

A Young Lion, Smelling Blood

Written by Ron Borges

Tuesday, 07 October 2008 19:00

Can a fighter unify portions of the light heavyweight title if forced to give them up just to try? That is the question Chad Dawson is asking himself as he prepares for the biggest fight of his life Saturday night.

It is still the subject of some debate over whether or not it will also be the biggest challenge of Dawson's life when the undefeated 26-year-old squares off with aging IBF title holder Antonio Tarver at The Palms Casino in Las Vegas but on paper Tarver certainly has the best resume of anyone Dawson has faced on his way to winning and then relinquishing the WBC title barely 18 months after first snatching it from Tomasz Adamek.

Dawson's decision to give up the green strap for the opportunity to take a slap at Tarver is the kind of decision being made more and more frequently these days, now that fighters and their management have begun to understand that the best way to making a good living in boxing is to accept the challenges of the best opponents rather than clinging resolutely to a belt at a time when they are all but meaningless in the larger sporting arena because there are more of them around than bankrupt real estate agents.

For several years this fight has been debated but never was really close to being made, as Tarver insisted Dawson needed to make a name for himself first. He managed to do that in the same way Tarver once did, beating first Eric Harding and, in his last outing, Glen Johnson. The latter was a fight not seen as close by the judges at ringside but one at least a portion of the crowd felt should have gone in the other direction.

How much that victory six months ago came into making a fight with Tarver can be debated but what cannot is that this is a classic rite of passage fight, one that features the up 'n comer versus an aging champion who may still be the best light heavyweight in the world despite some lackluster recent performances in a one-sided loss to Bernard Hopkins, razor-thin majority decision over journeyman Elvir Muriqi and an uneven performance in his last fight against former champion Clinton Woods.

In the end then this will be a fight that answers questions about both men. Questions of youth and a relatively unimpressive list of victims for Dawson and questions of the ravages of age and the passage of three years since Tarver's last truly significant victory – a fairly easy points win over Roy Jones, Jr. in the third rubber match in their trilogy – for the IBF champion.

That both men were willing to put themselves in a position to have such questions answered by the other says something about them and much about the economics of boxing today, where giving up a world title to face another champion in the same weight class is forced upon you if you want to maximize your income.

"Everybody said it wouldn't happen," promoter Gary Shaw said. "To Tarver's credit he took the fight that everybody said he wouldn't take. And to Dawson's credit he took a belt off his waist to

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take the fight that everybody said wouldn't happen. That's what will help boxing, not a lot of stuff like what we've been watching on TV."

Although Tarver and Dawson don't seem to agree on much they did agree on that point as well as on the importance of fights being made with paying customers in mind rather than protecting belts worth no more than what it cost to manufacture them.

"You got a lot of old fighters fighting old fighters," an old fighter named Tarver, who is 39, said recently. "They're not willing to take the risk to fight these young guys. So I go on record saying I'm a fighter. I fight the best.

"Chad Dawson fought Glen Johnson, which was a battle. He made it through. He survived and now he's in line to fight the best. While Roy Jones and the other guys out here are trying to make these celebrity boxing matches I'm out here fighting champions."

Well, in Dawson's case, a former champion, but by choice, not by defeat. Dawson (26-0, 17 KO) has taken this step believing it is his best road to bigger money fights with, perhaps, the Joe Calzaghe-Jones winner if he is dominant against Tarver. That's a big if however if one uses his performance against Johnson as a barometer. Big to everyone but Dawson, who is nothing if not confident.

So confident that for one of the few times in his career he has become nearly as loud and belligerent as Tarver, which is no easy task itself.

"He's past his prime," Dawson insists. "Look at his last three fights. They speak for themselves. He couldn't beat a guy looking for a paycheck (Woods, who he did beat although not all that convincingly).

"He's old. He's slow. I respect what he's done but that's in the past. You can't compare him to me. This is going to be a statement for me."

That will be true win or lose. If Dawson overwhelms Tarver, even though the champion is in his dotage it will elevate him to the point where he would very likely be considered the best light heavyweight in the world by many, although if Jones manhandles the undefeated Calzaghe, or vice versa, then it would behoove young Dawson to enter the senior circuit once more to face the winner before moving on to fresher faces.

If Tarver finds a way to use his experience and superior punching power to test Dawson's somewhat suspect chin and the once and future champion fails to pass it, then he will have risked it all for gold and glory but not got enough of either to have made it worth his while. The latter, of course, has never crossed young Dawson's mind, which is why he's taking the gamble in the first place.

"Everybody wants to see what I got," Dawson said. "Am I ready to be the big man in the light heavyweight division? I got a lot of things to prove, you know? I'm going to prove 'em.

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“It’s not about the future. It’s about who is going to be the better fighter (Oct. 11). There’s only room for one champion. One guy is going to be standing on Oct. 11 and that is going to be the best man and that’s me. I know what’s going to happen Oct. 11 I know what’s going to happen.

“I just want to prove a point. I want to shut his big mouth up. That’s all I want to do. I’m a better fighter all around. He ain’t been anything in his last five fights. He’s the one going to get touched all night.”

Not surprisingly, Tarver (27-4, 19 KO) believes he is about to school a young kid who has no idea what he’s going to be facing. Perhaps he will but it has been three years since he last looked good and at 39 that’s a long time between starring performances.

To his credit, Tarver came back to win three times since losing so badly to Hopkins in 2006 but one has to wonder what those victories meant. If Chad Dawson is right they may mean this is the beginning of a sea change in boxing, a series of matches in which old reliable names like Tarver, Jones and Hopkins could all face extinction at the hands of younger men.

That is what boxing has always been about. It is a test of time and tide, a corrosive endeavor that eventually wears out even the very best of its craftsmen. For a brief moment, Tarver was one of them after he knocked out Jones six months after being badly jobbed in a majority decision defeat to Jones so obscene that even Jones had to grant him a rematch.

But his time did not last long. He lost a split decision seven months later to Johnson and even though he avenged it and then beat Jones again it has been downhill from there. Chad Dawson has seen that slippage perhaps more clearly than Tarver can for that is the way it is in boxing. The young lion always smells the blood before the old one realizes it is his own.

Yet come Saturday night, Dawson must do much more than talk about his superiority. He must prove it, which is quite often more complicated a task than the young man expects.

“I got a lot of Chad Dawsons on my resume,” Tarver reminded his challenger menacingly. “He don’t have not one Antonio Tarver. He thinks it’s all just about fighting but he’s going to get a crash course in what it really feels like to be in there with a legendary fighter. A great fighter. He’s got decent skills but decent ain’t never beat me.”

Not yet, at least, but yet may be looming as the pages of the calendar fade away and a young lion awaits Antonio Tarver, smelling blood that is not his own.