

Andre Dirrell Advances, But At What Cost?

Written by Frank Lotierzo

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It clearly wasn't how he wanted to get the win and pick up two points in Showtime's Super Six World Boxing Classic. After outboxing the favored Arthur Abraham 31-1 (25) for nine rounds, getting the benefit of a missed knockdown by referee Laurence Cole in the tenth, and beginning a shaky eleventh, Andre Dirrell 19-1 (13) was completely separated from his senses by a monstrous right uppercut thrown while he was down. In a spooky delayed response, Dirrell put his glove to his temple, and then slowly sank to the canvas, his body prone partially under the ropes and his legs twitching spasmodically. Cole correctly called for the disqualification right away, ending the fight at 1:13 of the round. It was a horrific ending to a one-sided, but surprisingly frustrating fight.

Although Dirrell fought much better than he had in losing a split decision to Carl Froch in his earlier Super Six appearance five months ago, and although he was far enough ahead on all scorecards (97-92 twice, 98-91; I had him up 97-92) that only a knockout could have prevented him from winning, it's not entirely out of the question that the mostly lethargic Abraham could have gotten the job done. There probably wasn't enough time remaining for Abraham to do it, but it's hard not to think about his previous kayo of Jermain Taylor with six seconds to go in the fight.

Trying to sort things is a little tricky. Arthur Abraham lost for the first time. And he lost in much the way that it was often supposed he would: he simply gave away rounds by doing almost nothing. Unlike most of the times that that's been his MO, however, in this fight a lot of his inability to get rolling can be attributed to Andre Dirrell's busyness and good movement. Dirrell scored the most important win of his career, but left some unanswered questions along the way. He still doesn't punch in strategic combination, although he punches in flurries -- generally two jabs followed by a cross. These are mostly thrown from the southpaw stance, but against Abraham he switched to orthodox at least once every round. I still don't think he knows why he's doing this; it seems to be almost entirely arbitrary.

Any way you look at it, it has to be seen as a bad loss for Abraham. He was immobile all night, consistently beaten to the punch, wild with his single punches on the rare occasions that he threw them, and was even dropped for the first time in his career when Dirrell nailed him with a solid left late in the fourth round. In the seventh, he suffered a fairly bad cut over his right eye that was caused by a head butt (Cole missed this call too, as he missed a number of others), adding to the impression that he was a beaten fighter. What has in the past looked like patience and supreme self-confidence now looked like rigidity and lack of imagination. Abraham really didn't mount anything close to a serious attack until the tenth. There was no great sense of urgency on his part once he finally did. Also alarming was the way that, used to getting official assistance when fighting in Germany, he looked to the referee at the first sign of any infraction, whether real or imagined. This was Detroit, not far from the other guy's hometown of Flint. Where the hell did Abraham think he was? And he didn't exactly help his cause as an international fan favorite by telling Showtime's Jim Gray that Dirrell was "a good actor," suggesting that the knockout had been Andre's attempt at scoring a cheap win.

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Of course, nothing could have been further from the truth. Andre Dirrell would almost surely have won the fight without resorting to theatrics. And nobody in the Joe Louis Arena was as distraught by the finish as the fighter himself. After finally regaining consciousness, he spent minutes in a daze, initially convinced that he'd been kayoed, and only slowly coming to the realization that he'd won the fight. This news didn't comfort him much; he was crying as he processed the information, completely dissatisfied with the terms of the win.

Andre Dirrell still seems like a work in progress. As we've seen, there's no question about his hand speed (at one point, he threw about fifteen jabs in five or six seconds) or foot speed or about his general mobility. In the first few rounds against Abraham, he punched from too far out, but his sense of distance improved as the fight unfolded. He figured out a way to loop his punches a bit in order to get them under Abraham's tight elbows, scoring to the ribs. He put enough weight behind his shots to floor Abraham for the first time in his career, although the knockdown was at least partially the result of Abraham being off balance. Because doing what he was doing was carrying him to an easy victory, we didn't really get to see whether what happens to Dirrell under serious pressure, as we'd expected to against Abraham. One issue worth bringing up though is that he really was dropped in the tenth with one shot, despite Cole not scoring it as official, and from there until the unsatisfactory end, he appeared very vulnerable. Being knocked out cold by one punch, regardless of where you are when it lands, can't be seen as a good sign.

Arthur Abraham, with a loss now on his record, can't take much pleasure in being the one standing at the end. Until the near finish of the fight, he never fought with the sense of urgency that might have made a difference. Maybe success had made him too complacent or too sure of his ability to turn things around with one punch. If so, he'd better remember that it won't do much good to throw that punch when the other guy is on the floor. The loss probably places Andre Ward, who was watching from ringside, even more strongly as the tournament's favorite (odds suggested he was a slight favorite overall—with Abraham following—prior to this fight.) Unless Abraham learns from this experience and increases his punch output and begins his aggression earlier in his fights, he's in real trouble. The book has been written on how to beat him.

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