

## Misunderstood--Guzman's Boxing Clinic Goes Largely Unappreciated

Written by Frank Lotierzo  
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Joan Guzman may currently be the biggest underachiever in boxing. Supremely talented, blessed with unerring footwork, perfect balance, radar reflexes, and the ability to punch from any position, his biggest enemy is his lack of conditioning. He is so gifted that, even out of shape, he can put on a boxing clinic and beat a tough customer like Ali Funeka. It's too bad that even an experienced judge like Duane Ford can't recognize a masterful performance when he sees one. Ford somehow managed to have the wrong guy winning the fight.

On Saturday night at the Hard Rock Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas, in a fight shown on HBO's Boxing After Dark, Guzman won a split decision (113-114, 114-113, 116-111) that would have given him the IBF lightweight title if he hadn't come in nine pounds - you heard that right - over the 135 pound limit. Guzman is a little guy, so it's not a matter of his body growing out of the weight class. He just doesn't get into shape. He's so good, though, that he can allow himself to be backed into the ropes where he can rest, potshot as he likes, and then slip away whenever he's caught enough of a breather. That he can win rounds largely by utilizing this strategy even against a legitimate top ten opponent gives an indication of just how great he really is. He very well maybe one of the most naturally talented fighters in the world. But his best years and his best weight are well past him. We'll never know what he might have been.

Ali Funeka tried hard to win the title. Making weight, he would have been awarded it had he won. He pressed forward all night long, threw lots of punches, and generally gave another good account of himself. But forget the closeness of two of the scores: he lost the fight big.

The fight followed a general pattern, with a few surprises along the way. As expected, Funeka, with his good conditioning and advantage in size (forget it that Max Kellerman kept talking about Guzman being a welterweight facing a lightweight. Funeka is by far the bigger man; Joan is really just an overweight junior lightweight) wanted Guzman on the ropes where he could work him over. The problem for Ali is that Guzman is comfortable on the ropes, and will go there willingly. He's able to see incoming punches better than almost anyone else in boxing, and he's capable of avoiding them by simply moving his head an inch or two. He also has an incredible ability to slide out of a corner or move off the ropes whenever he's caught his breath. This advanced technique allows him to constantly regroup.

Unfortunately, this is a style that's too subtle for many viewers to understand, let alone to enjoy. Throughout the fight, Guzman would back himself onto the ropes, counterpunch, move off, and then stand right in the pocket, calmly slipping Funeka's punches, then answering back with the shortest right uppercuts imaginable. Once he's done that, he's liable to clinch until broken by the referee.

Guzman won the first two rounds using a variation of these tactics. He gave Funeka the third by coasting, although he made sure to potshot enough to hold Funeka's attention.

Guzman took much of the fourth round off too, but made sure to steal the round by

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counterpunching well, landing good body shots, and closing the round emphatically.

After sacrificing the next round in conserve energy, Guzman exploded in the sixth, dropping Funeka suddenly with a clubbing right. When Funeka got up, Guzman briefly tried to finish him off by using a variety of body and head shots, then attempting to use the same clubbing right again. He's not a great puncher at any weight above than 126 or so, and he figured out that Funeka wasn't going to go. So he continued his boxing lesson.

That's essentially how the rest of the fight went: Funeka was aggressive, and Guzman schooled him. After Funeka took the eleventh with his accelerated work rate, Guzman closed the show with a seminar on Old School tricks, ending the fight motoring backwards, jabbing in and out, barely moving his head as he avoided punches, landing flurries of light but accurate shots, dipping all the way into a full squat a la Pernell Whitaker, clinching whenever he wanted to, and yelling when the mood struck him. It was beautiful. It would have been better if all three judges had appreciated the show.

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