

The Ronnies! The First Annual Year End Awards

Written by Ron Borges

Tuesday, 30 December 2008 19:00

The end of the year is a time for nostalgia and remembrance and so it is in the boxing world as well.

We pine for the Golden Days when boxing was king and we remember back to a time when the heavyweight division really made a difference rather than being in such a sorry state that it is a part of the business largely ignored by the sporting public.

Clearly boxing has begun to lose the attention of the mainstream fan that it once had for an assortment of the same old reasons: too few compelling matches, too many champions, dysfunction and disaster in the heavyweight division and a general inability for the sporting public to see the sport's best fights without having to shell out an additional \$50 or more at a time when the economy is tighter than Willie Pep's defense.

Yet for all its warts, boxing remains the most compelling sport. It is a test of the will and the skill of two men stripped half naked and left to compete in the most primal way – with their wits and their two fists. No one else to blame (although they sometimes try) for failure and no one else to praise (although they sometimes try) for success.

While 2008 may have been a disappointment in boxing's boardrooms it was not in the ring, where there were enough rising stars and compelling moments to make us yearn for what comes next while wanting to revisit what has already begun to fade into memory one last time before we move on.

FIGHTER OF THE YEAR: Manny Pacquiao

Some years there is a debate over this issue that can get as heated as a round between Israel Vasquez and Rafael Marquez but this is not one of those years.

This year there is Manny Pacquiao and then everyone else. Or, perhaps more accurately, there is Manny Pacquiao and nobody else.

That is no disrespect to fighters like Antonio Margarito, Chad Dawson, Victor Darchinyan, Joe Calzaghe, Juan Manuel Lopez, Paul Williams and the comebacking Vitali Klitschko. They all achieved major accomplishments in 2008. It is just that Pacquiao accomplished more than all of them in a year when he was quite often, and quite justifiably, compared to Henry Armstrong.

Sugar Ray Robinson is universally regarded as the greatest boxer who ever lived but Armstrong could not have been far behind. Among his many accomplishments was a 10-month stretch between October of 1937 and August of 1938 in which he won and held world titles at featherweight, welterweight and lightweight. That came at a time when boxing was a purer sport, one with only eight weight divisions instead of the current 17, and with only one champion rather than present pile of (depending on how many different organizations you can stomach)

The Ronnies! The First Annual Year End Awards

Written by Ron Borges

Tuesday, 30 December 2008 19:00

upwards of 100.

To have 100 champions is to have none, which is what makes Manny Pacquiao so remarkable. Whether he has a sanctioned belt or not, he is a champion in the eyes of the public, something he emphatically proved this year by winning a hard-fought split decision from Juan Manuel Marquez in March to win the WBC super featherweight title. He then moved up to 135 pounds and stopped WBC champion David Diaz to win the WBC lightweight championship with a spectacular ninth round knockout of a brave but beaten Diaz.

Then he completed his remarkable trilogy by stopping six-time world champion Oscar De La Hoya in eight rounds in December without losing a minute of the fight to lay claim not to a portion of the welterweight title but to claim he had been the man to retire boxing's Golden Boy.

Unlike Armstrong's situation, there was no welterweight title on the line when Pacquiao squared off with De La Hoya but he dominated the driving force of boxing, a 35-year-old De La Hoya who had not fought at the 147-pound limit in 7 1/2 years, while moving up three weight classes in less than a year.

De La Hoya was a better than 2-1 favorite in large part because he had lost a close split decision to then pound-for-pound champion Floyd Mayweather, Jr. 18 months earlier and so the consensus was that De La Hoya's size advantage and his proven skills against Mayweather would prevail.

Not even close.

Pacquiao dominated the fight in the same way he had Diaz in his only fight at 135 pounds, winning every minute of every round until a disheartened De La Hoya finally quit on his stool after the eighth round.

Pacquiao was too fast, too slick, too powerful, too aggressive, too everything for De La Hoya to handle. Remarkable as that performance was that alone did not win him my nod as fighter of the year but when you combine it with capturing world titles in two other weight classes over a 10 month period and again dropping Marquez to gain a razor-thin edge over his nemesis and doing it all while moving up over 20 pounds in the process, it is impossible to think of anyone who did more since the days when Henry Armstrong roamed the ring.

TRAINER OF THE YEAR: Freddie Roach

Roach is the man who prepared Pacquiao for all those victories and so you could stop right there and have a hard time coming up with another trainer to make this a debate.

Certainly Antonio Margarito's trainer, Javier Capetillo, has done an admirable job as well this year but Roach was the first man to believe Pacquiao could defeat De La Hoya and he convinced first himself and then his fighter of it by showing him a plan Pacquiao could believe in and then training him perfectly.

The Ronnies! The First Annual Year End Awards

Written by Ron Borges

Tuesday, 30 December 2008 19:00

While De La Hoya was drawn and at weight far too soon (more than three weeks before the fight he already weighed 145) and the strain to maintain it for so long proved to be more than he could handle, Roach had Pacquiao perfectly prepared at 142 1/2 pounds.

Roach made no mistakes in readying Pacquiao for any of his three title fights while also maintaining a jammed gym in Hollywood, CA. where he trains some of the world's top fighters.

That now includes a reclamation project which has only begun to bear fruit. Roach has been asked to retool young Amir Khan, the British Olympic sensation in Athens, who was knocked cold in one round by a none descript fighter brought to England to serve as mere cannon fodder for the well protected Khan.

Now Roach has been asked to revive his career by teaching him how to protect a vulnerable chin and to date he's 1-0 with him. But regardless of how successful he might be with Khan, in the end Freddie Roach will be remembered for what he did with Manny Pacquiao – which simply put was to help turn him into a legend.

PROSPECT OF THE YEAR: James Kirkland

This is a tough call because although Kirkland has the kind of power that makes not only champions but ticket sellers, he did not stand alone this year among rising stars.

There was also Victor Ortiz, who is not called Vicious for nothing; the Cuban sensation Yuriorkis Gamboa, who is an all-offense kind of guy who is 12-0 with 10 knockouts but who has already been down four times in his career and thus makes every fight a potential adventure; Devon Alexander, the best fighter in promoter Don King's shrinking stable, who is 17-0 with 10 knockouts and this year was particularly impressive defeating former world champion DeMarcus "Chop Chop" Corley and ex-title contender Miguel Callist.

Alexander has probably been in with the more difficult competition, Ortiz probably has the most charismatic personality and Gamboa's loose defense makes him the most intriguing fighter in the group yet in the end it is Kirkland who seems to have the greatest upside primarily because he tends to put people on their backside.

Kirkland (24-0, 21 KO) is trained by Ann Wolfe, a demanding and hard-nosed former women's champion who seems to understand power punching is what sells tickets. Kirkland comes into the ring not only with bad intentions but with concussive ones and thus far he has left with his hand held high and his opponent's head hung low most of the time.

He was 3-0 this year, all victories coming by knockout. Although his level of competition needs to be stepped up, thus far he seems to have as much upside as any young fighter in the world. What he does with it is up to him but he has already said "No 154 pounder can beat me," and he intends to prove it in 2009.

FIGHT OF THE YEAR: Antonio Margarito TKO11 Miguel Cotto

The Ronnies! The First Annual Year End Awards

Written by Ron Borges

Tuesday, 30 December 2008 19:00

It was a tough choice between Margarito's stoppage of Cotto and Israel Vazquez's split decision over Rafael Marquez in the third fight of their trilogy. That night Vazquez was down in the fourth round and wobbled in the seventh before rallying to the point where he hurt Marquez badly in the 11th round during a three minute assault. Vazquez then came out for the final round sensing he needed to do something spectacular to win and he did. He overwhelmed the tiring Marquez, finally dropping him late in the round for his margin of victory.

Yet as stirring as that fight was it was overshadowed by Margarito's late rally to beat down Cotto and cement his position as the best welterweight in the world.

Early in the fight Cotto boxed slickly and effectively, landing solidly enough to control for a time Margarito's relentless stalking of him. He also seemed at times to cause him problems with his speed and movement but as the rounds wore on and Margarito refused to take a backwards step Cotto, the smaller man by far, began to wear down and be hurt by Margarito's body shots and nasty uppercuts on the inside.

Margarito, trailing on the scorecards in the late rounds, continued to stalk Cotto regardless of what he was being hit by before finally beginning to bust up Cotto's bloody face late in the fight. Along with it he broke his spirit.

By the 11th round Cotto was weary, wary and in retreat, by now fully aware that despite having hit Margarito with flush shots that time and again snapped his head around as if he was a bobble head doll he could neither hurt him nor dissuade him from pursuing him and throwing howitzers back at him.

Margarito finally dropped Cotto early in round 11 and when Cotto got up he was a beaten man in full retreat. Margarito followed him across the ring but before he could nail him another flush shot, Cotto simply took a knee without being hit, the universal sign of surrender. As he did, his cornermen rushed into the ring and stopped the fight, crowning Margarito as the king of the welterweight division.

ROUND OF THE YEAR: Holt-Torres II, Round 1

Although you could make a strong case for Round 4 of the Vasquez-Marquez II fight (and many others have) my vote goes to the 61 seconds that constituted the entirety of the rematch between Kendall Holt and Ricardo Torres.

Most 12-round title fights don't pack in as much drama and action in 36 minutes as these two did in the 61 seconds their match lasted beginning with Torres dropping Holt barely 12 seconds into the fight with a massive overhand right. When Holt (25-2, 13 KO) arose he was clearly in trouble and Holt didn't waste a lot of time trying to keep him there.

He swarmed Holt, finally dropping him a second time when after a flurry of punches both of Holt's gloves touched the canvas. The fight was now 32 seconds old and Holt appeared to be getting old.

The Ronnies! The First Annual Year End Awards

Written by Ron Borges

Tuesday, 30 December 2008 19:00

But as Torres charged him wildly to try and finish him off, the two collided heads accidentally and Torres came out the worst for wear. After their heads slammed together, Torres was both cut and dazed and when Holt realized it he rallied himself and went after Torres with vengeance in his heart.

This time he landed a flurry of punches himself that drove Torres to squat on the lowest rope, out on his feet before he slumped to the floor completely out of it. By the time he came to, he learned he'd been on the wrong end of the Round of the Year.

STORY OF THE YEAR: Sadly it is not about a fight or a fighter but rather about the continuing economic collapse of boxing, at least in the short term.

A year ago boxing seemed to be in a revival. Attendance and pay-per-view sales were up and the suits that run the business side of the sport finally seemed to understand that interest in boxing wasn't dying, interest in the boxing matches these guys were putting on was dying.

But just as 2007 was a revelation, 2008 became a disappointment. Pay-per-view numbers were down significantly as the larger economy began to crumble and both ESPN2 and Telefutera cancelled their regularly televised boxing shows, a sign that the long-term health of prize fighting as a main stream sport is seriously being compromised.

ESPN2 moved to pull the plug on its summertime, Wednesday night series, retaining the Friday Night Fights with Teddy Atlas at ringside but still giving up a sizeable share of a shrinking market.

Then Telefutera, which was doing about 40 shows a year, stunned the boxing world when it announced it would no longer do live televised boxing either despite gaining a consistently high rating because the cost of those shows could not be justified in light of other debt taken on when the network was sold.

That meant the sport had lost two of its main venues for showcasing young talent and getting them some recognition and a much-needed spotlight among fans. Those opportunities are gone now and no one is stepping up to take their place, which is alarming long term.

Worse, it appears the public has grown weary of watching old stars in decline, even though HBO in particular continues to try and foist them off on the public.

That's why Calzaghe vs. Jones, Jr. and Hopkins vs. Pavlik did so poorly on pay-per-view, barely cracking 200,000 household buys. The public wants new faces, new stars. They want to see guys like Andre Berto and Andre Ward and the Dirrell brothers and Amir Khan and many more, rather than old shadows of fighters who used to be great but the cable networks would rather try and capitalize on old reliable names believing that sells more than the sport itself.

This is nonsense but it's been their formula for short term success for some time. Unfortunately, while they line their pockets the sport deteriorates because fans neither know who the champions are, nor who the young faces on the rise might be.

The Ronnies! The First Annual Year End Awards

Written by Ron Borges

Tuesday, 30 December 2008 19:00

The December showdown between De la Hoya and Pacquiao did do near record box office and PPV numbers but even that success seemed a Trojan Horse, a reminder of what the fight game used to be and still could be with proper promotion and long-term thinking but which it is a far cry from at the moment.

COMEBACK OF THE YEAR

You have to hand it to Vitali Klitschko. Admittedly the heavyweight division is in a steep decline but he did come out of a 4 1/2 year layoff during which he ran for political office, performed charity work in Africa and paid little attention to boxing beyond watching his younger brother, Wladimir, win two of the four bogus world titles.

Then he decides it's time to earn a paycheck again and, without a tuneup, comes back and batters Samuel Peter so badly it appeared Peter was the one coming off a long layoff.

Eventually Klitschko made Peter quit on his stool to lay claim to the WBC title belt and arguably the title of true heavyweight champion because, frankly, I'd like his chances against his brother if the two ever met. They won't, they insist, and it's probably true. Sadly, it's also the only really compelling fight in the division unless young David Haye proves his chin is as strong as his punch... which we know it isn't.

DISASTER OF THE YEAR: Bernard Hopkins dec. Kelly Pavlik

As admirable a job as the 43-year-old former middleweight champion did in undressing and exposing Pavlik's modest boxing skills, Hopkins did his sport no favors by knocking off one of the few boxing stars who had begun to get national recognition in magazines and on television while crossing over into the consciousness of the general sports fan after twice beating up Jermain Taylor.

Although the lopsided Hopkins victory keeps him alive in the sport, boxing suffered overall because what it needs right now is not the resurrection of another old face but the spawning of fresh new ones that young fans can relate to. Kelly Pavlik was one of those until Bernard Hopkins made that face all but unrecognizable by exposing his limited boxing skills.

No one knows where Pavlik will go from here but boxing goes back to the drawing board in 2009, a sport in search of a new identity and some new faces the public will latch on to. Until that happens there's always Manny vs. Ricky Hatton and then, perhaps, the return from exile of Floyd Mayweather, Jr. to square off with Pacquiao by the end of the year in what would figure to be a blockbuster affair.

It is that kind of hope that keeps fight fans believing that next year, which soon will be this year, is going to be better than last year.