

Imagine That, Just Good Fights

Written by Steve Kim

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After a relatively slow month of October, the game of boxing has a November that could be one to remember. This past weekend, the world's best featherweight (and one of the best fighters in the world period), Marco Antonio Barrera put on a classy display of boxing against the still-respected Johnny Tapia.

Then, this upcoming weekend we see an interesting clash between two former jr. welterweight titlists who are still considered to be among the division's elite when Vince Phillips takes on Sharmba Mitchell.

A week later, we have a featherweight title bout between Erik Morales and Paulie Ayala that should be an entertaining affair.

And then finally, we have the rematch of the pulsating blood-and-guts, back-and-forth war that was Micky Ward-Arturo Gatti.

And what's the one common thread of all these fights? Yes, they were or still are fights that every boxing fan should look forward to, but that's not what I'm talking about. Do you notice something about these matchups? Give up? Well, do you see any of the sanctioning bodies mentioned here? No. And it's not because I'm on a Max Kellerman-like crusade/rant to discredit these organizations- they can do that for themselves, thank you- but because these fights don't have any sanctioning bodies involved: period.

Imagine that, making good fights for the sake of good fights? I can't believe it, but that's what I'm seeing here. Perhaps it's a trend, most likely it's not; but it proves a few points here.

First, all these fights are being made possible with the licensing fee's of HBO or Showtime. Which means that if those two cable giants want to push for a fight- they can get it done. Except of course when it comes to Roy Jones and HBO, but that's for another column. It shows just how influential and powerful these networks really are in the current marketplace of boxing. They are not just broadcasters, but they're promoters to a large degree.

Think about it, aren't they the ones that approved the matchups to go on their airwaves and most importantly, supplied the money to make these fights a reality? They even play a large part in choosing the dates of the fights. Awfully similar to a promoter, isn't it?

Secondly, it shows that boxing fans want good, competitive matchups. After

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all, how many fans can tell you all four major titlists at featherweight? Probably not that many- but for the record, that would be Scott Harrison of the WBO, Derrik Gainer of the WBA and the WBC and IBF are currently vacated- but ask them who the top dog is at 126 pounds, the consensus would be Barrera.

Do you think the fact that the first Ward-Gatti war was just a regular 10-rounder with no title at stake took away from the action in the ring? I don't think so. And the ironic thing is that the first fight took place on the same night that Kostya Tszyu, who is currently the undisputed jr. welterweight champion, defended his belt successfully with an easy 12-round decision over Ben Tackie. Now, which fight is the one you remember? All the belts at the Gap, couldn't get your mind off of what happened between Ward and Gatti.

Third, the networks can spur change. Now, this goes back to my first point; the networks played a role in these fights happening and in the case of Barrera, who has ditched the WBO and WBC hardware, HBO has basically sponsored his quest to go title-less but with the recognition of being the divisions champ.

But unfortunately, only a handful of the game's premiere fighters fall under this umbrella. Unless you have a long term network deal with an HBO or Showtime, the title is oftentimes the only leverage you have in negotiating or making fights. Lennox Lewis has been able to juggle belts because he knows that as long as he wins, he will be considered the champion of the heavyweight division until he loses. But Winky Wright, on the flip-side, at jr. middleweight doesn't. And it's not only because Oscar De La Hoya could make that claim, but it's because even with his IBF title, it will be hard to entice 'the Golden Boy' to ever get in the ring with Wright, a crafty and tricky southpaw. And if he drops his belt, well, good luck to Winky in getting consistent work since he's a managers worse nightmare.

And this points out the double-talk of HBO, who at times is the Hypocritical Boxing Organization. Think about it, on one end they always make a point to mention that they don't recognize these 'spurious' belts. Well, they sure have been doing a lot of these bogus mis-mandatories of these organizations for Roy Jones the past few years haven't they? Also, countless people in the industry including promoters, managers and others in the know, tell me all the time that HBO in their contracts will demand that a 'title' fight be included on their undercard.

And yes, they do recognize titles when they have to. Why else would they televise the fight between John Ruiz and Kirk Johnson for the WBA heavyweight title? Think about it, just about everyone is in unanimous

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agreement that we have one heavyweight champion, the aforementioned Lewis, right? And wasn't Ruiz the same guy that they have been on a smear campaign against the past few years? And now, suddenly, when they sense an opportunity to make a Lewis-Johnson unification match in Toronto, Canada, they want to recognize the WBA? Huh?

To go further, why did they telecast the third bout with Evander Holyfield? It couldn't have been because it was a good matchup- the first two weren't exactly Foreman-Lyle if you know what I mean. And now get this, they are attempting to prop up the very same Ruiz to one Roy Jones and billing it as some historic event where a middleweight attempts to win a heavyweight title.

A heavyweight title (when it's convenient) that they say that they don't recognize with the same fighter they have done everything to discredit. Just how historic is that?

But hey, at least we have some good fights in the upcoming weeks.
RANKINGS

Gary Shaw, who is promoting the fight between Phillips and Mitchell, announced on a conference call last week that he would be asking the IBF to make this fight an eliminator for the top ranking in the IBF. Therefore setting up a chance for either fighter to get another crack at Kostya Tszyu. Currently, the number one and two spots are listed as vacant and the three and four guys (Ward and Gatti) are fighting each other on the 23rd of this month but haven't asked for any special consideration for their fight. Phillips and Mitchell, currently are not ranked by the IBF.

A source within the organization tells me that Shaw's request will be turned down because of the timing of it(simply too close to the fight) and the fact that neither guy is currently rated.

But Shaw does make a compelling argument on the fighters behalf.

" Basically, one guy beat Kostya Tszyu(Phillips knocked him out in 1997) and the other guy(Mitchell) was even on the cards before he suffered an injury that had nothing to do with boxing. And these are two guys that are willing to fight one another and then be willing to fight Tszyu. I'm not sure Micky Ward and Arturo Gatti want to fight for the title."

Shaw has a point, both the camps of Ward and Gatti were offered approximately the same amount to face Tszyu but opted instead for the rematch with each other for about the same amount. You can even assume that if Gatti wins the rematch, that a rubber match is the most attractive option for both men and not a shot at the undisputed crown.

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Phillips adds this, " I beat Tszyu to take the IBF championship from him. Second of all, I beat Micky Ward, I gave Ward the first opportunity for a world title shot, correct? Terron Millett, who I lost the title to-Sharmba beat him. So the IBF has to recognize this to that extent because we've beaten the people that they're putting in their rankings and just ignoring us.

" So that should put us in the mix. I'm a former IBF champion, I beat the number three contender. I beat their former world champion, who's a champion again, which is Kostya Tszyu."

I give them this, they do make a decent argument.