

OLYMPICS ASSESSED: Shields Rocked, The Men Stumbled Badly in London

Written by Michael Woods
Wednesday, 15 August 2012 10:48



That gold tasted sweet to the Flint Fury, Claressa Shields. But her effort can't mask the sour taste of a medal-less effort from the men's side in London.

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From an American perspective, the 2012 London Olympics will be remembered as Claressa Shields' Games. Better that, better to look on the bright side that is the gold medal obtained by the 17 year old brashtalker from Flint, Michigan than to ponder for too long the ignominy that is the performance by the men's side of the squad.

Zero medals. The nine guys didn't take home so much as a bronze, and if not for the high schooler from Flint, and a bronze taken home by fellow female Marlen Esparza, the US would have been saddled with the buzzkill fact that every US squad came back home with at least a bronze. (In the first year boxing was in the summer Games, 1904, only Americans took part. Ah, the good old days...)

I refuse to diminish middleweight Shield's feat, her 19-12 win over Russian Nadezda Torlopova, and I haven't heard anyone suggesting Shields' or Esparza's wins get an asterisk, but the women's side featured 12 boxers apiece in three weight classes as opposed to 10 classes of up to 30 men apiece. Yeah, it was a thin debut class. Still, I like Shields, with her solid basics and asskicking 'tude to bring home the top medal even in a deeper field.

The nine guys who gloved up for the US I hope chipped in for at least a decent gift basket for Shields, the Flint Fury, daughter of a streetfighter, because if she didn't win a gold, the snapback on the guys would have been bordering on vicious.

Rau'Shee Warren's opening round loss, his third in a row, is a negative standout from the London fiasco. The Ohioan got a bye to start, but was dumped out by Nordine Oubaali, a Frenchman, 19-18. Probably time for the three-time loser to exit the am ranks; he's just 25, so he could of course try again, and aim for Brazil in 2016, but perhaps his style is better suited for the pros. "It's kind of telling me it's time to move to another level," he said after the loss, an indication of the direction he will head in.

Bantamweight Joseph Diaz Jr. gave reason for optimism, before the men's chances funneled down the drain, with a 19-9 opening round win over Pavlo Ishchenko of the Ukraine. The kid from Cali, who started boxing at age eight, showed some nice traits and skills, as the 19 year-old lefty put his punches together quite often against the loser, and used body work to good effect. In the round of 16, he was paired with Cuban Lazaro Alvarez, age 21, who took bronze home with him. The judges said Diaz lost, 21-15, but Teddy Atlas and Bob Papa of NBC

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didn't love their tally. Atlas thought Diaz should have won the second round, and had a cushion entering the third round. "I though Diaz carried the fight," Atlas said. Many are high on Diaz' chances as he pivots to the pro game; the kid with a six-grader's face has a nice back story, having learned to box after being bullied in school. No reason some promoter doesn't market him to the same folks who revere Justin Bieber.

Californian lightweight Jose Ramirez, age 19, got off to a solid start, winning a 21-20 decision over Frenchman Rachid Azzedine in the round of 32. He showed a long jab, exhibited some decent footwork at times, but had a tendency to get a bit wild against a semi-crude foe. Ramirez met up with Uzbek Fazliddin Gaibnazarov in the next round. He started slowly, a trait that annoyed many watchers of the US crew. (Volume is key in this scoring system, and history doesn't often favor patient tacticians. I mean, the scorers might miss a scoring blow during a flurry, but you can be sure they won't give you a point if you aren't throwing but rarely.) Down 12-5 entering the third, Ramirez got hungry and aggressive, while Gaib tried to run and hold to run out the clock, but it was too little, too late, and the Uzbek scored a 15-11 win. "Most likely I'm going to go professional," he told KFSN, of Fresno. "I'm going to step up to a pro career and we'll see where that takes me. I know it's going to be exciting. I know a lot of companies have been looking at me for a long, long time. And now they're excited to know that I'm going to turn pro."

Jamel Herring, the 26-year-old Marine out of Long Island, didn't make it out of the first round. In his light welterweight tangle, he lost 19-9 to Daniyar Yelessinov of Kazakhstan. He could have in retrospect tried to be first more during the fight. Props to the captain of the squad for not getting down, though, and keeping on encouraging his mates after he lost his tussle. Does he have a pro career in him? Let's see how he does if he works with a top-level trainer.

Texan Errol Spence was the last hope for the men's team, but he lost a 16-11 decision to Russian Andrey Zamkovoy in the welterweight quarterfinals last Tuesday. He'd actually lost his opener to India's Krishan Vikas, but that loss was overturned on appeal, because Vikas held excessively. In the loss to the Russian, Spence too often let the winner be first, and will need to fix that moving forward.

"It leaves a bad taste in all our mouths," Spence told NBCOlympics.com after his loss. "We all have great athletes. We didn't think we were going to come out here and not be winning medals. After this Olympics, our whole organization needs to get together and come up with a new gameplan to get back on top." Sensible words from the Texan, who will head to the pro ranks.

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Cleveland's Terrell Gausha, who trains in California, got our hopes up with a stoppage win in his opener. The middleweight, who has some issues with wildness, and balance, took out Armenian Andranik Hakoyan, displaying a nice aggressive streak. But he got stopped out in the round of 16, by Indian Vijender Singh, by a score of 16-15. "I disagree with that decision," Teddy Atlas said after. "I disagree with much of what I've seen in the Olympics boxing competition." He used the "C" word, "corrupt," when talking to a reporter from the Cleveland Plain Dealer, and he delved deeper into that to TSS, which you can check out a bit later. The 24 year-old is leaning toward turning pro, and Atlas singled him out as one of the guys he liked, especially for his aggression and desire.

Marcus Browne of Staten Island, NY liked his chances to leave London with a medal, telling me before his first match, "I'm not cocky, but confident. I'm not going to say I might lose, settle for silver. I know I have what it takes to win gold, but I got to put the work in. I've put my foot in my mouth a couple times, and don't like the feeling." But Aussie Damien Hooper outworked the 21 year-old light heavyweight, who wasn't able to ramp up in the crucial third round, when Hooper turned on the juice, after being down 6-5. Hooper scored a standing eight late, while the New Yorker spent too much time avoiding contact rather than causing it. At the end, Hopper scored a 13-11 victory. One can see Browne having better luck with smaller gloves and no headgear, however.

Our heavyweight entrant, Michael Hunter II, didn't manage to get the gold he wanted to honor his dad, the late Michael Hunter I, who is remembered as a decent pro and mainstay on USA's "Tuesday Night Fights." Against Russian Artur Beterbiev in the round of 16, the opener for both men, he fought on the back foot a great deal, engaged in regular clinches and looked to be gassed out a bit more than you'd like after three rounds. The score after three stood at 10-10 and the Russian got the nod through a tiebreaker against the Las Vegan. Being a heavyweight, you expect that he will sift through a few offers and transition to the pro game, always on the lookout for a Klitschko Killer, or at least, someone who can test the Brothers K. Or someone who can at least be presented to the people as a plausible foe.

Californian Dominic Breazeale made the leap from football to boxing, but it is hard to picture the super heavyweight who played QB at Northern Colorado as being a factor in the near future as pro, let alone a Klitschko Killer. Dom got a bye, but then was handed a tough task in the round of 16, in Magomed Omarov of Russia. The 26 year-old didn't register a point in the first round, and his form lagged as his energy waned, and he lost by a 19-8 score. Does he he really dig boxing, or does he see boxing as a so-so substitute for an NFL career? That remains to be seen.

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Cover Girl Marlen Esparza, the flyweight from Houston, defeated Kartha Magliocco from Venezuela in the quarters, 24-16, and clinched a bronze then and there. Her stellar smile dimmed in the semi, against China's Ren Cancan, who defeated the 23 year-old. Ren, a 10-8 winner, waited and countered Esparza in a bout which featured warnings to both boxers for inactivity. Esparza has nice basics, punches in bunches, is a slick mover and could clean up in the endorsement arena. She says she's leaving boxing and heading off to college. "My body is falling apart already," she said to KHOU.com. "I'm in sports medicine four hours a day."

Queen Underwood, a lightweight from Seattle, Washington has to be seen as a winner, just for getting to London. Her dad was jailed for a sex crime, she started running with a druggie crowd and tried to commit suicide, before getting her head together, and finding structure in boxing. yes, yet another of the hundreds of people annually who use boxing to better themselves, give them structure, purpose and a concrete goal. Great Britain's Natasha Jonas beat Underwood, 21-13, in the round of 16. She was visibly emotional in a post-fight interview, needing time to collect herself and stave off tears, showing an admirable level of desire.

The lady who leaves London as the standout star in the States, Shields, just 17, showed some of the fire, and fury and desire that was too often absent in the guys' efforts. She was downed by a score of 18-11 vet Anna Luarell, age 32, of Sweden in the quarters, showing some of the best pure boxing instincts of any fighter, male or female, on the US squad. Next up was Marina Volnova of Kazakhstan, who was no match for the Flint Fury. Shields scored two knockdowns, won all four rounds and exited with a 29-15 win. Her foe had ample international experience, something the US team, with shoddy leadership and funding, hasn't enjoyed of late. Volnova since 2008 fought in China, Turkey, Russia, Greece and Poland, while Shields has never crossed an ocean. But that same fire and resolve that had her deciding to leave her parents house to live with her aunt in Flint carried her to a win over a more tested opponent. "I didn't have to, I just decided," she told NBC regarding the move to her aunt's. "I've always wanted to live with Tammy to help my boxing." Contrast that sort of confident decision-making and candor with some of the knucklehead yapper pros who are Twitter legends, and it just makes you like Shields that much more. Last Thursday, Shields became the youngest Olympic boxing champion since 1924, as she downed Nadezda Torlopova, a Kazakhstani boxing for Russia. Shields didn't have a problem showing an elder, age 33, that all US teens aren't bloated gamers. Shields' body work, which didn't show up in the points column, affected Torlo, who didn't know how to handle bunches of punches flying at her face and gut. No one couldn't love Shields' head movement as she slipped a Torlo combo in the final round, in which she stayed aggressive, but smart, while protecting a 15-10 lead going into the final frame. She's been fighting for six years, but you either have an instinct for fighting, or you don't, and Shields just does. Her brain contains the knowledge to do it the right way, physically, and her character is of a variety that I dare say a few of the guys from this London squad would do well to emulate.

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Check back a bit later, and hear what Teddy Atlas, who called the boxing for NBC, has to say about the US showing; warning, Teddy pulls no punches. We'll ask a couple other smart folks what can be done to get the US boxing program back to a respectable level.

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deepwater says:

the us mens team should be ashamed. really ashamed. marcus brown gave up in the 3rd round of his fight and started talking about making \$ in the pros. props to the girls from usa. props to katie taylor from ireland, paddy barnes from ireland, props to lomachencko from ukraine, props to lil zu shimming from china,props to super heavy italian cavallari who got ripped off by the judges. seriously every last person in the usa boxing organization needs to get fired. the usa team should be picked along with back up fighters 2 years b4 the next games.