

The Beast one of SA's best

Written by Deon Potgieter

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From rags to riches has always been coined as the American dream, but Vuyani "the Beast" Bungu made it a South African one during an impressive career which saw him claiming the IBF super bantamweight world title and making 13 successful defenses thereof.

You'll have to look hard to find a more humble man considering his achievements than Bungu, a proud man who came from very poor beginnings. "Bungu came from a very disadvantaged background," says Rodney Berman who promoted most of his fights. "The story that always brings a tear to my eye, is that when Bungu attended school, he was too proud to admit that his family was poor and couldn't afford to pack him lunch. To hide the fact he used to wrap stones in paper and pretend it was a sandwich. He'd then go off to one side and make as if he was eating, so that the other children wouldn't suspect his situation."

Fueled by the fire of desire to improve his standard of living and that of his family, Bungu took to the square ring in April 1987. Equipped with a tenacious will to succeed, he scored an impressive ten knockouts in his first 15 fights. On May 13 1990, he captured the South African super bantamweight title by outpointing the powerful and heavy hitting former world title contender Fransie Badenhorst over 12 rounds.

Badenhorst had inflicted the first loss on Bungu's record nine months earlier in a brutal bout in which Bungu was dropped 3 times in the first 5 rounds and Badenhorst once in the seventh. The rematch was thus a hotly anticipated affair which did not disappoint either, although Bungu had learned his lesson with regards his defense and avoid being hit. His career was by and large built on a phenomenal defense and an unrelenting and persistent attack.

Bungu made 5 defenses of his title and scored another 7 knockouts in his next 9 fights. At the time he was the IBF super bantamweight world champion Welcome "the Hawk" Ncita's primary sparring partner. "It was Welcome who encouraged me and made me to believe that I could become a world champion," says Bungu. "When I saw him lose his belt to (Kennedy) McKinney (against the flow of the fight), I knew that it was time for me to step up. I had the beating of McKinney in me."

Bungu was matched to face Ncita's conqueror on August 20 1994. McKinney was a noted puncher and very highly rated as a champion. Few gave the soft-spoken South African a chance and he was considered a rank underdog going into the fight. "I didn't want to take the fight," says Berman. "I never rated Bungu as high as Ncita and McKinney defeated him twice. It was madness to accept it, but Mzi (Mguni) convinced me that his boy could do it ... and the rest is history."

Bungu put up a masterful display in taming McKinney over 12 one-sided rounds and the stage was set for a fistic future that would have few peers. The new champion accepted all challenges and successfully defended the crown 7 times over the next 2 years. He was then matched in a rematch with McKinney who fervently wanted to reclaim his lost glory.

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Bungu frustrated the former golden boy with his watertight defense and weathered a last ditch all-out offensive by McKinney to retain his title in an exciting 12 round split decision win. The Beast, so named for his movement around the ring which resembled an animal stalking his prey, continued his undefeated reign against solid opposition, making another 3 defenses before traveling to Atlantic City to face Danny Romero. Romero, then a former two time world champion who boasted a record of 33 wins, 2 defeats with an incredible 29 knockouts, was expected to be Bungu's toughest opponent to date.

The television series "Survivor's" credo of "Outwit, outplay and outlast" could have been inspired by Bungu as that was always his strategy going into a bout. He had little difficulty in again upsetting the odds in defeating Romero over 12 rounds, thereby equaling Brian Mitchell's South African record of making 12 successful world title defenses. On the February 6, 1999, Bungu went one better easily defeating Victor Llerena with a 7th round TKO. Llerena at the time boasted a record on 22 wins with 16 KO, with only 1 defeat. That at the hands of Bungu 4 years earlier.

Following this win, Bungu was convinced by his promoter and manager to relinquish his world title as it was an obstacle in their negotiations to land a fight with WBO featherweight kingpin Naseem Hamed. "The whole idea was for Bungu to retire as undefeated IBF world champion." says Berman. "No one can ever take that away from him. He was the undefeated IBF world champion."

Bungu had been eying a super-fight with Hamed to no avail for a many years and had given up on ever receiving the opportunity when after being inactive for a year he received an offer on short notice to face Hamed early in 2000. Passing the opportunity and the highest purse he had ever been offered was of course not an option, even though he has always been in fine physical condition when entering the ring. Bungu was mentally ill-prepared, did not receive the support from his team he should have and was overwhelmed on his arrival in London. Feeling lost, alone and sold out, Bungu suffered an embarrassing fourth round stoppage. Most assumed he was just collecting a last paycheck, having run into serious conflicts with regards back taxes the previous year and that they had seen the last of the Beast.

His pride and reputation hurt, Bungu returned to the ring two years later and put on a fine performance in a failed bid to claim the vacant WBU featherweight world title against another former IBF super bantamweight world champion Lehlo Ledwaba. Showing he was still a class fighter, Bungu came back a year later to defeat the now highly rated Takalani Ndlovu in an IBO featherweight world title eliminator. The two met again the following year for the title and Bungu again proved victorious.

The one fight a year continued and in 2005 Bungu lost his IBO world title in a somewhat disputed points decision to Thomas Mashaba. Although he never formally announced his retirement, Bungu never fought in 2006, but was seen in the corner of a number of fighters and is shaping into a fine trainer. Whichever road this humble champion's life now takes he has undoubtedly proven himself a living legend in South African boxing and his 5 year tenure as IBF super bantamweight world champion with 13 successful defenses is one to be proud of.