

BWAA Fighter of the Year award tops of Donaire's 2012 accomplishments

Written by Ryan Songalia
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Boxing superstar Nonito Donaire, Jr. (center) with Jersey City, N.J. students during his tour of the city in October 2011. He fought and won at Madison Square Garden against Omar Narvaez on Oct. 22, 2011. (Photo by Robert Delacruz)

Special to the Filipino Reporter

The year of 2012 was one to remember for Nonito Donaire, Jr.

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The San Leandro, Calif.-based native of Bohol, Philippines successfully made the transition from being the best-kept secret in boxing to one of the sport's most celebrated fighters today.

And it wasn't just how he did it, but how often he did it.

Long frustrated by inactivity and inability to land key fights, the 30-year-old Donaire (31-1, 20 knockouts) fought a total of four world title matches in 2012, an almost unheard of amount of bouts for boxers at the elite level of the sport.

All of this was accomplished while Donaire submitted himself to 24/7 performance-enhancing drug screening by the Voluntary Anti-Doping Agency (VADA), a feat in itself that is unequaled in today's landscape of boxing skepticism.

These facts weren't lost on the voting members of the Boxing Writers Association of America (BWAA), who selected him as the 2012 recipient of the Sugar Ray Robinson "Fighter of the Year" Award.

In addition, his trainer Robert Garcia won the Trainer of the Year award.

Donaire is just the second Filipino or Asian to win the most prestigious year-end award, which has been issued annually since 1938, that could be bestowed upon an individual in boxing.

Manny Pacquiao, who won the award three times (2006, 2008, 2009), is the other Filipino.

Donaire, who has now won world titles in four divisions, entered 2012 hot off of a second-round knockout of Fernando Montiel that earned him the BWAA's Knockout of the Year for 2011.

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His first order of business was moving up to 122 pounds to challenge former titleholder Wilfredo Vazquez, Jr. of Puerto Rico in February for the vacant World Boxing Organization (WBO) junior featherweight champion.

The new division took a while to adjust to, as Vazquez withstood Donaire's withering attack, going down just once before lasting the distance to a split-decision loss to Donaire.

Donaire returned five months later in July, facing another top-rated fighter in the division, IBF titleholder Jeffrey Mathebula of South Africa.

Mathebula looked to be on his way to a knockout loss after going down in round four but survived to adjust and implement his awkward game plan.

Donaire had another adjustment up his sleeve as well, resorting to a more technical boxing approach to seal the deal towards a unanimous decision win.

By the time Donaire returned three months later in October, he had worked out any kinks associated with his rise in weight.

Donaire faced Japan's Toshiaki Nishioka, who had been the division's longest titleholder prior to being stripped of the WBC belt just months earlier and was rated No. 1 by The Ring magazine at 122 pounds.

Most thought it'd be a difficult style matchup for Donaire to adjust to, but Donaire went on to knock Nishioka down in the sixth and ninth rounds, stopping him and winning the vacant Ring magazine championship in the process.

Nishioka announced his retirement after the bout, but Donaire wasn't done yet retiring boxers.

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Donaire returned to the ring just two months later in December, facing former multi-division titleholder and fan favorite Jorge Arce in a bout that most people figured would produce a highlight reel performance from Donaire.

The analysts were right, as Donaire knocked Arce onto his back with a picture-perfect left hook in round three that would end up as a contender for Knockout of the Year.

The year 2012 was a year of transitions, not just for the Philippines but the sport in general.

Pacquiao, who was long considered the sport's biggest star and the greatest athlete to ever come from the Philippines, suffered a devastating knockout to Juan Manuel Marquez in a fight that was deemed Fight of the Year by the organization.

In many ways, it was Donaire's victory over Arce that restored hope in Filipino boxing fans, and also gave the world a new star to look towards when contemplating the direction the sport moves towards.

Ryan Songalia is a member of the Boxing Writers Association of America (BWAA) and contributes to GMA News. He is also a member of The Ring ratings panel and can be reached at ryan@ryansongalia.com. An archive of his work can be found at www.ryansongalia.com. Follow him on Twitter: @RyanSongalia.