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A sensationally timed short right uppercut by Thomas Mashaba stopped Oscar Leon in his tracks in the third round on Friday night in Kimberly, South Africa. Leon, who was challenging Mashaba for his IBO featherweight world title, protested the stoppage as he felt that he was fine to continue when the referee counted him out. There was no real controversy however as the challenger was still on the canvas on the count of eight and only started to rise as the referee counted 9.

Leon, who was looking good on attack when the champion found the sweet-spot on his jaw, was clearly disorientated as he sank to the canvas following the blow. He seemed to be looking for his gum-guard, which was knocked from his mouth and was lying right next to him, when it suddenly dawned on him that the referee was almost finished the count. He jumped up, but it was too late as the referee completed the ten-count. One could argue about the count, but that was the referee's call.

Leon battled to make the weight but looked up to the task from the outset and showed that while the champion is a dangerous puncher he has a few holes in his defense. Had the fight gone beyond the first three rounds, Mashaba could have had his hands full. Nevertheless it was a good win and Mashaba is certainly knocking on the doors of first-tier titleholders.

"Chris John defends his WBA title in February," says Mashaba's promoter Thinus Strydom. "Mashaba will also be defending his title once more. If both champions are successful Mashaba will fight John for his title."

On the Mashaba-Leon undercard, Simphiwe Nongqayi stopped veteran Khulile Makheba in the 8th round to claim the WBF super flyweight world title. Nongqayi is a solid fighter with good skills and it's a pity that his handlers have chosen to take him the paper title route. He could do way better and the WBF crown is so obscure and without any credibility that it could hardly be seen as a steppingstone to bigger things. If anything it diminishes a boxer's credibility when he's acclaimed a world champion of "nothing."

Is it merely a coincidence that the decline of boxing started when the alphabet soup of world titles arrived on the scene? Even with the so-called big four—the WBC, WBA, IBF and WBO—there are too many "world champions," never mind all the smaller sanctioning bodies. I do believe that these smaller and bigger groups do have a contribution to make towards the development of boxing and in giving fighters opportunities, but let's reinvent the roles and structures of boxing. I'm getting tired of biting my cheek every time I have to refer to someone as a so-called world champion. If we the writers and by default the historians of the sport don't respect these titles, how on earth can the fighters and more importantly the paying public do so?

Boxing has always been about the personalities and individuals, even when there was only one world champion in each weight class. World titles were merely something to aspire to. Fans

paid to see their favorite fighter in action, not to see a world title belt. Those who held the world titles were not necessarily the best guys out there or the most popular. Many of the world's greatest boxers never even received the opportunity to contest a world title in their careers, but those selfsame boxers respected the moniker of world champion, because it had a legacy and with that a form of credibility. It was seen as an achievement just to fight for a world title fight, never mind winning it.

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In other news, the formal announcement of the upcoming Laila Ali – Gwendolyn O'Neil WBC super middleweight world title fight was made this week. Ali's expected to arrive in South Africa in mid-January for final preparations for the fight, which is scheduled to take place on February 3rd at Emperor's Palace in Kempton Park. Ali stopped O'Neil in three rounds in 2004 to claim the IWBF's light heavyweight world title. Since then O'Neil has won three in a row and also claimed the WIBC light heavyweight world title.

The Ali – O'Neil bout will be the first high-profile woman's boxing match to take place in South Africa. While there have been many local ladies eager to get in the ring, the wheel of acceptance by the powers that be has been moving slowly and supportive structures are not really in place to assist aspiring women boxers into the sport. It's hoped Ali's presence in the country will help bolster the idea of women's boxing and speed things up for those ladies who wish to lace up their gloves as professional fighters.

With the sport currently at an all-time low in the country, some are looking at women's boxing as a novelty sideshow to attract fans. That approach is shortsighted. If presented and developed properly there's no reason why women's boxing could not become an asset to the noble art, which still seems to battle with the idea that it is part of the entertainment industry. Dingy venues with mediocre fights just don't cut it anymore.

The main supporting bout on the Ali – O'Neil card will feature Cassius Baloyi in a rematch with Gairy St. Claire for the vacant IBO super featherweight world title. Also early in the New Year, Malcolm Klassen will defend his IBF super featherweight world title against Mzonke Fana. Fana defeated Argentinean Roberto Arrieta earlier this month in an official world title eliminator over 12 rounds. Fana may not have a devastating punch, but he does have quick hands and a big heart. Many of his bouts have been won by his lighting left jab and despite his blowout against Marco Antonio Barrera, he is a formidable fighter who will always be in with a chance if he can stretch the fight the full distance.