

Popo's A Paper Champion.

Written by Steve Kim
Sunday, 04 January 2004 21:00

This past weekend Acelino Freitas won the WBO lightweight title with an easy decision over the long-reigning champion Arturo Grigorian by the scores of 115-108 and 116-107 twice.

'Popo' has now won world titles at 130 and 135 pounds and has a sparkling record of 35-0. So he has to be one of the games best fighters pound-for-pound, right? Well, in a word, nowayinhell.(Yeah, that's one word to me). In watching him defeat Grigorian you came away unimpressed by either his skill or his once vaunted power.

Yeah, you could argue that he beat a guy who held a major world title for over seven years and had made 17 successful title defense of that crown. But here in lies the rub, have you seen who this guy was beating in the safe cocoon of Germany under his promotional outfit Universum, that basically controls the WBO?

In his title run, Grigorian had to stave off the likes of Marty Jakubowski, Raul Balbi, David Armstrong, Marco Rudolph, Giorgio Campanella, Oscar Cano, Michael Clark, Sandro Casamonica, Zoltan Kalocsai, Antonio Pitalua, Angel Perez, Aldo Rios, Rocky Martinez, Stefano Zoff and Matt Zegan.

Off those names, only Balbi, Clark and maybe Rios could be considered solid guys. Fighters like Campanella and Martinez are recognizable to boxing fans in the states because they have lost to more recognizable names in the past on network TV.

Like many other WBO champions of the past, Grigorian was with a promoter that was very influential to that sanctioning body(like the above mentioned Universum) and fought in the safe harbor of his home turf for the most part. In other words he was just a smaller, lesser known version of guys like Dariusz Michalczewski, the Klitschko brothers and to a certain extent Joe Calzaghe.

And did we mention that Grigorian is now 36? Nope, it wasn't exactly Roberto Duran or Ike Williams that Freitas was downing to capture his newest trinket. Which continues a trend for Freitas, since beating Joel Casamayor in January of 2002 in a close decision, Freitas has taken an extended victory laps of sorts by taking on the likes of Daniel Attah, Juan Carlos Ramirez and Jorge Barrios in his last three bouts at 130 pounds before beating Grigorian for his latest world title.

Which brings us to a larger issue that has become more and more prevalent in the sport in recent decades. Since the advent of multiple sanctioning bodies and their championships, it's become much easier for lesser talented fighters to call themselves 'champions'. Think about it, back in the era of one undisputed champion, you either had to beat guys like Joe Louis or Sugar Ray Robinson to become the champion, or you were just another contender. Now, with four major organizations(WBA, WBC, IBF and WBO), you can basically cherry pick a title and milk it.

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Seriously, how much credit can you give Roy Jones for beating John Ruiz, no matter what the difference in size. But in todays day and age, that win allowed Jones to be called a 'heavyweight champion.' Hell, if you think about it, in todays watered down era of multiple titles, it allowed a mediocre talent like Ruiz to be called a heavyweight champion in the first place. Guys like Ernie Shavers, Jerry Quarry and Ron Lyle, it seems, were born about a quarter of a century too early.

And remember all those heavyweight 'champions' of the 1980's not named Larry Holmes and Mike Tyson? I know you do, so they wont be mentioned here.

So how in the world does this all relate to Freitas? It's simple, if you look at the lightweight division it's clear that Floyd Mayweather is by far and away the best at 135 pounds. For all intents and purposes he is THE champion. But his status as a lightweight is unclear as he might be moving up and vacating his WBC belt. Fine, so there was no way Freitas could fight him even if he wanted to. But just below him are two very tough guys in Jose Luis Castillo and Juan Lazcano-who will be fighting for his belt if Mayweather does indeed vacate the crown. Lazcano just beat the always game Stevie Johnston for the right to box for the vacant belt. Castillo, lost two relatively close fights to Mayweather to earn his ranking, in addition to downing Johnston twice.

Leonard Dorin, will be moving up in weight soon to face Arturo Gatti, but had a grueling bout with then-IBF champion Paul Spadafora last year that was a draw. Javier Jauregui just stopped the dangerous Leavander Johnson for the IBF belt that was vacated by Spadafora. And on top of all them is Mayweather, who more than any other blue-chip prizefighter, had knocked off one top rated and respected challenger after another the past few years.

So in other words, all the best lightweights had been knocking heads and knocking each other for the right to call themselves the best lightweight in the world. What a novel concept.

All of them, save for one notable exception, Arturo Grigorian, who we talked about earlier. So when Freitas, who'd been ducking a rematch with Casamayor and every other credible 130 pound fighter for the past year decided to make his move up and fight for a title, guess who he goes after?

Hey, Ray Charles could see this coming from a mile away. He chose Grigorian, he beats Grigorian and now, tada, he's a champion. And you can bet that a familiar pattern will be taking place- for both Freitas and the WBO- easy title defenses, one after another. After all, doesn't it seem like every other threat at 135 pounds is fighting for other title belts? And isn't that the way Grigorian held his belt for so long?

Having multiple title belts, some argue(and maybe rightfully so) creates opportunities for more fighters to make money and get fights. True, but on the flip side, when this process is abused so much, like it was by Grigorian and Freitas at 130 pounds in his last three title defenses, it has the same effect on boxing as expansion has had on other sports like baseball and basketball- it hurst the overall quality of the game. Like the fourth or fifth starter on the Tampa Bay Devil Rays, who gets shelled in every start, has no business of being in the major leagues and

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wouldn't have been 30 years ago. There are plenty of guys with titles that wouldn't have in a by-gone era.

And in todays landscape, where boxing is being squeezed by the networks one way or another, it's imperative that the best fighters of this era fight each other on a regular basis. The bottom line is that Showtime has been waisting plenty of money and the viewers time by showing Freitas' last several bouts. They would have been better served by showing a combination of bouts featuring the above-mentioned lightweights. Those were real fights, not showcases.

But now with Freitas picking up another WBO belt, it seems that he'll be sequestered away from the other world class lightweights. This isn't to castigate all the fighters who currently hold or have held WBO titles in the past, guys like Marco Antonio Barrera and Naseem Hamed have taken on all comers in their divisions.

But they proved that a champion makes the belt, not the other way around. Unless Freitas goes about challenging those other lightweights, he's just another guy with a belt around his waist.