

A Proper Introduction To Chris John

Written by Ronan Keenan
Saturday, 21 February 2009 19:00

Despite being an iconic figure in his native Indonesia, featherweight world titlist Chris John has experienced relative anonymity in Houston during the build-up to Saturday's defence against Rocky Juarez at the Toyota Center.

But being an outsider is nothing new for John, who is accustomed to fighting thousands of miles away from his homeland in locations as diverse as Australia and Japan. The endeavors have thus far been successful, as he has enjoyed a five-year reign as the WBA 126-pound titlist, defending the belt ten times en route to accumulating a 42-0-1 (22 KOs) record and pervasive domestic fame.

Yet the 29-year-old's profile in the United States is diminutive, even among ardent boxing fans. John is noteworthy for a decision win over the outstanding Juan Manuel Marquez in Borneo nearly three years ago, but the contention surrounding the victory and his subsequent triumphs over obscure opposition have overshadowed his exceptional ability.

But a newly-formed relationship with Golden Boy Promotions has led to John's appearance in Texas on the HBO-televised card headlined by Marquez' showdown with Juan Diaz. According to John's U.S. adviser Sampson Lewkowicz, the Indonesian will be taking a pay cut for Saturday's fight, but then again, money had nothing to do with John's introduction to boxing.

Born in Jakarta and raised in a small village in Central Java, John was tutored in boxing by his father Djohan, who believed his energetic son needed a focus in life that would serve as an outlet for his youthful exuberance.

"[Chris] was a hyperactive kid," recalled Djohan, a former amateur boxer. "I thought it was better for him to be doing something useful. But the only skill I [can teach] is boxing."

Djohan administered a strict routine for his son. He bought Chris a bicycle so that the youngster would not commute to school on motorized transport, thus tiring him out. Djohan believed that if Chris was exhausted on his return home from school he would then take a nap, thus replenishing his energy and enabling him to train harder in the evening.

The training sessions took place on a section of disused rice fields, and lasted three hours a day regardless of the weather. But the regimented routine soon began to take its toll on Chris.

"I felt like I was being forced to do something that I didn't like," he revealed. "My father did everything he could to make me like boxing. Everything was tightly controlled. Dad scheduled breakfast, lunch and dinner. The training had to start and finish on time. It didn't matter if it was raining, or if something happened."

After years of intensive instruction, Djohan felt that at 15, John had acquired the necessary physical and mental tools to compete. His debut amateur contest was a victorious one, and

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from that point on Chris learned to appreciate the value of the strict schedule, while also realizing that he possessed a special talent.

After finishing high school, John sought to capitalize on his pugilistic aptitude and left home for the province's capital city of Semarang to begin his paid career under the tutelage of Sutan Raming. The Indonesian boxing scene has a reputation as an unforgiving environment, with a reported 22 ring deaths occurring in the country since 1948, and it didn't take John long to realize that the professional game was a ruthless affair. In his twelfth outing he endured a brutal struggle against Muhammad Alfaridzi, and was forced to dig deep to grind out a knockout in the final round.

Yet he speaks about the dramatic twelfth round victory with humility.

"I was just lucky," acknowledged John. "It was a very hard match for me. My nose was broken. Until round four, I had no concentration anymore, everything was a blur. I was just punching around."

While rising up the pro ranks John also demonstrated a noted talent for wushu, a martial art similar to kung fu. He claimed medals at a number of international tournaments, but when presented with an opportunity for a world boxing title, he decided to dedicate himself wholly to his profession.

In 2004 a conclusive points victory over Osamu Sato in Japan saw John claim the WBA strap in a mild upset. In doing so, he became only the third fighter in Indonesia's history to claim a world title, but his status as a national hero was soon threatened by an ugly legal dispute.

John claimed that Raming took an unfair percentage of his purse for the first title defense against Jose Rojas, prompting the fighter to leave his longtime trainer and relocate his training camps to Perth, Australia under the guidance of Craig Christian, a figure who is no stranger to the nation's legal system. John believed that the move was necessary to aid his development as a world-class fighter, but various boxing figures in Indonesia criticized his decision, arguing that John was breaking a legally binding contract while also disparaging the sport in his native country.

"The Indonesian people must be disappointed by [John's] decision," the WBA's Indonesian representative Tourino Tidar told The Jakarta Post, while chairman of the Indonesian Boxing Commission Anton Sihombing added that John was "big headed" and had "forgotten his roots".

But John contended that the move would ultimately benefit his burgeoning career.

"I have a room in the back of the gym [in Perth] and stay with my brother for 6 to 8 weeks before each fight," he told Fightnews. "It is an old cliché but here in [Australia] I am able to eat, sleep and live boxing for the hard preparation I need to do to defend my title. I don't even go out; [I] just live a monastic lifestyle. My country of Indonesia has made me proud and I train [in Australia] away from the public adoration I receive at home to give me the mental and physical edge I need to be a dominant world champion at featherweight."

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John agreed to pay his ex-trainer Rp150 million [approximately \$15,000] to settle the dispute, while his decision to still reside in Semarang between fights and compete frequently in Indonesia eased tensions with the boxing public. Soon after, a dominating points victory over Derrick Gainer fully restored his popularity.

But the ensuing triumph over Marquez would bring John toward iconic status in his homeland. Yet elsewhere, John's success was met with skepticism. The western boxing community, unable to view the fight on television, struggled to comprehend that a pound-for-pound caliber fighter could lose a unanimous decision to an obscure opponent such as John. The setting also prompted claims that Marquez was the victim of a hometown decision, while claims of injustice from the loser's camp helped fuel such concerns.

"It is not fair," claimed Marquez' spokesman Jaime Quintana. "[John's management] did whatever they were supposed to do to win the fight; gloves [the fighters had to wear the Winning brand of gloves instead of Marquez' preferred choice of Reyes], coming all the way here, many things put us at the disadvantage here."

But Quintana later stated, "It was a close fight but I thought we took seven rounds." "I think I won a close fight," added Marquez. Such comments hardly indicate a blatant robbery.

The twelve round bout was a nip-and-tuck affair, with a relatively low degree of contact between the fighters. While John employed lateral movement and produced a more voluminous output through long punches, Marquez often connected with heavier right crosses and hooks to the body. The rounds were difficult to score, yet the cards of 116-112, 116-110 and 117-111 did seem too wide. But Scott Mallon, who was ringside for the fight, scored it 116-110 for John and reported on TSS that "[The decision] was fair. [Marquez] came on in the middle rounds, but then [John] started to dance, moving side-to-side, and it made it hard for [Marquez] to hit him solid."

In the three years following that fight, John has only competed in five bouts, all of which were straightforward victories over generally mediocre opposition. The only blemish on his professional record is a technical draw incurred against Jose Rojas, when a clash of heads in the fourth round left John with a deep gash, forcing the fight's stoppage. John easily won the rematch on a wide points decision, using his superior speed to turn back a game effort from Rojas, who holds a third round knockout over current 122-pound titlist Celestino Caballero .

The decision by Golden Boy Promotions to bring John to the U.S. and put him on the same card as Marquez seems to be an effort to drum up stateside interest in a rematch between the pair. At 35, Marquez is nearing the end of a stellar career and his focus is likely on avenging recent defeats. And given that Manny Pacquiao is campaigning at 140 pounds, a matchup with John is probably the only bout that will interest the Mexican.

Since Marquez has recently been fighting at lightweight, a bout between the two may have to take place at a catch-weight, but moving up a few pounds shouldn't bother John, who has had difficulty making 126-pounds. Last July his fight with Jackson Asiku was bizarrely cancelled on the day of the weigh-in, with The Jakarta Post reporting that John was nearly 10 pounds above the featherweight limit a day earlier.

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Victory over Juarez on Saturday is no given, and the Houston native, who has been competing at junior lightweight, is expected to be the physically stronger fighter.

John is not a powerful hitter and is most effective when fighting on the outside and Juarez, 28-4 (20 KOs), should have a clear advantage if he can get within John's long straight blows. On occasion, the Indonesian has looked ragged when trading in close ranges, Aswinging sloppy punches while leaving himself vulnerable to hooks to the body and head. Notably, in his 2007 points defeat to Marquez, Juarez enjoyed success with hard lefts to the body and the right cross.

John likes to set a quick tempo, employing quick footwork behind a sharp left hand. He moves his upper body constantly, while favoring the double jab, straight right combination. This ought to prove effective against Juarez, who stalks forward behind a high guard and generally punches in sporadic, yet heavy, sequences.

The clash of styles should provide an absorbing contest.

"I think it will be a fantastic fight for the crowd; boxer versus aggressive fighter," predicts John.

And while Juarez will have thousands of Houstonites cheering him on, John will have millions of reasons to win.

"I have the expectations of Indonesia on my shoulder," he declares. "I will do them proud."