

## CALZAGHE-The Best Brit Of All Time?

Written by Ron Borges

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For very likely the last time in boxing, Joe Calzaghe proved again that he's no ordinary Joe.

Thursday afternoon the reigning light heavyweight champion of the world, and truly still the best super middleweight in the world as well, formally announced what many in Britain had feared - that he has fought his last. In Britain this became not merely sporting news but among the lead stories on the BBC's 6 p.m. national news cast. It is unimaginable that a similar fistic retirement in the United States would warrant even a mention on a national newscast let alone the kind of headlines his retirement wrought but such is the respect Calzaghe commands in the UK, where many will argue he is the greatest boxer in that island's long fistic history dating back to the days of bare-knuckle brawlers.

When such a debate begins the names of Lennox Lewis, Jimmy Wilde, Ted "Kid" Lewis and Ken Buchanan are always immediately mentioned. Some add the likes of John Conteh, Barry McGuighan and Freddie Mills into the argument. A few of the younger generation lobby for Naseem Hamed or Nigel Benn as well while the grey beards mention Randy Turpin or the featherweight Howard Winstone, who lost three epic battles with Mexican legend Vincente Saldivar before finally winning the WBC title in 1968 from Mitsunori Seki, in the debate.

But now that Calzaghe is officially retired the name of the undefeated former super middleweight and light heavyweight champion immediately joins the short list for Britain's all-time best and certainly is at or near the top in any debate of their finest post-war fighters, joining Buchanan, Lewis and McGuighan.

After outpointing and savagely beating an aged Roy Jones, Jr., last Nov. 8 in Madison Square Garden, Calzaghe hinted that he felt there were no mountains to climb. Recently he began playing golf again, a sport he'd given up nine years ago because his persistent elbow problems were traced to his golf swing and so he abandoned it for the spartan life of a prize fighter. The fact that he had begun to pick up his driver and wedge again was a hint of the announcement to come.

These days, boxing is made up primarily of molehills masquerading as mountains but it is difficult to argue with Calzaghe's resume. He retires with an unblemished 46-0 record, 32 knockouts and clear domination of the 168-pound division for 11 years. During that time he defended the title he first won from Chris Eubank on Oct. 11, 1997, 21 times before moving up to light heavyweight to outpoint and wear out Bernard Hopkins last April in his first appearance in the United States before slicing Jones up in what now seems to have been his final appearance in the ring.

"It was a difficult decision but I have achieved everything I wanted to achieve in boxing," Calzaghe told the BBC. "I've been world champion for 11 years. I've got no other goals to go for. That's why I'm calling it a day."

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“I had a long think with my family. My children wanted me to give it up, plus my Mum. My decision is to retire. I’ve been boxing for 25 years and, like I said, I’ve achieved everything I want to achieve.

“You can never say never in this game, but I can't see myself boxing again. There are loads of things I want to do. I'm proud to be one of only a few fighters in history to retire undefeated.”

Calzaghe, who will turn 37 on March 23, suffered with numerous hand injuries and through much criticism over the years from those who wanted to see him come to the U.S. and match wits and fists with Jones, Hopkins and others. Instead he did his work mostly not far from his home in Wales, building a massive British following that culminated on the night he unified the super middleweight title by defeating Denmark’s Mikkel Kessler in front of 50,150 fans at Millenium Stadium in Cardiff a year and a half ago. That came after first totally destroying then undefeated IBF super middleweight champion Jeff Lacy, the former American Olympian, in a stunningly lopsided beating few outside his tight circle anticipated.

That circle included his father and lifelong trainer, Enzo, who was named trainer of the year by the Boxing Writers Association of America because of what he had accomplished with his son. Calzaghe told the BBC that the night he defeated Kessler after trailing early in the match was “a dream come true” because he was the underdog in his native land. Although no one realized it at the time he would never again fight in Great Britain, finishing his career with two victories by wide margins over Hopkins in Las Vegas and then Jones in New York last year.

Calzaghe now plans to launch a career as a boxing promoter but also has lined up television opportunities in the UK and frankly will very likely be able to make a lucrative living simply working the boxing celebrity circuit in England and Europe. His biography, co-written with the Sunday Times of London’s Brian Doogan, was a best seller and finalist for sports book of the year in the UK last year, selling over 125,000 copies.

Calzaghe began his 16-year professional career after going 110-10 as an amateur. Four years after turning professional, he stepped in to face Eubank, himself a British legend, after then WBO super middleweight champion Steve Collins chose to retire rather than defend the title against Calzaghe.

Although Eubank was past his prime he was still a respected and feared figure but Calzaghe dropped him in the first round of the fight only to see him rise like the Phoenix from the ashes of the only knockdown of his career and battle Calzaghe toe-to-toe to the final bell in what Calzaghe still considers the hardest 12 rounds of his career.

After that, as things turned out, Joe Calzaghe simply could not, or would not, be stopped. His fellow Welshman Nicky Cook, the one-time Commonwealth light heavyweight champion said of Calzaghe yesterday, “If you judge him on paper and achievements, you have to put him at the very top of the course. He has certainly put Welsh boxing on the map.”

It is a map on which he will no longer be found, having noticed over the past year that his taste for the hard training demanded of the sport was no longer to his liking. Although he continued to

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prepare himself for battle, Joe Calzaghe more and more came to realize it was finally time for him to become what he had never been before.

Time, at last, to be just another ordinary Joe...even if now a legendary one as well.