

## Good Just Might Be Good Enough

Written by Bernard Fernandez  
Tuesday, 12 May 2009 19:00

---

It has been said that in the land of the blind, the one-eyed man is king.

That was almost literally true in boxing in the 1960s, when a Philadelphia welterweight named “Gypsy” Joe Harris won his first 24 professional bouts despite the fact that, as a child, he had been blinded in his right eye after being hit in that eye by a brick hurled during a Halloween-night fight over a bag of candy he had snatched.

Harris to this day remains the only non-world champion other than Chuck Wepner ever to have graced the cover of *Sports Illustrated*, and his list of victims included the reigning welterweight titlist, Curtis Cokes, in a non-title scrap. Only 22, he was in line for a shot at Cokes’ 147-pound belt when, in October 1968, a medical examination revealed his partial blindness and his license was revoked by the Pennsylvania State Athletic Commission. Hugely popular in his hometown of Philadelphia, this free-form ring artist was forced to retire with a 24-1 record that included eight victories inside the distance. His only defeat, in his final bout, came on points as a middleweight against the great Emile Griffith.

Nigel Collins, editor of *The Ring* magazine, said Harris, despite his handicap, was to boxing what, say, Miles Davis was to jazz and Jackson Pollock was to painting.

“He was an improvisational genius,” Collins said of Harris a few years ago. “He did things that I have never seen a fighter do in the ring, before or since, and I have seen untold thousands of fighters.”

Eye care for boxers has improved to a point where a detached retina no longer is a career-ender. Any regular citizen who has to squint to read the writing on a billboard can opt for Lasix surgery and walk away with 20-20 clarity. Who knows, if Harris were to come along today, he might now be celebrated as one of the all-time welterweight greats. Then again, perhaps his condition, if truly beyond repair, might have been detected immediately and he never would have fought at all. What we do know is that, stripped of the only thing that made him special, a despondent Harris slid into alcoholism and heroin addiction. He died in 1990 at 44 after suffering his fourth heart attack in two years.

No heavyweight these days has been identified as being as sight-impaired as was Harris, but frustrated fans awaiting the division’s next savior might well settle for the arrival of a big man with heaping doses of skill and power, even if the mystery guest was wearing an eye patch like the Van Heusen man in those ubiquitous shirt ads. Anyone with mega-talent, even if restricted by a partial field of vision or maybe a club foot, would be preferable to the able-bodied dreck now being passed off as contenders.

Veteran promoter and matchmaker Don Elbaum seemingly has been around since Cain slew Abel, and his take is telling on the sorry state of affairs in the weight class that once upon a time yielded Jack Johnson, Jack Dempsey, Joe Louis, Rocky Marciano, Muhammad Ali, Joe Frazier,

## Good Just Might Be Good Enough

Written by Bernard Fernandez  
Tuesday, 12 May 2009 19:00

---

George Foreman and Larry Holmes.

“The way the heavyweight division is now, Primo Carnera, if he was boxing today, would be the undisputed champion of the world,” Elbaum said of the huge (6-5½, 280 pounds), ungainly and ponderously slow Italian who briefly held the title in the 1930s. Widely considered one of the lesser heavyweight champs, Carnera was floored (ital) 11 times (end ital) in being dethroned by Max Baer in 1934.

“The heavyweight division right now is absolutely the worst in the history of boxing,” Elbaum sighed.

Which brings us to a former defensive lineman at South Dakota State University, Joey “Minnesota Ice” Abell, who wasn’t slew by Cain, but was by Arron Lyons, Andrew Greeley, Al “Ice” Cole and Jason Nicholson en route to fashioning a 23-4 record with 22 victories inside the distance. Abell – who takes on journeyman Billy Willis in a scheduled eight-rounder Friday night at Philadelphia’s Blue Horizon -- isn’t ranked by any of the world sanctioning bodies, and probably wouldn’t be even if he or one of his handlers slipped a cash-filled envelope under the table to an alphabet bandits, but he is representative of the lowered expectations we have come to expect of heavyweights who have a little something going for them, if not everything.

Even Elbaum, who has done everything he could to prop up Abell except to try larger cushions, believes that the southpaw from Coon Rapids, Minn., could eventually emerge as the frontrunner in a field of stragglers.

“Does it put him back? Absolutely,” said of the three-fight losing streak Abell, 27, endured before he regrouped for the three-bout winning streak, albeit against guys you probably never heard of, heading into his off-TV and off-the-radar date with the 35-year-old Willis (12-13-1, 9 KOs). “But this kid, I think, is still the hardest puncher among the heavyweights. And if he’s not the hardest puncher, he’s no worse than second or third.”

Elbaum might draw an argument from the Klitschko brothers, Samuel Peter, Chris Arreola and maybe a dozen or so other heavyweights who imagine themselves to be big bangers. But still, his premise is valid given the barren landscape Abell hopes to traverse; greatness is no longer a mandatory requirement for becoming heavyweight champion of the entire planet. Being pretty good just might suffice, provided all the dominoes fall just right.

Abell, who is fighting for the 10th time at the Blue Horizon (where he’s 8-1, with 8 knockouts) after campaigning of late mostly in the Upper Midwest and in Scandinavia, hasn’t given up on his dream of wearing a bejeweled title belt. Hey, he sees what Elbaum sees. The heavyweight division as presently constituted must seem like what California represented to all those fleeing the Dust Bowl in the Carnera-era ’30s: the land of opportunity.

“By August I’d like to start fighting guys in the top 50 and work up from there,” Abell said of his blueprint for success. “And I’d like to be fighting guys in the top 10 within the next year and a half.”

## Good Just Might Be Good Enough

Written by Bernard Fernandez  
Tuesday, 12 May 2009 19:00

---

To get there, to rise a level, or two or three, to where the better-known fighters reside, Abell – whose repertoire to date has largely consisted of a pedestrian right jab and better-than-decent overhand left – understands that nailing a string of ham-and-egggers on the chin won't be good enough.

“Knocking somebody out is not something I rely on,” he said. “You can't plan on knockouts. They either happen or they don't.

“I've been working on improving specific areas, like my jab,” he said. Toward that end he has brought back trainer Ron Lyke, who worked Abell's corner throughout his amateur days and for most of his early professional bouts. Lyke doesn't carry a rep like Emanuel Steward or Freddie Roach, but there is a comfort level between the two men that ought to count for something.

“I started with Ron,” Abell said. “We've been together for, like, 15 of my 25 fights. I've been back with him for the last three. No, the last four. It just feels right to be back with him.”

Lyke, to be sure, is not coming back into a situation where his onetime pupil has advanced from elementary to graduate school. Even if Elbaum is right, power in and of itself is not enough to make a fighter special. Slugger Dave Kingman might have hit the baseball as hard and as far as Babe Ruth, but Kong never was or could be the Bambino.

“We're working on basic stuff,” Abell said of the gym work he's putting in with Lyke. “I don't have natural boxing ability. Some guys, they step in the ring and can display all the moves right off. That was something I had to learn. Hey, I'm still learning.”

That much has been evident in Abell's losses, which might provide a better hint of where he is and needs to go than all those quickie wipeouts of bums of the month. In his first pro setback, a first-round technical knockout at the hands of Arron Lyons on Dec. 1, 2006, at the Blue Horizon, Abell was stunned by a quick three-punch combination and was stopped after an elapsed time of just 77 seconds when referee Hurley McCall determined he was in no position to defend himself.

Lyons had an interesting story to tell as the native of Gulfport, Miss., perhaps foolishly elected to ride out Hurricane Katrina on Aug. 29, 2005, despite the fact his house was only a block and a half from the beach.

“One block down, everything got destroyed,” Lyons said of the big winds and high waters that blew through his hometown like the wrath of God. “My house was left standing. I was lucky.”

Lyons was expected to last about as long as a flimsy shack vs. Katrina when he took on Abell, but he turned the tide, so to speak, with a ferocious opening salvo that sent the overwhelming favorite reeling back to the ropes, confused and hurt. It was a tough lesson to learn, but then in boxing all lessons learned are tough to some degree.

Another lesson was learned came on Sept. 5, 2008, in Karlstad, Sweden, where Abell lost a disputed six-round split decision to Cole, the former IBF cruiserweight champion who is his

## Good Just Might Be Good Enough

Written by Bernard Fernandez  
Tuesday, 12 May 2009 19:00

---

biggest-name opponent to date. Cole was 43 at the time and came with a three-fight losing streak, but he is a crafty veteran who knows tricks of the trade Abell is just now beginning to fathom. Another lesson learned.

“It wasn’t all bad,” he said of the stumbles he’s had, including the one to Cole. “You can learn from losing. Sometimes you have to learn a lot more than if you just keep knocking guys out.

“Al Cole is a veteran, a former world champion. And he was tough. That’s the kind of fighter I can learn from. As to whether I should have gotten the decision or not, the record always is going to show it as a loss. All you can do is accept it and move on.”

Abell is tentatively set for a rematch with Cole on Sept. 5. If he can stretch his present winning streak into 2010, maybe Elbaum will be proved right. Good just might be good enough to earn Abell his shot at that tarnished brass ring.