

## Fana gets second chance and it's Showtime in Thailand

Written by Deon Potgieter

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As if in answer to his prayers, Mzonke Fana will be receiving the opportunity to blot the memory of his defeat a year ago at the legendary hands of Marco Antonio Barrera. Fana, who has since looked a much improved fighter with two good wins, has been given a lifeline by the IBF and will face Argentinean Roberto Arrieta in a world title final elimination bout on December 8th in Johannesburg. If successful, Fana will meet fellow South African Malcolm Klassen for the crown early next year.

Klassen became the third South African to claim the IBF junior lightweight world title earlier this month when he defeated Gairy St .Claire via a split decision at the Emperor's Palace in Kempton Park South Africa. Although split there were no arguments about the decision and all agreed it was an exciting and entertaining encounter. Cassius Baloyi is also vying for an opportunity to get in the ring with Klassen in a bid to reclaim the title he briefly held. Klassen's trainer Manny Fernandez dashed any hope Baloyi had of fighting the new champion in a voluntary defense before he faces the winner of Fana-Arrieta.

"Klassen is coming off a tough fight," says Fernandez. "It wouldn't make sense to jump straight into a fight with Baloyi now. There are no easy fights in the junior lightweight division, but we'll look for an easier opponent for his first defense." Following the news that Klassen – Baloyi isn't on the cards, Rodney Berman announced that Baloyi will get an opportunity to vindicate himself when he meets St. Claire in a rematch in February. The two will face-off for the vacant IBO junior lightweight title. Although St. Claire held both the IBF and the IBO crowns when he fought Klassen, the IBO belt wasn't on the line when they fought as a result of Klassen not being rated by the IBO at the time. Following his loss to Klassen the IBO crown was declared vacant.

Although the IBF crown was previously held by Baloyi and years earlier by the legendary Brian Mitchell, neither fighter posted a successful defense thereof. Mitchell relinquished the IBF title after winning it from Tony Lopez, while Baloyi lost it to St Claire. Pressure will thus be on Klassen to become the first South African to post a successful defense thereof irrespective of who his first defense will be against.

While announcing the Baloyi – St. Claire rematch, Golden Gloves Rodney Berman also announced that the main event on the bill in February will feature Laila Ali defending her super middleweight world title against an as yet unnamed opponent. There were a lot of red faces in South African boxing earlier this year when Ali arrived to fight and found that the tournament was not in place. Berman, who was behind the Lennox Lewis – Hasim Rahman heavyweight title fight staged in Brakpan, certainly does have the muscle to make this bout happen. There are only three promoters in South Africa with the firepower to stage high-profile bouts (and the man behind the aborted Ali fight is not one of them).

South African eyes will be focused on Thailand this weekend as Mhikiza "Showtime" Mykeni challenges Pongsaklek Wokjongkam for his WBC flyweight title. Although Wonjonkam has not lost a fight in 10 years and has amassed 15 defenses of his world title, it is widely known that he

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is a protected champion who mostly faces handpicked opponents. Myekeni himself has not faced any big names, but has shown tremendous potential. Much like Malcolm Klassen he exudes a championship aura and improves with every outing. Irrespective of the caliber of opponents Wonjongkam has faced, he is vastly more experienced than the South African challenger and must be considered the firm favorite.

This fight should be an entertaining affair as both boxers will be made to step up to the plate and show what they're made of. If the champion expects a run in the park in this one, he's in for a rude awakening. Myekeni has good skills and can bang. He's one of those guys who believes he was born to be champion and won't give up without giving of his best. Going into the champions backyard is always tough, but going there knowing that no quarter will be given by the fans and more importantly the judges must weigh on the challenger's mind. He knows he needs a knockout to ensure victory and that's what he'll be gunning for.

In other news, Irvin Buhlalu was awarded a free pass when he retained his national lightweight title on Friday night against Benedict Dlamini. Judges awarded Bulalu a victory on a very controversial split decision. Only they and the Buhlalu himself thought that he had won the fight. This was a rematch following a controversial ending to their first encounter in which the timekeeper rang the bell for the end of the last round after only two minutes. Many felt had the bout gone the full three minutes Dlamini would have won the fight. A third meeting between these two now seems imminent, but do controversial endings fuel fight fans or does it chase them away?

Following the disappointing events surrounding Dingaana Thobela's return to the ring against Soon Botes two weeks back, local media have been hounding the former three-time world champion, asking him if he is now going to hang up his gloves. One boxing writer went so far as to print that the "Rose of Soweto" announced his retirement. "I haven't retired," says Thobela. "There's lot of speculation as to my future, but I have no plans of quitting at this time. There were many problems leading to the Botes affair and I am sure that if they were taken into consideration and the fight postponed, there would have been a very different outcome. I am meeting with a number of stakeholders and we will release a formal announcement as to my future plans in the near future."