

Tyson vs. Lewis: A Little Reason, Please

Written by Chris Gielty
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Lennox Lewis is 37, Mike Tyson 36. Though this fight may be happening 10 years too late, it still holds much intrigue for the boxing public.

To use Teddy Atlas' analogy - the young Mike Tyson was a comet, not a planet. A fighter of immense physical talent, but one who was flawed mentally, lacking the character of truly great fighters such as Ali, Robinson or Louis (with an "ou"). A fighter with a style predicated on explosive speed and bestial aggression, a style, in fact, destined to deteriorate quickly. A fighter, not of enduring substance, but one destined to burn brightly, albeit fleetingly.

In retrospect, the sheer magnificence with which Tyson shone during the late 80's has perhaps blurred the collective vision when considering his career.

Lewis too is past his best. In fact, I would argue Lennox Lewis never reached his best. Bereft of top caliber sparring during his amateur years, then proper coaching during the first part of his pro career - Pepe Correa, Lewis' trainer when he was knocked out by Oliver McCall, was a cheerleader, not a trainer - it was not until Emmanuel Steward resurrected Lewis' career that Lewis began to display his true quality. Lewis, however, was approaching 30 when Steward took over, a fact considered by few. What could have been had Lewis been trained properly since day one.

Still, I digress. "Lewis Tyson is On," so what's likely to happen?

At the end of the day, we can break this fight down all we want, put the X's there and the O's over here, the X's here and the O's there, at the end of the day there appears to be so much hype, so much emotion and, now, so much apparent ill will that form may very well go out the window as this one just might go off big time. Still, the analysis ...

Mike Tyson's reputation precedes him (in more ways than one). The Mike Tyson that cleaned out the division during the late 80's was an apparently awesome force. But just how awesome? I would suggest that there is a myth that has come to surround Mike Tyson the fighter.

Let me be clear, Mike Tyson was often awesome during his peak years. However, not necessarily as awesome as the myth would suggest. In this regard, I'd pose a few questions:

- who has Mike Tyson actually beat?
- in particular, how many top caliber heavyweights did he defeat?
- how many quality fighters has he beat recently (ie. during the last 5 years)?
- how has he fared against big men throughout his career ie. fighters like Lewis?

Let's take them one by one.

Looking back over Tyson's dance card, there is a surprising dearth of quality opponents, given

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the magnitude of Tyson's reputation. Fighters he has beat include Razor Ruddock, Tony Tucker, Frank Bruno (twice), Michael Spinks, Francois Botha, Lou Savarese and Andrew Golota. A respectable list, but hardly one that would have Muhammad Ali losing sleep. Amongst the top caliber list of fighters Tyson has fought, find Tony Tucker, Razor Ruddock, Evander Holyfield, Michael Spinks and Andrew Golota.

Of course, it depends on how you define "top caliber", but for the sake of argument I put these guys near the top of the division at their best. Golota is perhaps suspect on this list, but he makes it based on physical strength and technique, a dangerous package, despite his house of cards psyche. Michael Spinks is also suspect. Certainly, he was a tremendous boxer, but he just wasn't a heavyweight. Again, looking at the list of the toughest fighters Tyson has fought, one might wonder what all the fuss was about. Note that Buster Douglas, the first to conquer Tyson, is not even on the list.

The other fighter who defeated Tyson was, of course, Evander Holyfield. Holyfield dominated Tyson and finally exposed to the world what Teddy Atlas had known all along. Mike Tyson struggles badly when he's not the boss, a sign of insecurity, according to Atlas. Based on the maxim that "styles makes fights," I wouldn't read too much into the fact that Lewis beat Holyfield. The enduring feature that lives on from the 2 Holyfield-Tyson bouts is that Holyfield exposed the lack of substance in one of Tyson's greatest weapons - intimidation.

Think back to Frank Bruno entering the ring blessing himself repeatedly, squirming as he approached the ring, or Bruce Seldon taking a dive, going down from a punch that didn't touch him. Intimidation has always been one of Mike Tyson's greatest weapons. It was something Cus D'Amato cultivated from the very early days. Indeed, through the years Mike Tyson scared a lot of guys senseless and effectively secured victory before the opening bell even rang.

Stacey McKinlay - one of Tyson's trainers - this week said: "Lennox Lewis is a b*tch. He is a coward. Tell him I said that." The Tyson camp can talk all they want, don't expect to see a frightened Lennox Lewis enter the ring on Saturday night.

Back in Tyson's heyday I always felt that Lewis was the fighter with the best "chance" to beat Tyson, simply because Lewis wouldn't beat himself before he entered the ring. Still, this may not be as big a factor as it once may have been, simply because the secret is out as far the Mike Tyson the myth is concerned.

Ron Borges pointed out this week that Tyson's camps' mouths are in overdrive, but - notably - Iron Mike has fallen silent. Borges - definitely one of the most tuned in boxing writers - suggests it is because Tyson doesn't really believe he will "spread Lewis' pompous brains all over the ring" on Saturday night as Mike previously had threatened.

As Borges pointed out, when there were thousands of miles between the fighters and Tyson was preparing in Hawaii, Tyson's mouth was in overdrive. Now the distance has closed to 15 miles, Tyson has fallen silent. Personally, I feel too much is made of this type of thing. In truth, who really knows what Tyson (or even Lewis) is thinking? The point is that I don't see intimidation being much of a factor in this fight, and that definitely is to the detriment of Mike

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Tyson.

When considering this matchup, one must also ask: how has Tyson fared against big men throughout his career, men with styles comparable to Lennox Lewis? The answer is not as well as you probably think.

Of course, Buster Douglas comes to mind immediately. Sure, Tyson was undertrained and perhaps overmedicated, had Douglas on the canvas during the fight and was facing a guy who - inspired by personal circumstances - fought the fight of his life.

Still, Douglas was big man who could stick and move, and it was a style that obviously caused Tyson problems. And there have been others. James Tillis and Mitch Green both took Tyson the distance and caused him some problems. Both were tallish fighters who could jab. And there was Tony Tucker. Tucker faced a prime Mike Tyson and, frankly, Tucker - in my opinion, a very underrated heavyweight in terms of pure talent - caused Tyson some problems in a competitive fight, though a fight Mike Tyson clearly won.

These glimpses of the past may be an ominous sign for Mike Tyson when he confronts Lewis, the tall, powerful boxer-puncher, on Saturday night.

But which Lennox Lewis will show up on Saturday night? That is the question many of the experts are asking.

Will it be the assertive puncher-boxer who dominated Rahman in the return leg, who blasted out a dangerous Razor Ruddock early and who chopped down the feared-at-the-time Andrew Golota in the first round. Or will it be the tentative, calculating to the point of inertia boxer who forgets to punch, who struggled with Zeljko Mavrovic, who refused to step it up a gear against Holyfield the first time, or who coasted against David Tua when a true beating for Tua looked on the cards. Again, who knows, really, but the man himself?

History tells us, though, that when Lewis faces dangerous tests - Ruddock, Golota, Rahman II and even Holyfield - he brings the focus necessary to do the job. Under the glare of the spotlight, when the pressure is on, I've always fancied Lewis. When was the last time Tyson entered a fight with this much at stake, under this degree of pressure? It was over 5 years ago when he bit Evander Holyfield's ear.

But before we rush ahead of ourselves, we must ask the same questions of Lewis that we have asked of Tyson.

- who has Lewis actually beat?
- in particular, how many top caliber heavyweights did he defeat?
- how many quality fighters has he beat recently (ie. during the last 5 years)
- how has he fared against shorter men like Tyson?

Lewis' opponents include Razor Ruddock, Tony Tucker, Frank Bruno, Tommy Morrison, Ray Mercer, Andrew Golota, Shannon Briggs, Evander Holyfield, Michael Grant, Francois Botha,

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David Tua and Hasim Rahman. The list is comparable to that of Tyson, though probably slightly more impressive. In addition, Tucker, Mercer, Golota, Tua and Holyfield seem to comprise a list of elite heavyweights slightly more impressive than the list of elite heavyweights Tyson has battled. Still, there may not be much in it, and either way I doubt this list would have been enough to make Joe Louis nervous.

However, recent competition is where Lewis clearly has an edge over Tyson. Since the ear biting fight with Holyfield during 1997, Tyson has fought Botha, Orlin Norris, Julius Francis, Savarese, Golota and Brian Nielsen. The only credible opponents in that list are Botha and Golota.

Of course, Lewis had already had beaten the fight out of the Pole and a rusty Tyson struggled badly for the better part of 5 rounds before a complacent Botha walked into a peach of a right hand from Tyson. Notably, Lewis dispatched Botha through the ropes during the 2nd round with consummate ease.

Lewis, in addition, during the last 5 years has fought Akinwande, Golota, Briggs, Mavrovic, Holyfield (twice), Grant, Botha, Tua and Rahman (twice). Clearly, Lewis has had much stiffer opposition over the last 5 years. If this means anything, it gives Lewis an edge. I'd suggest it means something.

What about the Tyson style? Frankly, this is where Lewis could run into trouble. There is no other fighter who is comparable in style to Tyson. Tua has a superficial resemblance, but is too one-handed and doesn't bring enough pressure to be credibly compared to Tyson. Mercer, perhaps, could be compared based on build and strength, but he doesn't have the speed or movement of a Tyson. Mercer was able, though, to slip Lewis's jab and as a result was able to cause Lewis all sorts of problems, providing Lewis with the toughest physical battle of his career. Mercer's ability to slip the jab and absorb physical punishment along the way, without wilting, may provide a general blueprint for Tyson.

Tyson will have to use foot and head movement to get inside Lewis' long arms, where he can break down Lewis, to the body and to the head. If Tyson can close the distance and breach Lewis' long range attack, Lennox will be in a world of trouble.

I do not believe that Lewis necessarily has the glass chin he is reputed to possess, but it is undeniable he does not possess the kind of whiskers a la Holyfield) that are required to absorb the blows of a heavy handed Tyson. If Tyson lands any significant combinations, I have to say, the big man from Kitchener by way of London will go. Good night London. Good night Kitchener. Good night Vienna.

However, will Tyson be able to do enough to close the distance on Lewis? One of the great conundrums of Lennox Lewis the fighter is that space is one of his greatest weapons. He is tall, has long arms, possesses a good jab when he cares to use it and is physically powerful. Space, then, is naturally his ally. When he keeps a shorter man (most opponents) on the end of the jab he is out of harms way and has room to think, room to pick his spots and room to unload his long power punches, especially the right cross.

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However, when Lewis becomes passive, when he attempts to employ space defensively, hiding out of harms way, thinking too much and going into a defensive shell, he not only elicits accusations of being boring, more importantly, he opens himself up to being caught with a hopeful bomb.

Against Tyson, Lewis must not only establish distance, but must defend it aggressively, using the space to launch attacks on Tyson, not just to punish him, but to take Tyson out of his rhythm. It is imperative that Lewis employs a punishing jab (a la Rahman II), not just to Tyson's head, but to the chest too if need be.

Lewis must use his long arms to upset Tyson's rhythm, he must hit Tyson on the chest and shoulders as well as the head, to keep Tyson off balance and to stop Tyson from getting set. As Gil Clancy has pointed out, when Foreman destroyed Frazier he set it up by constantly hitting, pawing and pushing Frazier's left shoulder, keeping him off balance and thereby negating Frazier's greatest weapon, the left hook. Lewis must attempt to employ a similar strategy against Mike Tyson.

So, there you have it, some X's and O's. But what happens if Tyson has decided it's all or nothing and comes roaring across the ring at the opening bell intent on ripping Lennox Lewis' head off? Truthfully, your guess is as good as mine. But for the record ...

Tyson has a legitimate chance of ending this one within 5. The most compelling thing about heavyweight boxing is that it can end in the blink of an eye, and this cannot be discounted when handicapping this fight. One Tyson combination could quite plausibly end it all.

However, at the end of the day I see Lennox Lewis getting the jab going and unsettling Tyson. There may be some anxious moments along the way, but Lennox Lewis is too good for Mike Tyson. He's too good, too strong and too self-assured to succumb to the Tyson fury.

Lennox Lewis will win this fight and I'm picking him by a decision. I do not think this bout will end on a disqualification! I see Lewis possibly ending it anywhere between 4 and 9, but in all likelihood taking Tyson the distance and giving him a lesson along the way.

Now, with the carnival atmosphere and emotion that surrounds this fight, the foregoing analysis seems, in retrospect, just a little too conventional. So, with that in mind ... as Larry Merchant might say, if the universe is a righteous place then on Saturday night karma must surely have its say. Only then will the astral light course down from the cosmos and bathe humanity in its glow. For a brief moment - if you look closely -that epiphanous light might even illuminate the very nature of humanity's soul. At least I hope so.

Lewis by decision.