

THE PAUL WILLIAMS PARADOX

The Good, The Not-So-Good, And The Man Nobody Wants To Fight

By Don Stradley

Imagine a young fighter—we'll call him Fighter A—a fighter pegged by some as a man of destiny. His physical dimensions are such that he will either end up in Canastota or the Museum of Natural History, for he is a 6'1" sometime welterweight with arms longer than those of most heavyweights. But not only is he a case of nature run amuck, he throws such a high volume of punches that he can nearly drown an opponent with his activity level. The stories around him are extraordinary, with tales of promoters fleeing in terror rather than match one of their own fighters with him. Elite fighters from welterweight to middleweight supposedly shudder at the thought of him.

Now, imagine another young fighter—we'll call him Fighter B. In his first title bout, he fades down the stretch but wins a disputed decision. In his next fight he is out-hustled and loses the title. He wins the rematch by knockout, then he tries a new weight class. He scores a TKO over an aging veteran, but doesn't look impressive. Then he faces a 37-year-old who hasn't fought in nearly two years. Fighter B wins easily, but less than 5,500 people are in attendance, and the venue is not exactly crackling with electricity.

Fighter A and Fighter B happen to be the same guy, Paul Williams, a fighter who exists between two plains—that which he has achieved versus that which he might achieve. Williams' supporters have a knack for ignoring Williams' off-nights and looking ahead to future glories. That is, when they're not complaining that he's not getting the big fights. You see, he is this year's "most avoided fighter." Williams' camp makes it sound like a truly desperate situation.

We wonder if Williams ever heard of Charley Burley.

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The debate between those who believe Paul Williams is a superstar in the making and those who remain skeptical came to a momentary halt last April 11 at the Mandalay Bay Resort & Casino in Las Vegas. That was the night Williams handily out-pointed Winky Wright over 12 rounds, giving the sort of performance that usually is pointed to as a defining moment, the fight where the critics stop being negative and say, okay, let's get his autograph on a boxing glove and go home.

The next day's reviews included the by now familiar hosannas to Williams' outlandish height and reach, and Wright's inability to handle Williams' hailstorm of punches. There was also the occasional self-congratulating comment like "Those who truly appreciate the Sweat Science know that Williams is a godsend," for it's not enough that his supporters write odes to him, they must condemn those who've yet to sign up.

The writers under Williams' spell aren't alone; fans who clustered in Internet chat rooms after his Las Vegas victory theorized their man would not only reign supreme from 147 to 175, but would in his spare time visit Wales to kick Joe Calzaghe's retired bottom, and then climb into a time machine to smash Tony Zale.

To a degree, the enthusiasm was understandable. No one has dominated Wright, 159, the way Williams did. Wright's armor-like gloves and elbows offered little protection against Williams, 157, who by the end of the bout had thrown 1,086 punches, 247 of which left Wright looking puffy, scraped, and beaten. Judges Adalaide Byrd, Robert Hoyle, and Jerry Roth saw the bout for Williams, 120-108, 119-109, and 119-109, respectively.

Notoriously sore loser Wright even showed up at the post-fight press conference to give Williams his due. "He threw a lot of punches, and they come from so long a distance it's hard to even counter," said Wright, 51-5-1 (25).

The win brought Williams' record to 37-1 (27). This was not the prime time, impossible-to-hit Winky, but Williams' loyalists would argue that no other fighter could produce a near shutout against Wright, even in 2009. They might be correct.

Still, the skeptics bring up other bouts, namely the 2007 bout with Antonio Margarito, where Williams sputtered in the late rounds, the loss to Carlos Quintana, and the less than brilliant performance against Verno Phillips. If you're a cup half-empty type, then those bouts are probably enough to keep you from buying into Williams. But if you're a cup half-full sort, you may see these bouts as character builders. Margarito and Phillips, after all, are tough veterans. As for Quintana, Williams more than evened things up in the rematch by dusting him in a single round. Williams' trainer, George Peterson, thinks the world has no choice but to recognize Williams' gargantuan talents.

"Paul will exceed the fame of Sugar Ray Leonard, or Marvin Hagler, or Tommy Hearns, or Roberto Duran," Peterson told *The Augusta Chronicle*. Peterson also claimed that he held Williams back from knocking Wright cold, for fear that such a result would scare off future opponents.

So much has been written about Williams being this year's "most avoided man in the sport" that those words should be sewn onto the back of Williams' robe. But maybe Goossen-Tutor, the promoters behind Williams, are expecting too much. They keep asking: Why won't anyone fight him? But why should anyone fight Williams? He doesn't have anything anyone wants, no title, no marquee value, no nada. Even if you beat him, as Quintana did, it doesn't mean much. It certainly didn't make Quintana a star.

Veteran trainer and former fighter Harold "Shadow" Knight believes the people behind the scenes are at fault.

"Here's a fighter with tremendous ability and the wingspan of a jet, and no one knows who is," Knight told THE RING. "His promoters need to get Paul's face in every magazine

and billboard, take out ad space, anything. Saying no one wants to fight him is just an excuse; they aren't promoting him right."

Williams' low-key personality may be hurting him too.

"He's a respectful young man from down south," said Knight. "He needs to talk it up a little, make people want to see him. But I don't know if he has it in him. That's why his promoter needs to get to work."

ShoBox analyst Steve Farhood admires Williams, but told THE RING, "I don't consider Williams the next big thing; I think he's already among the most elite fighters in the world. Whether he can transcend boxing is another story. At this point, I don't see him separating himself from the pack in terms of developing or cultivating an out-of-the-ring image. And if you're going to become a superstar, that's a must."

It's difficult to predict Williams' immediate future. The Wright bout should've paved the way for something, but Dan Goossen sounds as if Williams' career is still stuck in a holding pattern.

"We think Paul would still be devastating at 147, but all the welterweights want to fight Manny Pacquiao," said Goossen. "Can you imagine Paul fighting Pacquiao? It's ridiculous.

"We wanted Shane [Mosley], but this is the first time in Shane's career where he hasn't wanted to fight someone. I respect him for being honest and admitting it."

Middleweight champion Kelly Pavlik nearly fought Williams last year, but opted for a more lucrative bout with Bernard Hopkins. A bout with Pavlik would at least show us if Williams has a middleweight chin. But according to Goossen, Pavlik's promoter Bob Arum recently gave him another emphatic "No."

Williams is ranked number two by THE RING at junior middleweight, and a bout with number-one ranked Vernon Forrest might crown a champion recognized by THE RING, but strangely, there is talk of Williams meeting WBO titlist Sergio Dzindziruk, which would bring Williams neither money nor prestige. Maybe alphabet-brand loyalty has something to do with it, since Williams once wore the WBO welterweight belt. Former light heavyweight champion Glenn Johnson is also being considered for Williams.

We asked if it might behoove Williams to stop hopping around in different weight classes and just plant himself somewhere. He's only 27, so why couldn't he take a year or two to become the dominant force at, say, junior middleweight?

"It's not bad thinking," said Goossen, "but for various reasons it can't happen. There's been a growing tendency over the past 15 years for managers and promoters to be overprotective of fighters, to the point where they'd rather leave money on the table

than take a chance. Paul would be happy to clean out a division, but there's nothing to clean out."

Goossen was asked if he's ever been on the other side of the coin, preventing one of his fighters from fighting a tough opponent.

"I've been in situations where I knew the odds were against us, but I've always had the philosophy, and so did our fighters, of no risk, no reward," said Goossen.

ESPN2's *Friday Night Fights* commentator Teddy Atlas told THE RING, "If no one wants to fight Williams, I'd put him in with some more ham-and-egggers. Showcase this kid who has natural gifts, this great height and reach, with the busy hands, and people would become curious, and want to see him take more risks. Then there would be demand for a real fight. But I also worry about him—he might get too cute against these ham-and-egggers. He could end up losing again."

Atlas also downplayed Williams by saying, "He's not a monster; he's just difficult. He's not sensational. He's hot and cold. Maybe he's matured since losing to Quintana, but he's not great.

"All the talk about him fighting in five weight classes and winning titles, it sounds good, but the days of Roy Jones hand-picking easy opponents and making all that money on HBO are over. This is now an event driven business, and Williams needs to be built into an event fighter. That's hard to do and it's becoming harder. There are only one or two event-type fights per year. Every one else is competing for a much smaller piece of the landscape," said Atlas.

If Goossen could snap his fingers and make a fight happen, it would feature Williams versus Hopkins. "Paul would be fighting someone his own size, and I think he'd be the fighter to give Bernard his first kayo loss. We've spoken to Golden Boy Promotions, and it's being discussed. Bernard beat another young whippersnapper last year, Kelly Pavlik, so maybe he'd like to try it again.

"If nothing can happen at the lighter weights, we'll just have to 'Supersize' Paul Williams, like they do with a McDonald's meal."

In the meantime, Williams shouldn't feel too badly about his predicament. Maybe he's not landing the big bouts, but he's not being ducked the way Archie Moore, Hagler, Mike McCallum, and even Hopkins and Wright were ducked. Then there's Charley Burley. He had a record of 83-12-2 (50), but never came close to a title shot. He died broke and alone in Pittsburgh, where he'd worked as a garbage collector. He probably couldn't even afford to live in one of the buildings Williams owns. But those qualified to speak of such things said he was just about the best they'd ever seen. Being ducked by Sugar Shane Mosley is one thing—Burley was ducked by Sugar Ray Robinson.

Williams is a long way from Charley Burley. He's earned a few millions bucks, he has a small but devoted fan base, and maybe soon a date with Hopkins. And his reach is long enough to keep even the skeptics at bay.