

Hvywt Saleem Is 38-0..But, Can He Fight?

Written by Bernard Fernandez
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Anyone who has promoted boxing events understands that, metaphorically speaking, there is always a possibility of losing your shirt. Maybe that's why during Butch Lewis' heyday he made a fashion statement by arriving for major fight cards he was involved in wearing a tuxedo, bow tie and no shirt.

Now 61, Ronald "Butch" Lewis can afford all the pricey, hand-tailored shirts he wants. His company, Butch Lewis Productions, still has somewhat of a presence in boxing, but it's his music and film production companies that constitute his heaviest revenue flows. When Lewis drops names and speaks of having had telephone conversations with "Denzel," it's a good bet he's not referring to some Police Athletic League boxer who wants Lewis to turn him into the next Michael Spinks.

But old habits die hard, and for Lewis there is nothing quite as satisfying as strutting toward the ring with a fighter who is either a world champion or is challenging for a title, especially if many millions of dollars are involved. That's a rush music and movies can't duplicate for someone who insists that, in his heart of hearts, he's first and foremost a boxing guy.

"No matter what other things I do in business that pays my rent, once you've got that jones for boxing, you've got it forever," Lewis said from his offices in New York. "That's just how it is. When I'm in it, I'm in it."

Lewis, however, isn't in it to the extent he once was. In the mid- to late-1980s, he took Michael Spinks to light heavyweight and heavyweight championships. He also had Michael's older brother, Leon Spinks when, in only his eighth pro bout, Leon shocked Muhammad Ali to win the WBC and WBA heavyweight titles on Feb. 15, 1978. But Leon was much less disciplined and more unpredictable than Michael, creating as much or more exasperation than exultation for Lewis. Leon lost the rematch with Ali seven months later and faded into obscurity.

A one-time vice-president of Top Rank who bolted in 1978 to form his own company on a wing and a prayer, Lewis' break from the safety net of an affiliation with a successful corporation was very much like the scene in (ital) Jerry Maguire (end ital) when Tom Cruise, in the title role, announces he is taking one goldfish, one female assistant and one client into an unknown future.

There really wasn't a goldfish in the equation, but Lewis' company consisted of a small Manhattan office, a receptionist and that one loyal client, Michael Spinks, the Cuba Gooding Jr. equivalent who believed he would receive more personal attention from Lewis than he could get in Top Rank's more expansive operation.

And as was the case for Jerry Maguire, success for Lewis didn't come immediately. His early shows were splashed with red ink. He wasn't always sure he could afford the rent or the secretary, and what would he have done had Michael Spinks taken a hike? For a time, Lewis

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helped fill his undercards with a midget wrestler called Ed "Too Small" Jones. Things didn't get any easier when, immediately after his first bout under Lewis' promotional banner, Spinks suffered a knee injury that kept him on the shelf for nearly a year.

But Spinks rehabilitated the knee, unified the light heavyweight title and became a megastar when he upset IBF heavyweight champion Larry Holmes on Sept. 21, 1985, in the process snapping Holmes' unbeaten streak at 48, one short of matching the late Rocky Marciano's 49-0 record.

Spinks' new status as the first light heavyweight champion to win a heavyweight title gave Lewis leverage, which he wielded like a Jedi warrior's light saber. Remember how much Lewis was criticized when he pulled Spinks out of the heavyweight unification tournament, for which Spinks would have been paid \$5 million for a bout with Mike Tyson? But when Tyson claimed all the belts, as Lewis suspected he would, the public demanded the new ruler of boxing's flagship division be paired with the undefeated conqueror of Holmes and Gerry Cooney who, oh, yeah, was still recognized by many as the linear heavyweight champion.

Lewis negotiated a \$13.2 million payday for Spinks to Tyson's \$17 million for their June 27, 1988, showdown, and so what if Tyson, then at the height of his powers, blew away Spinks in a mere 91 seconds. Do the math. Who wouldn't be placated by a quickie beatdown if the rate of compensation worked out to \$145,055 (ital) per second(end ital)?

Lewis and Spinks are still tighter than bugs in a rug, but however profitable their joint business ventures, the allure of boxing kept tugging at them like an attention-seeking child holding onto the coat sleeve of a parent. Lewis had a nice run with in the late 1990s with a modestly gifted heavyweight from Chicago named Vaughn Bean, whose shtick was to wear a pointed Arabian nights hat, like Sinbad the Sailor, into the ring. But while Bean, whose last bout was in 2005, never was as good as Michael Spinks, he compiled a 45-6-1 record with 34 victories inside the distance and, more significantly, got two shots at the heavyweight title. Bean acquitted himself better than most would have anticipated in dropping a majority decision to IBF champ Michael Moorer on March 29, 1997, and then a unanimous decision to WBA/IBF ruler Evander Holyfield on Sept. 19, 1998.

Which brings us to Lewis' ongoing heavyweight project, Faruq Saleem, who is less a Spinks in the making than someone who, just maybe, can replicate the run that Bean was able to pull off a decade ago.

It's been a long road for Lewis and the 34-year-old Saleem, who might be the only 38-0 heavyweight in the world to appear at this comparatively late stage of his career in six-round walkout bouts at club venues like the New Alhambra in South Philadelphia. In making his first ring appearance of 2008, and only the fourth since 2004, the 6'7", 257-pound Saleem hardly looked like a world-beater in scoring a unanimous decision over Willie Perryman (10-17, 7 KOs), a journeyman from Clarksdale, Miss., on Nov. 14 Then again, nobody booed when the final bell rang.

Lewis doesn't mind admitting that he cajoled promoters J Russell Peltz and the Hands, Joe Sr.

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and Joe Jr., into accepting Saleem. It was an easy sell, all things considered, because Lewis paid the purses for both his fighter and for Perryman. That meant that Lewis took a hit of a little more than \$4,000.

“I asked Butch what the heck he was doing, sticking with Saleem for as long as he has,” Peltz said. “He told me he had so much invested in the kid that he might as well invest a little more.”

That explains the essence of Butch Lewis. He is more realist than sentimentalist, and is well-aware that Saleem is never going to be considered a great heavyweight. But Lewis' realism extends to the heavyweight division as presently constituted, and there is a little voice that tells him that he has someone with a big body and decent punch who could get lucky in a field mostly populated by has-beens, never-weres and never-will-be's.

And there is also the little matter of Lewis' renowned obstinance. If he discouraged easily, he would have bailed from boxing way back when he had to pitch Ed “Too Small” Jones to audiences tinier than the midget wrestler.

Lewis points out that Saleem was world-ranked a few years ago before a string of injuries let the air out of his balloon and brought him back to ground zero.

“I'm thinking he got as high as No. 5, but I do know he was in the top 10 of both the WBA and WBC,” Lewis said. “I can't remember which one had him in the top five. The IBF may have had him in its top 15.”

So where did it start to go wrong for the Newark, N.J., native?

“Injuries,” Lewis said. “He's been riddled with injuries. In the gym, in the street. He broke his hand, twice. He had elbow chips. All kinds of stuff, man. It's the first time I've ever had a fighter who was as hurt as this guy is all the time.”

To date, Saleem – whom Lewis has handled since he was a fledgling pro – has been a dry hole into which Lewis and, to a degree, Spinks, have sunk a substantial investment with no return. Which begs a question: Why?

“I won't send a fighter out there if I feel he has a legitimate injury, and this bleeper-bleeper's had a lot of them,” said the ever-profane Lewis, which at least explains Saleem's recent history of inactivity. “He had two or three fights scheduled earlier this year, but something always happened. The other guy pulled out, or Faruq got injured in the gym.

“Now we got a fighter who's 38-0, with however many knockouts. I'm not prepared to just throw him out there and say, ‘(Crap) or get off the pot. You'd better get it together, and fast.’ Sure, it would be easy for me to say that. But I'm stubborn. Me and Slim (Spinks) see Faruq go 10 or 15 rounds in the gym and he can look pretty good at times.

“Our intention is to build him back up again, in a way that is in keeping with my style. If we make it across the finish line, fine. If we don't, I ain't gonna be happy, but in my heart I'll know I did it

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the right way.”

What makes Lewis convinced that Saleem is salvageable is that he is another nomad wandering the heavyweight desert. First man to stumble upon an oasis can become a big deal in a hurry, or so the theory goes.

“If he were a welterweight or a middleweight, I’d be real concerned right now,” Lewis said. “But come on now. We’re talking about the bleeping heavyweight division. Every bleeper-bleeper whose name anybody recognizes is older than 34, damn near. And nobody’s a killer. There ain’t no bleeping killer nowhere. I mean, who’s the killer?”

“Faruq hasn’t been in any wars. I think he has to potential to deal with any of these bleeping champions on a given night. That’s not to say how great my fighter is, but it tells you the level of what the division is. We’d go into any championship bout as the underdog, but my attitude would be, `Bleep that. We know we can win this bleeper-bleeper tonight.”

But if Lewis has enough patience to keep the faith, what about Saleem? He’s also been on a treadmill to nowhere seemingly forever. What if he threw up his arms, without injuring a shoulder, and declared that enough is enough?

“Certainly he’s frustrated,” Lewis said. “He sees what I see. He knows we can beat some of these bleeper-bleepers if we bring our best game. We got a shot. We ain’t out of this.

“What we got to do is get the wins, then step up to where you can kick ass and look good doing it. Hit the right guy on the chin. Then you can pull down some real money.”

So what about the heavyweights generally considered to be the best of the current bunch, WBC champ Vitali Klitschko and his younger brother, IBF, WBO and IBO titlist Wladimir Klitschko?

“They’re bullbleep!” Lewis shouted. “They put you to sleep! And by that I mean by boring you, not by knocking somebody’s ass out. Man, I’m telling you, we can whip those bleeper-bleepers on a given night. We got as good a shot to win the title as any bleeper-bleeper in the top 10.

“With the expertise I think I have in this sport, I believe I can get him ranked again within the next however many months. I’d like to get him a meaningful fight, a 10- or 12-rounder. From there, maybe into a title shot. Who the hell knows? They’re running out of so-called contenders. They can’t keep recycling the same bleeper-bleepers.”

It will be interesting, or at least informative, to see what happens when and if Lewis puts Saleem in with anyone with a discernible pulse. How easy is it to get to 38-0? Well, it’s not as hard as it otherwise would if the stiffes you’ve been pounding had a combined record of 399-897-41, with 492 losses by knockout, at the time you swapped punches with them.

Amazingly, Saleem’s pro debut, on Feb. 28, 1998, came against a veteran with 54 bouts. So how did any state commission sanction such an apparent mismatch? Well, the “seasoned” opponent Saleem bombed out in one round, James Holly, entered the ring with a 4-50 record,

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all 50 of his defeats coming inside the distance.

What Lewis wants is to find a heavyweight, any heavyweight, who can get people talking again.

“The current heavyweight champions are fighting overseas and can’t always get on American TV,” said Lewis, a point reference to hulking WBA champ Nikolay Valuev and the 46-year-old remnants of Evander Holyfield. “That’s ridiculous. This sport is losing fans because it’s not delivering.

“They say De La Hoya-Pacquiao is a big fight, but come on. It’s a big fight because there’s no heavyweights pulling the bleeping wagon like they ought to. I see people in the street and they say, ‘Butch, get back in the game. Boxing needs you.’ They must think I got a superstar in hiding somewhere.

“I’m disappointed that the situation is what it is because to me, boxing is the king of sports. It was that way for so long, and now it’s gone, or almost gone. I mean, think about it. You can’t even go into a barber shop any more and hear people talking about boxing. That’s bad, man. It’s sad.”

To reference a movie other than (ital) Jerry Maguire,(end ital) Lewis is a lot like Michael Corleone in (ital) Godfather III.(end ital) Every time he thinks he’s out of boxing, it pulls him back in.

“I got Bean two world title shots,” he recalled. “He didn’t embarrass us. He had limited talent, but he was in the mix for a while, you know?”

“I didn’t go looking for Bean. Bean was brought to me. I worked with him and got some decent results. It could be the same with Faruq. Who knows?”

“I saw Faruq in a couple of his early fights in Newark because I have friends on the police force there who brought him to my attention. I wasn’t sure I wanted to get involved. But they kept saying, ‘B, you can do it! You can make something of this guy!’ Next thing you know, I was signing him.

“Right now I’m being pitched a white heavyweight, 19 years old. They say he’s a street kid, never fought professional, but he can fight his ass off. My first reaction was that I didn’t want to get caught up in this bullbleep again, having to develop somebody for three or four years with no guarantee he’ll ever amount to anything.

“But you know what? I’ll probably take a longer look at him because that the way boxing is when it gets in your system.”