

Ouma Lived Champion's Dream, Not For Long And Not Anymore

Written by Ron Borges

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It is a familiar story in boxing and now Kassim Ouma is on the hard side of it.

Not so many years ago the Ugandan refugee who was kidnapped at six and forced to become a child soldier in the rebel army of his native country was a fighter on the rise. He had a bright smile and a bright future in boxing because he had skills and a warrior's heart.

He was a prospect on the rise and the best kind of prospect because he had a compelling story to go with his talent. It was something that would sell even in its sadness.

Soon Ouma was using older, half-used up fighters like J.C. Candelero, Verno Phillips and Tony Marshall into stepping stones to where he was headed, which was to the IBF junior middleweight title. The night he won it from Phillips on Oct. 2, 2004 he collapsed on the canvas, weeping not so much for the victory but over so much of what he'd lost in life, which included his family and his childhood.

Yet he was a champion and with that he would right many wrongs. Or so he thought. It never quite worked out the way he'd hoped however because nine months later he lost the title to Roman Karmazan on a night when it simply looked like he was tired of warfare, fistic or otherwise. Thus began a slow slide down to where he will be Saturday night – a stepping stone for somebody else.

His is a fate that most every boxer experiences if he stays long enough. Even some of the greatest like Sugar Ray Robinson, Joe Louis, Sugar Ray Leonard and Roberto Duran ended their careers with someone stepping over them to get to where they wanted to go.

Now it is Ouma's turn, or so a young 23-year-old junior middleweight named Vanes Martirosyan believes. So, too, does his trainer, Freddie Roach. Roach is the best trainer in the world at the moment and he would not be putting his young, undefeated prospect (23-0, 17 KO) in with Ouma if he was not confident that his fighter was ready for him.

Surely Ouma (26-6-1, 16 KO) knows what is likely to happen at the Hard Rock Casino in Las Vegas. He knows why he's been brought there. He's there to pad a young man's record at his own expense. He wishes it was different and may by now have convinced himself that it will be for that is what boxing is often all about. It's the sport of illusion and self-delusion.

Ouma is 31 now, not a kid of 23 on the rise like Martirosyan but rather a former champion on the slide to journeyman status. He has lost four of his last five fights and not had a significant victory since he defeated Sechew Powell four years ago. It has all turned sour for Ouma.

It is sad to see this whenever it happens but sadder still to see Ouma in this position because life has been nothing but a series of sadnesses interspersed with an occasional moment of triumph before the world gave him another reason to cry. The path he's on was inevitable for it

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is the one nearly every champion follows in the end, but who wants to watch it?

Ouma was recently the subject of a documentary called, simply, Kassim, that is only peripherally about boxing. In reality it is about the hard life of someone who has his boyhood stolen from him at the age of six and the corrosive effects of such an experience.

We see him lying on his father's grave at one point back in Uganda, wailing uncontrollably as he tries to hug the ground under which his father lies after having been murdered by Army officials Ouma once thought were his friends. The pain of it all makes it difficult to watch but this has been his life. Or at least too much of it has been.

With him is the IBF belt, a meaningless bauble in such a sea of pain but really all he has to give his father. That was some time ago now and in the interim everything seems to have gone sour since he lost that title.

He made some money volunteering to be beaten up by then middleweight champion Jermain Taylor, who towered over him but could not get rid of him. For 12 rounds Ouma fought bravely, unable to win but not willing to lose. In a way, that fight is the story of his life.

And so now it has come to this. Now he does for Martirosyan what Marshall and Phillips and Candelo once did for him. He goes to the arena to sell his resume for a few thousand dollars and some pain so a younger, fresher man can benefit.

"I'm finally fighting a guy with a good name and a good record on national television," Martirosyan told RING magazine. The implication was clear. Kassim Ouma was a test the former U.S. Olympian and his trainer feel sure he will pass.

If he does, Vanes Martirosyan will move one step closer to where Kassim Ouma once was. One step closer to becoming a world champion. But if he does, Ouma will move one step farther away from the dream he once held in his hand for a few short months in 2004 and 2005. It was a champion's dream and he lived it.

But not for long and not anymore.