ATOP THE EUROPEAN HITTING HILL- Even if you're an undefeated champion, as the old saying goes, sometimes it's lonely to be the King.

After stopping Raul Marquez last November, it looked like IBF middleweight titlist "King" Arthur Abraham, 28-0 (23 KOs), would take a big step toward more substantial recognition and paydays. Such progress is often listed in "global" terms, but what that usually translates to is pay-per-view status in the United States.

I remember the optimism that surrounded Arthur's camp like a glow, as they discussed what was then considered a very likely scenario in which Arthur travelled abroad to meet an established, marketable opponent that would whet the public's appetite for a unification showdown against red hot Kelly Pavlik. That tentative time frame had Arthur appearing somewhere like Las Vegas or New York in the spring, then meeting Pavlik for a huge summer bash.

Those visions of slugging sugarplums never developed, complicated of course by Pavlik's stunning defeat to Bernard Hopkins. Subsequently for Arthur, another hot topic tilt, a unification against arch-rival countryman Felix Sturm that could yet become the biggest fight in German boxing history, also fizzled before even reaching a primary process.

Among other disappointing developments for the Arthur camp and his promoter Sauerland Event, the pair of most mentioned, proposed US based foes that Abraham's camp was optimistic about meeting this season will face each other instead, as Winky Wright and Paul Williams face off at Mandalay Bay on April 11th.

Now, for his part, Abraham faces undefeated but also underexposed challenger Lajuan Simon at the Ostseehalle in Kiel, Germany this Saturday night. There's no guarantee Arthur wins, but he doesn't seem to be looking past Simon, 21-0 (12 KOs), and has to be considered a substantial favorite over the Philadelphia contender.

Perhaps 30-year-old Simon, a 6'1 prospect, can fully capitalize on the openings in Abraham's still improving defense that Marquez found but couldn't exploit. If so, it would be hard to top in the Upset of the Year category.

More than likely though, by a wide percentage, Abraham scores another convincing, treadwater knockout.

During exclusive contact with The Sweet Science, Abraham sounded calm and prepared for whatever the immediate future held.

"Together with my coach Uli Wegner, I have analyzed Simon closely," said Abraham. "We have watched tapes of his fights and know what to expect from him. A famous German football coach

once said 'The next match is always the most difficult', such is the case with Simon. He wants to take the title away from me and I can not allow that to happen. If I don't perform at one hundred percent and win, all my future plans of fighting Pavlik are destroyed. That will not happen, either."

"I think it is a shame that neither Pavlik or Sturm have the guts to fight me," continued Abraham. "We offered Sturm 2.5 million euros (over 3 million dollars) to stage a unification but he ducked out. He is scared and everyone knows it. As for Pavlik, I hope we can set something up soon. My management has been in touch with Top Rank for months and I'm confident we can get it done. A unification is what the whole boxing world wants to see. The Hopkins fight showed that Pavlik can be beaten, but that was nothing new to me!"

In my observations of the classy Sauerland team, including the process of negotiation and development of the Nikolai Valuev-Evander Holyfield fight, they have always been straightforward and forthright, whether things were progressing well for them or not.

To hear Abraham's version, he'd gladly tackle the winner of the Wright-Williams bout in the same Vegas arena immediately, and offer necessary concessions to make it happen as a building block step toward Pavlik.

Still, some mechanisms that seem obvious are much more complicated than they appear.

Despite Arthur's recognition as one of the game's top performers among a growing audience, he still has a few things to prove.

No one questions the power and conditioning of Abraham's chiseled physique, but the fact remains that even with some quality wins and highlight reel knockouts, Abraham has never posted a big victory over a proven elite fighter in their prime.

Abraham's 2006 unanimous decision over a then unbeaten Edison Miranda may have been his best showing so far, or it could have been his four round rematch stoppage against a faded looking Miranda last June. Then again, Arthur's win over a still tricky Howard Eastman may well be the true highpoint of Arthur's current resume.

None of those notches carry the prestige a decisive victory against foes like Pavlik or Sturm would hold.

There are widespread, weighty questions of who needs who more amongst performers who weigh-in around 160 pounds, and also of the risk- reward factors involved.

Williams or Wright, who held critical HBO approval, could still be next in line for Abraham, but that's really no more likely now than it was last year.

If the surging Williams beats the well-travelled Wright, "The Punisher" could very likely be in position for a bigger pay check with much less of a downside factor than Abraham brings to the table. And at Winky's winding down stage of the game he probably wants every big fight he can

get in the near future. Realistically, losing to a fighter like Williams or Abraham won't really hurt Wright's current status. Overall, at this stage Wright was probably avoided for major contests more than either Abraham or Williams.

Arthur could always move up a weight division or two if he has to. How high Williams can go in weight and stay formidable remains to be determined, but for Arthur there's always the possibility of fighting someone like Hopkins, who's flexible on the scales and remains a potential big money opponent for just about anybody who comes in around 160 pounds. But remember, Hopkins kept himself in that position by not hesitating too much to take fights if he wasn't the favorite or didn't get all the contractual points he might have preferred.

Arthur may find himself in the position of having to take shorter money on foreign turf, but if he can win big against someone like Wright or Williams, he'll have considerably more leverage at the negotiating table next time around. It should only take one big win to put him in a solid position to meet somebody like Pavlik, Hopkins, or perhaps Mikkel Kessler.

Then, win or lose a few fights like that, Abraham could return to Germany for bigger bucks than projected now in regional clashes with the likes of Sebastian Sylvester or Sergiy Dzinziruk.

Demand for a mega bout versus Sturm isn't likely to fade unless both men fall into losing streaks. Arthur won't be holding his breath for that one.

"There is always hope, but a fight against Sturm does not seem to be realistic," observed Arthur. "But I am always willing to take on Sturm to prove to the German fans and the international audience that I am the best middleweight in the world. However, Sturm's behavior reminds me of a scared rabbit that is running away from something."

Chris Meyer, a vital part of the Sauerland braintrust, gave this summary of Arthur's present state of the gloved-up union.

"We offered Sturm 2.5 million euro. It was the second time we made a superb offer but Universum refused. They are scared of losing their only star fighter. Everybody knows that King Arthur has got too much power for Sturm. As for Pavlik, we would like to stage that fight no matter the venue or the time. We have been in touch with Top Rank, but apart from nice talking from their end during the last couple of months there isn't any interest.

"A lot of rumors are circulating but the fact is that they neither have made us any offer nor have we demanded ridiculous amounts. Our job now is to take things in our own hands and give Arthur more exposure in the USA, to build him up on that side of the Atlantic too. But I am still optimistic that a unification with Pavlik can happen in 2009."

"I would love to come to Pavlik's hometown," professed Abraham. "I will fight him anywhere in the world, I have no problem coming to his backyard. In fact, I fought Miranda in Flordia. You know how it ended. I would fight Pavlik in his living room."

Abraham understands that if he gets busy against marquee opponents over the next couple

years he could retire sooner rather than later, with a large nest egg as padding against taking long term punches or ongoing global economic issues.

Of course a few big shots to the cranium could change all that in round one against Simon or anybody else, but so far, the 29-year-old Abraham looks dauntingly durable and built well for a very long and strong career run. Still, in this game time is few boxers' friend past age 30.

It seems that for Arthur, Saturday night offers a stay-busy assignment more than fulfillment, but he appears secure with his current progress. Meanwhile, he'll tend to boxing business as usual on a quality card that includes new Sauerland stablemate
Lamon Brewster against respectable Michael Sprott in an eight round warm-up act.

"My main target is Pavlik," summarized Arthur. "After I have beaten him I will fight the best boxers at super-middleweight. Once I have unified the titles at middleweight I will move up and chase new titles there. It is really hard for me now because I have to lose a lot of weight ahead of each fight. I know I got some mention in the end of the year rankings at ESPN. I felt honored by that and would like to move into the top ten at pound for pound this year."