

Jermain Taylor Home for the Holidays, Decisions Ouma

Written by George Kimball

Saturday, 09 December 2006 19:00

NORTH LITTLE ROCK, Ark. --- For the better part of Saturday night, Jermain Taylor looked like a man being pursued by a swarm of pesky gnats.

And although the middleweight champion fought virtually all twelve rounds in full retreat, by the end of the night the gnats had suffered the heavier casualties. That's what happens when you try to chase a man around in his own house.

The old boxing saw about inevitability of the result in a fight between a good big man and a good little man played itself out in real-time at the Alltel Arena Saturday night, as Taylor captured a unanimous decision over a thoroughly game Kassim Ouma to retain his 160-pound belts in the main event of Lou DiBella's 'Home for the Holidays' card in Taylor's Arkansas hometown.

The disparate force of the two men's power was on display throughout the night, beginning with the first round, when Taylor rocked Ouma with a solid right uppercut that knocked him two steps backward.

Recognizing that an aggressive mode was not only his best chance, but his only one, Ouma played the aggressor's role, but Taylor patiently allowed him to charge in before countering with his heavier artillery.

Ouma performed well and he performed bravely, but he was simply overmatched.

The occasion also marked the American debut of the WBC's new system of Open Scoring in title fights, and when the judges' tallies were announced at the end of the fourth, Taylor was up 40-36 on all three cards.

By the fifth Ouma was beginning to swell on both cheekbones, but before that stanza was over, Taylor got his only real fright of the evening when he emerged from one exchange with what appeared to be a nasty cut along his left eyelid.

Between rounds, cutman Ray Rodgers was able to repair the wound, which didn't reopen significantly until the last couple of rounds, by which time the fight was well in hand.

Taylor claimed that the cut had been caused by a head-butt, but if so, we didn't see it, and neither did referee Frank Garza.

In the seventh, Taylor connected with a big right that lifted Ouma right up off the canvas, but the smaller man kept coming.

The second announcement of the judges' tallies demonstrated yet another unanticipated flaw in the Open Scoring system: What happens if the ring announcer screws up the total?

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Precisely that transpired after the eighth, when Michael Buffer correctly announced scores of 80-72 and 78-74, but misread a third card (either Tom Kaczmarek's or Jack Woodburn's) and erroneously gave the judge's seven-round tally (70-63), omitting the eighth-round score.

Despite the oversight, it was clear enough that the fight was in danger of becoming a rout, which resulted in Ouma pressing forward with even more urgency, while Taylor pulled in the horns and, realizing at last that he wasn't going to knock Ouma out anyway, boxed more cautiously.

"I wanted to knock him out," said Taylor. "I was in great shape, but I kind of took out a loan the last couple of rounds."

"Jermain was kind of running on fumes toward the end, but I think the cut may have been bothering him, too," said DiBella.

Even though he lost the last three rounds on the cards of Kaczmarek and Italian judge Servio Silvi (and two of the last three on the Canadian Woodburn's), Taylor was handily ahead at the end. Woodburn had him up 118-110, Kaczmarek 117-111, and Silvi 115-113. (The Sweet Science scorecard was an even more emphatic 119-109 in the champion's favor.)

Taylor landed 244 punches to Ouma's 177, but the statistics could not register the wide gulf between the force of the blows delivered by the respective combatants. Most of Taylor's, in keeping with his nickname, were delivered with bad intentions, while, by backing up, he was able to smother most of Ouma's scattershot array.

And even though Ouma threw more punches (701 to 579 for Taylor) his average of 58 per round was just a little better than half the 104 per round he had averaged over his previous ten fights.

"Ouma came out and fought hard for all twelve rounds," said Taylor. "He's a little guy, but he's very tough."

Although Taylor had knocked out 16 of his first 20 professional opponents, the Ouma fight marked the fifth time in his last six outings that he has been extended the 12-round distance. Obviously, the level of competition may have something to do with that, since all five were against reigning or former world champions -- Ouma, Winky Wright, Bernard Hopkins (twice), and William Joppy.

Taylor retained his WBC and WBO titles with the win. He is also recognized by the WBA as its 'super champion.'

"Whoever wants to fight, come on!" Taylor threw down the challenge before departing for the hospital. "I'll fight the toughest guy out there."

Taylor was taken to a local hospital where a plastic surgeon stitched his wound, which should heal in time for his next HBO date, probably against 'Contender' first-year winner Sergio Mora in

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mid-April.

That would put it a week or two after Joe Calzaghe's Cardiff super-middleweight defense against Contender runner-up Peter Manfredo Jr., which has now been rolled back from March 3 to April 7. The tentative plan still calls for Taylor to move up to 168 to challenge the Welshman later in the summer, probably in the United States, but not, we can now safely predict, in Arkansas.

Everything about Saturday night's fight suggested that Ouma would be better served by going straight back to 154, a division in which he would be a force to be reckoned with against almost anyone, but, surprisingly, the beaten Ugandan had other ideas.

"You know me, I'm a small guy, but I'm here (as a middleweight) to stay," vowed Ouma.

Describing himself as "a guy who never gives up," Ouma was even asking for more of Taylor.

"I want to come back here again and fight you in Little Rock," Ouma told Taylor in the ring.

Taylor-Ouma was the first world title fight ever contested in Little Rock (unless one counts a trio of WAA bouts the late Pat O'Grady staged here in the 1980s, which we don't), and just the second in the state of Arkansas. In March of 1903, Joe Gans successfully defended his world lightweight title by stopping Steve Crosby in the 11th round of a scheduled 20-round fight in Hot Springs.

(An 1896 heavyweight title fight between Gentlemen Jim Corbett and Bob Fitzsimmons was originally scheduled to be held in Hot Springs, but Arkansas Governor James P. Clarke threatened to use the state militia to prevent the bout, which he ran right out of his state and all the way to Nevada, where Fitzsimmons won the title after felling Corbett with his "solar plexus punch.")

DiBella didn't have to contend with any hostile forces in the Arkansas state house, but his former employers at HBO didn't do him any favors when it came to Saturday's live gate. Although the free HBO feed is prohibited from being shown in public establishments, the network was allowed to peddle the closed-circuit sale. The result was that many saloons in Little Rock's popular River Market area were advertising the fight at cover charges ranging from \$5 TO \$10, while the paid attendance of 10,119 meant nearly 7,000 empty seats in the Alltel Arena.

"I'm guessing it probably cost us a couple of thousand fans," said DiBella. "They had the choice of buying a ticket to the fight or paying a small cover charge so they could get sh**-faced while they watched it in a bar, and a lot of people took that option.

"Next time we do one of these fights I'm going to argue that they shouldn't be allowed to sell closed-circuit rights in a small-town market, because it does have a significant impact on the gate," added the promoter.

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DiBella also had to pander to local custom by interrupting the live show midway through the undercard to show the Heisman Trophy telecast on the overhead screen. Arkansas' Darren McFadden had even less chance of winning the Heisman than Ouma had of beating Taylor, but unless the Razorback crowd had a chance to see it with their own eyes, they might have opted to stay away from the fight.

Andre Berto, the talented Florida welterweight who boxed for Haiti in the 2004 Olympics after being disqualified in the US trials, ran his pro record to 16-0 in an impressive HBO debut as he overwhelmed his New Jersey opponent Miguel Figueroa (25-5-1) in posting a sixth-round TKO.

In the first round along Berto hit Figueroa with everything but the ring post, scoring a 10-8 round. With seconds left in the round he buckled Figueroa with a solid right uppercut, followed by a left that might have sent him down had the bell not intervened.

Berto piled up round after round, punishing his game opponent with an impressive arsenal of punches. By the end of the fifth, a stanza in which he landed 49 of 76 power shots, Berto was simply teeing off on his opponent, and while the sixth lasted he continued that dominance, landing 25 of the 44 power punches he sent Figueroa's way. A left to the body/left to the jaw combination wobbled Figueroa, and when Berto waded to thud a hard right to the head that snapped Figueroa's head sideways, referee Laurence Cole wisely intervened. The end came at 1:59 of the sixth.

Overall CompuBox stats showed Berto landing 64 jabs to Figueroa's 26 and 129 power punches to his opponent's 25.

Fighting as a pro for the 69th time, crowd-pleasing Texas junior welterweight Emanuel Augustus had was for him a rarity -- a comparatively easy fight. A longtime stalking horse for contenders and pretenders alike, Augustus coasted to a lopsided unanimous decision over Denver's Russell Stoner Jones in their ten-round undercard bout.

Since it was for one of those cockamamie WBC titles (the 'Continental Americas,' in this case), Open Scoring was also in effect for Augustus-Jones. Announcing the scores after the fourth and eighth turned out to be somewhat anticlimactic, since Augustus had won every round at both junctures to lead by 40-36 and then 80-71. (Kaczmarek, Silvi, and Woodburn even agreed on a 10-8 seventh round despite the absence of a knockdown.)

In the end Kaczmarek and Woodburn both had it a 100-89 shutout, with Silvi (who scored the last round even at 10-all) not far behind at 100-90. Augustus acquired the meaningless belt with the win, but more importantly, the victory provided him with his first three-fight win streak since 1998-99. The new Continental Americas champion is now 34-28-6, while Jones is 15-16.

Connecticut light-heavyweight Jaidon Codrington decked Thomas Reid with a short right hand in the second to score the only knockdown in their six-round prelim. All three judges -- Bill Morrison, Paul Fields, and Gale Van Hoy -- scored it 59-54 for Codrington, now 14-1 and 5-0 since his shocking first-round knockout by Allan Green 13 months ago. Reid dropped to 35-18-1 with the loss.

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DiBella's latest recruit, former American University basketball star Ronald (Son of Tommy) Hearns, stashed late substitute Robert Smallwood, dropping the Missouri super-middleweight three (and, probably, four) times in less than three minutes en route to a first-round TKO.

Hearns' performance was impressive enough, though how much of it was due to the ineptitude of his opponent remains open to question. Less than a minute into the fight, he hurt Smallwood with a right-hand body shot, and then put him down with a left-right combination. Another right to the body followed by a right to the head sent Smallwood down for the second time, after which Hearns knocked his opponent right through the ropes with yet another right.

Although Smallwood was completely outside the ring except for his lower legs, which were draped over the bottom rope strand, Garza declined to give him a count and in fact helped him back into the ring, but no sooner had the referee wiped off the gloves than a Hearns left knocked his foe right back from where he had come. This time, with Smallwood once again precariously perched on the apron with only his feet still in the ring, Garza halted the one-sided slaughter at 2:55 of the round. Hearns went to 9-0 in his DiBella debut, while Smallwood fell to 4-3-2

When Dominick Guinn dropped Zack Page with a left hook late in the first round, it appeared he might make an early night of it, but the Arkansas heavyweight quickly regressed into his all-too-familiar listless mode. Page not only clawed his way back into the fight, but won it on the card of one ringside judge (Fields; 76-75). That verdict was offset by the other two officials, as David Sutherland scored it 77-74 and Van Hoy an unconscionable 79-72, allowing Guinn to escape with a split decision. Guinn is now 27-4-1, Page 11-9-1.

It was also a pretty good night for the Fighting Smiths of Little Rock. Heavyweight Terry Smith had to work for it, but came up on the right end of a unanimous decision over his much larger opponent, 256-pound Georgian Ramon Hayes. Smith (29-2-1) won by scores of 79-73 on the cards of judges Fields and Bill Morrison, 78-74 on Sutherland's. Although there were no knockdowns, Hayes (15-22-1) made sure Smith knew he'd been in fight. The hometown was puffy around both eyes from the third round on.

In another early Smith bout, light-heavyweight Ray Smith (6-0, and unrelated to Terry) won a unanimous decision over Pennsylvania journeyman Randy Pogue (8-6-1), with each of the three judges -- Fields, Morrison, and Sutherland -- scoring it 40-36 for Smith.

HOME FOR THE HOLIDAYS

ALLTEL ARENA

NORTH LITTLE ROCK, Ark.

December 9, 2006

MIDDLEWEIGHTS: Jermain Taylor, 159½, Little Rock, Ark. dec. Kassim Ouma, 158¾, Kampala, Uganda (12) (Retains WBC, WBO, and WBA 'super' titles)

HEAVYWEIGHTS: Dominick Guinn, 229, Hot Springs, Ark. dec. Zack Page, 203¼, Warren, Ohio (8)

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Terry Smith, 225 ³/₄, Little Rock, Ark. dec. Ramon Hayes, 256¹/₄, Athens, Ga. (8)

LIGHT HEAVYWEIGHTS: Ray Smith, 175¹/₂, Little Rock, Ark. dec. Randy Pogue, 175¹/₄, Norristown, Pa. (4)

Jaidon Codrington, 173¹/₂, Bridgeport, Conn. dec. Thomas Reid, 174, Jackson, Tenn. (6)

SUPER MIDDLEWEIGHTS: Ronald Hearn, 163¹/₂, Detroit, Mich. TKO'd Robert Smallwood, 164¹/₄, St. Joseph, Mo. (1)

WELTERWEIGHTS: Andre Berto, 146¹/₄, Winter Haven, Fla. TKO'd Miguel Figueroa, 146³/₄, Camden, NJ (6)

JUNIOR WELTERS: Emanuel Augustus, 138 ¹/₂, Brownsville, Tex. dec. Russell Jones, 140, Denver, Colo. (10) (Wins vacant WBC Continental Americas title)