

Vabaza has big footprints to follow

Written by Deon Potgieter

Wednesday, 09 August 2006 19:00

When Gabula “The Tiger” Vabaza steps into the ring in Johannesburg on September 1 in a bid to claim the IBF super bantamweight world title, he will be walking on hallowed ground in South African boxing history. From 1990-2001, except for a two-year sojourn, this world title remained in South African hands. When Vabaza takes on Canada’s Steve Molitor for the vacant title, many locals will be looking at the fight as a homecoming of a crown they believe belongs to the country.

The three South African’s who previously held the IBF super bantamweight world title all did so with distinction and all attained legendary status amongst local fight-fans as well as International respect. Vabaza ironically is also trained by the first of the trio to have held the crown.

Welcome “The Hawk” Ncita won the title on March 10, 1990 when he outpointed Fabrice Bennichou in Tel Aviv Israel over 12 rounds. He made 6 successful defenses thereof before walking into a sucker punch by Kennedy McKinney in the 11th round of a fight he was winning in December 1992. They had a brutal rematch two years later, which McKinney claimed on majority decision over 12 rounds.

Vuyani “The Beast” Bungu, who had been Ncita’s chief sparring partner during his reign as champion, then did what his mentor couldn’t and outboxed McKinney in August of the same year to claim the crown. The fight was voted Ring magazine’s upset of the year. Bungu remained undefeated as IBF super bantamweight world champion, making 13 successful defenses against formidable opposition the likes of Danny Romero and a rematch with McKinney over the next five years, before relinquishing the crown. In later years Bungu added the IBO featherweight world title to his display cabinet, with a win over Takalani Ndlovu.

Lehlohonolo “Hands of Stone” Ledwaba was standing in the wings and took over the IBF world title when he defeated John Michael Johnson to claim the vacant crown in 1999. Five successful solid defenses of the title followed. Ledwaba was fast developing an aura of invincibility in the division and was heralded by many as the best pound for pound boxer in South Africa.

Having fought two tough fights in four months Ledwaba journeyed to the US for what was supposed to be a less aggressive opponent for his third bout in 6 months, in order to give him a “semi” break. His opponent was withdrawn at the last minute citing injury and an in training phenomenon by the name of Manny Pacquiao stepped in as a late replacement. A sixth round TKO resulted. A year later Ledwaba returned to the ring to outpoint Vuyani Bungu for the vacant WBU featherweight world title.

With twenty-six wins as opposed to 3 losses (2 Ncita, 1 Ledwaba) for the IBF super bantamweight world title over a 9-year period, it’s easy to see where expectations will be loaded for this specific belt. Vabaza will not only be facing the normal anxieties of being involved in a world title bout, but will also be carrying the pressures brought upon by the hopes and dreams

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of the nation's fight fans. Ironically, if he is successful in becoming the country's fourth IBF super bantamweight titleholder, the real pressure will begin as Vabaza will inevitably be compared to the warriors who strode forth before him.

Three have entered the ring as mere mortals, left as champions and gone on to be legends; will Vabaza be next? The South African does have tremendous ability, but has not been showing his best form in recent outings. Ncita, Bungu and Ledwaba were all sterling on the nights they claimed the crown. If Vabaza, 23-0-1 (15), is to follow he will need to bring his best game to the ring. Vabaza, the current WBA intercontinental champion, is a former WBU super flyweight world champion and also held the national flyweight title with distinction early in his career.

Steve Molitor, 22-0 (8), defeated the highly rated Nicky Booth in 2002 to claim the Commonwealth bantamweight title and also won the NABA bantamweight crown in 2004 before moving up to super bantamweight division. Both men are southpaws, which should make for interesting viewing.

In other IBF action Cassius Baloyi will be given the opportunity to make up for his less than impressive showing when losing his lightweight crown to Australia's Gairy St. Claire last month. The two have been scheduled for a rematch in South Africa in November.

Following his gutsy loss to Rafael Marquez for the IBF & IBO bantamweight world titles on Saturday, Silence Mabuza will be looking to reclaim the vacant IBO version of the crown. His trainer/manager Nic Durandt said discussions were already on for his charge to fight for the vacant IBO title later this year. Marquez relinquished both titles after defeating Mabuza and said he now planned to campaign as a super bantamweight. This could lead to the winner of Vabaza-Molitor defending against the tough Mexican in the near future.

No confirmation as yet as to who will be former three time world champion Dinga Thobela's opponent when he makes his come back in September. Sources close to Thobela say he has received interest from top super middleweight contender Danny Green's camp. Another possible mentioned is a rematch with current national light heavyweight champion Soon Botes. Thobela beat Botes for the national super middleweight title prior to his claiming the WBC super middleweight crown in 2000.

Former IBF heavyweight champion Francois "The White Buffalo" Botha is also still on the look out for a comeback opponent for later this year. Ideas of matching him with David Tua haven't been realized and promoters are now considering bringing Butterbean into the picture.