

Sorta Super: Bute-Johnson, And The Question Of Where It Leads

Written by Eric Raskin

Tuesday, 01 November 2011 11:17



Boxing and college football have a fair amount in common. The championship pictures in both are an absolute mess and many would-be fans keep their distance as a result. The rankings in both are based not just on wins and losses but on perception of quality of opposition and quality of performance. In both sports, there are new scandals surfacing seemingly every week. And in both boxing and college football, if you can overlook all the external crap, the actual athletic competition is often spectacular.

I don't follow college football closely at all (ever since the '94 season ended with Penn State undefeated and somehow not able to play for the national championship, I've found better things to do with my Saturdays), but I pay just enough attention to know that there's a parallel to be drawn between Lucian Bute and Boise State. For whatever reason, Bute wasn't invited to the Super Six. His schedule since Showtime's two-year-long tournament began has been as

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small-conference as it gets (Librado Andrade, Edison Miranda, Jesse Brinkley, Brian Magee, and Jean-Paul Mendy). While the big-conference players like Andre Ward and Carl Froch and Mikkel Kessler and Arthur Abraham have been beating up on each other and spoiling all the undefeated records except one, Bute has just kept winning. And in so doing, he's kept everyone wondering: Should he be ranked number one? Number two? Number three? Can you have a championship fight without him? Does he deserve to fight for the championship? All the same questions college football fans will be asking about Boise State if they finish their season undefeated apply here.

Given the quality of his last few opponents, Bute's fight this Saturday night against Glen Johnson at the Pepsi Coliseum in Quebec City is easy to embrace. Even nearing his 43rd birthday, "The Road Warrior" is a dramatic step up from Mendy, Magee, Brinkley, and Miranda. (Andrade was perceived as a real test at the time of their rematch since, you know, he sort of knocked Bute out in their first fight.) It's not Bute's fault that, for their various reasons, neither Kessler nor Kelly Pavlik put pen to paper to face him on this date. And the fact of the matter is, Johnson might prove to be a stiffer test for the Romanian-born Canadian ticketseller than either Kessler or Pavlik would have been.

Bute-Johnson is neither a superfight nor a sham. It might turn out to be lopsided and devoid of drama. Or it might turn out to be a back-and-forth rumble for the ages. Even if it's a marking-time fight of sorts for Bute, it's one of those rare marking-time fights in which victory is far from assured.

So just how big is Bute-Johnson? Just how meaningful is it? Just how excited should fight fan be for it?

That all depends on where it leads.

On December 17, Ward is set to fight Froch in the Super Six finals. If Bute defeats Johnson and faces the winner of Ward-Froch next, then Bute-Johnson will have been, in retrospect, very big and very meaningful indeed. If Bute defeats Johnson and doesn't fight the Super Six winner soon thereafter, then Bute-Johnson will have been just another fight in a not especially fruitful relationship between Bute and Showtime.

I asked both a representative of Bute's promotional company InterBox and a representative of Showtime about their intentions regarding a matchup in 2012 with the Super Six winner. As you might expect, without knowing whether that winner will be Ward and Froch, and without knowing for sure that Bute will escape this weekend's fight with his unbeaten record intact, all parties played it conservatively and were optimistic but non-committal.

"Previously, InterBox was going to outline where we would go with Lucian on November 6," explained David Messier, the publicity director for Interbox. "But with the injuries to Kessler and Ward, that will delay knowing exactly the plan for 2012. InterBox and Lucian's wish is to fight the winner of those two fights [Kessler vs. Robert Stieglitz and Ward vs. Froch]. But first, Lucian will have to beat Glen Johnson. A very difficult fight awaits Lucian on November 5 in Quebec City. He'll think about his future after this fight."

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Chris DeBlasio, the head of communications for Showtime Sports, weighed in: "I think everybody wants to see Lucian Bute fight the winner of the Super Six final. It would be the biggest fight in the history of the super middleweight division and one of the biggest fights that can be made in boxing right now. But we can't begin to speculate yet on the likelihood that it will happen, particularly because we don't have a Super Six winner yet and Lucian has a very tough challenger in Glen Johnson ahead of him this Saturday night. What we know is that these fighters, Ward, Froch, Bute and Johnson, they all want to fight the best—they've proven that. So we're hopeful that it can happen and we'd look forward to it being a terrific fight."

Bottom line: We don't know if Bute-Johnson is a semifinal matchup in a four-man tournament featuring Ward and Froch on the other side of the bracket, but we all want it to be. Unfortunately, all we can do right is analyze the pairing between Bute and Johnson on its own merits.

Bute is 11 years younger than Johnson and is faster, slicker, and a more accurate puncher. And he's probably the very best bodypuncher in the sport at this moment. It would appear that Bute is in his absolute prime right now. Then again, Miranda, Brinkley, Magee, and Mendy might have simply been the perfect opponents for making it look that way.

Johnson has had one of the most unusual boxing careers of the last couple of decades. He won his first 32 pro fights, but hasn't enjoyed a winning streak exceeding four fights since. In fact, he hasn't won more than three in a row since 1999. But of his 15 defeats, there's a case to be made in seven of them that he won. And his two draws both should have gone his way. Johnson is 51-15-2 (35) with a whole bunch of asterisks.

Since his career year in '04 in which he beat both Roy Jones and Antonio Tarver and was named Fighter of the Year, it's fair to say Johnson has declined. But it's been the most incremental of declines. He's slipped by about a percentage point or two each year, which means now, seven years past his absolute prime, he's somewhere in the vicinity of 90 percent of what he was in '04. Two fights ago, Johnson knocked out Allan Green, and in his next fight, he came up just a round or two short against Froch. This isn't a shot fighter. This is a guy in his 40s who beats all the guys he's supposed to beat and comes pretty damned close against all the others.

Johnson is going to pressure Bute; we know that. He has one of the great chins of his era; we know that. The questions are, has Bute progressed enough since his 12th-round meltdown in the first Andrade fight to deal effectively with Johnson's pressure, and what's going to happen when the best bodypuncher in the business bangs Johnson's 42-year-old ribs? We might see Johnson's first knockout loss in 15 years. We also might see Johnson's first win as an underdog since December '04 against Tarver.

Bute vs. Johnson is a solid, compelling super middleweight fight, one nobody can reasonably complain about. But if Bute wins and this victory doesn't lead to Ward-Bute or Froch-Bute, then "solid" is all it is. If it does lead to one of those showdowns for undisputed 168-pound supremacy, then it's much more than that. If it sets up Bute for the ultimate challenge, Bute-Johnson is super by association.

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the Roast says:

All right now we got something to watch. Bute-Road Warrior and Kirkland-Angulo this Saturday. I'll be pulling for Glen but he's gonna need a knockout to win. Maybe. Bombs away Kirkland-Angulo!!! Anything can happen here but I think Angulo will land the big punch first.