Super Middleweight

Cristian Sanavia – Challenger to European champion Mger Mkrtchyan

Light Heavyweight

Silvio Branco – Challenger to European champion Stipe Dreads

Antonio Brancalion – N.6

Cruiserweight

Vincenzo Cantatore – Challenger to European champion David Haye

Pietro Aurino – N.2

Giacobbe Fragomeni – N.8

Heavyweight

Paolo Vidoz – He was European champion until July 15

8 ITALIAN BOXERS IN THE WORLD'S TOP TEN RANKINGS

I have considered only the rankings of the four major sanctioning bodies.

Flyweight

Andrea Sarritzu – N.4 WBO

Bantamweight

Simone Maluddrottu – N.2 WBC, n.8 WBA, n.5 IBF and n.6 WBO

Super Welterweight

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Michele Piccirillo – N.6 WBC and WBO

Super Middleweight
Cristian Sanavia – N.5 WBC

Light Heavyweight
Silvio Branco – WBA interim champion, n.5 IBF and n.4 WBO
Pietro Aurino – N.4 WBA

Cruiserweight
Pietro Aurino – N.2 WBC and n.3 WBO
Giacobbe Fragomeni – N.5 WBC and WBO
Vincenzo Cantatore – N.4 WBO