

Boxing Ringside with Bobby Franklin

So Close He Could Taste It Laurent Dauthuille Was Seconds Away From Winning the Middleweight Title

On the thirteenth day of September in 1950, with just thirteen seconds remaining in his challenge to Middleweight Champion Jake LaMotta, Laurent Dauthuille was kyoed by Jake LaMotta. Dauthuille was far ahead on the scorecards when the fight ended. I have no doubt the French boxing sensation suffered from triskaidekaphobia (fear of the number 13) for the rest of his life after that experience.



Laurent Dauthuille

On February 21, 1949, LaMotta and Dauthuille met for the first time in Montreal, Canada. This was before Jake had won the title, and both men were vying for a shot at champion Marcel Cerdan. In that fight, Dauthuille fought a smart battle and won a ten round unanimous decision. Laurent used a precision left jab and landed solid blows on the Bronx Bull. LaMotta continuously applied pressure throughout the bout and managed to inflict some damage on his opponent. However, the scores of 7-3, 6-3-1, and 6-3-1 left no doubt about who deserved the decision.

LaMotta would continue chasing a shot at the middleweight title with wins over Robert Villemain, O'Neill Bell, and Joey DeJohn. Interestingly, his fight with Villemain, another Frenchman, almost put an end to his dreams of fighting for the title.

The fight, which took place in Madison Square Garden, was seen as a gift decision for Jake. One judge and the referee ruled for LaMotta, while the remaining judge had Villemain as the clear winner. The crowd and sportswriters also saw it as a decisive win for Villemain. The United Press reported:

"Jake LaMotta won an unpopular split 12 round decision over Robert Villemain of France after a great fight Friday night before 11,491 fans at MSG. The fans booed the decision for more than 5 minutes. They hooted LaMotta as Jake climbed down from the ring and they gave the Frenchman a great ovation. There were no knockdowns during the bout but LaMotta appeared to be staggered in at least three rounds. Villemain won the fans with his persistent short-hooking attack to the head that caused far more damage than LaMotta's wide swings. And it was the Frenchman that did most of the forcing. Both scappers were bleeding from gashes over their left brows at the final bell."

The New York State Athletic Commission suspended both the judge and the referee who scored the fight for LaMotta indefinitely because the decision was considered so bad.

Jake was able to secure a shot at Champion Marcel Cerdan without having to face Villemain again. He won the title when Marcel was unable to continue because of an injury sustained in the first round when Jake threw him to the canvas. Fighting with just one arm Cerdan was still able to take the fight into the ninth round before the fight was stopped because of his injury. Red Smith wrote of the fight: *"In spite of his injury and in spite of a severe beating in the first round ... Cerdan won the second round big and the third and fifth by lesser margins. A master at handling his opponent, turning him, tying him up, slipping or blocking his punches, and setting him up, Cerdan could do none of this one-handed. He couldn't even stick his left out to ward off his foe ... it is difficult to believe LaMotta would have a chance with a two-handed Cerdan."*



Cerdan vs LaMotta

LaMotta was scheduled to fight a return match with Cerdan on September 28, 1949, but the former champion was tragically killed in a plane crash while returning to New York for the bout.

Within a year, LaMotta had fought three French boxers. He lost to one, got a gift decision from the next, and won the title when an injury ended the fight. You can either see that Jake had a real problem with Gallic fighters or that he had great luck against them.

I should also mention that LaMotta gave Villemain a rematch after winning the title, but it was a non-title bout. In this fight, the Parisian won and received a one-sided decision but was not given a title shot. If Villemain had replaced Cerdan as the challenger for the title, it is very likely that the crown would have been returned to France.

A French contender eventually got the first shot at Jake's crown when Laurent Dauthuille, who had beaten him in 1949, got that opportunity.

On September 13, 1950, the two men stepped into the ring at Olympia Stadium in Detroit. For the first ten rounds, the fight went much as their first bout did, with Dauthuille building upon a lead. The next four rounds were close as Jake increased the pressure, but Laurent still stayed comfortably ahead on the judge's cards going into the fifteenth and final round.

As the bell rang for the last round all Dauthuille had to do was move around and run out the clock. Of course, no one knows for certain how the judges will score a fight; ask Robert Villemain.

As the round opened it did appear Laurent was going to fight smart. He didn't need to slug it out to win the round. He proved he could win rounds with his jab and just needed to continue doing that. LaMotta was the one in desperate need of a knockout. He put the pressure on and was throwing left hooks with abandon. He still wasn't getting through. Then he pulled a sly move. He fell back against the ropes looking exhausted and possibly on the verge of being taken. In reality, he was playing possum, and Dauthuille took the bait. Laurent couldn't pass up the chance to win the title by kayo. He started to mix it up with the champion and then realized he had been taken in. At this point it was too late.



Dauthuille is down for the count

Jake had Dauthuille trapped in a corner and launched a fierce attack. Despite Dauthuille using all his skill to break free, he was hurt and Jake continued to pursue him aggressively. The champion chased Dauthuille across the ring and knocked him down with a series of punches. Dauthuille was counted out with just thirteen seconds remaining in the fight, so close to winning the title. It was a heartbreaking defeat for Dauthuille.

It was the first time Dauthuille had been knocked out. In fact, he was only stopped on two other occasions, during his final two fights. He never got another shot at the title. LaMotta lost the title to Sugar Ray Robinson in his next fight.

France had a trio of outstanding middleweights fighting simultaneously in Cerdan, Villemain, and Dauthuille. Had things been just a little different, it could have been a dominant era for French boxing.

When it comes to close calls for winning a championship people think of Billy Conn vs Joe Louis in their first fight and Meldrick Taylor's loss to Julio Chavez with just two seconds to go. The LaMotta/Dauthuille fight certainly ranks near the top for very near misses.

Laurent Dauthuille retired in 1952 with a record of 45 wins (24 KOs), 13 losses, and 4 draws. He was a brilliant boxer who, like Conn and Taylor, will be most remembered for the fight he lost. He died young, passing away in 1971 at the age of 47. In nearly fifteen rounds against LaMotta he proved to be the better fighter. He made one big mistake in that fifteenth round, and for that reason, he is not remembered as a World Champion. It truly was heartbreaking.