

Pavlik Or 'Money': Fighter of the Year Is...

Written by Michael Woods

Saturday, 29 December 2007 19:00

There's nothing like the terror felt when you have a big black bear snarling and snorting and hunting you down, eager to stuff your tender head into his mouth, to make you run as fast as you've ever run.

Thanks, Dana White, aka the big black bear.

Thanks for waking up the semi-slumbering powers that be, and forcing them to acknowledge that boxing needed to step up its game, or be eaten alive, and shifted even further back in the sports world's relevance race, in 2007.

With UFC threatening to snarf up those much lusted after PPV dollars, the suits went into overdrive, and worked smarter, and harder, to give fans compelling matchups.

They agreed to get along to get money, and they relegated the sanctioning bodies, with those moronic mandatories, and instead listened to you, the consumer, and booked the fights that made sense.

Nobody worked smarter or harder than the PR arms for HBO, and "Money" Mayweather, the artist formerly known as Pretty Boy Floyd. Through his appearance on the ABC reality dance competition "Dancing with the Stars," and stubbornly effective marketing by HBO (24/7 before the De La Hoya and Hatton showdowns were masterful mini-movies which whet appetites of even non fight fans), "Money" emerged as a pay per view attraction who can take the baton as the premier earner from Oscar De La Hoya.

He transcended the sport, and boxing added another player to the mix of fighters that even non-fight fans in the US recognize the name of. Now there's Mike Tyson, Oscar De La Hoya, and Floyd Mayweather...

Boxing, a sprawling mess of interests lacking a central organization that insures cohesiveness in marketing, and message, and mission, relies on a central figurehead to maintain its precarious perch in the mainstream sports information flow. Mayweather, a savvy marketer who has outgrown his periodic outbreaks of youthful indiscretions, is a superstar that fits our age to a T.

He knows exactly what buttons to push to keep his name in the papers—or, more accurately today, on computer screens---and feeds us rabid presshounds of negativity and turmoil red meat, with his intra-familial beefs and 50 Cent-inspired rants proclaiming his peerlessness.

The only thing holding Mayweather back is his own talent, probably, as he owns too much of it. He blew out De La Hoya, and Hatton, and like Roy Jones in his heyday, he so dominates his opposition, that drama is missing from his fights. Most of us tune in to the sport to savor the drama that comes from one man reaching deep into the well of heart and guts to bring forth

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reserves even he didn't know he possesses, and imposing his will on an opponent who had been imposing his will upon him. That sort of drama, as manufactured by the late Diego Corrales, is the variety that the sweet science can deliver like no other sport.

We saw it in excess in 2007, from my personal choice for 2007 Fighter of the Year, Ohio's Kelly Pavlik.

He dug into his well, after getting knocked to the floor in the second round of his tussle with middleweight champion Jermain Taylor, and refused to lose.

All of us could apply his tenacity in staying on his feet, and roaring back to topple Taylor with a furious flurry in the seventh round of their Sept. 29 battle, in our own lives. We all could identify with, and root for, the TSS Fighter of the Year.

One could argue that Mayweather, with ultra high profile wins over De La Hoya and Hatton, who did as much as anyone to keep the sport relevant in the last 12 months, deserves the TSS FOTY honor. As referenced before, maybe his superior level of talent has set the bar too high for us nitpickers. We may be prone to be too hesitant to bestow praise on Floyd, because he makes it look too easy. Sorry, Money, it's possible you are being penalized for just being too damned good. You certainly are the runaway frontrunner for Fighter of the Decade...

Pavlik, we didn't know how good he was coming in to this year. We knew how good his promoter, Bob Arum, thought he was. But we reserved judgment, unwilling to make too much of wins over Lenord Pierre and Bronco McKart. We became believers, to a point, when the Ohio native showed boxing skill and a closer's mentality with his January win over Jose Luis Zertuche (KO8), and true believers with his dominant march over Edison Miranda (TKO7), the heavily hyped Colombian who was no match for the Youngstown hitter's work rate in their May match.

But we still withheld a measure of respect before Pavlik met Taylor, the middleweight king, in Atlantic City. Maybe we had been burned by (not as great as we were led to believe) white hopes in the past, and were worried that hype and marketing were his greatest attributes as a boxer. The respect came pouring forth when he stayed on his trembling legs in the second round of his September scrap with Taylor, and intensified when he closed the show with a KO crack in the seventh.

The fighter has to be rewarded for staying the course, and not allowing himself to be knocked off the title path since turning pro in 2000, and progressing at a sometimes snailish pace, and sticking with his no-name trainer Jack Loew even though some experts urged him to trade Loew in for a flashier model, and battling frail hands, and getting pinched for slugging an off-duty cop in 2005.

Pavlik's rise in 2007 came the old fashioned way, via training his tail off, and staying on message mentally, and rising to the occasion when the situation offered a softer, easier choice.

There was no mega marketing machine bombarding our short attention spans with a campaign to make Kelly Pavlik into the torchbearer for the sport in 2007.

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But the 2007 leg of his march to prominence reaffirms the best of what the sport has to offer, and reminds us that with talents like Pavlik, the sweet science will never crumble into obsolescence.