

## Mouthy Mundine Moves To Middleweight

Written by Ronan Keenan

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“It is the Mundine show and I am bloody glad that I got to be part of it,” remarked Shannan Taylor after losing a unanimous decision to fellow Australian Anthony Mundine on Wednesday.

Mundine has interesting views on the world and has managed to continually court controversy throughout his sporting career. He has drawn hostile media reaction for acts that include: accusing America of bringing the September 11 terrorist attacks “upon themselves”, making a rap video featuring the burnings of the Union Jack flag and a photo of then-Australian Prime Minister John Howard, and a myriad of comments disparaging the most successful fighters of his native land.

Unsurprisingly, corporate sponsors have distanced themselves from the two-time super middleweight world titlist.

Yet one man’s villain can be the next man’s hero.

Mundine, born in New South Wales of indigenous Australian descent, has been awarded accolades honoring him as the Aboriginal person of the year and is viewed as an icon by thousands of young Aborigines.

Some portray him as a vehicle for expressing the views of Australia’s original dwellers, a race that was long scorned and rejected by the Christian conquerors of the land. In a move apparently inspired by his heroes Muhammad Ali and Malcolm X, Mundine converted to Islam in an ostensible effort to move further away from the religion of his ancestors’ persecutors.

For Mundine, denigrating symbols of Australia’s government is a rallying cry for his followers to stand up to what he believes is a domineering regime.

“[The burning of the flag] signifies politicians and the structure of the government and its foundations,” the 33-year-old told The Australian newspaper. “What they have done to my people in the past and what they are still doing today mentally and psychologically.

“It’s not to start a race riot. The Union Jack, that’s the government, that’s what it was built on and it’s a symbol of oppression. It’s a fight for justice, we have to stand up and be counted.”

He described John Howard as “a puppet to the bigger brothers, who are England and America” and poured scorn on Cathy Freeman, an Olympic gold medal athlete of Aboriginal descent recognized by mainstream Australia as the perfect role model for the largely impoverished race. Mundine branded Freeman a “sell-out,” as if viewing her as a defector that has forgotten the past in favor of generating income for the corporate world.

Mundine vows never to disregard his impecunious roots. He regularly trains at a shabby gym in Sydney and has made discreet trips into the Australian heartland to talk to troubled youngsters

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and help inspire them to join the recently formed Indigenous Boxing Academy.

"I'm not one of those guys who needs to bring 20 cameras. I do it out of my own heart," he told FoxSports.

"People can't buy my heart," he added. "My heart and my soul; that's who I am. I represent the people. I represent the struggle. I represent the common man. And [the media] might want to portray me as a villain, this or that, a d\*\*\*head, brash - there are reasons why I'm like that."

Like the youthful Ali, he is determined to maintain his political views regardless of mainstream opinion, but Mundine's charisma falls short of his hero's. While Ali courted the media through an unscathed, perfectly formed visage, Mundine has the face of a fighter, a rugged jaw line embalmed with rough skin.

While his fights attract significant publicity in Australia, many viewers are more interested in seeing him lose, as evidenced when he was jeered and pelted with debris after his 2005 knockout victory over Rico Chong Nee in Perth. Mundine had previously sparked the ire of many boxing fans after labelling Hall of Fame inductee Jeff Fenech a "limited fighter" and former light heavyweight world titlist Danny Green a "bum."

Yet his own boxing ability is also a topic of contention.

Mundine turned professional at 26 after abandoning a successful rugby career that he claims was stymied by racism. While his only experience of boxing was a handful of amateur bouts in his teenage years, Mundine's exceptional athletic ability and guidance from his father Tony, a world-class middleweight contender in the 1960s, has seen him develop into an agile, sharp-hitting prizefighter.

Over 30,000 attended his lopsided points win over the popular Green. On that night Mundine effectively shutdown his strong, heavy-handed opponent, utilizing superior hand speed and footwork.

In claiming his WBA titles he scored decisive victories over respectable opposition in Sam Soliman and Antwun Echols, but the defeats on his 33-3 (23 KOs) record highlighted severe vulnerabilities.

His first world title bout came in just his eleventh pro outing against the long reigning IBF champ Sven Ottke in 2001. Mundine journeyed to Ottke's homeland of Germany and put up a commendable effort against the skilful champion, but in the tenth round a right cross sent the Australian crashing to the canvas in shocking fashion. The manner of the loss was worrying, given that the light-hitting Ottke finished with just six knockout wins on his final career tally, but some Mundine supporters dismiss questions about their fighter's punch resistance, categorizing the punch a freak blow that landed high on the temple.

Regardless, Mundine's points defeats to Manny Siaca and Mikkel Kessler pointed to a fragility in the Australian's psyche. Against Siaca, Mundine was floored in the second and thereafter

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allowed himself to be outworked by the relatively ordinary pressure fighter, relinquishing his WBA title in the process.

Mundine put up a more robust effort versus Kessler in 2005, but never provided a genuine threat to the fighter now regarded as the world's premier 168-pounder. In both losses it was apparent that Mundine seemingly retreats into a shell if he is unable to dictate the pace of the contest.

Physical ailments have also hampered his career. In August 2007 a serious infection threatened the sight in his left eye, while a long-term hip injury will require surgery in the coming months.

Yet Mundine, who has worked with Roy Jones Sr. on numerous occasions, has racked up 12 straight victories since the Kessler defeat, and has developed a working relationship with Golden Boy Promotions. He won every round in his points victory over Shannan Taylor and was able to box well within his true ability against the rugged, yet faded 36-year-old.

Mundine seemed content to attain a decision victory, using his speed to counter Taylor's attacks and control the bout's sluggish tempo. Given that it was his first fight at 160-pounds, stamina issues may have been weighing on his mind.

"I worked hard to get to middleweight," explained Mundine after the bout. "I didn't know how I was going to hold up. But the longer I stay at middleweight, the stronger I will get, the better I will get."

Mundine's drop in weight seems to have been inspired by the prospect of a WBA title shot against current incumbent Felix Sturm – a smooth, yet physically unimposing boxer. Mundine is highly ranked by the organization and if the match comes to fruition it will occur in Sturm's base of Germany, but Mundine views the possible excursion as an opportunity to exorcise his pugilistic demons.

"It feels as if God is drawing me back to Germany," he said in reference to the Ottke defeat eight years ago. "This time I will be going there as a man, whereas last time I was just a boy in boxing terms."

Many observers also hope that Mundine's rhetoric will take a more mature tone. But whether he will be remembered as a spiteful egomaniac, brilliant self-publicist or a heroic campaigner misunderstood by the masses, his pugilistic epitaph is far from finalized.

"I've got the will, I've got the drive, I've got the determination and I've got the talent, the sheer brilliance, the ability and I've got the flamboyance, everything that makes the great champions. And in the future people are going to see that," he predicts.

To achieve such recognition Mundine must prove that when the going gets tough in the ring, he can fight with the same tenacity with which he craves publicity.