

A Note on the Refereeing in Agbeko-Mares...HAUSER

Written by Thomas Hauser
Monday, 15 August 2011 15:23



Anyone who cares about boxing has to be appalled by referee Russell Mora's conduct of Saturday night's fight between Joseph Agbeko and Abner Mares.

Agbeko was defending his IBF bantamweight title against Mares at the Hard Rock Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas. Agbeko is promoted by Don King Productions. Mares is promoted by Golden Boy.

Mora is thought of in some circles as a "Golden-Boy-friendly" referee. Alan Hopper (vice president of public relations for DKP) says that several days before the fight, King complained to Keith Kizer (executive director of the Nevada State Athletic Commission) about the choice of Mora as the referee. But King's influence has waned in recent years. Mora remained in place.

Once the fight began, Mares went low from the opening bell. By any objective standard, Mora should have deducted a point for low blows as early as the second round. By this writer's count (after watching a tape of the bout), Mares landed FIFTY-FIVE punches below the belt. And they

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weren't pity-pat punches or borderline shots. Many of them were hard blatant flagrant fouls.

For those who think that legal body shots hurt, consider the debilitating effect of a low blow. When a fighter's protective cup is jammed into his groin again and again, it takes a toll. Moreover, Agbeko was wearing his trunks low and his belly-button was fully exposed, which made the fouls even more flagrant. Yet absurdly, Mora kept warning Agbeko for pushing Mares's head down (which he wasn't doing) instead of insisting that Mares fight within the rules.

Mora also blew two knockdown calls. In round one, an off-balance Agbeko tumbled to the canvas when his left foot became entangled with Mares's left foot. The referee called it a knockdown. That mistake was understandable. A referee's eyes can't be everywhere all the time.

The second knockdown was a different matter. Two minutes into round eleven, Mares landed yet another flagrant low blow. Agbeko crumpled to the canvas in pain. Mora was in perfect position to see the foul, yet he called the occurrence a knockdown.

Agbeko controlled round eleven apart from the "knockdown." But as a consequence of the miscall, the stanza was scored 10-8 for Mares. If Mora had called the low blow and deducted a point from Mares (as he should have), it would have been a 10-8 round in favor of Agbeko (a four-point swing that would have changed the outcome of the fight).

As it was, C. J. Ross scored the bout even. She was overruled by Oren Shellenberger and Adalaide Byrd, each of whom favored Mares by a 115-111 margin.

Agbeko vs. Mares is now known as "Agbeko vs. Mares + Mora."

"The referee is not supposed to decide the champion," Agbeko said afterward. "The referee's job is to make sure it is a fair fight, not steal the title for one fighter."

Kudos to the Showtime announcing team for recognizing the problem early and calling it like it was throughout the fight.

Al Bernstein took the lead . . . "(round one) Another low blow by Mares. He better watch it. There's a low blow again . . . (round two) Abner Mares has landed at least five low blows. There's another one. Russell Mora's got to take a point away pretty soon . . . (round three) Another low blow . . . (round four) Another low blow by Mares . . . (round five) You've got to take a point away at some point. I'm loath to criticize referees. I hate to do it. But in this instance, you have to take a point away. Mares again goes low. You better take a point away or he won't keep [his punches] up . . . (round six) That's low blow number twenty-eight in this fight by Abner Mares [actually, by this writer's count, it was number thirty-three] . . . (round seven) Russell Mora is not even bothering to look anymore. I hate to do this; I hate criticizing officials. That was a left hand in the worst spot. How can you not take a point away? I'm sorry to be a broken record on this. But come on . . . (round eight) Again; he goes low . . . (round nine) There he goes again. I'm not trying to lean on Russell Mora. I'm not trying to be unfair. But when you don't take a point away from a guy for landing twenty low blows, it doesn't look good . . . (round

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ten) Oh, my. Oh my goodness. If he doesn't take a point away. This is outrageous. It's an outrage. Good God!"

Then came the second "knockdown." Forgive the hyperbole; but Stevie Wonder could have seen that it was a low blow. And incredibly, Mora started counting.

"Oh, my God!" Bernstein proclaimed. "Russell Mora had a good look at that. He's in perfect position. That's so low; you can't miss that. How could you not see that? This is the most disgraceful performance by a referee I've seen in the last fifteen years."

Showtime's blow-by-blow commentator Gus Johnson chimed in from time to time: "Oh, man! Another low blow by Mares . . . The left hook continues to fall well below the beltline . . . Joseph Abeko has been hit low repeatedly, but the referee is refusing to take a point. If Abner Mares wins this fight, it will be a tainted win."

And Antonio Tarver had his say: "That's another low blow . . . He [Mora] is the man in charge in that ring. He should be seeing these low blows . . . That low blow is almost to the knee . . . He's been getting hit with these low blows since round one . . . Those punches have to be taking a toll on Joseph Agbeko. All night long; it's totally unfair . . . That was a low blow. This referee has failed in this fight totally . . . This referee has stolen a good fight from us because he's not doing the job he was paid to do."

After the fight, Jim Gray conducted an on-air interview with Mora. At that point, as Michael Woods later wrote, the referee's "non-existent credibility went into the sewer from the gutter."

"You just raised the arm of Abner Mares," Gray began. "The question is, 'Would he have won without your help?'"

"I don't help the fighters," Mora responded. "I enforce the rules. Those punches were on the beltline. They're fair punches. I have to call them fair."

Gray then showed Mora the knockdown on a television monitor and asked, "Tell us right now if you feel this is below the belt."

Faced with clear unambiguous evidence of his wrongdoing, Mora offered an inane excuse: "It has a different viewpoint, looking at it here in slow-motion. When I saw it live, I saw it was a fair punch on the beltline."

Fight fans might recall that Mora was also the referee who allowed Nonito Donaire vs. Fernando Montiel to continue after Donaire nearly decapitated Montiel in the second round of their fight in February. I often disagree with Jose Sulaiman. But in this instance, the WBC president is worth quoting.

"It was a criminal act," Sulaiman said. "Montiel was in a poor state. And after telling him to walk and he does not, and after asking him to raise his arms and he does not; [the referee] still allows him to continue. We will object to this referee whenever we can."

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Donaire later added his thoughts to the dialogue, branding Mora “a horrible referee.”

Boxing has seen too many fights lately where the referee and ring judges seem to have their own agenda. Mora’s problem in Agbeko-Mares wasn’t one blown call. It was a consistent failure to enforce the most fundamental rules of boxing.

“Incompetence is usually the answer for most of the riddles in boxing,” Carlos Acevedo wrote of Mora’s conduct. “But Russell Mora was a quantum leap removed from mere ineptitude. Mora was clearly biased in favor of Mares and, worse than that, seemed to enter the ring with a predetermined notion of what he was going to do. Mares had carte blanche to whack Agbeko below the belt as often as he wanted.”

The boxing community will remember Mora’s performance in Agbeko-Mares for a long time. It should also look closely at how the Nevada State Athletic Commission handles the matter. The NSAC has a policy of refusing to acknowledge that its officials make mistakes. That policy breeds suspect officiating and is one of the reasons for what happened in Agbeko-Mares.

Meanwhile, if Russell Mora looks at a tape of Agbeko-Mares and still thinks that he did his job properly, he shouldn’t referee fights anymore.

Thomas Hauser can be reached by email at thouser@rcn.com. His most recent book (Winks and Daggers: An Inside Look at Another Year in Boxing) has just been published by the University of Arkansas Press.

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Radam G says:

Mora was in on a fix. Enough said! Holla!

Real Talk says:

Couldn't have said it better myself. Real Live. Dueces

MisterLee says:

Kenny Bayless apologized to Pacquiao about round 10 of Mosley, Mora REFUSES to admit he is wrong. I hope no one in boxing forgets this night...

Radam G says:

Whaddup, MisterLee? I haven't seen you in a minute. Where have you been? Holla!

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