

Surprise

Written by Steve Kim
Monday, 29 November 1999 19:00

It looked so perfect for middleweight prospect Tokunbo Olajide.

Olajide, the younger brother of Michael 'the Silk' Olajide', a middleweight contender of the late 80's, was on the fast track to boxing utopia.

He had 'the look' that managers and promoters all look for. Also, he had the bloodlines that can turn into 'feel good' stories that the media just eats up.

The younger Olajide is also an affable and intelligent young man with interests outside of boxing. And to top it off, he was born and bred in the media capital of the world- New York. Olajide had it all. And he was on the verge of breaking out from being just a mere contender to being a legitimate world class contender who would eventually ascend to being a world champion.

But a funny thing happened on his way to super stardom: he would get knocked out on national TV by an unknown Colombian Epifanio Mendoza in one round.

With a left hook-right hand combination, Olajide is now on the fast track for becoming the next Shannon Briggs, much less 'Silk' Olajide, who at least was undefeated prior to his championship challenge of IBF middleweight titlist Frank Tate.

And more than just an unblemished mark was wiped out with this stunner. Out the window goes scheduled meetings with all the major promoters that were scheduled for the next few days and weeks as Olajide had just broken away from Cedric Kushner and was a free agent. And believe me, all the familiar names were hot on his trail. Also, HBO had shown plenty of interest in showcasing Olajide in early 2003 on it's 'Boxing After Dark' series.

With one ill-advised fight, he goes from prospect to suspect. And yes, it was an ill-advised fight in every respect. The Olajide decision makers failed to adhere every rule of Boxing 101. This bout was televised live on ESPN2 on Sunday afternoon. So yes, the exposure would have been great, except, just how much exposure could they have gotten going up against a cadre of NFL games? Also, this event took place at the Regent Wall Street Hotel in New York City- not exactly the Madison Square Garden. But the real snafu came when the original opponent dropped out and Mendoza was accepted as an opponent. Not much was known about this Colombian except that he was 15-0 with 15 knockouts. Yes, you read the correctly, 15 up, 15 down. And he was much bigger physically than Olajide. Of

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course, they didn't find out till it was too late because Olajide's people didn't deem it necessary to get a tape on this unknown. Yeah, we could be doing some 'Monday Morning Quartebacking' but as one veteran matchmaker told me," Listen, when you get a guy from Colombia with that kind of record, he can either fight a whole lot or he can't fight at all and he's built up. Now, if he has 15 straight knockouts, you stay away from him. But if he only has five or six knockouts, then you think about rolling the dice." And Olajide crapped out. Why even take that risk when you have all the major promoters lined up and willing to make a favorable deal with your fighter and HBO is about to showcase Olajide as one of their bright young stars? Perhaps because Tommy Gallagher who trains Olajide was also the shows promoter. Which puts him in a conflicted position- not to say that he didn't have anything but the best of intentions for his fighter- but wouldn't it have it been easier for him to take his fighter off the card if he didn't have to worry about his show or his commitment to ESPN2? After all, let's just say, Olajide would have won that fight, what would have really been gained? He would have won a bout against an unknown novice in front of a very small audience. And while being a free agent is theoretically a great thing in boxing, it also has it's drawbacks. In this instance, who was looking out for Olajide? I seriously doubt a Top Rank and Bob Arum would have allowed one of their bright young stars to get in there and take such an unnecessary risk with so much on the line. Also, companies such as Top Rank, Main Events and Don King, have matchmakers to ensure that such maladies don't take place. Do you really believe that a Bruce Trampler or Carl Moretti would allow a 'live' or unknown body in there against one of their youngsters who looking at getting some HBO air time? But this is boxing and the spin doctoring has begun. A press release has been put out by the Olajide people stating that there man had fractured his right ankle in the fight and had undergone successful surgery to repair it. Now, I'm not doubting any of that, boxing is a very tough, physically demanding sport, but a knockout loss, is a knockout loss. And Gallagher is quoted as saying," He wasn't knocked out, he was unable to continue because of his ankle. He had his full senses but it was obviously too severe an injury to continue." That maybe true, but should he have ever been facing a guy that dangerous to begin with. Remember, it was Mendoza's punches that sent Olajide to the canvas that eventually injured his ankle. The press release also notes that Olajide's ankle will be in a cast for six weeks with rehabilitation to follow. It'll be at least several months before he continues. Who knows what type of fighter he'll be when he comes back but you get the feeling that he'll never be the same again. CURSE OF THE WALRUS A word of warning to any fighter who tries to leave Cedric Kushner. Hasim Rahman, Mark Johnson, Kirk Johnson, Shane Mosley and now, Olajide, all left Kushner for what they thought were greener pastures, only to lose shortly there afterwards. Olajide, according to my sources could have been resigned by Kushner for a signing bonus of about \$75,000, but Kushner, who always seems to be swimming in red ink couldn't come up with

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that kind of money. Olajide was looking for a signing bonus of around \$200,000 from the major players before his stunning loss. I'd say his stock crashed worse than Enron's. And remember that famous story of Don King coming to the fight with Joe Frazier and then leaving with George Foreman, after Foreman knocked out Frazier brutally in Kingston, Jamaica? Well, Lou DiBella, was in attendance and he was very interested in the services of Olajide. Now, he's set up meetings with Mendoza and his people. Hey, DiBella, was looking to sign an undefeated middleweight prospect and those plans haven't changed. Adding insult to injury is that Olajide's people had held off an finalizing any deals with promoters till after this last fight to maximize their leverage. I guess it would be a major understatement to say that it backfired on them. MIS-MANAGEMENT I'd have to say that this moves is right up there with Felix Trinidad Sr.'s decision to allow his heavyweight Fres Oquendo to face David Tua. The scenario was this, Oquendo, considered an average prospect just a few years ago, had beaten the likes of Cliff Etienne and David Izon to secure the top rating in the WBO. The Etienne and Izon fights were sound calculated risks that paid off as Oquendo would stop both men. And with Wladimir Klitschko the champ of the WBO, you'd figure with HBO telecasting that fight, that Oquendo, by forcing a purse bid, would have gotten at least a million bucks for his challenge of the big Ukrainian. It was time for 'the Big O' to sit on that ranking like a bean bag. Instead, they accept a bout with Tua for about \$400,000, who can punch like a mule. And it must be noted that Oquendo's whiskers aren't exactly the sturdiest. Where was the upside in this? As his former promoter Dan Goossen told me the week prior to the fight, "They're taking 4 years of our hard work and making a number one contender a number seven." Goossen, like many others, was predicting a Tua KO. Which is what precisely happened when Tua would finally catch up to Oquendo in the ninth round of their bout. And on the flip side, Kevin Barry, the manager of Tua has brilliantly guided his fighters career. After that win they would take on Michael Moorer- another guy with a good name, who's chin isn't exactly Rocky Marciano-like. Tua, would stop Moorer in less than 30 seconds. And all of sudden Tua is thought of again as a monster. He may not be a monster, but he is well managed. Oh, and just why did Trinidad Sr. take that fight? I've heard from associates of his that he wanted to take that fight and beat Tua, because fellow Puerto Rican and WBA titlist John Ruiz had been flattened by Tua in 19 seconds. In other words, they wanted to shame and embarrass Ruiz into a fight. It just proves, that it's sometimes the fights you don't take that are more important than the one's you do.