

Pocket Rocket Return Is NOT A Comeback

Written by Rick Folstad
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Funny place for a fight.

The Cayman Islands are beautiful sunsets, spring-break coeds in tiny bikinis and beer chugging frat boys down by the water. It's warm nights, light ocean breezes, white sand and tropical drinks with little umbrellas stuck in them.

You don't go to the Cayman Islands looking for a fight. You go to the Cayman Islands looking for a tan.

Unless you're Wayne McCullough.

You remember the Pocket Rocket: 1992 Olympic Silver Medalist and former WBC bantamweight champ. Well, he's back, though he swears he never actually left.

"People will probably say this is a comeback," McCullough (27-6, 18 KOs) said as he prepares to fight Juan Ruiz (21-5, 6 KOs) of Santa Clarita, Calif. on June 20 in paradise. "But in truth, I never retired."

It sure looked like he did. It's been almost three years since he fought, and that's usually long enough for someone to erase your name from the "still active" list.

Retirement or not, McCullough, 37, didn't exactly schedule a walkover for this return to the bright lights.

Ruiz, or "Johnny," as his trainer, Larry Goossen, calls him, is one of those lost souls in the fight game who seem to have potential, but never get the chance to develop it.

But under Goossen, it looks like Ruiz might have found what he's been missing. And it's been a quick learning process, Goossen hooking up with Ruiz just before his last fight in February, an NABF super-bantamweight title fight against Bernabe Concepcion. Ruiz lost that fight on the scorecards. He didn't lose in the eyes of Goossen.

"Everyone who saw his fight with Concepcion knows who really won," Goossen said. "All I want is a fair shot for Johnny. Concepcion had a hard fight with Johnny because he couldn't keep Johnny off him."

Which is what the Pocket Rocket might expect to see.

"We don't have to guess what Wayne is going to do," said Goossen, whose brother Dan is McCullough's promoter, "He's going to come out and fight, and that's what we want him to do. That's his style, and it just happens to be our style. Johnny isn't afraid to mix it up with anyone. It's going to come down to who is willing to spend everything inside him to win."

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Goossen is old school in the sense that he expects his fighters to fight, not dance or clown around or hold anything back. He wants them to throw punches and put on a good show. That way, you get asked to come back. And that's an important part of the business. It's why Goossen says he doesn't like it when fighters jump up on the ring corner post and wave to their fans after a tough fight.

"That shows me the fighter didn't go all out for that fight," Goossen said. "Johnny will fight every round to the death. He fights hard and he fights to the end. That's his style."

Nothing left for frivolities.

Goossen is expecting large portions of heart from both sides.

"Wayne is a bad dude," he said, meaning it in the way you might say a guy is a tough SOB. "And he's probably got his juices flowing again."

As for predictions, Goossen has one. "This could be the fight of the year," he said. "You're going to see two guys who will do whatever they have to do to win. This is a fight I would pay to watch."

Will it go the distance?

"Well, Johnny is not a big puncher," Goossen said. "Wink, wink."

The fight is on the undercard of the NABO super-middleweight title fight between Andre Ward (15-0, 10 KOs) and Jerson Ravelo (18-2, 12 KOs); and the USBA heavyweight title fight between "Fast" Eddie Chambers (30-1, 16 KOs) and Raphael Butler (30-4, 23 KOs).

Welcome to paradise.