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Pointless Until Career Has Heard Last Bell

Can we as boxing columnists please stop matching the Champions of today with past greats? It's just my opinion but a present day title-holder cannot be fairly or accurately ranked until his career is completed. No one can predict how a supposedly great champion of today, undefeated or not, is going to rank until his career has heard its last bell.

Case in point: As recently as 21 months ago a well-respected monthly boxing publication matched Oscar De la hoya against 10 of the greatest welterweight champions ever. In the panel's opinion, the then undefeated De la hoya would have defeated all but three of their top 10, which included Sugar Ray Leonard and Thomas Hearns. I say to them, based on what? After seeing former lightweight champion Shane Mosley out-box and out-punch De la hoya in only his third fight as a welterweight, I wonder how the same panel would rank the slightly-tarnished "Golden Boy". Could they possibly have believed that on his best day he would have beaten Sugar Ray or the "Hit Man"? I question whether Oscar could have beaten the best Donald Curry or Wilfred Benitez. And it's not a given that he could beaten Carlos Palomino.

Did you know that in 1968 "Mr Boxing," Nat Fleisher, the founder of Ring magazine, did not have Muhammad Ali ranked in his top ten heavyweights of all time? However, his top 10 did include the likes of Jim Jeffries, Max Schmeling and James Braddock. I believe it is reasonable to assume that had Fleischer lived to see Ali's entire career, he would have been capable of making a more balanced evaluation, "Mr.Boxing" questioned Ali's toughness and ability to take a punch from a proven knockout puncher. Had he been around to see Ali's three fights with Joe Frazier and his title-winning effort against the fearsome George Foreman, Fleischer would have seen that Jeffries, Schmeling and Braddock had nothing to beat Ali with. He would painfully have had to admit that all three of them would have been only too glad to pay their way into a gym just to see Ali hit the heavy bag.

Still not convinced? Here's the best example why we need to wait until a fighter's career has ended before evaluating his place among the all-time greats: In 1988 another high-profile boxing publication rated then-undefeated heavyweight champion Mike Tyson the second-greatest heavyweight ever. Only the incomparable Muhammad Ali ranked above him. Incidentally, this ranking came on the heels of Tyson's 91-second knockout of 31-year- old former light heavyweight champion Michael Spinks. Does knocking out an over-fed 175-pounder in the signature fight of his career afford such a lofty place in history? Not when 21 months later, Tyson was seen searching the canvas for his mouthpiece while being counted out against a journeyman named Buster Douglas-the same Buster Douglas who had been KO'd in three of four career defeats and entered the ring against Tyson in Tokyo a 42-1 underdog. Douglas will be remembered forever for being the first fighter to expose the myth called Mike Tyson. He also provided answers to the questions that some of us had about Tyson. What kind of chin does he have; can he get up off the canvas to win a fight; and how will he cope with a fighter who can take his punch?

Years later, Evander Holyfield, coming off the two worst fights of his career (the third bout with Riddick Bowe, in which he was knocked out, and a desultory effort against Bobby Czyz) showed, in front of the largest viewing audience ever to witness a televised fight, undeniable proof of Tyson's shortcomings. Holyfield, who had to be medically cleared to fight by the Mayo Clinic, erased any benefit of doubt afforded Tyson after the Douglas fight by scoring a Round 11 TKO. Once again Tyson showed he could not cope with a fighter who could not be intimidated and even dare to fight back. In the rematch eight months later Tyson showed he could not take a butt-kicking like a champion. When Tyson committed the most cowardly act in boxing history by biting both of Holyfield's ears, he was telling us that he wanted out of the fight before he was knocked out by Holyfield for the second consecutive time.

Is this the body of work of a fighter considered to be the second-best heavyweight ever by some of those who are supposed to know? They could not have been more wrong! A fighters career must be complete on order to determine when he was truly at his best. Trying to match yesterday's fighters with those of today is about as credible as the computer that said light heavyweight champion Bob Foster would knock out heavyweight champion Joe Frazier one month before they fought. Frazier went on to knock Foster out cold in the second round.