

Rodriguez-Wolak I Was A Classic, Wasn't It?

Written by Michael Woods
Thursday, 07 June 2012 12:19



Here is the story I wrote for the June 6, 2012 BWAA award dinner program, about the 2011 BWAA Fight of the Year.

I have a theory I call the "American Idol-Boxing Theory."

As "American Idol," the Fox rags-to-riches singing contest which catapults waitresses, karaoke kings and weebegone wannabees from the minor leagues to the bigs, has proven, America is filled with superstar warblers, people who only needed a break to prove their worth as performers. In the boxing world, I believe that there are a good ten fights which take place annually in lesser venues which could well win the BWAA's "Muhammad Ali-Joe Frazier Award," for Fight of the Year.

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But because the off-the-beaten-path classics are off TV, and more eyeballs don't take in the back and forth tussle, those epic tradefests, with awe-inspiring action which restores your faith in what makes this sport of ours, the sport to which all others aspire, they don't make the cut. Thankfully, the 2011 Ali-Frazier Award winner, the maniacally spirited clash between two boxing idols, Delvin Rodrigiez and Pawel Wolak, was shown on ESPN's Friday Night Fights, allowing well over a million fight fans to see what it is that separates boxing and boxers from other sports.

When the July 15, Rodriguez-Wolak fight was booked at the Roseland Ballroom in New York City, no one foresaw it as a Fight of the Year candidate. The 31-year-old Rodriguez (entering at 25-5-2 with 14 KOs) was seen by pundits and even some of his backers as a boxer at a crossroads, with one foot pointing towards Retirement Road. The Connecticut-based boxer had lost three of his last four fights. The 29 year-old Wolak (entering at 29-1 with 19 KOs), the Polish-born New Jersey resident, was on a severe upswing. He'd won eight straight, five by stoppage. The Polish Jerseyite had a fighting style that matched his personality and lifestyle; he was wide open, no mysteries, squared up. Wolak, who worked his construction job 9-5 happily while edging up the ladder towards a title fight, liked to get dirty during the day. He liked to feel tired limbs and have a hard time scrubbing the detritus of the day when he went home to shower before going to the gym for training; that told him he was giving his all. Same thing in the ring....Rodriguez had to fend the Raging Bull off, stick, move, rinse and repeat for every minute of the ten rounder.

So...this Friday Night Fights main event which turned into the Fight of the Year was of slightly more than moderate interest to fight fans coming in, with many expecting the volume edge and thus the win would lay with Wolak, more comfortable at 154, at the end of the night.

The Roseland crowd provided a dense backdrop of noise virtually the whole way through. Joe Tessitore and Teddy Atlas called the classic for ESPN, and Teddy sounded like he'd gulped a couple Red Bulls from round one on. "They're earning every bit of their pay tonight!" Atlas enthused during the fifth. One wondered watching live, if it went to the cards, would the judges pay more attention to Wolak's busy hands, as he was throwing more than 100 punches a round through five, or like Rodriguez' selectivity? While I was watching, on the edge of my couch, yelling at the screen, drawing the ire of my wife what with the baby sleeping in the next room, I saw Rodriguez landing the cleaner, harder shots through six. Atlas had Wolak up one point at that time, but there was nothing trainer Fernely Feliz could've said to buck up Rodriguez; he was fighting his face off.

Watchers of this classic likely have an image stamped in their head, that of Wolak's grotesquely

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swollen right eye. That party favor started puffing up in round seven. "That eye looks like a golf ball!" Teddy shouted. The doc took a hard look at the abomination post-round, as Smoger leaned in, and made his stance known. "It's ugly, but I don't mind," he said. "How you feelin?" the doc asked. "Good," Wolak replied immediately, not risking getting the bout halted. "Good job by the doctor, good job by the referee, they know this is not opera," Atlas said, as the eighth started. It was another tradefest. If you hear a little extra clapping, that's me," Atlas said after. That round, I screamed at the TV, and woke the baby, and got yelled at by the wife.

"Doc said let 'em roll," Smoger told the New York commission to start the ninth. The whole crowd stood, the vendors stopped selling their wares, all knew they were present at rare event: two men were putting the entirety of themselves on the line, every ounce of strength and pride, and they were totally suspending their instinct to survive. Winning had superseded survival.

"I have it dead even!" Atlas screamed over the din. The men paused only to take half-gulps of breath in the last, yet another tossup frame. "Was that brilliant? Was that absolutely brilliant?" Tessitore bellowed at the close.

Indeed it was.

The judges did their jobs, declaring the only rightful result: that neither man lost. The Fight of the Year for 2011 was a draw, but all who watched it know that in reality, both men won that night. They showed fight fans the best sides of themselves, and reminded us what the sport can be on any given night.

Wherever their careers go, both men know that their legacy is immense, having taken part in a Fight of the Year. Rodriguez wanted to share some of the glory with some of those other idols, the ones who haven't gotten television exposure and maybe never will.

"The guys who fight off TV, are coming up, they get to TV as hungry fighters, and give great fights," he told me for this piece. "Many don't get to the position they deserve. But I give thanks to God now I'm starting to get recognition."

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deepwater says:

very good fight yes. classic no. wolaks eye made it very interesting. wolak has a good chin but not any boxing skills. thats why wolak woke up annd realized he has no good boxing skills and he retired from boxing. wolak will be a good union worker trying to knock out guys with pink hair in mma now. even a guy like wolak with a little bit of boxing should do well knocking out these rolling around pink haired weirdos.lol

Radam G says:

Hehehehe! WOW! Deepwater is going to deep waters and gettin' his comedy on.
"Wolak...should do well knocking out these rolling around pink haired weirdos..." is a classic.
Imfao! Holla!