

A Note on Rodriguez-Wolak...HAUSER

Written by Thomas Hauser
Monday, 18 July 2011 11:28



The best of boxing was on display Friday night, by this man, Pawel Wolak, and his foe Delvin Rodriguez. No, not technical superiority, or flashy showmanship. Miles and miles of heart were on display Friday night.

Pawel Wolak sat on a chair in a small dressing room on the second floor of Roseland Ballroom in New York. The entire right side of his face from his mouth to his hairline was grotesquely misshapen and swollen. His right eye was completely shut and looked like Sylvester Stallone's after Rocky Balboa's first fight against Apollo Creed. It was as though someone had shoved a tennis ball beneath the skin and painted the entire area purple.

"I wasn't hurt," Wolak said. "I just couldn't see out of my eye. I don't let people hit me on purpose. But this is boxing, so you're gonna get hit. The doctor asked me a couple of times if I could see. How could I see? But I'm a fighter, so I said yes."

"Have you seen your face yet?" Wolak was asked.

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“Not yet. I imagine it looks pretty bad.”

We live in an era when the fundamental assumptions that underlie boxing are sorely tested. The “do-or-die” attitude that once illuminated the sport often seems like fantasy. David Haye punked out against Wladimir Klitschko because (he says) he hurt his little toe three weeks before the fight. Shane Mosley and Devon Alexander disappointed in multi-million-dollar outings.

Wolak had just fought Delvin Rodriguez with each man receiving a purse of \$15,000. In an era of overhyped, overpaid, manufactured-story-line encounters, they’d reminded people of what boxing is about.

Rodriguez-Wolak was a crossroads fight for both men. Rodriguez is a boxer-puncher, who came into the bout with a 25-5-2 ledger, but had gone 2-3-2 in his last seven fights. The prevailing view was that he’d been jobbed by the judges several times. But he was perilously close to becoming an opponent.

Wolak is a brawler with a good chin and the ability to absorb punishment. Prior to facing Rodriguez, he’d compiled a 29-and-1 record against mostly club-fight-level opposition and was moving toward a title shot. Pawel’s way of dealing with an adversary’s punches is to walk through them. He’s a pressure fighter who unloads like a non-stop threshing machine and beats opponents down with his forearms, shoulders, and every other available body part. But he’s not a power puncher and is too squared up when he fights, which makes him a large target.

One day after Rodriguez-Wolak, write-ups would describe the fight as “awesome . . . incredible . . . breathtaking . . . thrilling . . .”

It was all of that. Everyone who was at Roseland Ballroom on July 15th will remember the battle.

There was no feeling out process. Rodriguez started well, staying in the pocket, predicating his

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defense on getting off first rather than moving in and out of range with his legs. He landed the sharper harder punches in the early going, doing damage with a stream of left hooks and uppercuts. There were virtually no jabs from either man.

By the end of round three, Wolak's right eye was starting to swell. But Rodriguez was the naturally smaller man, having moved up from 147 to 154 pounds to face Pawel. After four rounds, Delvin appeared to be tiring from the rough-house trench-warfare pace. After six, the fight was dead even.

Then Wolak started to tire. Getting whacked in the head again and again will do that to a fighter. Rodriguez said "I'm still here" with his punches. And by the end of round seven, Pawel's right eye was useless. The only function it served was to make his head a bigger target for Delvin and add to the drama of the moment.

The last three rounds, everyone in attendance understood that they were watching a time-capsule fight. Wolak was fighting for every second of every round and Rodriguez engaged him. The action was non-stop and brutal.

Wolak was getting hit by left hooks on his damaged right eye that everybody in the arena except Pawel could see coming. His left eye was closing too. But he refused to surrender, fighting by the maxim, "If this guy is close enough to hit me, then he's close enough for me to hit him back."

When it was over, most observers at ringside (including this writer) gave Rodriguez a slight edge. Virtually no one thought that Wolak had won. Tom Schreck scored the bout 97-93 for Delvin. But he was overruled by Julie Lederman and Steve Weisfeld, who called the fight a draw.

Rodriguez was relaxed and happy in his dressing room after the fight. There was some moderate swelling and bruising on his face, but he had the aura of a winner about him.

"I knew it was going to be a tough fight," Delvin said. "That's the way Wolak is. He doesn't hit that hard. But whatever you do, he keeps coming."

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“How do you feel about the decision?”

“A draw is discouraging,” Delvin answered. “But it’s better than a loss, which is what I’ve gotten in some fights that I know I won. And I’d rather have my face tomorrow morning than his.”

That was in keeping with the overall sentiment that, yes, Rodriguez deserved the win; but Wolak had fought with such courage and the fight was so thrilling that it was hard to begrudge Pawel the draw.

The larger question is whether the fight should have been allowed to continue. The damage to Wolak’s eye gave the bout incredible drama, but it also endangered Pawel’s longterm physical wellbeing.

Wolak came into the fight with a lot of scar tissue above his right eye. He’d been cut there in six previous outings. A more serious problem might be permanent damage to the soft tissue underneath the skin.

Danny Milano (one of the foremost cutmen in boxing) worked Rodriguez’s corner. He had a good view of the carnage as Rodriguez-Wolak unfolded.

“The way it swelled up, it looked to me like the eye socket might have been damaged,” Milano said after the fight. “I wasn’t in Pawel’s corner. There were people who had a closer look at the eye than I did. But I think they should have stopped it. Pawel was still in the fight and he’s a warrior. But he took a horrible pounding on that eye. He might never be the same after tonight.”

There’s a chance that, from now on, every time Wolak enters the ring, he will be an impaired fighter.

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Meanwhile, let it be said that, in an age of phony championships and incompetent corrupt power brokers, Pawel Wolak and Delvin Rodriguez dignified boxing. They showed why many people, myself included, believe that boxing at its best is the greatest sport of all.

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Radam G says:

That bout shoulda been stopped. Homecooking benefitted Wolak. Enough said!

the Roast says:

Like Wolak I had one eye on this fight. Smoger is just about the only ref who would have let this continue. I think he did the right thing. Very good fight. I was pulling for Wolak but I thought Rodriguez did enough to win. Rematch.