

HE GOT HEART, NO DOUBT: Guerrero Takes Title From Klassen

Written by Michael Woods
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I do believe we can bury the "heart" issue in regards to Robert "The Ghost" Guerrero. The Californian didn't let a cut over his left eye, from a clash of heads in the seventh round, put him off his game as he liberated the IBF super featherweight title from South African Malcolm Klassen at the Toyota Center in Houston, TX.

Two fights ago, Guerrero drew flak when he told a ref that his eyesight was affected and he could not continue against Daud Jordan. That bout was ruled a No Contest, and fans at the venue hooted vigorously when Guerrero uttered his No Mas in San Jose. The hooting and the critiques postfight stung, but Guerrero put all that six feet under with a super sharp outing against Klassen on HBO's Boxing After Dark. He started strong, and stayed smart and busy the whole way through, enroute to a unanimous (117-111, 116-113, 116-112) decision. Oh, and it emerged after the bout that he broke his left hand in the fourth round, and worked through the pain with nary a wince.

Harold Lederman of HBO saw it 117-111 for Guerrero, a card TSS can wrap its arms around. The CompuBox stats spoke loudly; Guerrero threw 1,200 punches and landed 200, while Klassen, lacking in the footspeed department, went 143 of 518.

"Ghost" Guerrero (130 pounds; 24-1-1, with 17 KOs entering; from Gilroy, CA; age 26) held the IBF featherweight title from fall 2006-spring 2008. Klassen (129 ¼ pounds; 24-4-2, with 15 KOs; from South Africa; age 28) picked up the IBF super featherweight title from Gary St. Claire on Nov. 4, 2006, and dropped it to Mzonke Fana four months later in his first defense. He beat Cassius Baloyi in April (TKO7) to snag the super featherweight crown up for grabs Saturday.

In the first round, the lefty Ghost started off like he'd warmed up properly in the locker room. Really, he seemed a man possessed, in a good way. He did good work in retreat, but he wasn't just in counterpunch mode, no way. Klassen followed the Ghost, but wasn't all that effective in doing so. In the second, Klassen warmed up, and his lead right found the mark a few times. In round three, Klassen started off even more vigorously. Guerrero smartly shoved Klassen off, and moved to his right, away from the power of the right. Klassen doesn't much care for the hook to cap a combo, and it looked like Guerrero noted this during film study. In the fourth round, Ghost's movement continued to confound Klassen. Ghost banged to the body, just for good measure, not an obvious tactic for a man half a head taller. In the fifth, Klassen threw caution out the window, and it lifted his fortunes. But still Guerrero threw, and moved, and banged a right hook to the body on his way out. In the sixth, Klassen chased, and Guerrero waited for him, and made him pay, usually. A right uppercut smacked Klassen's mouthguard out. But the South African wasn't deterred, or too frustrated. He stayed optimistic, and in the fight. In the seventh, Ghost's feet weren't as active, and one wondered if the action would tighten up even more. Klassen saw blood in the eighth, but didn't try to impose his will that much more. Guerrero hung tough, kept moving, popping, and slipping. In the ninth, Ghost's D stayed sharp; his torso movement as Klassen got in his grill made his corner happy. But when he stayed on the ropes, they had to be nervous. In the 10th, Guerrero was in danger of giving a

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round away—he was moving, but not throwing as much as before. Klassen's energy level was more than ample here; he would not be conceding a Ghost win til the final bell tolled. In the 11th, Klassen simply could not catch up the mobile Ghost. Same thing in the 12th, and Guerrero made sure not to just run out the round, he was throwing til the end.

SPEEDBAG: HBO paid homage to fallen warriors Alexis Arguello, Arturo Gatti and Vernon Forrest after the TV opener. Michael Buffer presided over a ten toll salute to the men who left us in July. Bob Papa and Max Kellerman discussed the impact of the fighters. Kellerman cast doubt on the verdict of suicide for Arguello and Gatti, and of the early exit for each, said: "It's a crying shame." Amen.