

Abraham No Knockout, Cruiserweights Steal Show

Written by Phil Woolever
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FALLEN KINGS AND FALLING STARS; There was an excellent fight card in the lush-life region deemed North Rhine Westphalia last Saturday with plenty of thrills, spills and technical skills on duked-out display. The funky, artistic looking industrial area of Mulheim an der Ruhr appears a bit different than many of the surrounding German towns near the Netherlands border, and there was a special buzz around the packed, moderately-sized arena.

Too bad for the still quite popular Arthur Abraham that he couldn't be as much a part of it as he and his team envisioned.

On prefight paper a TKO 2 is exactly what the doctor ordered, but not how it occurred in the abbreviated, anti-climactic contest against hard luck Stjepan Bozic. It wasn't Abraham's fault in any way, unless you can blame someone for having too hard an elbow area.

Abraham entered the standing room sell out looking almost shy, but leapt out of his shell as soon as he was introduced. Whether or not he had tweaked more early action into his style remained unanswered due to the brief duration, but he looked headed in the right direction.

At least it looked like Bozic showed up ready, confident and loose as he danced around during Abraham's 200 decibel entrance. Bozic tried to catch Abraham cold and whaled away wildly to the body without landing much. He did tag a startled Abraham with a couple hooks. Bozic stayed busier but after about a minute Abraham double-clutched into 4th gear and started thumping in heavy body work.

Bozic charged out again for round two and tried to get past Abraham's peek-a-boo style defense as Abraham started planting himself for heavy leather. Bozic darted in and crashed his left wrist against the bottom of Abraham's right glove area, then bent the wrist again on Abraham's elbow a second later. There was a freeze frame moment as Bozic recoiled with a face of tortured shock then knelt to the canvas while Abraham slowly circled the ring and extended his arms in a frustrated gesture to the booning crowd.

Michael Buffer earned his paycheck by announcing the official time of 1:01 in a manner that made it sound like Abraham had scored a steamrolling triumph. Though the swarm cheered sincerely, Abraham's face said there was no big celebration in order. Still, it seems like the glass is more than half full.

Abraham's unlucky failure to close the show with a bang in his confidence builder against a heavy underdog opponent is just the latest in a stinging string of frustrations since stumbling

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against Andre Dirrell and freezing against Carl Froch.

"2010 was bad for me because I was too passive," reflected Abraham. "But that year is over and I will not talk about it any more. I was in good shape from my training, working very hard to be more aggressive and go to my opponent's body more, but I did not get the chance to show the people. There is nothing more I can do except keep working. I have to win two more fights in the Super Six."

Capping a big fight night with a strong, aggressive display was exactly what Abraham needed to re-establish himself as Germany's favorite fighter. Instead, a number of the night's other participants endeared themselves to the patrons more. It was difficult to determine exactly how many fans were inside, but approximately 3,013 were counted.

Steve "USS" Cunningham did himself and his homeland proud again, with a solid showing against inspired challenger Enad Licina. Cunningham remains based in Philadelphia but is still a prominent new addition to the Sauerland stable, and has done enough PR to have a growing fan base here. Cunningham wasn't mentioned in all of the promotional material and he wasn't booked for the live TV broadcast, but his fight was the most legitimate "title" tilt on the card and he showed why he is the consensus cruiserweight champ.

Cunningham embodies the kind of dedicated, professional type precision Germans love. A bit more pop and he'd be near the top of pound for pound lists.

Cunningham had a solid jab working from the start but considerable underdog Licina showed up in great shape and came to win, no matter how much of a longshot that possibility was. Licina charged in behind some dangerous right hands and made Cunningham blink, but the champion remained totally composed.

Cunningham scored many fine combinations, but between his relative lack of one punch stopping power and Licina's determined conditioning it became clear the challenger wasn't going anywhere; although that no-go territory also included the winner's circle.

There were scattered boos when the verdict was announced but scoring seemed very accurate based on an informal ringside poll. Scoring: Howard Foster 118-110, Dave Parris 117-111, Manuel Palomo 115-113. The Sweet Science saw it 118-110.

"He was strong but I'm world champion who can win by boxing, scuffling, any way I need to," said a fresh faced Cunningham. "I caught a flu here and my legs got a little weary, but I'm the USS Cunningham, a ship of war. Drop bombs, missiles, troops, whatever it needs to be done to win the mission. He caught me a couple times and I had to dig in, but I was taking his energy (by) hitting him to the body, so he really didn't hurt me. Now I'm looking for unification, unification, unification."

Probably the most dramatic contest was the primary co-feature of Yoan Pablo Hernandez challenging Steve Herelius for one of those silly "interim" designations. Whatever the so called sanction, these guys made it a very worthwhile sporting affair while it lasted. Both left handers

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were in top shape. When one man landed the other made a point of scoring back immediately.

Herelius appeared to have an Achilles tendon problem around the 3rd. After the 4th and extended medical consultation for an obviously distressed Herelius, it was determined that the bell would sound and if Herelius didn't come out he'd lose via TKO. So he limped out and went for broke. Hernandez didn't exploit the injury by mauling, though he didn't need to as the busted up Herelius plodded along; noble but completely futile. When a huge straight right then a wicked, short uppercut dumped Herelius, he tested his leg and got up for more of what was obviously next. A dozen thuds later, a red towel was thrown, just as Herelius went sprawling again. Official time was 1:19 of the 7th.

With considerable drama and fan response it wasn't a hollow victory, but it wasn't as fulfilling as might have been, either. Hernandez's powerful showing and emotional post fight words to the crowd indicated he would be a popular factor in the future 200 pound landscape, especially if Sauerland promotions finalize their cruiserweight tournament. Even without the tournament, there are more than a few good showdowns on tap.

Considering the venue's clear, close sight lines throughout and the fact fans could get eight scheduled fights for around twenty two US bucks, this was one of the best boxing bargains to be found. Hopefully, it set the standard for a great 2011 in Deutschland duke outs.

Hernandez looks like the type attraction with staying power, and Cunningham is obviously a class act. In today's boxing market, they might have to travel, but trips around Germany usually mean very nice confines at the top of the European boxing scene.

Abraham didn't really get the chance to soar, but at least he didn't crash, either.

"I am very disappointed tonight because I wanted to please my fans, but the most important thing is that I won and that I feel good. I am ready to keep training harder than ever. I know Ward is considered a big favorite now, but I will be ready because it is very important for me to look good the next time I fight in America," mused Abraham.

Trainer Ulli Wegner, who recently called Abraham to task by questioning his fighter's courage seemed satisfied for the moment. "Saturday was for Arthur to reconcile with his fans. We've made progress in recent weeks but we still have a long way to go. It is never easy."

Considering realistic current odds against Abraham beating Ward in the next Super Six session, probably in or near Ward's California home base; Abraham needs to do something drastic to give himself any real chance to be competitive, let alone pull off the upset.

While Abraham's jaw always seems sturdy, he may have something of a glass psyche.

Abraham should find another journeyman, maybe at light heavyweight, and fight again within a month. He still needs more mental mechanics, until he's seen so much he won't get jarred off track as often. If the people inside Abraham's camp know he's not ready, could he find himself with a back injury like Froch's that caused a postponement of their initially scheduled

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showdown?

The best strategy is probably to get Abraham to Philly for a few weeks of sparring with Cunningham and philosophy with USS trainer Brother Nassim.

For Abraham to have any real shot against Ward, "King Arthur" needs something drastic, far outside his usual comfort zone.

Whatever or wherever that cruel magic may be, it eluded Abraham yet again last weekend.

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