

Thobela exposes SA boxing

Written by Deon Potgieter

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While ultimately former 3-time world champion Dinga Thobela must accept responsibility for his disappointing display on Friday night at the Wembley Stadium in Johannesburg, his non-title fight against national light heavyweight champion Soon Botes exposed the plethora of problems which are killing boxing in the country.

A grossly overweight Thobela ran out of steam and quit after the ninth round in a fight which should not have taken place on the night. Had there been any legitimacy in the structures which dictate the terms of the sport in the country, it would not have.

Thobela, who has been inactive for two years largely as a result of SA boxing dragging their heels to renew his license, has been dreaming of making a comeback, to embark on a farewell tour, to give his millions of fans a last opportunity to see him in the flesh before hanging up his gloves. As a result of his forced inactivity, Thobela's weight sky rocketed and was walking around at over 94 kilograms up until 6 weeks ago.

When Boxing SA finally reissued Thobela's license and the fight was made for "The Rose of Soweto" to challenge Botes for his title, they made the provision that they would monitor his weight and training and ensure that he is in the weight limit by the time the fight took place. A failed car highjacking at gunpoint outside his home rattled Thobela and led to him losing two weeks training in the run up to the fight.

Five days before the fight Thobela tipped the scales slightly under 84 kg. Having lost 10 kg (22 pounds) clearly indicated he had been working, but still needed to shed 3.5 kg by the final pre-fight medical which took place on Thursday. He managed to shed another kilogram, but was still 2 kg (4.4 pounds) over the light heavyweight limit. Remembering Thobela started out as the national junior lightweight champion, his 5'7" frame is not built to fight as a cruiserweight.

Clearly if Boxing SA had any credibility they would have enforced their provision of canceling the fight if he did not make the weight limit. Instead, they went ahead and sanctioned it, the only change being that Thobela would have to forfeit a percentage of his purse and it would no longer be a title fight, but instead a non-title fight over 12 rounds. The later in itself boggles the mind, a 12 round non-title fight?

Never mind the fact that Boxing SA failed to effectively monitor the fighter as they promised to ensure that he makes the weight. In the above situation they should have fined the boxer and either canceled the fight indefinitely or, given the highjacking disruption, issued a new fight date. Having a firearm pointed in your face with only a piece of glass between you and it and being fired upon as you drive away from your own home is stressful. The fact that somebody you have known for 16 years is gunned down on the same day in their home in another failed highjacking and the fact that the police failed to respond when you called them for help are all real factors.

Besides the obvious physical aspect, boxing is largely a mental game and anybody who

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disputes that knows nothing of the sport. One of the key reasons why this fight was not canceled or postponed is because it was scheduled to be broadcast live on the national broadcaster SABC. Promoters base their entire existence on television dates and would themselves never willingly forfeit a date.

Undercards are usually too pathetic to warrant broadcast, so if the main event can't take place there's nothing to show. So instead of doing the right thing, the show goes on and more harm is done to the sport as fight fans get to see on television one of the most loved boxers ever in local boxing in the worst shape of his career step into a disgraceful venue where no attempt was made and no dime was spent to try and make it special for those who paid to be there.

I was personally embarrassed for the sport that a fight featuring a boxing legend, broadcast on the national broadcaster, was being hosted in such a poor, disorganized setting with zero glitz or glam. No wonder people aren't coming to venues anymore. It's not just about who's fighting, it's the whole experience that's supposed to impress. Boxing is show business and if those involved in the sport wish to continue milking the cow they need to step up and feed the cow or soon they'll be sucking on dry udders.

In attendance was a team of Irish amateur teenage boxers. What motivation or inspiration were they given to continue in the sport and one day enter the professional ranks? Forget about the fight. Just sitting there and looking at the venue and the show on offer, they must have thought, so this is what I have got to look forward to. If I win a WBO and WBA lightweight world title, and a WBC super middleweight world title, I could have all of this.

Beyond that another glaring problem in boxing is the fact that there is zero work done on marketing. I'm inundated by people telling me they never know when and where there's boxing. They always hear about it after the fact. Not only fights hosted in the dismal manner this one was, but even bouts taking place in the more suitable casino venues receive very little marketing. If people don't know about something they can't attend it.

Television broadcasters also have to accept responsibility; if Boxing SA and the promoters are not prepared to step up and ensure that fans are given good quality fights they need to cancel the broadcast of the shows. Promoters also have an obligation to ensuring that fighters are at their best. They're selling the product, they need to make sure it's in good condition when it arrives before going on the shelves for the public to buy. Just because a title is on the line means absolutely nothing. The majority of national title fights staged in South Africa in the last few years have not been worthy and frankly the title is fast becoming a joke. Again Boxing SA is sanctioning these fights and destroying their own brand.

Case in point was the pathetic and again embarrassing national heavyweight title fight between Osborne Maschimane and some nobody who had lost his last fight against another South African. Neither boxer looked worthy of fighting for the title in this one. Why wasn't the winner given a title shot, accept for the obvious that he'd probably defeat the current "champion."

Going back to the Thobela – Botes fiasco, Thobela was too cumbersome to move around effectively so opted to allow Botes to pound away at his defenses and huge midriff, and then

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throw one or two punches a round himself. Botes blows had no effect on Thobela and every time the Rose landed a punch it clearly unsettled the champion. In the sixth round Thobela dropped his man with a well-timed right cross. That was the most exciting moment of the evening. It was apparent that Thobela's eyes are still good and he made Botes miss on a number of occasions by merely moving his head. You could see he knew exactly what to do, but couldn't move with all the weight bogging him down.

Although Botes was headed to a lopsided points victory when Thobela quit, it was Botes' face that was reddened and bruised from the blows Thobela did throw. Had he landed one or two more crisp shots I've no doubt he could have stopped the champion. In contrast, except for being tired and sweaty, Thobela was unmarked. Following the halt to a fight which could have been an entertaining affair under different circumstance, it was Thobela who was mobbed by the crowds. Botes had long left, when fans were still getting photos, a hug or just a touch of the Rose of Soweto.

If he's to continue with his farewell tour, Thobela at the very least needs to come down to the super middleweight division. An official from BSA said on the night that they wouldn't let Thobela fight again. That would be a tragedy as he is the only real recognizable draw-card in the South African ring at present. The dream may be over, but South African boxing dearly needs the light this legend could shine on the sport with a few in shape performances. He did disappoint his fans on this occasion, but gathering from the adoration he received following the bout despite the showing, there's no doubt that they still love him.