

Mike Jones, Minus The Dorsal Fin

Written by Bernard Fernandez
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Jones (r) gets the better of Irving Garcia last July. Props to his team for taking a Soto-Karass rematch, rather than proclaiming victory, and plowing ahead. Jones and his team truly want to know what he is, or is not.

According to Hollywood, Great White sharks are capable of swimming around for years, patiently waiting to settle old scores with a particular human family ("Jaws: The Revenge"), or have been genetically engineered to be smarter than a team of marine biologists ("Deep Blue Sea").

But don't believe everything you see on a movie screen, which fight fans should already know if they picked up on the falsified portions of "based on a true story" film treatments of "The Hurricane," "Ali" and even the current Academy Award-nominated smash, "The Fighter." Sharks don't have a predisposition for vengeance, nor do they have IQs higher than MIT graduates. They have existed for millions of years by utilizing their primal, predatory instincts. If some creature in the water is bleeding and behaving erratically, sharks will show up and go into a feeding frenzy. It's what they do.

Not that certain boxers can be equated to aquatic eating machines, but they can be instinctive, too, particularly if they find themselves in a situation where a familiar pattern takes precedence to a formulated strategy. If a big puncher with a high incidence of early knockouts gets his man in trouble in the first couple of rounds, his natural inclination is to seal the deal then and there, and so what if his corner team had laid out a fight plan of lots of jabbing and a gradual breakdown of an opponent with the history of going the distance? Feeding frenzies are what sharks and knockout artists do when they detect blood or fear.

Mike Jones, the rising welterweight contender from Philadelphia, had hoped to use the occasion of his Nov. 13 bout with Mexican tough guy Jesus Soto-Karass, in Cowboys Stadium and part of the HBO Pay-Per-View-televised undercard of a show headlined by Manny Pacquiao's 12-round pummeling of Antonio Margarito, to announce to the world that he was ready to join the ranks of boxing's elite performers.

"I'm going to shine and shine bright," he said shortly before he was to take his star turn. "I know I'm going to put on a hell of a show in Cowboys Stadium."

Bob Arum, who had just taken on Jones as part of Top Rank's promotional stable, in association with Jones' local promoters, J Russell Peltz and Joe Hand Sr., must have expected the same dominating flourishes.

"We really like Jones," Arum said. "We think he's a real talent. He represents the future of the welterweight division."

So much for the best laid plans of mice and men, and, maybe, sharks. Jones didn't exactly start

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munching on seaweed in the most important bout of his career, but, after a torrid second-round assault that had Soto-Karass gasping and thrashing about in deep waters, the lean Philadelphian with the Tommy Hearns physique found himself punched out, his razor teeth dulled. Soto-Karass rallied, and only a reasonably strong finish by a rejuvenated Jones, who caught his second wind toward the end of the 10-rounder, enabled him to escape with a disputed majority decision.

Judges Sergio Caiz and Levi Martinez submitted scorecards favoring Jones by margins of 97-93 and 95-94, respectively, while colleague Gale Van Hoy saw the fight as a 94-94 standoff.

And if you think Team Jones wasn't thrilled with what had transpired, just imagine how the other side felt.

"That's the way the judges saw it, but it was an all-out robbery," huffed Soto-Karass, who extended his streak of professional bouts in which he hasn't been stopped to 32.

Arum, Peltz, Hand, co-managers Doc Nowicki and Jim Williams, trainer Vaughn Jackson and Jones himself had to know that the big splash they had hoped to make in Jones' first HBO appearance was more like a ripple. If they were to keep all that positive momentum going, it was going to be necessary to schedule a do-over with Soto-Karass, to determine, one way or the other, whether Jones was worthy of the mounting hype or was just another prefabricated flash-in-the-pan.

So it came to pass that the rematch is set for Feb. 19, at Las Vegas' Mandalay Bay, with Jones (23-0, 18 KOs) mixing it up again with Soto-Karass (24-5-3, 16 KOs), as an appetizer prior to the main event which pits WBC/WBO bantamweight champion Fernando Montiel and challenger Nonito Donaire. Jones' fringe NABO and NABA 147-pound belts will again be on the line, as will the vacant WBC Continental Americas title, but this time the fight has been scheduled for 12 rounds, not 10.

Peltz said he believed that Soto-Karass and his trainer, Joe Goossen, wanted the two additional rounds because they believe Jones' stamina level is such that he won't be able to withstand six more minutes of the challenger's constant pressure. Whatever the thinking, Soto-Karass and his people were as anxious for a second go at Jones as Team Jones was for another crack at Soto-Karass.

"I saw Joe Goossen on the way back to the dressing room (after the first fight) and said, 'What do you think of a rematch?' He said, 'Great.'"

To hear Peltz and Nowicki tell it, their guy fell into the dual traps of hurting Soto-Karass earlier than anticipated and a pattern of quick and perhaps premature stoppages in earlier bouts that night.

"He definitely punched himself out," Peltz said of Jones. "It took him most of the fight to get it back together again."

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“I thought he was one solid punch from having the referee (Rafael Ramos) stop the fight. Later, Mike told me that prior to the fight, when he was in the dressing room watching the earlier fights on the monitor, he noticed how quickly the referees were stopping fights that night. And they were. I guess he just went for (the KO) and got carried away.

“He said it took him four rounds to get his legs back, that he had no legs until the seventh round. I told him, ‘If you think that was the only thing you did wrong in that fight, you have a problem. You abandoned the jab that was working so well in the first round, a jab we had been harping on you for years to use more.’

“Mike also squared up and stood in front of Soto-Karass all night. Every time he would nail Soto-Karass, he stood there and waited for Soto-Karass to clock him back, rather than to move side-to-side and give him angles. He fought Soto-Karass’ fight. Soto-Karass wants you to stand in front of him. And Mike accommodated him.”

Nowicki said the worst thing that Jones could have done was to allow his inner dorsal fin to emerge too soon, which is what can happen when a fighter wins his first 12 pro fights on stoppages, including 11 within the first three rounds.

“That wasn’t the game plan,” Nowicki said of Jones’ decision to shoot the load in the second round. “The plan was for him to box the guy because we knew (Soto-Karass) tries to put a lot of pressure on you. Then, if the opportunity presents itself, do what you have to do.

“If you look at Mike Jones’ history, in 22 fights before that night there were 18 knockouts, most of them in the first three rounds. He indicated to us in the corner that there were a couple of shots (in the second round) that he really hurt Soto-Karass with. He could see in the guy’s eyes that he was nearly ready to go. Mike’s natural instinct is, ‘Hey, he’s hurt, I’m not going to let him hang around. I’m going to take him out now.’”

Ramos’ reluctance to jump in quickly, which now appears to be justified, also proved a factor.

“They were calling them off rather quickly,” Nowicki said of the all the early stoppages, some of which might have been a bit premature. “I actually jumped up in the ring afterward and asked the referee, ‘What were you waiting for in the second round?’ he said, ‘(Soto-Karass) was still throwing some punches.’ When I looked at the tape – and I guess I’ve seen it 20 or 30 times – I can somewhat agree. The guy was getting pounded, no question, but he was still attempting to fight back.

“If Mike had taken a step back and just let the guy come to him ... well, he didn’t do that. He got caught up in trying to end it there. He threw a lot of wide shots. Some landed, some didn’t.”

Jones enters the rematch still highly regarded. He is the second-ranked welterweight contender the WBO and is rated No. 3 by both the WBA and IBF, No. 4 by the WBC. He is so close, so very close, to a world title shot and big-money fights, maybe eventually against the great Pacquiao who, after all, also is promoted by Arum. But another less-than-stellar performance against Soto-Karass could have the effect of pushing him further back in the pack.

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“What Mike should have been thinking the last time was, ‘I need to break this guy down a lot more before I try to take his head off,’” Nowicki said. “This next time, you’re going to see Mike try to hurt him in every round, box him, break him down little by little. Hopefully, by the ninth, 10th, 11th and 12th rounds, he’ll have broken him down enough to lay that barrage on him and take him out.”

But talking about doing something is not the same as doing it. What happens if Jones lets his finisher’s instincts take over when his man isn’t quite ready to be finished? Can a shark pick and choose his feeding mode like a discerning diner in a five-star restaurant?

Jones, prior to the first fight, suggested that he is not in so much of a rush as some people might imagine.

“I’m a patient person,” he said of his hanging on to his job at Home Depot even as his boxing career began to take off. “I truly believe I’m meant to be the best. I can wait a while longer for that to happen.”

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