

A REALLY Bad Idea: Nelson/Fenech III

Written by Ron Borges
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There may be a good reason why Jeff Fenech and Azumah Nelson intend to fight each other on June 24 in Melbourne but I can't think of one. Don't take my word for it, though.

"This contest will prove nothing, other than that one old man is better than another," fellow International Boxing Hall of Fame member Barry McGuigan told the London Daily Mirror when he first heard of the two's intention to fight for a third time, 16 years after Nelson last beat Fenech half to death in a rematch.

"This is ridiculously silly on a number of fronts, but first and foremost it's dangerous."

It is certainly that considering that the 44-year-old Fenech, who has not fought in 12 years, is five years YOUNGER than Nelson, who retired 10 years ago at the age of 39. In case you can't do the math that will make Nelson 49 when the punching begins anew for him. One more year and he could have fought for a AARP title, if the retirement group decides to become boxing's newest sanctioning body.

In their prime these were two of the world's best super featherweights but their prime was a long time and many pounds ago. On June 24, the two of them will face each other for the third time not as super featherweights but as aged junior middleweights, 154 pound guys who have decided to fight, one would assume, for the money, although both deny it.

"Let me guarantee you from my point of view this is something very, very personal for me," Fenech claimed. "They will either carry me out or they will carry my mate over there out."

That, of course, is the problem. Not to mention the fear.

Fenech, the two-time world champion who was inducted into the Hall of Fame in 2002, claims he has lost nearly 40 pounds in preparation for this comeback. He says he can see his abs "for the first time since 1996." None of that is particularly encouraging to anyone on the outside looking in but there is a method to his madness, it would seem, and the madness involves money.

The fight itself, you see, has been tethered to a reality TV show following Fenech's preparations that has been running on channel 9 in Australia in the weeks leading up to the event. Whether anyone wants to see the reality of how the show ends for Fenech is another matter all together, not that the TV execs care how it ends.

Nelson, to the best of anyone's knowledge, does not have a similar arrangement with a TV station in Ghana. He does, however, also claim to have dropped considerable tonnage, an estimated 28.6 pounds, in preparing for this match. Just so there's no confusion about that weight loss by either man, it is not to get back to their prime fighting weights of 129 pounds (which each weighed in their 1992 rematch). It's to get back down to 25 pounds over their prime

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So let's put this into perspective. Forty-four year old Jeff Fenech and 49-year-old Azumah Nelson have dropped nearly 40 and 30 pounds respectively to come into a ring 25 pounds over their best fighting weight. "Ridiculously silly" seems a kind assessment of the situation at that point.

There's no danger in this effort of course, according to Fenech's trainer. Johnny Lewis is sure of this because, after all, it's not like his man is facing a real fighter any more or anything like that. Just an old guy with dyed hair, crows feet around the eyes and, frankly, a violent nature once trapped inside four sets of ropes.

"If there was any real danger to Jeff I'd tell him not to fight but he's not fighting a young lion on the way up," Lewis theorized. "He's fighting a guy of his same vintage."

Yeah, he's also fighting a guy who knocked him silly inside eight rounds in 1992. A guy who's nickname was "The Terrible Warrior" because he was just that. Ask Fenech if you think it as otherwise back in the day.

But to be truthful, when last seen in the ring the emphasis was on "terrible" not "warrior" for both of these geezers. Fenech was stopped in three of his final five fights, including a second round knockout by IBF lightweight champion Philip Holiday that retired him in 1996. Nelson finished his career losing somewhat less violently but still dropping his last two fights by clear decisions to Genaro Hernandez and James Leija. Do either figure to be even a shadow of the shadows they had become by the time of their retirements?

No they don't so what's the point? Sadly, Azumah Nelson seems to have explained it best in the latest issue of *Boxing News*, the weekly British boxing magazine.

"Boxing is what we know how to do," he said, implying they don't know what else to do with themselves these days, which very well may be the case.

The only thing said about this that sounded worse was Fenech's surprise at what he'd heard and seen written about the upcoming slowdown - I mean showdown - in Melbourne.

"I was totally shocked," he said. "I thought there would be much more negative publicity."

Shame that there hasn't been but it's never too late to start, especially when it is way past the time for Jeff Fenech and Azumah Nelson to stop plying the most dangerous trade in sports.