Anyone walking into the press conference after the Anthony Joshua–Joseph Parker bout in Cardiff, Wales would’ve been shocked by the mood of the room. It felt less like the aftermath of a heavyweight title contest, and more like a bunch of grumpy men waiting their turn before a judge. Joshua, who won a unanimous 12-round decision, smiled a lot but wasn’t exactly elated. Parker, who looked slightly scuffed up around the left eye, could only shrug and say, “The bigger and better man won.” As for going 12 rounds for the first time in his pro career, Joshua said he felt good. More smiling and shrugging followed this. It was a shrug fest.
By winning, Joshua added another alphabet title to his collection – he has three now – and he said he wants all the belts because it would make him “the most powerful man at the table,” a reference, perhaps, to Deontay Wilder, the American heavyweight who also owns a title belt. Though Joshua and Parker had inspired 78,000 customers to crowd into Principality Stadium, Wilder was on the minds of many. How could he not be, when Joshua and Parker fought such an uninteresting bout?

Of course, many will say Joshua decreased interest in his brand. He’d knocked his previous 20 opponents out, often in dramatic fashion, but by going the distance with Parker, and looking downright hesitant at times, he suddenly seemed far from being an invincible young boxing star. Yet, this happens now and then. Joe Louis, the most destructive puncher in heavyweight history, was forced to go the full distance in his very first title defense against Tommy Farr. Mike Tyson, even in his terrifying prime, went the full route against several opponents. All fighters have learning experiences. Here’s hoping Joshua learned something. If he didn’t, we’re in trouble.

Joshua, unfortunately, has to do his learning in public. At 28, he’s a superstar in the United Kingdom. He’s walking a finer tightrope than most fighters, with a rabid cult of followers taking in his every move, judging him at every moment. He’s only one man, but his popularity is that of an American football franchise. If nothing else, he has shown remarkable poise in the spotlight. That’s a talent in itself. In beating Parker, he showed that he can go 12 against a solid fighter, and that he’s not stupefied when the knockout doesn’t come.

“My strategy in there was to stick behind the jab,” Joshua said. “A right hand will take you around the block, but a good jab will take you around the world. I stuck behind the jab. I was focused. I controlled him behind the jab, and the main thing is I am the unified champion of the world. I thought it was hard, but going the 12 rounds was light work.”

It was a scrappy bout. Parker used his own jab to keep things close during the early part of the fight, but by the middle rounds it appeared Joshua was landing more often. Parker dashed in and out, doing what shorter fighters are supposed to do against tall men, and there were moments when Joshua looked flustered. Both fighters landed good punches in the 11th, but it was Joshua whose knees buckled. The scorecards (118-110, 118-110 and 119-109) were too wide in favor of Joshua, but no one could argue with the decision.

Indeed, the bulk of the post-fight discussion centered on Italian referee Giuseppe Quartarone. Quartarone must not have heard the old axiom that the best referees do not make themselves part of the contest. He interrupted the action so often that it appeared he wanted the fighters to stop and take a selfie with him.

Especially critical of Quartarone’s disruptions was Parker’s trainer, Kevin Barry, who complained his fighter was not allowed to fight on the inside. “It was very important for us when we did close the distance that we were able to work the inside,” Barry said. “I tried to speak to (Quartarone), but he had no idea of the question I asked him.”

But it wasn’t Quartarone who made the bout into a stinker. That was all on Parker and Joshua.

With a fine-honed sense of how to read a room, Joshua immediately went on a rant about Wilder, giving variations of the same speech to Showtime, Sky Sports, and the post-fight gathering. “Forget the hype, I’m about business. Let’s get the business done,” Joshua said. “Get him in the ring and I’ll knock him spark out.”
There was further talk at the press conference about whether Joshua would fight Wilder in America or the United Kingdom. Joshua’s promoter, Eddie Hearn, has said America is a possibility, citing the great successes of Ricky Hatton in Las Vegas, but Joshua was quite vocal about preferring a United Kingdom location. British fighters have always had to go to America in the past, Joshua pointed out, which didn’t seem fair to him. Joshua also spoke about Wilder not being a gentleman, and said there wasn’t much to be done about it. “Wilder is Wilder,” he said. For his part, the loquacious Wilder sent out a few words on social media: “This is a simple fight to make happen. It’s easy. Let’s make it happen, once and for all, and see who’s the best.”

Wilder, incidentally, was supposed to be in Cardiff doing television commentary for Sky, but balked at the last minute. “It would’ve been massive for Deontay Wilder’s profile for him to be there, but for some reason he didn’t want to be there,” said Hearn. The beef revolved around Wilder’s wish to get in the ring and interview Joshua. Hearn, not wanting Joshua to share the spotlight, denied Wilder’s chance to be the new Larry Merchant. Sadly, it might’ve been the highlight of the evening.

More than one boxing site offered post-fight surveys about a potential Joshua – Wilder showdown. Oddly, Joshua was favored by a large margin. Either a lot of Brits were voting, or boxing fans still aren’t sold on Wilder’s lack of technique. It could also be that even after a dull performance, Joshua seems to have a superstar’s aura in that no one wants to bet against him. Perhaps seeing Wilder so badly staggered in his recent slug-out with Luis Ortiz hurt his image a bit, and the feeling is that Joshua, should he get Wilder in a similar predicament, would finish him off.

Wilder, though, is an anomaly. His style is awkward and unpolished, but that could very well be where his power comes from. Larry Holmes once said of Tim Witherspoon that “Terrible Tim” threw punches from a weird distance; you didn’t expect them to land, but they did. This could be true of Wilder, too. He wings punches, and opponents can’t see them coming. To be struck by one of his high and wild shots may be like standing in a dark room and getting hit from behind with a brick.

How Joshua endures getting wacked with one of Wilder’s flying bricks is something we may see soon, according to Hearn. The fight has to happen in 2018, Hearn said recently, “because at some point we will have to drop a belt and the whole point of the fight was to unify all the belts.” Hearn expects all the parties will sit down soon to discuss a possible summer bout.

And so it went, all this talk of title belts, and whether or not Wilder deserved a 50/50 split, and whether Wilder was a gentleman or not, and whether Parker, a likable 26-year-old from New Zealand, would fight again, and whether names like Tyson Fury and Dillian Whyte would be on Joshua’s list of future opponents. Alexander Povetkin scored a nasty KO of David Price on the Joshua – Parker undercard, roughly jamming his own name into the heavyweight picture.

As for Joshua – Parker, it will simply go down as a forgettable heavyweight fight. We’ve had plenty of those over the years. It was off to a great start, though, with prefight rituals that included shirtless Tongans, endless national anthems, music from The Black Panther movie, ring walks that resembled the start of a rock concert, and the roar of 78,000 for a bona fide boxing star who has won the hearts of his countrymen.

Maybe it should’ve ended there. Can Hearn make a living by promoting ring walks? ★

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