

The Good,the Bad and the Ugly

Written by Steve Kim

Monday, 29 November 1999 19:00

They say as the heavyweight division goes, so goes boxing. Based on what we'll see this upcoming weekend, I hope that no longer holds true. No, I'm not saying that the heavyweights aren't important- because it is still the flagship division of this sport. But what we have this Saturday ranges from the the good, the bad and the ugly.

THE GOOD

Down in New Orleans, 'the White Buffalo' takes on 'the Black Rhino', no this isn't a matchup of endangered species but Frans Botha and Clifford Etienne. And the winner of this bout goes onto bigger and better things while the loser, well, as a bona-fide contender does become extinct. No title is on the line, but this is the best matchup of the weekend.

Not that Botha or Etienne are in the upper echelon of the division but what they have both proven in the past is that aren't averse to getting into good scraps. Botha, has been in with the games biggest names ranging from Michael Moorer, Mike Tyson, Wladimir Klitschko and Lennox Lewis. No, he has't beaten any of these guys but he's proven that he can defeat anyone below that level. Which is exactly the level that Etienne is at currently.

It only seemed like yesterday that Etienne was a rising star and had signed a new deal with Showtime. Well, after being sent to the canvas seven times- face first, no less- by the seemingly non-threatening Fres Oquendo, Etienne was exposed as a raw fighter who has a suspect chin. Which is exactly what makes this an appealing matchup. Botha, is a gritty overachiever that can throw fast combinations but doesn't have great punching power. Etienne, is a pressure fighter that throws a high volume of punches himself.

I see a high-action bout with plenty of fierce exchanges and back and forth volleys. Fights that involved guys who are flawed in some way, whether it's lack of a solid defense, sturdy chin or average pop, are usually the fights that end up being the one's we remember. Like the legendary matchmaker Teddy Brenner once said of light heavyweight Harold Johnson, who had problems getting fights and was rarely in an entertaining one, " Harold Johnson is perfection and there is no room for perfection in boxing."

These guys are imperfect, which makes them a perfect match. I'll take Botha's big fight experience and over-hand right to tame the 'Rhino'.

THE BAD

The battle for the WBA heavyweight title between John Ruiz and Kirk Johnson isn't necessarily a bad fight. Afterall, both Ruiz and Johnson are both universally considered among the top 10 heavyweights in the sport.

But what does it say about how badly the WBA title has been devalued when it's being

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shown tape delayed on HBO(to at least the west coast) on 'Boxing After Dark'? It probably means that this belts stock has plunged further than Worldcom stock. Yeah, yeah, I know when Lennox Lewis abdicated this crown in 1999 that he made this title worthless- and perhaps that's the way it should be- but still, winning the title is economically important with the way boxing's economics are structured.

What's really on the line here is a placement of just who should be the true number one contender to Lewis- who is recognized as THE true heavyweight king. While some are lavishing praise on Wladimir Klitschko, the reality is that the big Ukrainian has been a product of some careful matchmaking by his promotional company, Universum and his biggest victory to date is over a faded Ray Mercer. Looking at the latest Ring Magazine ratings, which are supposed to be an unbiased ranking of today's fighters, Johnson is rated fourth, with Ruiz right behind him at five. Evander Holyfield, Chris Byrd and Klitschko are rated ahead of these two with Lewis being the champion.

The winner of Ruiz-Johnson could make a strong case for being number one.

Why?

Well, with Klitschko we already stated our case. Holyfield, had all kinds of problems with Ruiz in their three fight series.

And Byrd?

Well, he's taken on all comers and this 'David' has held his own against the 'Goliaths', he does make a strong case for the top spot.

A win by either man and they could legitimately make the case that they should be the one's challenging for Lewis' heavyweight championship. But this fight is dying at the box office like a Spike Lee movie and you can expect to see a lot of empty seats at the Mandalay Bay in Las Vegas. And it's easy to understand why that might be the case, Ruiz, is still best known for his 19-second loss at the hands of David Tua and Johnson, despite his 32-0-1, is still a virtually unknown fighter.

Why this fight wasn't put at the Foxwoods or the Mohegan Sun in New England near the fan-base of Ruiz(who is out of Chelsea, Massachusetts) is beyond me.

Also, while both camps and promoter Don King have been accommodating as can be in pushing this event, both Ruiz and Johnson don't exactly have the kind of personalities that will capture the imagination of the public. Ruiz is about as nice a guy as you can ask for and he embodies an 'everyman' quality that is easy to like, but there is a reason he is nicknamed 'the Quiet Man'- because that's generally what he is. Johnson, himself is a friendly sort and tries his best with the media but if he was a flavor at Baskin-Robbins, he'd be, you guessed it, vanilla.

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But hey, you never know, a good fight can break out making all this other stuff pointless. Johnson, despite coming in as the challenger is a 3-1 favorite based on his advantage in God-given physical tools. But remember this, Ruiz has gone 36 rounds with the still dangerous and lively Holyfield and Johnson struggled twice with a blown up Al Cole and was a bit passive against Larry Donald. Sorry, but this just doesn't look like a 3-1 fight to me.

Unless, Johnson can really get out quickly, I see this becoming a nip-and-tuck bout with plenty of jabs on both sides. My head tells me Johnson, but my gut tells me not to count out Ruiz.

THE UGLY

Ok, where do I start when it comes to Eric Esch vs. Larry Holmes? Butterbean against a Has-Bean. CarnivalAct vs. Canastota. And get this, it's on pay-per-view.

Holmes, one of the greatest heavyweights that ever lived in my book, was never one of the most embraced fighters in his day- even though respect for him and his accomplishments have grown throughout the years. But on this night, I'm pretty sure Holmes will have the full, unadulterated backing of the whole boxing community when it takes on Butterbean. Holmes, isn't just fighting for himself here, he's fighting for all the real prizefighters who embody the sacrifice and toughness of this game. Holmes' mission is to prove that boxing isn't a novelty act but a noble endeavour that takes a certain type of skill and craftsmanship to succeed at.

So what if he has to lower himself to do this, hey, he's getting paid pretty well from what I hear and besides, Holmes has always been honest in saying that he is about the money. So if he has to trash his self-respect to get one last payday and save the honor this sport, then so be it. I'd say this bout is almost(I said almost) as important as his quest to break Rocky Marciano's mark of 49-0. Except, only this time, we're behind you all the way Larry. See, how far he's come. Who would have thought when he beat Gerry Cooney many moons ago, that the boxing establishment would be rooting for him against a white guy?

I like Holmes big in this fight, regardless of his age. Because till the day he dies, the 'Easton Assasin' will always bring with him a first rate jab and I don't see how 'Bean can get inside that stick. And don't forget, this is the same guy who get stopped by Mitchell Rose- which by the way, makes Rose the linear 'King of Four Rounders'- and Rose in his best day couldn't be a sparring partner for Holmes on his worst.

Larry, the eye's of the boxing world are upon you. Restore our faith in this game.