

Paulie Next For Best Junior Welter, Witter?

Written by Ronan Keenan
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After recording the most impressive victory of his career, Junior Witter has good reason to be pleased with himself.

“I am the best light-welterweight in the world, bar none,” he proclaimed after his seventh round knock out of Vivian Harris in Doncaster, England last Friday.

The self-assessment may be accurate, but his impressive victory is unlikely to bring him any closer to securing his dream bout with 140-pound king Ricky Hatton. For all his indisputable talent, Witter isn't an attractive opponent for someone of The Hitman's stature.

Despite holding the WBC title, Witter is a limited attraction who generates precious few dollars at the box office and owns an exasperating fighting style. On some occasions he has looked sensational; smoothly switch-hitting with ferociously powerful hooks and crosses as he did against Harris. Other times he has boxed like a novice, such as when he outpointed Colin Lynes and Andreas Kotelnik in 2005; backpedaling for twelve rounds while missing with sloppy arm-punches.

Regardless of his inconsistency, the 33-year-old Witter has amassed an impressive 36-1-2 (21) record that includes clear-cut victories over DeMarcus Corley and Lovemore N'dou, with the only loss coming on points to Zab Judah seven years ago – a fight the Englishman took at just a week's notice.

Undoubtedly, Witter has the physical tools to gain recognition as a top pound-for-pound fighter. With chilling punching power and Brendan Ingle-inspired cat-like reflexes The Hitter occasionally resembles a larger version of Naseem Hamed.

But unlike Naz, Witter doesn't sell tickets. He can generate a reasonable gate when he fights in his native Yorkshire area, but nothing that would make promoters fight for his signature.

His power-punching performance against Harris was exponentially more exciting than his previous four outings, but the Guyana native fails to carry the name recognition necessary to attract a substantial fanbase. Even among many informed fight fans Harris was considered little more than a modest challenger given that he had been knocked out by the obscure Ricky Hatton victim Carlos Maussa.

Still, irrespective of the monetary value he brings to the table, Witter may take inspiration from the storied careers of Marvin Hagler and Bernard Hopkins; two underappreciated craftsmen who were excluded from the big-time before finally forcing their way to legendary status. But times are different now.

Owning a world championship means little in the 21st century. Being the mandatory challenger for a superstar's belt is no longer a guaranteed shot at glory. If the champ doesn't fancy taking a

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'high risk, low reward' fight, he'll just relinquish the alphabet title without incurring any reputational damage.

Likewise, holding all three of the major sanctioning bodies' baubles lacks the prestige it once carried just six years ago when Hopkins unified the middleweight titles with Felix Trinidad. Hopkins was offered a place in Don King's 160-pound unification tournament and a subsequent showdown with the Puerto Rican superstar since he held a version of the championship, not because he was a potentially great fighter.

Unfortunately for Witter, the rebirth of The Ring championship in 2001 and the growing disregard TV networks have toward alphabet titles make unification matchups decidedly less attractive.

So what does Witter do next?

"Paul Malignaggi, that's who we want," says Witter's promoter Mick Hennessy. "After that performance [against Harris], the world is his oyster. [Witter] did the best job that's ever been done on Vivian Harris."

"[That was] an in-shape Vivian Harris, not the one that fought Carlos Maussa," continues Hennessy in reminding everyone of Harris's suspect credentials.

Yet even though Harris may not have been Kostya Tsyzu, the victory may entice Malignaggi into a bout with Witter. A clash with the Italian-American would be Witter's biggest fight given that Malignaggi has headlined two HBO-televized cards – but his slippery defensive style didn't impress the Time Warner outfit, who haven't offered him another date on the network.

So with both talented fighters left without a big date they'll probably try and make one together. A showdown between the two stylists would likely be a pick 'em fight given that they are evenly matched in terms of speed, chin, defense and, the most exciting factor, haircuts.