

The Light and Wright-Soliman

Written by Bill Knight

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So many fighters dance on the edge of greatness, teetering on the brink, the glare of the boxing world's main spotlight always just one more big win away. They are successful. They might even become champions. But they never get to make that last grand step into the spotlight ... into public acceptance.

A pair of real professionals, Winky Wright and Sam Soliman, will try to make a next-to-last step Saturday night, on a cold December night in Connecticut.

Wright, of course, is dancing closer to the bright light than is Soliman. But a win for either fighter could catapult him into a chance to reach that brass ring. Will Jermain Taylor, now the two-time conqueror of age-defying Bernard Hopkins, give these men their shot? Time will answer that one for us.

Actually, Wright could probably have gotten that date — even without his Saturday night tango with Soliman. His last three victories — twice over Shane Mosley and most recently a near shutout of Felix Trinidad — have put him on the precipice. Fight fans are beginning to acknowledge his 49-3 record, acknowledge that he has become a special fighter.

And so why Saturday night's fight with Soliman?

"I know how Sam feels about trying to get a big fight and no one would give it to him because I was in that same predicament," Wright said. "It's an honor for me to be able to give him the same chance that Shane Mosley gave me. He deserves it. You know he's going to fight me to win. He can do it with an attitude that he is going to get a world title shot and get another big fight. For me, I need a big fight. I need a fight that can get me excited and coming off of the fights with Mosley and Trinidad, it's kind of hard to look forward to somebody who isn't of the same caliber. So we came out, we got them Sam, who is No. 1 in the IBF. We have got to go out there and prepare ourselves and get ready for the fight and, like I say, we are looking for a great fight. We are coming to fight. We always come to fight. The fans better come because it's going to be a great fight."

Soliman is 31-7 over his fascinating journey through the world of professional boxing. He has traveled the world, fighting all comers. He has fought at any weight from middleweight to cruiserweight. He has won 19 consecutive fights ... has not lost since 2001. Still, Sam Soliman hardly perks the attention of fight fans the way Felix Trinidad or Shane Mosley does.

"Well, I can't lie," Wright said. "It's not the same fighting Sam as it was fighting Tito Trinidad. But Sam is the number one contender. We've got to train hard and we've got to get motivated because we want to show the world that we're the best fighter out there. So, to do that, you know what I'm saying, we've got to motivate ourselves. And, like I say, it's not hard to do that against a guy like Sam, because he's a different kind of fighter."

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Wright correctly called last Saturday's Taylor-Hopkins showdown, picking a Taylor victory. Now, he simply has to hope that Taylor gives him that shot at stardom. Oh, and by the way, he must take care of business Saturday night in Connecticut. He must give himself a very early Christmas present.

Soliman is taking the same trek. He knows his career gets a huge boost with a victory Saturday night, catapulting him into a possible bang-off with Taylor. At the least, it gives him another big, big fight. After years of wandering the planet in search of fights, it would be quite nice.

"Well, we've got a lot in common, me and Winky," the Australian said. "And the fact we both travel the world, we've both looked around for the best fighters that are out there all over the world; took our bags and went out to find and fight the best and I used all my power and ability as a manager, managing myself to be able to get me up there ... and I took the fights on short notice. I took fights out of my weight division. I flew to fights from Europe to Australia ... 24-hour flight to take a five-day notice fight with Anthony Mundine. So I've done things like someone like Winky Wright was doing."

Soliman's trainer, Dave Hedgecock, sees yet another similarity.

"I think most people in the States thought that Shane Mosley was probably unbeatable and would probably beat Winky," Hedgecock said. "Well, I think we're coming from the same sort of area and I think that the people over there are going to get quite surprised."

For his part, Wright knows he is on the verge of center stage. He is so close he can feel it, taste it, smell it. He is playing it cool. But you know he wants to make that one final giant step ... that magical step into public adulation, the step into far bigger paydays, the step into a small corner of the boxing history books.

"Well, like I said for me, I'm trying to fight the best," Wright said. "If they want to say I'm pound for pound best, that's cool. If they say I'm not, then that's cool with me. But for me, I want to fight the best fighters. I do. And if the best fighters don't want to fight me, then that goes to show that I'm a pretty good fighter."

Pretty good, indeed.

Soliman is also pretty good, too. And he had a particular interest in the Wright-Trinidad fight. And he had a fine time watching.

"We had a nice barbecue, couple of things on the barbie and watched the fight," he said. "And that was very interesting because I was a big fan of Tito and I still am a big fan of Tito's. You don't forget what he's done. I've got posters on my wall of Tito Trinidad. So, I'm a fan through and through and after Winky took him out the way he did, he just proved he's one of the best pound-for-pound."

Soliman will not be home in Australia Saturday night. It will not be nearly that relaxing. Nothing on the barbie; though it could get pretty warm. But, most of all, it will be a special moment for

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him. It will be his chance. He knows. But he also knows it will be one tough night.

“He’s (Wright) is a package deal,” Soliman said. “He can box. He can brawl. He can do a bit of both. He can punch. You don’t get 25 knockouts by luck.”

But he says he is ready. For everything.

“I’m prepared for anything, really. Anything he puts on the table, we will be prepared for. Planning for it like there’s no tomorrow. And this is why it’s going to be one of the best fights of this year.”

Is Winky Wright ready for that kind of challenge? Is he taking that tiny, costly ... forever costly, mental dip because he is not fighting a Mosley or a Trinidad ... or not yet a Jermain Taylor?

“Like I said, I’m not taking anything away from Sam,” Wright said, “but it’s just that once you get to that factor where everything is on the line ... where you’re fighting someone where everybody thinks that he does this and does that ... and you’re training to beat him, you know, for a true professional you’ve got to train for everybody. I know Sam’s going to be training hard. So I have to be ready. I’m going to be prepared for that. I want to win and I have to train as hard for Sam as I did for Shane and Felix. I cannot afford to lose any fights.”

The training is almost at an end now. It is time for glossing and spit-shining.

Soon there will be the weigh-in. Soon there will be the walk in. Soon there will be the showdown.

Winky Wright made his pro debut way back in 1990. Sam Soliman began his professional career back in 1997. They have wandered, traveled the planet, chasing dreams. Saturday night a very big dream will be there in that Connecticut ring with them.

One man will reach out, grab it. He will move on. He will take that next-to-last step toward center stage. The other will go on wandering, go on chasing. Boxing is like that.

Life is like that.