

IBHoF Gets The Message

Written by George Kimball
Saturday, 21 October 2006 19:00

Almost exactly two years ago we were moved to write a column in these pages in which we vented our displeasure with the election procedures of the International Boxing Hall of Fame. Our principal objection, you might recall, was that in promising automatic induction to the top four vote-getters on the annual ballot, the IBHOF was in danger of diluting the product.

Particularly in a year in which the overall field was weaker than usual – and 2004 was surely one of those – the prospect loomed that immortality might be conferred upon unworthy candidates, and that turning also-rans into Hall of Famers tended to diminish the stature of more accomplished predecessors who had previously been enshrined.

Having taken the Hall of Fame to task for perceived shortcomings back then, it is only fair to note that Ed Brophy & Co. appear to have gotten the message. When this year's ballot arrived, electors were still invited to vote for as many as ten candidates, but only three will automatically be elected.

And, in what may be a happy coincidence, it happens that the list of prospective 2006 candidates in the 'modern' category includes the names of exactly three legitimate, slam-dunk, first-ballot Hall of Famers.

There are still 45 names on the ballot, and in our judgment that's about twice as many as need be there, but this year even Bert Sugar should be able to find his way through the clutter to arrive at the obvious choices. Unless we badly miss our guess, when the motorcade revs up on the streets of Canastota next June 10, Roberto Duran, Pernell Whitaker, and Ricardo Lopez will be waving to the crowd from the lead vehicles.

The credentials of all three would seem unassailable. Duran, in particular, would have been in the Hall of Fame long before this had he not continued to box well beyond his prime (candidates are required to have been inactive for five years in order to be included on the ballot), but he's not the first or the last Hall of Famer to have overstayed his welcome in the ring.

One could make the argument that at 135 pounds Manos de Piedra was the greatest lightweight ever to lace on gloves, and he also won legitimate world titles at welter, junior middle, and middleweight. His overall record was 103-16, but fully half those losses came after his 40th birthday. (Better to remember that he went into the infamous 1980 'No Mas!' fight against Sugar Ray Leonard 72-1, the lone defeat a subsequently-avenged loss to Esteban DeJesus.)

He won the lightweight title in 1972 by beating the estimable Ken Buchanan and beat Leonard in their first 1980 fight to win the welterweight crown, later adding championships at 154 (Davey Moore, 1983) and 160 (Iran Barkley, 1989). Along the way the Panamanian great defeated world champions (Leonard, Carlos Palomino, Saoul Mamby), and fought the likes of Tommy Hearns, Wilfred Benitez, and Marvin Hagler, with whom he went 15 rounds.

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Whitaker emerged from a star-studded pack of 1984 US Olympic gold medalists to have the most successful professional career of the bunch, winning world titles at lightweight, junior welter, and welterweight. His overall record was officially 40-4-1, even though the latter figures include at least three larcenous decisions. (He beat Julio Cesar Chavez in 1993 only to have the verdict declared a draw, he may have beaten Oscar De La Hoya in '97 but lost the decision, and the most egregious verdict of all was in his first title challenge, in Paris back in 1988, when a pair of WBC judges robbed him against Jose Luis Ramirez. (The third judge, Britain's Harry Gibbs, scored that fight 117-113 for Sweet Pea.)

Whitaker's record was 0-3 with one no contest (a positive drug test overturned a split decision win over Andrei Pestriaev at Foxwoods in the other) in his last four fights, but by then it was clear that he was far more devoted to cocaine than to boxing. He lost decisively to only one boxer – Felix Trinidad – in his career, and was never stopped until his final fight, when he broke a collarbone against Carlos Bojorquez.

It's pretty difficult to argue that a man undefeated in 52 professional fights doesn't belong in the Hall of Fame, and the only conceivable argument against Lopez's candidacy is that he competed in a division more or less created for him. Holding a man's size against him seems specious at best, and for a decade and a half Lopez prevailed against all comers. (He will be the first, and probably, only straw-weight ever inducted into the Hall of Fame.)

Facing the toughest 105-pound customers one is apt to encounter this side of a jockey's room, Lopez beat them all in a career that spanned 16 years. The only minor blemish on his record was a 1988 technical draw with then-unbeaten Rosendo Alvarez, occasioned by a head-butt. Outweighed by five pounds in the rematch, Lopez won on a split decision and then moved up to win and defend the IBF light flyweight title in his final two bouts.

To say that Lopez was perpetually overshadowed by bigger men understates the case. Even though many of his title fights took place in the United States, they were invariably buried on Don King undercards, right up until the end. In his last outing, in 2001, Lopez stopped Zolani Petelo at Madison Square Garden. If you don't remember that one it might be because a few other things were going on in New York. Bernard Hopkins beat Trinidad in the main event that night, on a card that had been postponed by two weeks after the World Trade Center was leveled on 9-11. Even Lopez' post-fight retirement announcement was upstaged: his fight against Petelo might have been the last for *El Finito*, but that fight was also the swan song for the 81-year-old match referee, Arthur Mercante.

Two years ago our complaint was that "this is supposed to be a Boxing Hall of Fame, not the Hall of Pretty Good Boxers," but this time they seem to have gotten it right. To us, the real measure may be this one: Duran, Whitaker, and Lopez are not only worthy candidates, but boxers whose almost-certain inclusion is destined make their Hall of Fame predecessors look even better.