

America's Watching Calzaghe-Kessler

Written by David A. Avila

Wednesday, 31 October 2007 19:00

Never could anyone have imagined that two European fighters would capture the attention of the Western Hemisphere like Denmark's Mikkel Kessler and Wales Joe Calzaghe.

Imagine: A Dane and a Welshman have America watching.

It's the ultimate unification bout when Kessler (39-0, 29 KOs) tosses in his WBA and WBC belts against Calzaghe's (43-0, 32 KOs) WBO (and IBF title in reality) belt in Cardiff, Wales on Saturday Nov. 3. The battle in Wales will be televised live on HBO.

So what does Kessler think about entering the Dragon's den when he walks into Millennium Stadium before an expected 50,000 anti-Danish fans on Saturday?

"It's just a boxing ring like any other," said Kessler, 28, who has fought in the U.S. and Australia against that country's Anthony Mundine and emerged the victor after 12 rounds. "I'm more focused for Calzaghe."

It's a rare moment this Saturday. One could say it's like watching a solar eclipse. It doesn't happen very often that two Europeans or two fighters from other than North America and South America are part of a televised championship fight.

The last time it happened Wladimir Klitschko faced Corrie Sanders in Hanover, Germany and got knocked out and lost his heavyweight title in a big upset in March 8, 2003. That was shown on HBO too.

And why are we watching two European boxers?

It's academic. These are two of the finest boxers anywhere in the world in the 168-pound weight division. They are superb.

Kessler, born and raised in Copenhagen, resembles Jean Claude Van Damme and has displayed a European boxing style that combines speed, precision and power and has steamrolled through competition every time he enters the ring.

"I guess you could call my boxing a European style," said Kessler chuckling a bit. "I throw in combinations and have a good left hand."

American audiences saw Kessler fight in the U.S. back on March 4, 2000, on the under card of the Paulie Ayala and Johnny Bredahl bantamweight world title fight in Las Vegas. What the 8,000 in attendance saw that night was a particularly strong middleweight who mowed down Puerto Rico's Israel Ponce in a quick two rounds. Kessler was faster, stronger and precise.

"I'm not a brawler I stand up and fight," Kessler said this week by cell phone from Wales. "I'm a

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clean fighter who uses his skills.”

Kessler gave a good example of his fighting skills against American fighter Librado Andrade who was ranked number one and had accepted \$75,000 to step aside and let Kessler fight Germany's Markus Beyer. The Dane obliterated Beyer and then out-boxed Andrade over 12 rounds from the outside last March.

“He was the strongest fighter I ever fought,” said Kessler, 28, by telephone. “I couldn't allow him to hit me because I knew I wouldn't be able to last 12 rounds.”

Kessler bounced on his toes and gave movement while lashing out with quick jabs and effective combinations. Andrade was unable to land one of his patented killing blows.

“His foot movement is one of his strong points,” said Andrade, who seeks a world title rematch with Kessler. “He also throws very straight and accurate punches.”

Kessler is not a paper champion and he didn't earn the title through his promoters. He beat several quality fighters including Australia's Mundine, former champion Eric Lucas of Canada, former champion Manny Siaca of Italy and took the WBC belt from Germany's Beyer by knockout.

“He's the younger and hungrier fighter,” says Andrade. “I think he has the advantage.”

Calzaghe

Because he's not American or Latino, Calzaghe's career tended to get lost in the shuffle in the states. But the Welsh fighter of Italian descent won the title in 1997 and has successfully defended it in 20 consecutive confrontations. No matter what nationality that's an incredible feat and it lends to his comfort.

“I feel really confident,” said Calzaghe during a telephone conference call. “That's what it's all about, looking for the big fights.”

Other huge fights await the winner including possible bouts against Bernard Hopkins, Kelly Pavlik or Jermain Taylor.

It almost makes Calzaghe rub his hands in glee.

“This is going to be a fantastic occasion,” said Calzaghe, 35. “I still want to achieve greater goals perhaps in the light heavyweight division as well.”

The winner of this super middleweight bout will be the first professional fighter in the division's history to be the true undisputed world champion. Forget about the IBF titleholder Alejandro Berrio. That's really Calzaghe's belt too.

Whoever wins between Kessler and Calzaghe will make history.

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Super middleweight history

A super middleweight division was created in 1984 by the International Boxing Federation and Murray Sutherland was its first world champion.

Then the World Boxing Association established a super middleweight division in 1987 with Korea's Chong Pal Park as its first champion.

In 1988 Sugar Ray Leonard won the first World Boxing Council super middleweight title with a knockout of Don Lalonde.

Later in 1988, the World Boxing Organization established its champion when Tommy Hearn defeated James Kinchen by majority decision in Las Vegas.

The favorite

When a fighter has remained undefeated for more than 14 years and has beaten fighters from all points of the globe with styles that pretty much cover A to Z like Calzaghe, he's pretty much the favorite to win.

Though Calzaghe's resume includes wins over former champions like Chris Eubank, Richie Woodhall and Robin Reid. It's his wins over American fighters like Omar Sheika, Charles Brewer and Byron Mitchell that caught the attention of American boxing fans.

Then came Jeff "Left Hook" Lacy who had been attempting to mimic a super middleweight version of Mike Tyson. Though Lacy always had problems against boxers like Calzaghe (see Sheika and Richard Grant), many power-ogling boxing fans felt Lacy was indestructible. Calzaghe proved he was not with a commanding boxing performance that shocked most of America and stamped his name as one of the best fighters in the business.

Not everyone is convinced but Calzaghe knows that Kessler has more talent.

"Kessler is a better fighter than Lacy, he's a taller fighter," said Calzaghe. "I've seen him fight he has a good European style with good power in either hand, but he boxes the same way. I believe he's not adaptable."

Kessler likes that most people believe it will be a one-sided affair in favor of Calzaghe.

"Calzaghe is an awkward fighter," said Kessler whose second pro win came against a Michael Corleone. "I've trained for weeks for the way Calzaghe fights."

Kessler truly believes he will win against Calzaghe and the Welsh fighter is just as confident.

America is watching.