

Sumbu Kalambay, one of the best middleweights of the 1980s

Written by Luca De Franco
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Herol Graham, Iran Barkley, Mike McCallum, Robbie Sims, Doug DeWitt, Frederic Seillier and Steve Collins are the most famous fighters defeated by Sumbu Kalambay for the European or the WBA world middleweight titles. Kalambay also faced Micheal Nunn for the IBF belt and Chris Pyatt for the WBO championship, losing both times. From 1980 to 1993, the Zaire-born Kalambay built a professional record of 57 wins (33 KOs), 6 losses and 1 draw. He fought mostly in Italy, where he became an idol, was awarded citizenship and choose to live here after he hung up the gloves.

Kalambay never turned down a challenge, even if that meant going to Monte Carlo, Paris, Atlantic City, London, Toulon (France), Las Vegas and Leicester (England). He wasn't scared of partisan judges, like most of today's boxers. He competed in another era, when the WBA, WBC and IBF were the only respected sanctioning bodies and nobody cared about the newly born WBO. (In Italy, they called it World Branchini Organization, because legendary manager Umberto Branchini always seemed to get world title shots for his fighters.) Today, Kalambay works as a trainer for Paolo Vidoz. He has the utmost confidence in the European heavyweight champion and says that the sky is the limit.

Mr. Kalambay, do you think that Paolo Vidoz can go after a world title?

Yes, I do. Just look at the champions of the major organizations. None of them is superior to Paolo. WBA king John Ruiz had a perfect style for Paolo.

Why did Vidoz not look so good against Valuev?

Simply because Valuev broke Paolo's jaw during the fifth round. In the second stanza, Vidoz almost knocked down the Russian. You know, the giant is not so difficult to hit. Larry Donald proved it, winning every round. The best proof of the real outcome of that match are the boos for Valuev and the ovation given Donald by the German audience. Nobody cared about the judges' decision to give Valuev the victory.

Let's talk about your career. Who was your toughest opponent?

Iran Barkley. I knew it from the beginning because I watched the videos of his most famous matches. I noticed that he used his right jab to prepare for a big left punch. He was also comfortable in long exchanges: the more he got hit, the more he hit back. That's why I trained harder than ever before. In the ring, I found out he could deliver punishment with both hands so I never accepted the brawl; four or five consecutive punches, at best. My strategy paid off and I won the vacant WBA middleweight title, after 15 tough rounds. It happened on October 23, 1987. We were in Livorno, Central Italy.

Who turned out to be tougher than expected?

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Robbie Simms. They said he was an easy opponent, but he turned out to be very difficult. I never underrated anybody, besides Robbie had been USBA middleweight champion and had beaten by split decision Roberto Duran. As usual, I studied his style and it paid off. I won by unanimous decision: 118-110, 117-113 and 119-113. It was June 12, 1988. The match was held in Ravenna, Northern Italy.

What about Mike McCallum?

The first fight was very important for my career because Mike McCallum was undefeated (32-0) and had a big reputation. He had been WBA light middleweight champion for about three years and was aiming at my WBA middleweight belt. It was my first defense and many people thought that I would lose. We fought on March 5, 1988 in Pesaro. It was a hard battle, but I came out on top: 116-115, 118-114 and 115-114. I met him again on April 1, 1991 in Monte Carlo (Principality of Monaco). The judges saw it close again: one had it 115-114 for me, according to the other officials McCallum won by 116-115 and 116-114. At that time, he was the WBA middleweight champion. He had beaten Herol Graham by split decision for the title. Graham was a great boxer and turned out to be very important for my career.

Explain that to The Sweet Science readers.

When I met Graham for the first time, his record was 38-0 and had won the British and European titles in two divisions: light middleweight and middleweight. Herol was born in Sheffield, but packed arenas everywhere in England. Nobody gave me a chance against him, especially because I accepted to fight him on his own turf. We fought on May 26, 1987 in London. I won on points, bringing the European middleweight crown to Italy. After that, the sceptics started to consider me a real champion. I faced Herol Graham a second time, on March 12, 1992. He came to Pesaro, but the result didn't change: I won again.

You needed seven years to get your world title shot. Weren't you discouraged during the years of waiting?

No, because I knew that the world title was the final stop of a long road and I had to prove myself winning the Italian and European championships. I did it and I was very proud both times. In the 1980s there were many good boxers in Italy, so wearing the national belt was a big achievement. Today, even the world title belt is no big deal considering there are so many sanctioning organizations that nobody can name them all.

Tell us about your loss to Michael Nunn.

There's not much to tell. He KOed me with a left hook to the jaw during the first round. You know, I prepared very hard for that fight. I spent a month in Las Vegas and trained properly. It's sad that one punch ruined it all, but that's boxing.

You were never a big puncher.

No, my strengths were my technique and my conditioning. I stared slowly and gave the best in

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the second half of every match. That's why some people underrated me. Even my friends laughed when I talked about becoming world champion. That has always been my goal, ever since I decided to become a prizefighter.

Did you have any idols?

I admired Marvin Hagler, Ray Leonard, Muhammad Ali and Howard Davis, who won the gold medal at the 1976 Olympics in the lightweight division. He wasn't equally successful as a pro, building a record of 36 wins (14 KOs), 6 losses and 1 draw. He lost to WBC lightweight champions Jim Watt and Edwin Rosario and to IBF light welterweight king James McGirt.

You faced many top fighters. Did you find any differences between Europeans and Americans?

Americans were better conditioned, but that wasn't a problem for me because I was used to train very hard and fight often. When I became WBA middleweight champion, I didn't slow down a bit. I successfully defended the title three times, in 1988 against Mike McCallum (in March), Robbie Sims (three months later) and Doug DeWitt (in November). Americans also tend to be brawlers, but that could be overcome with the right strategy. Europeans, on the other hand, were more skilled technically.

What are your plans for the future?

I want to go on with my career as a trainer. I worked with Vincenzo Cantatore and Michele Piccirillo, and now I'm focusing on Paolo Vidoz. Despite what some critics say, Paolo goes to the gym every day and trains very hard. He will defeat easily Cengiz Koc on January 28, and retain the European heavyweight crown.