

One Career Ends, One Ascends

Written by Rick Folstad
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The “Pocket Rocket’s” comeback never got off the ground. Blame ring rust or age. Or both.

Or maybe the blame should fall on the shoulders of featherweight Juan Ruiz, the 29-year-old no-name kid from Santa Clarita, CA, whose overhand rights and sharp left hooks to the ribs ended a proud career.

In an NABF featherweight title fight that didn’t really require a referee, Ruiz stopped former bantamweight champ Wayne McCullough after five rounds last Friday night in the Cayman Islands.

When it was over, McCullough (27-7, 18 KOs) did what he knew was right. He took the ring microphone and announced his retirement. It was his first fight in almost three years, but it didn’t end like he’d planned.

“I don’t think Wayne wanted the fight,” said Ruiz’ trainer, Larry Goossen. “Coming back after that long lay off, I think he wanted an easier fight.”

Goossen wasn’t surprised Ruiz (22-5, 7 KOs) did so well. The fighter he calls “Johnny” never gave the former champ a chance to catch his breath.

“Wayne was in great shape, he just couldn’t get his shots off on the kid,” said Goossen, who has been with Ruiz for his last two fights, the first one a controversial loss to Bernabe Concepcion for the NABF super-bantamweight title. “I think Wayne was hurt in the first round with body shots. Johnny was hitting him with a hook to the ribs.”

McCullough didn’t come out for the start of the sixth round, and Ruiz is finally getting a little of the recognition and respect he’s been chasing his entire career.

“I’ve been waiting for this for a long time,” Ruiz said. “The first round, I was hesitant to do anything because I was in there with a former world champion. But he hit me one time and that was it.”

Goossen helped his fighter get inspired.

“I yelled at Johnny to jump on his (butt),” Goossen said. “Johnny caught him with an overhand right at the end of the second that I think hurt Wayne.”

Ruiz said he knew he hurt McCullough late in the fifth round. He wasn’t surprised McCullough didn’t come out for the sixth.

“I’ve always respected him, how he would always fight,” Ruiz said. “He has a big heart and a big chin.”

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After the fight, McCullough had some words for Ruiz.

“Wayne is a class guy,” Goossen said. “He came up to Johnny in the corner and told him, ‘You better be world champion.’ He didn’t say ‘you could be world champ,’ or ‘you should be world champ.’ He said, ‘You better be world champ.’ “

“Wayne is a very proud guy and for him to say something like that to me is something special,” Ruiz said. “Now I’ve got to go out and do it.”

Ruiz’ resume’ improved quite a bit with the win. And it came so easy, Goossen said it was almost “scary.”

“Johnny is a soft-spoken kid with great heart both in and out of the ring.”

As to what’s next for Ruiz, Goossen said that was up to his manager.

“We’ll give him a week off and then get him back in the gym,” Goossen said. “We’ll fight anybody. We’d like to fight Concepcion again, but we’ll fight anybody. Just give us a chance.”

Concepcion probably won’t take a rematch. He has nothing to gain in a second fight with Ruiz. But Ruiz said he can see himself facing Concepcion some time down the road.

“If I win the (world title) belt, he’s going to have to fight me if he wants the title,” he said.

Goossen claims his fighter was robbed in the fight with Concepcion.

“We’re looking at it like we’re 2-0 with one knockout, not 1-1,” he said. “Johnny won that fight.”

Meanwhile, the no-name kid and his hard-nosed trainer will go back to work and wait for news of another fight.

“Larry works me real hard in the gym,” Ruiz said. “I thought I worked hard before. But I’ve always been a gym rat.”

“Johnny has a lot more power in his punches than people think,” Goossen said. “He’s coming. The left hook is a work in progress, but we’re getting there.”

McCullough might say it’s already arrived.