

Willie Nelson continues on-the-job advanced education

In ring to prepare for future world title shot



(photo by Bob Barton / Rumble Time Promotions)

In my humblest opinion, I don't think Willie Nelson is ready for the Big Stage (Right Now). I do think with the proper training and guidance, he will be an extremely tough force in the Junior Middleweight Division. Depending on how quickly his handlers want to bring him along or how patient they are willing to be, Nelson will either be just another contender or he will be the aforementioned force. It is completely on how he is guided. We can knock Bob Arum at Top Rank for all of his "I was lying yesterday, but today I'm telling the truth" statements all we want, but what we can't knock is how well he guides his fighters to championship pedigree. With that said, I wonder where Willie "The Great" Nelson would be under the Top Rank Banner being trained by Freddie Roach?

World Boxing Council (WBC) No. 3-rated **Willie "The Great" Nelson** (21-1-1, 12 KOs) continued his advanced education in boxing on June 29, learning invaluable lessons in his HBO® debut fight against battle-tested Argentinian veteran **Luciano Leonel "El Principito" Cuello** (32-3, 16 KOs), whose only two previous losses as a professional were to world champions **Saul "Canelo" Alvarez** (TKO7) and **Julio Cesar Chavez, Jr.** (DEC10).

The 26-year-old Nelson, fighting out of Cleveland, strayed too often from his game plan, struggling for parts of three challenging rounds. He regrouped to earn a hard-fought victory by unanimous 10-round decision (97-93, 97-93, 96-94), successfully defending his North American Boxing Federation (NABF) 154-pound title, at MGM Grand Theater at Foxwoods® Resort Casino in Mashantucket, Connecticut.

Despite not having his "A" game, like an ace baseball pitcher who wins without his best

stuff, Nelson won a tough fight against an underrated opponent, overcoming adversity along the way like the world-class prizefighter he has become.

"I tried to knock him out early to look better than Alvarez had," Nelson admitted, "and that's all on me. I took him too lightly and he really came to fight. I tried to outclass him, take him out in the first few rounds; now, I know that I can punch but I can't knockout everybody. I should have stuck to the game plan and used a double jab and then come back with a right. I was supposed to spin him so I wouldn't get caught by his left hook, but I didn't do what I worked on in the gym. I'll learn from this fight."

The 6' 3 ½" Nelson, whose 81" reach is freakish for a light middleweight, stayed too often in the pocket and essentially gave up his tremendous size advantage in an effort to put Cuello (listed at 5' 9 ½") to sleep early, as he did in his previous fight to **Michael Medina** (KO1). Never-the-less, he still defeated the WBC No. 13-rated challenger, who gave Chavez all that he could handle and more in their controversial 2009 fight, in which Chavez won a questionable 10-round decision (97-93, 96-95, 96-94) at home in Mexico.

"I watched more videotape of Cuello than just his Alvarez and Chavez fights," said **Jack Loew**, who trains Nelson in Youngstown, Ohio. "I knew Cuello could fight and we were in for a tough fight. We know that Willie can do better but it was a great learning experience for him. I know it'll make him an even better fighter. Don't forget, it wasn't perfect, but Willie won the fight fair and square on HBO. We didn't take a step backwards, not by any means, and he's ready right now to fight any of the top names in the light middleweight division. There's no doubt in my mind that Willie will be world champion.

"I thought he dominated when he did what he was supposed to do - use a double jab and come back with the right. His second jab landed all night long but he wanted to bang-out his opponent early. When Willie didn't throw his double jab, throwing only one jab at a time, Cuello blocked it and then snuck inside. Willie has so much talent; he can box and punch. He just can't go looking for a knockout like he did. He needs to learn how to adjust better during a fight and listen to his corner. This is like fine-tuning a car. Everything is there and all we need to do is put it all together."

Because most of the top light middleweights are committed to fights during the next few months, rather than wait for a major fight opportunity, Nelson will headline a local show, presented by Rumble Time Promotions and DiBella Entertainment, September 28 close to his adopted second-home of Youngstown at Packard Music Arena (tickets: 314.662.2000) in Warren, Ohio.

"The top guys aren't available and we're not waiting for Willie to fight again," explained Rumble Time Promotions president **Steve Smith**, who co-promotes Nelson with Lou DiBella. "We're going to keep him busy so he can continue to improve his skills. We tried to get (WBC #1 rated **Sergey Rabchenko** for this fight (June 29) on HBO but they turned it down.

"Willie was a little too overconfident and put too much pressure on himself to knockout Cuello quicker than Alvarez had in six rounds. That's why Willie came out so fast. He's young and could have made things a lot easier, if he had just fought his fight. He's a big puncher whose strong boxing skills enabled him to win a lot of amateur titles."

Cuello was a relatively unknown, at least in the United States, but the Argentinian proved to be a rugged, albeit awkward opponent who is cut from the same mold as his countrymen, contemporary stars such as **Sergio Martinez**, **Lucas Matthysee** and **Marcos Maidana**.

Nelson was cut for the first time in his pro career, in fact, he suffered lacerations over both eyes (in the 3rd and 10th rounds), but he was fortunate to have one of the world's premier cut-men working his corner, **Danny Milano**, who kept the bleeding under control. Nelson displayed the heart and determination of a true champion down the stretch to win convincingly in his first HBO fight.

"American fans didn't know how good Cuello is because he had never fought on U.S. television before," Smith added. "His close loss to Chavez was in Mexico to the son of a Mexican legend. Willie solidified his position among the top-ranked light middleweight contenders in the world like **(Miguel) Cotto**, **(Erislandy) Lara**, **(Alfredo) Angulo**, **(James) Kirkland**, and **(Vanes) Matirosyan**."