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Earnest appeals for prizefighters to quit their profession are a regular occurrence. As is the case with Jermain Taylor, the retirement calls are usually driven by a fear of witnessing a man severely damage his health. The prospect of possibly watching a once-superior athlete transform into a second rate pug is also a major factor behind the pleas; as if a faded fighter continuing his career will discolor the memories of his past achievements.

For the 31-year-old Taylor, retiring after a fairly competitive defeat to an outstanding fighter such as Arthur Abraham is considered a dignified method of ending a career.

Taylor's abilities have apparently been in decline for a couple of years, but if the authorities passed him fit to continue fighting, he can look forward to one day partaking in events such as Friday's show at Las Vegas' Orleans Hotel. Inside the hotel's Mardi Gras Ballroom, a variety of formerly prominent fighters will compete, with each man united by the fact that his athletic peak was a decade ago. Former heavyweight titlist Oliver McCall meets onetime contender Lance Whitaker, while ex-cruiserweight beltholder Arthur Williams will fight against one Victor Barragan in the co-feature.

Frank Luca's Crown Boxing is promoting the event and has listed both bouts as "Championship Title" contests. A press release for the show describes McCall as a "four time World Champion", even though his 1994 victory over Lennox Lewis is the only occasion he won a recognized championship. Friday's fight will be for the IBA Heavyweight Continental Championship, but Luca will supposedly look "to unify The World Title with its IBA Champion."

And according to the show's promotional material the main event may be overshadowed by Williams' defence of his WBC USNBC title. "No early Halloween celebration for either fighter in this Title fight," states the press release. "Both fighters want to leave with the Title, but as we all know, two men enter the ring and only one man leaves with the Title."

It's a disheartening thought that such tawdry trumpeting will ever accompany a Jermain Taylor fight. But it takes a hard sell to effectively market matchups involving desperate pugs, especially those with McCall's notoriety. The 44-year-old is known for his history of drug problems and the infamous night in which he broke into tears during a 1997 rematch with Lennox Lewis; an act that prompted the referee to disqualify the eccentric fighter. Most observers thought they had witnessed the end of McCall's career that night, but since then the Vegas resident has contested 29 fights.

Whitaker, 37, is also no stranger to irrational behaviour. For a brief period the 6'8" Californian was one of the more respected heavyweight contenders after he overpowered the previously unbeaten Monte Barrett and Robert Davis and scored a second round knockout of the usually resilient Oleg Maskaev in 2001. But Whitaker's streaking career hit a speed bump when he inexplicably broke ties with his long-term trainer Joe Goossen and signed a management deal with Rock Newman, who had been away from the fightgame since his days with Riddick Bowe.

Adding to the oddness, Whitaker and Newman bizarrely decided to change the fighter's name to GOOFi in a ridiculous attention stunt that did little to enhance his credibility.

The madness seemingly had an adverse impact on his in-ring achievements too as he boxed more like his Disney character namesake while turning in a lethargic effort during a points loss to Jameel McCline. Whitaker, 34-5-1 (28 KO), subsequently fought against a long cast of journeymen until 2005 when he suffered stoppage defeats to Luan Krasniqi and Sultan Ibragimov. The setbacks ostensibly ended Whitaker's days as a prizefighter, but he made a comeback in 2008, with his first test coming from Jason Estrada.

Yet Whitaker's losing effort against the 2004 Olympian received biting reviews.

Wrote Ron Borges: "Normally, a fighter waits until after a fight to retire. Friday night former world title contender Lance Whitaker retired before his bout with Jason Estrada. There is little other explanation for the somnambulant manner in which Whitaker sleep-walked his way through the first nine rounds of what proved to be a lop-sided points victory for Estrada."

But while a matchup such as McCall-Whitaker may be a garish sideshow, there is a chance that the two slow heavyweights may put on an absorbing contest which could justify such a meaningless fight. After all, professional boxing has never tried to fit within the bounds of tastefulness. It is part of the entertainment business, not a sporting exhibition.

Writer Mike Marley recently referenced a fitting line from Jackie Gleason in the movie Requiem for a Heavyweight: "A sport? Are you kidding? If they had headroom, they would hold these things in sewers."

Friday's showdown won't be staged in a cesspit, but if Whitaker decides he wants to unleash his potentially violent right cross on McCall's cast-iron chin, the attendees may feel a little less guilty about shelling out the admission fee.

McCall has lost just two fights since the embarrassment against Lewis. And while he hasn't looked spectacular, the veteran has proved a step above fringe contenders such as Yanqui Diaz and Darroll Wilson. Only the skilful Juan Carlos Gomez, to whom McCall lost a lopsided points decision in 2007, has made the American look his advanced age. But even then McCall provided the Cuban with a stern workout on both occasions they met [the first fight was ruled a no-contest after Gomez failed a post-fight drug test].

McCall, 53-9 (37 KO), doesn't do anything particularly remarkable, but his durability seems to dishearten opponents. That would seem to be the pivotal factor in the outcome of Friday's fight, but while Whitaker has lacked tenacity in the past, he has shown a little more pride in his profession in recent months.

In July he rallied from a points deficit to out-score Danny Batchelder over ten rounds, and a month later he obliterated Matthew Ellis inside three minutes. While neither opponent was of notable stature, Whitaker exhibited a temerity that has rarely been a part of his psyche. Sometimes desperation can do that to a fighter.

“[Before] I came out slow trying to use a jab,” said Whitaker in August. “I’m not doing that no more. Now I’m coming to knock guys out.”

Heated sparring sessions with Chris Arreola at Joe Goossen’s gym in Van Nuys earlier this year add further credence to Whitaker’s comeback effort. “During sparring [Whitaker] had those moves and tactics that showed he’s been up against elite competition,” reported David Avila. “On several times he used his strength to push off Arreola after missing a combination.”

There are enough ingredients to suggest that McCall-Whitaker could be a competitive tussle. Yet regardless of the result, neither combatant can expect to be awarded with a major world title opportunity in the foreseeable future. The victor on Friday will be the man with the ability to convince himself that the fight is not a futile exercise.

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