

The Gift Of Zab: Judah Finds Another Big Fight

Written by Eric Raskin
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On July 23, Zab Judah is going to knock Amir Khan the @*&# out.

Now that I have your attention, allow me to transition to the real thrust of this article: how Judah found himself in a position to put Khan's name and all those funky keyboard symbols in the same sentence.

I'm not talking about the machinations that made this specific fight possible; the story of how Tim Bradley inexplicably walked away from the opportunity to face Khan and Judah stepped in has already been told on several websites. What I'm talking about is the bigger picture of how a guy like Judah was even in the mix in the first place.

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The way boxing works, a fighter is usually past his peak when his earning power is at its highest. Look at Shane Mosley, whose mainstream name landed him a \$5-million (at least) payday last month despite the fact that he was badly faded and everybody knew it. It's not just boxing; Derek Jeter gets overpaid on account of his name and his past contributions, Adam Sandler still makes \$20-million a movie even though he did his best work in the mid-'90s, etc. But it's especially true in the fight game, and has been since Jim Jeffries left someone else to tend to the alfalfa more than a century ago.

So it should come as no surprise that Judah is continuing to get major opportunities after 15 years as a pro and six defeats inside the prize ring. When you've logged enough big fights, win or lose, the world gets to know your name, and Judah's name is probably among the top-10 most well known among casual American boxing fans. What makes this case unique is that Judah's name alone isn't what earned him his crack at Khan. Judah's name let him return from a humiliating loss to Carlos Baldomir and immediately face Floyd Mayweather without doing anything to earn the opportunity. His name let him face Miguel Cotto at Madison Square Garden two fights later despite not posting a win in more than two years. And his name let him get back on HBO against Joshua Clottey three fights after that.

But something is different here. Heading into the Khan fight, it's not unreasonable to ask this question about Judah: Is it possible he's actually on the verge of his greatest glory at age 33, when once it seemed it was all downhill for him after 23?

The "veteran cashing in on an established name" was just the first facet of a five-pronged plan that put Judah in this spot.

Prong number two: maturing (finally), cutting out the BS, and working his butt off to get the most out of his ability before it was too late.

Hey, maybe I'm a sucker, but when I hear Judah talk now, after I tune out all the Jesus praising, I hear a calmer, wiser man. The motor-mouthed ADD case who couldn't get through a sentence without a "youknowwhatimsaying" or two has given way to a guy whose interviews are coherent. The metal in his teeth is gone. The bling is in a safe-deposit box somewhere. Sure, the shirt he was wearing for his HBO interview this past Saturday night appeared to be a bit heavy on the bedazzling, but we can forgive that. The bottom line is that he carries himself more like a mellowed guy in his 30s than a hyperactive, attention-seeking twentysomething kid.

That apparent maturity paved the way for prong number three: new trainer Pernell Whitaker. It had long ago become clear that Zab's father, Yoel Judah, had taken his son as far as he could and that he was a negative influence from a maturity perspective (see the brawl during the Mayweather fight for a reminder of that). It was time for a change, and six weeks before Judah's last fight, a seventh-round knockout of Kaizer Mabuza, that change was made.

"A year ago, I wouldn't have made any bets on Zab truly having reached a different level of maturity, but now, I'm convinced," said Judah's promoter, Main Events CEO Kathy Duva. "The final factor was the addition of Pernell Whitaker to his team. That was the last little piece that was missing. Pernell has brought such a sense of calm and peace and joy to that camp. And to

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Zab. Look, everybody has insecurities—except Pernell Whitaker. He just doesn't. And having that guy there to look at Zab and say, 'Don't worry, we'll beat him,' has sealed it, at least in my eyes.

"Zab is working harder than he's ever worked in his life. And the fact that he's continued to learn after he's been a world champion in two weight divisions! That takes a lot. Most people in his position would not accept that there's anything they don't know. Whitaker went into camp six weeks before the Mabuza fight and said, 'Okay, son, we're going to go back to what you used to do right. Let me remind you of how you used to fight a long time ago.'"

The fourth prong of the Judah rebuild was the work of Main Events—and Judah's willingness to put his trust in them. Main Events' specialty in recent years has been building attractions at the Prudential Center in Newark, New Jersey, drawing impressive crowds and not always having HBO or Showtime money behind them. Judah has bought into that. He's scored three straight wins at "The Rock," including one on ESPN2 and one on an independently produced pay-per-view. He's now on his first five-fight winning streak since he lost his unbeaten record in 2001. In other words, he's done something to EARN his next opportunity.

But there's more to this picture than just name recognition, hard work, rededication, and smart career management. There's a fifth prong too: sheer luck.

"Sometimes things happen in mysterious ways," Duva said. "In the case of Zab's career in the last year, there have been so many remarkable coincidences and things that have fallen into place—things that were completely outside of our control. It's happened with every bout that he has had."

Judah's HBO return against Lucas Matthyse last November fell into his lap when he already had a lesser fight scheduled. Zab then won a one-point split decision in that fight, positioning him for an alphabet title try that he wouldn't have gotten if one judge scored one round differently. Then it looked like Judah's fight with Mabuza would land in South Africa, but Mabuza's promoters submitted their purse bid incorrectly, the bid was disqualified, and Main Events got to swoop in and promote the fight in Newark. And then, of course, Bradley proved his head can be as dangerous to himself as it is to others when he passed up the Khan fight for reasons only he understands. Erik Morales said no to the Khan fight also, and that opened the door for Judah.

You can almost picture Duva watching her email inbox like Jerry Maguire and Rod Tidwell staring at the fax machine, waiting for the contract offer to come through. "I think I stressed over this one more than any fight I've ever made," Duva said. "It was one of those fights where it's like, please, please, let me make this deal." It was the dream fight for Judah at this point in his career, and it got done.

And as I wrote at the beginning of this article, I have a funny feeling Khan is going to end up either staring at the ring lights or wrapped in the referee's arms. If indeed Judah can perform to the best of his abilities, the combination of his speed, his power, and Khan's chin feels all wrong for the British beltholder.

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And if that prediction comes true, then this little million-dollar payday becomes a mere appetizer for what's next. Maybe a fascinating battle with a rejuvenated young Victor Ortiz. Maybe a rematch with Mayweather (remember, Judah was winning their 2006 bout through four rounds, and Duva insists that Zab "trained about three days" for that fight).

And then there's the dream fight of dream fights for everyone near 147 pounds, Manny Pacquiao. Not that such a fight would need extra plotlines, but Freddie Roach trying to avenge Khan's loss behind his superduperstar would be a compelling twist.

Amazingly, Judah is just one win away from being perfectly positioned to fight the biggest names in the sport. That's partially because he's still a big name himself. But that's only one of the many reasons this 33-year-old fighter, arguably a decade into his decline, is just one KTFO from his absolute earning prime.

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the Roast says:

I like this fight. Less headbutts and more action. Zab's fast hands and Khan's questionable chin could lead to an upset!

Radam G says:

I guess that the Dome-blasting Dessert -- I mean Desert Storm Bradley came to his senses. Good for him. Da Great Khan would have served him roasted and toasted brains outter that bowling ball noggin. Holla!