



I thought I heard a sigh, a humongous sigh of relief, coming from Kathy Duva and Russell Peltz, sitting in the front row at the Asylum Arena in Philly during the main event of NBC's "Fight Night" first installment. Their mainer, a late addition after the Sergei Liakhovich-Eddie Chambers bout was scrapped last week due to a Chambers injury, turned out to be a decent scrap, a rarity for heavyweights in this day and age.

No, this was no Ali-Frazier type tussle, but the Bryant Jennings-Maurice Byarm mashup had the crowd amped to a decent degree. Neither man had ever been more than six, but they went ten rounds, and to the scorecards. The judges liked Jennings, by scores of 97-93, 96-94, 96-94, and all the way in Brooklyn, I breathed a little sigh of relief for Main Events, the promoter of the series. That's because I want boxing as a whole to succeed, and the networks to re-embrace the sport of all sports.

Jennings said after to Chris Mannix that mental prep was key. He said he did tons of situps and that helped when Byarm strafed him. Byarm said he landed heavy shots, but the winner just took them well. He said he didn't listen to his coach when he was told to be busier. After,

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analyst Freddie Roach said people got their money's worth.

Byarm (13-0-1 entering; age 29; 244 1/2; from Philly; son of ex pro Lionel Byarm) said before that the fight would not go the distance. We heard pre-fight that he'd battled drinking and weight problems, which kicked up after his sixth bout, a loss to Tyson Fury. He debuted a pro two years ago. Jennings (11-0 coming in; age 27; 220 pounds; from Philly) took up boxing at age 24, so he's only been at it three years. The Pennsylvania heavyweight belt was on the line in a fight scheduled for ten or fewer rounds.

In the first, Jennings tossed out a quick jab to keep the beefy lefty at bay. He moved left and right, giving Byarm credit for some power. The big guy didn't throw much at all in the first. We hoped he'd pick it up, for the sake of the series, if for no other reason. Sadly, he looked to be living down to expectations of the heavyweight of today.

In the second, Byarm did throw to start the second, apparently having been chewed out in his corner. Jennings has the work rate of a lighter fighter, and took it to the heavier man.

In the third, Jennings took combos to Byarm. The big man didn't look like the power was bothering him, but the judges had to like Jennings' work.

In the fourth, Jennings kept up his work rate. It looked like this fight was his to lose. Then Byarm got cooking, using that weight to good advantage, in the sixth. Jennings' legs weren't as fresh now, so Byarm, no Astaire, was able to find him more easily. Body work was working for Byarm, but then in the seventh, Jennings got some more wind, and moved more.

Jennings scored well to start the eighth, but Byarm took the combos well. I was surprised the hefty Byarm, particularly, had such energy in round nine. In the tenth, the two men both looked like they wanted it. We'd go to the cards.

SPEEDBAG In the next "Fight Night" installment, Zab Judah will fight Vernon Paris. That takes place on March 24. That junior welterweight IBF eliminator takes place in Brooklyn.

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