

THE BORGIES: Borges Hands Out Year-End Honors

Written by Ron Borges

Thursday, 29 December 2011 14:54



It is nearly the end of another year and boxing remains alive and...well?

Actually, the signs are good for a sport whose passing seems to be continually predicted by its critics. It is returning to a form of regular television with the new NBC deal that kicks off next month as part of NBC's expansion into the world of 24-hour sports. If the originators of this new series stick with their plans and keep the network open to any and all promoters rather than making what always become death-knell deals with a single promoter it is a chance to bring boxing back to the people without charging them an arm and a leg for the privilege.

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That NBC has taken this small step is a sign, at least, that they realize, as Bernard Hopkins once aptly put it, “as long as you got ghettos you’ll have boxing.”

Despite the self-destructive attitudes and actions of so many of the people who make a living in the sport, boxing has begun to prosper once again because the fans are more resilient than Arturo Gatti. They can take a shot and keep on coming, for which all fighters and promoters should be thankful.

So as another year closes let’s take a look at three categories of annual awards and single out a few people for giving boxing what it needs most – their best efforts.

FIGHTER OF THE YEAR – Although there are a few candidates one can debate about there seems to be only one conclusion in this category. Who had a better year in boxing than Andre Ward, the soft-spoken, hard-edged super middleweight champion from Oakland, Ca.?

Nobody, to be truthful about it.

Ward not only unified the WBA and WBC versions of the 168-pound championship as well as laying claim to the RING magazine belt but he ended the SHOWTIME Super 6 Super Middleweight tournament with a win so convincing over then WBA champion Carl Froch that the brash Brit said something you too seldom hear today. He said the other guy won.

“I lost the fight for sure,” Froch admitted after Ward schooled him on Dec. 17 to end the SHOWTIME tournament with a much-needed American winner. “I got beat by the better man. He’s a slippery eel.”

He’s also a lethal one. While Ward lacks the concussive, one-punch knockout power fans crave, he is an adroit surgeon who can both box and punch. He has not lost a fight in over 15 years yet continues to be looked upon as less than he really is because he wins with skill and an aggressive but wise nature rather than with bombast and bombing runs.

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This year alone he destroyed former middleweight champion Arthur Abraham (a pre-tournament favorite) as well as Froch and became the only fighter involved in the event not to lose a single match. He opened things up two years ago with a beat down of the man many felt (myself included) would win the tournament, Mikkel Kessler, and never looked back. Considering that he beat five of the top super middleweights in the world over the past three years while also being the last American to win an Olympic gold medal (when he was an overlooked underdog in Athens) Ward should be a star in America and once he would have been.

But such is the nature of the sport's place among the U.S. media these days that is not the case. At least not yet.

"Slowly but surely we made believers out of a lot of people that doubted me," Ward said recently, without a hint of rancor or self-pity. "It's been a long time coming, almost 15 years of grinding and toiling when no one was around patting you on the back and there were no lights, cameras action!"

Ward is right about that and now stands as living proof that a man can make it in boxing, if he is skilled enough and relentless enough and faithful to himself and the people around him enough, without making headlines for bad behavior or one-punch knockouts. Truth be told, it's easier to do it the latter way but Ward has done it his own way and it seems unlikely the 27-year old champion will not end the year being named the Boxing Writers' Association of America's Fighter of the Year.

Ward is what everyone should want in a fighter. He is relentless, so ever ready he could be a battery if he wasn't a boxer, highly skilled and outside the ring genteel but far from gentle. He is, as he pointed out after beating Froch, "a warrior" even if many have yet to understand that because he doesn't feel the need to pound his chest about it.

Instead he pounds the chest, head and ribs of opponents to prove the point, something he did so well this year he had, in my opinion, no peer.

FIGHT OF THE YEAR

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This is always a difficult category because A) no one sees every fight that's fought around the globe and B) one fan's stylistic favorite pales in comparison to another's. Having said that who didn't love watching Delvin Rodriguez and Pawel Wolak take the measure of each other last July on ESPN2?

Whatever they each were paid for it was far less than they deserved. There was more action in that fight than in all the heavyweight title fights contested around the world in 2011. Wolak was a construction worker by day and fighter by night and he made both points clear in that fight because he worked his ass off constructing an approach designed to make Rodriguez's debut at 154 pounds a difficult one.

Wolak succeeded but he sacrificed the right side of his face to do it. By the end of the night it looked like someone had stuffed a medicine ball and two rolls of quarters around his right eye. Yet he kept coming forward, landing shots and bringing the crowd to its feet while nearly knocking Rodriguez off his.

Rodriguez, meanwhile, got as good as he gave. His face was a mess as well yet for 10 rounds he kept going on bombing runs at Wolak, strafing him like the RAF over Dresden. By the end of the night both were spent shells, two men flailing away at each other round after round until mercifully it came to an end with witnesses nearly as exhausted from watching as they were from plying what that night became an angry trade.

In the end the fight was called a majority draw and rightfully so. No one deserved to win that fight but more importantly no one deserved to lose because everyone involved – fans and fighters alike – came out winners.

As a footnote, they fought a rematch Dec. 3 on the undercard of Cotto-Margarito and, as was predictable, it was nowhere near as stirring. Both men were professionals but this time Rodriguez was in control. While Wolak was relentless in his pursuit of Rodriguez this time he couldn't reach him and by the end seemed to be a fighter who had left a large piece of himself in the ring at the Roseland Ballroom that night in July.

Soon after, Pavel Wolak announced his retirement. If indeed these were his last fights, the one on July 15 is something he and Delvin Rodriguez both can be proud of.

TRAINER/MANAGER OF THE YEAR

This is an odd hybrid category that almost doesn't exist anymore because frankly managers barely exist anymore. Oh, there are plenty of 33 percenters out there but few of them manage fighters. They make alliances with promoters and/or TV networks and then do as they're asked.

One exception this year was Teddy Atlas. ESPN2's analyst on the Friday Night Fights also trains recently crowned WBA heavyweight champion Alexander Povetkin, having taken a flawed and stalled fighter and broken him down over the last year and a half and then rebuilt him into a guy at least good enough to lay claim to one of the too-many world title belts that exist today.

The improvement in Povetkin is obvious, especially in his 8th round KO of Cedric Boswell in his first title defense after outpointing Ruslan Chagaev to win the vacated title in July. Where the manager's end comes in is that it was Atlas alone who stood up to promoter Wilfried Sauerland and the Russians who take their manager's cut out of Povetkin's hide and refused to send him to the slaughterhouse against Wladimir Klitschko or his brother Vitali.

At the time Povetkin was the mandatory challenger for Klitschko he had only 21 fights and none of them had yet prepared him to face the division's most formidable forces. He was still unsure of what kind of fighter he was and often seemed daunted and doubtful in early rounds, a recipe for being destroyed by the bigger Klitschko, who regardless of what you may think of him knows what his identity is in the ring.

Povetkin did not and Atlas knew it and refused the fight despite tremendous pressures, both internal and external to take it. He was roundly criticized by some in the media who should have known better and Sauerland was fit to be tied but Atlas would not budge, willingly giving up the mandatory position under the well thought out theory that something better would soon come along.

It did and Povetkin, although not in the greatest of shape and having less than a month with Atlas because of a dispute between his trainer and the men who ostensibly manage him over contract terms, beat back the more experienced former WBA champion to live out his dream.

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Eventually, Atlas knows, the big money will be in fighting one of the Klitschkos and there will be a time when that risk has to be taken. But boxing, like the insurance business, is about risk and reward. He was willing to put his own reputation on the line by taking the risk of not sacrificing his fighter for quick money because he believed in Povetkin and in his own talents as a trainer.

When Atlas first began working with Povetkin, a member of Klitschko's camp said privately, "The longer he's with Teddy the better he's going to get so the sooner we can get to him the better for us. I understand that."

Many in boxing did not but Teddy Atlas did, which is why this morning Alexander Povetkin is a heavyweight champion of the world.

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Radam G says:

Hum! Wow! This was one strange year in boxing. Then, again, every year is some type of jive in boxing. Holla!

Radam G says:

And a lot of scribes are picking SOG as the fighter of the year. I guess no one will dare pick SOL -- sno'nuff outsider and locked out. Wow! I'm beginning to wonder. Why are the fighter of the year is usually from the West Coast? Didn't anybody and dey sidekick see B-Hop? OOPS! I musta' fo'got! He is an ex-convict. And the history of the game is to be coldhearted to ex-cons. [I can name tons, who, in the last 35 years were showing their a\$\$es, but got no pick.] I was holla at some his story -- I mean history -- to check that jive out. And if you have been in da pen, not seeing' your arse, those in with da power preten[d sic]. Anytime that an old fart wins a legit title against a decent champ, he should get some type of award -- in my opinion, of course. A fudge-you-geezer award or something.

Back in the day, it was no second thought about calling Rev. [Big] George Foreman FOTY when his ancient arse won it all. But everybody and dey momma are running as if a skunk has gotten on his spray when even just mentioning B-Hop. WTF!

Andre Ward whup a few long-in-the tooth warriors at home on his way to conquering the hyped-up Super Six tourney. But B-Hop whup the arse of a young gun in the YG's home squared jungle.

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Each boksing super scribe to his own choosing of the year's top guns, but I was just wondering is the WEST simply the BEST. Or is it that we don't like da EAST, because they can showcase a reform Beast? Whatever! I'm down with O-P-P! Ya kno' me! Hehehehe! Advance Happy 1212. Holla!