

The Bernies! 1st Annual Year-End Awards

Written by Bernard Fernandez
Tuesday, 30 December 2008 19:00

Editor Michael Woods has requested that I write an article listing my personal end-of-the-year awards in boxing for posting on TSS. Normally, there would be no problem with such an assignment, except that I have been in Los Angeles since just after Christmas to chronicle the 95th Rose Bowl between the Penn State Nittany Lions and USC Trojans. As I increasingly tend to concentrate on one thing at a time, shifting from a football mindset to a boxing one on short notice might tend to leave me more dazed and confused than usual.

So, no, my Fighter of the Year is not Southern California assistant coach Ken Norton Jr., son of the former heavyweight who once broke Muhammad Ali's jaw. Prospect of the Year is not USC free safety Taylor Mays, although, at 6'3" and 230 pounds, this physical freak of nature (no one that size should be able to run 40 yards in 4.29 seconds) certainly looks as much like the next Lennox Lewis as the next Ronnie Lott. Nor will my Knockout of the Year nod go to any one of the many savage hits USC linebacker Rey Mauluga laid on some poor schnook of a wide receiver coming across the middle.

If he would consent to shave his head, I could make a decent case for 82-year-old Penn State coaching legend Joe Paterno as the winner of an Angelo Dundee lookalike contest, although JoePa is leaner and a bit more irascible than the perpetually sweet-natured Ange. But if the Nits are losing a close one in the fourth quarter, it wouldn't be that difficult for me to imagine Paterno, still a bit gimpy after undergoing recent hip-replacement surgery, calling down from the press box and telling quarterback Daryll Clark on the headset, "You're blowing it, son." And we all know of such utterances are miraculous rallies launched.

So without further adieu, here are my picks for boxing's best of 2008, stained as they might be by thoughts of blitz pickups, bubble screens, seal blocks and fade patterns in the red zone.

FIGHTER OF THE YEAR: MANNY PACQUIAO As something of a contrarian, I hate to always go with the obvious choice. A little voice in my head kept telling me to give more consideration to the superb years turned in by Antonio Margarito and Paul Williams. And, well, it is true that, upon closer inspection, Margarito's comeback stoppage of the favored Miguel Cotto probably is more impressive than Pac-Man's start-to-finish domination of the empty vessel that was Oscar De La Hoya. Williams, meanwhile, won bouts in three separate weight classes and won titles in two of them. But Pacquiao is now the little big man of boxing, and his conquest of Oscar is only the cherry on top of the ice-cream sundae. He outguttled pound-for-pound rival Juan Manuel Marquez for a split decision and the WBC super featherweight title and then bludgeoned David Diaz for the WBC lightweight crown. With his ridiculously easy TKO of De La Hoya, Manny even had some enthusiasts comparing him to the legendary Henry Armstrong. Such comparisons might be overblown and premature, but for now homage must be paid to 2008's ruler of the ring, King Manny of the Philippines.

FIGHT OF THE YEAR: ISRAEL VAZQUEZ-RAFAEL MARQUEZ III In boxing, first impressions are not always the ones that count the most. For many fans, the greatest fight in

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any given years is always the most recent really good one, which is why there is so much late support in this category for the Dec. 11 pairing of Steve "USS" Cunningham and Poland's Tomasz Adamek, in which Adamek wrested the IBF cruiserweight championship from the ex-sailor on a rousing split decision. Another strong contender is the welterweight showdown in which Antonio Margarito, trailing on two of the three official scorecards entering the 11th and what proved to be final round, finally wore down WBA 147-pound champ Miguel Cotto en route to win on an absolute pip of technical knockout. But, for me, the third pairing of Israel Vazquez and Rafael Marquez has to be No. 1. These guys don't know how to do anything except to draw the best out of each other, and the round-by-round, punch-for-punch action in each instance is about as good as boxing ever gets. Vazquez retained his WBC junior featherweight title on a razor-thin split decision, but, really, both of these gallant warriors walked away winners in my book.

KNOCKOUT OF THE YEAR: KENDALL HOLT KO1 RICARDO TORRES From my experience, individual knockout preferences tend to be separated by categories. Are you more impressed by, say, the emphatic, one-punch variety? A stoppage that occurs when a fighter who has gone down himself and seemingly is in trouble somehow regains the upper hand before delivering the takeout blow? Or an ending that is the result of a sustained combination of punches, each landed shot adding to the accumulation of damage? My vote as 2008's king of KOs goes to Kendall Holt's one-round, roller-coaster ride in which he regained the WBO junior welterweight title from Ricardo Torres. Torres twice put Holt down in the first half-minute, but he left himself open moving in for the big finish and wound up catching a huge right hand that rendered him unconscious along the ropes. Elapsed time: 61 seconds. The list of potential runners-up is long, but I'll go with David "The Hayemaker" Haye's second-round wipeout of Enzo Maccarinelli and Edison Miranda's turn-out-the-lights third-round knockout of David Banks. Really, would Haye now be considered such a threat to the Klitschko-dominated heavyweight division had he not knocked the snot out of Maccarinelli in their cruiserweight unification bout? Miranda clipped Banks with the sort of bomb that leads to everything fading to black for the clipee, at least for the next 10 seconds.

ROUND OF THE YEAR: KENDALL HOLT KO1 RICARDO TORRES For my money, this was a nearly dead heat between the minute's worth of spills and thrills in Round 1 of Holt-Torres II and the sustained fury in Round 4 of Vazquez-Marquez III. Can I call it a draw, Mr. Woods? No? OK, I'll throw my support to Holt-Torres, if only because so many rounds of Vazquez-Marquez III could be included in this category. It's like three actors from the same film being nominated for an Oscar; they tend to split each other's vote. Not much chance of that happening when you cast your ballot for boxing's top round to a fight in which all the action was compressed into 61 seconds of ups, downs and hairpin turns.

UPSET OF THE YEAR: BERNARD HOPKINS UD12 KELLY PAVLIK There is a movie now in theaters, "The Curious Case of Benjamin Button," in which star Brad Pitt is born into this world as a prematurely aged infant who, miraculously, gets younger as he gets older. A fantastic tale, no? Except that Bernard "The Executioner" Hopkins seems to be actually living the life of Benjamin Button. B-Hop, who turns 44 on Jan. 15, was a 5-to-1 underdog in his 170-pound catchweight bout with undefeated middleweight titlist Kelly Pavlik, the guy who once and for all was going to demonstrate that the Philadelphian is as susceptible to the natural laws of

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diminishing returns as all normal human beings. If this keeps up, Bernard “The Baby” Hopkins will need to be burped and changed when he’s, oh, about 95. For now, though, he is boxing’s ageless wonder, the sipper of a Fountain of Youth that apparently runs beneath his Delaware estate. There are no runners-up in this category. Hey, Hopkins would have pulled the upset of the year had he eked past Pavlik, but he toyed with the hotshot kid as a cat might play with a mouse.

PROSPECT OF THE YEAR: VICTOR ORTIZ The smooth southpaw is 21 years old, 23-1-1 with 18 victories inside the distance. Sure, there are other up-and-comers who are similarly young and bearers of shiny records, but this junior welterweight looks like the real deal. And for all of you who haven’t seen him yet, consider this a heads-up to monitor the progress of welterweight Danny Garcia, who’s 10-0 with seven knockouts. He’s my early projection to win top prospect designation for 2009.

BAD DECISION OF THE YEAR: NIKOLAY VALUEV MD12 EVANDER HOLYFIELD Yeah, Commander Vander needs to be sitting in a rocking chair on the porch of his suburban Atlanta mansion and sipping an ice-cold beverage while enjoying his retirement from the ring. At 46, he’s merely a shadow of his once-magnificent self. That said, however much is left of him was more than enough to expose WBA heavyweight titlist Valuev as the pituitary-gland fraud that he so obviously is. Shouldn’t a 7-foot, 310-pounder be scarier than this? Guy looks like Frankenstein’s monster, but moves slower and hits like Mr. Softee. “No one roots for Goliath,” the late Wilt Chamberlain once observed, but apparently three non-neutral judges in Switzerland were more inclined to reward a robotic Russian giant for doing nothing than to hand a fifth version of the heavyweight title to a more active American who, if only fighting by memory, deserved better than this heist by pencil.

TRAINER OF THE YEAR: FREDDIE ROACH A disciple of the late, great Eddie Futch, Roach told us exactly how Pacquiao-De La Hoya would unfold, and he prepared Manny to follow the script to utter perfection. Then again, Roach is no stranger to getting his fighters ready to deliver bravura performances. He was voted the Boxing Writers Association of America’s Futch-Condon Trainer of the Year for 2003 and 2006, and the exit polls should soon have him being projected for a third such honor for 2008. Runner-up nods go to Javier Capetillo (Antonio Margarito), Rudy Perez (Israel Vazquez) and Naazim Richardson (Bernard Hopkins).

EVENT OF THE YEAR: END OF SOLO BOXEO ON TELEFUTURA Coming on the heels earlier in the year of the cancellation of ESPN2’s Wednesday Night Fights, the termination of this eight-year series, which gave needed exposure to fighters on the rise, is a dark day for boxing, maybe as dark or darker than the day when the USA Network pulled the plug on its Tuesday Night Fights in 1998. Runner-up is Pacquiao-De La Hoya, which had 1.25 million pay-per-view buys and generated \$70 million in PPV revenue despite a weak economy, again demonstrating that a good fight, or the prospect of one, always resonates with the public. Unfortunately, even those numbers have a downside. Although all available tickets were snapped up just 17 minutes after they went on sale, mainly of the costly ducats went to speculators who hoped to resell them at a profit. Some scalpers got scalped, proving, at least, that there is at least occasionally justice in the world.

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INSPIRATION OF THE YEAR: THE LIFE AND DEATH OF SHAUN NEGLER Bernard Hopkins' most devoted fan, 18-year-old Shaun Negler, was given no more than a couple of weeks to live as cancer ravaged the body of the Philadelphia teenager, a former amateur boxer. But Shaun refused to yield to the inevitability of his death for over three months, or just long enough to see his hero, B-Hop, dominate Kelly Pavlik, on TV. He slipped into a coma the next morning and passed away five days later.