

Elvir Muriqi: No Longer A Kid

Written by Michael Woods

Tuesday, 29 January 2008 19:00

No more club fights.

No more fighting in dingy basements, and nightclubs that reek of stale beer.

No more last minute opponents, fighting on short notice, for short pay.

Finally, Elvir Muriqi, the Kosovo Kid who Gil Clancy said way back in 1998 was one of the best prospects he'd ever seen, hit the big time. Or so he thought when he almost pulled off a massive upset against Antonio Tarver last June.

TSS saw Muriqi, who pressed the pace, and stayed in Tarver's face from minute one, as the winner in that fight.

Maybe TSS was swayed by the underdog factor, and didn't particularly care for Tarver's dismissiveness to the one judge who saw a draw, or anyone else who had the temerity to not see his obvious brilliance on display.

Regardless, Muriqi performed on that night like many who saw him cutting through Golden Gloves competition like butter knew he could.

He performed like his acclaimed trainer, Teddy Atlas, thought he could. He performed like his proud pop, fighting for the cause back in war-ravaged Kosovo, knew he could. He performed like he knew he could.

Finally.

Finally, after learning so many lessons on how to think, and act, like a fighter, from Atlas.

Finally, after enough time passed that the Kosovo Kid truly became The Man From Kosovo.

Finally, after his head caught up with his foundation of talent, Elvir Muriqi was close to the big time.

Finally, no more club fights.

Not so fast, Elvir.

Muriqi (34-4-1, 21 KOs) has at least one more club fight to get through, when he meets 10-5-1 Willis Lockett of Maryland at Utopia Paradise Theatre in the Bronx (NY) on Thursday evening.

Then, maybe his promoter Joe DeGuardia will lock down that rematch with Tarver, or a tussle with a Chad Dawson, or a Glen Johnson, or a the WBO 175-pound champ, Zsolt Erdei.

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The 28-year-old Muriqi, who came to the US in 1996, lives in the Bronx. He checked in with TSS on Wednesday evening, and chatted with us, in an accent that advertised Bronx more than Kosovo. ("A lot of people in the Bronx tell me I was born here," he tells me.) We touched base, and then Muriqi asked us to call him back in 20 minutes, because he was picking up a pal at the airport.

You can be certain, if he was two days away from an HBO or Showtime main event, against a Tarver, Dawson, Johnson or Erdei, somebody else would be dispatched to do the airport errand. But Muriqi is the sort who might well to volunteer to do the task, forthcoming main event or no.

Family, and friends, are especially important to him. That's easily understood, if you have basic knowledge about what went on in his native Yugoslavia going back a decade.

Kosovo was a province whose inhabitants overwhelmingly wished to gain independence from Yugoslavia and Serbia in the late 90s. The Serbs and Yugoslavs faced off with Kosovarians; Kosovo, in 1999, after much savage fighting, was placed under United Nations oversight, but obtained a system of self-governance. Muriqi's father, Ramiz, went back to Kosovo in 1999, to fight for the Kosovo cause, with the Kosovo Liberation Army. His younger sister Elinde, also flew from the US back to Kosovo to help the cause. That left Elvir, who was chomping at the bit to join his dad and sister, back in the US.

His father directed him that he would help the cause more by spreading the word about the tumult in the homeland, so the fighter reluctantly agreed, and stayed behind to learn the craft.

His did so, under the tutelage of Teddy Atlas, for 27 professional fights.

Those two split, amicably Muriqi says, after the fighter decided that he and Atlas were too similar, too headstrong, to keep on working together.

Muriqi told TSS that he wouldn't trade the Atlas experience for anything, and that he is grateful to the combustible Atlas for showing him the ropes in and out of the ring.

"People grow up," he said. "I had a hard head. I was younger then. Teddy is a great man, with a great family. Being with Teddy for 5 ½ years was like I went to college. He was a great person for me, for boxing, for life."

Atlas was painstaking in his approach to building Muriqi up to becoming a competent pro. Some argued that he was too timid in the process, and that Muriqi got bored as he fought an assemblage of journeymen. The fighter explains his take.

"Teddy took his time," he said. "I started getting bored. He wanted to see me prove myself to guys that weren't so great, so I didn't show as much."

Muriqi began to fight down to the level of his competition, in his mind. At one point, he climbed to No. 5 in the rankings, but he began to lose his love for the sport. He and Atlas parted in, after

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Muriqi fought his 29th fight as a pro, a win over Thomas Reid in December 2003. Since then, he has worked with Harold Knight, and Joe Guzman and Colin Morgan. Morgan was in his corner when he nearly knocked off Tarver, but for now, Muriqi is in transition. "For now," he says, "I can handle it myself."

Now, trying to better comprehend why such a promising prospect has taken so long to reach a period of fertility where meaningful fights are within his grasp, I asked Elvir if the civil war back in the homeland drained him mentally, and set back his progress.

Yes, he conceded, he did think about the battle back home, he admitted. But "I can't make excuses," he told me.

Perhaps Muriqi should be more eager to tell people about how the war at home affected him. There is a difference between an excuse and an explanation.

Three times, attempts were made on his father's life. The first time, he got sprayed with an AK 47, but escaped. The second time, someone tried to blow him up with a bazooka, but missed. The third time, someone loaded up a few kilos of explosives, and detonated them, but again, Ramiz escaped. It's hard to concentrate on anything, let alone the savage science, when that is hanging over your head.

Back to the present.

No, he says, he is not overlooking his Thursday foe.

"He's a rugged guy, a tough guy," Muriqi said of Lockett. "I can't sleep on nobody. He's not the best in the world, but he comes to fight."

To get ready, Muriqi, who mostly works out at the Morris Park gym in the Bronx, has gotten solid sparring with Lou De Valle, and Delvin Rodriguez.

But more importantly than who his manager is (nobody, at the moment, but he's entertaining offers), or who is training him, is Muriqi's maturity.

"I'm mature," he said. "I've built a record, and I'm confident. I grew up at 26. Now I'm calmer than ever. I'm better than ever. It was OK the way my career went. In the end I will be on HBO. I'll be around a long time. I'll beat all the old champions and big names now."

"But to be honest, two years ago, stepping in with Tarver, I don't know how I would have dealt with that. Colin, Shadow, Teddy, all those parts of my career have helped me a bit. I'm still young. I'm 28. I figure I'll leave the sport at 32, 33. These five years I will fight and beat the big names. When I leave the sport, I will have had a title. I will be remembered as a world champion."

Muriqi says he told his promoter to get him a big name, and with decent judges, he'll fight winner take all. He does wonder if maybe he showed too many skills against Tarver, and that he

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presents too much risk vs. too little reward for some of the top tier at 175.

“Why fight Muriqi, he’s not the biggest name, and he’ll give you a tough fight, and you can make more money in an easier fight?” he says rhetorically.

Muriqi finishes with a few words to the readers, his fans, the suits and himself.

“Thanks to TheSweetScience.com for taking the time to talk to me, and all my fans,” he said. “I will soon make it happen and become world champion. And to HBO and Showtime, c’mon, you need a real light heavy to test Roy, and Johnson, and Clinton, and Chad and Zsolt. I’m here. You know I’ll give a good fight, put me on. My job is to win a title. I haven’t done it yet. I want to win a title, defend it at Madison Square Garden, then in Kosovo. I want to fly my flags together,” says the fighter once known as The Kosovo Kid, now known as The Man From Kosovo.