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Is there anything in sports that sparks more passion and debate between sports fans then the "what if" argument? What if Wilt and Shaq had to guard each other? Who would've won, the undefeated Dolphins or the 78 Steelers? Who would have come out on top in a seven game series, Magic's Lakers of the '80s or Jordan's Bulls of the '90s? I'm willing to bet that if you're reading this, nothing could get your blood pumping like the "what if" in boxing. How about Louis vs Ali, or Monzon vs Hagler? I'm sure whatever side you come down on, you can make a strong case supporting your side. The great thing about these debates is that you will never be proven wrong, because Louis and Ali or Monzon and Hagler will never fight. However, a more difficult question can be posed: Who should be ranked higher, Louis or Ali, Monzon or Hagler?

When ranking all-time great fighters what's more important in determining who should be ranked above who, the fighter with the better career accomplishments or the fighter who would have won had they faced each other on their best night? I don't believe there is an absolute way to justify one over the other, it's up to whomever is doing the ranking. Regarding who would have won if the fighters faced each other at their best is highly subjective. In weighing overall career accomplishments, many other variables come into play, such as title tenure, quality of opposition, how good were the best fighters they beat and who did they lose to. Whatever you place a greater value on, who would have won or who accomplished more, the debate will rage on as long as there are people and boxing.

Let's take a capsule look at two former heavyweight champions who show up on most lists of all-time greats. The two fighters are George Foreman from 1969-1977, and Larry Holmes from 1973-1986. I am not taking into consideration the comeback of either champion. Yes, Foreman did win the title back and Holmes fought for it. However, when I picture the best Foreman, it's the one from the '60s and '70s, and when I picture the best Holmes, it's the '70s and '80s version. The Foreman-Holmes comparison represents the perfect contrast. If you think the best Foreman would beat the best Holmes (as I do), does that mean when ranking them that Foreman should be higher then Holmes? Or should Holmes be above Foreman because he was more successful in keeping and defending the title, (obviously if you think prime Holmes beats prime Foreman then the contrast is void). For me, it comes down to what sways me more, the fact that I think at their best Foreman wins or the fact that Holmes was a more accomplished champion and a better overall technician.

CAREER ACCOMPLISHMENT

George Foreman (1969-77)

After winning the heavyweight Gold Medal in the 1968 Olympics Foreman, turned pro garnering much attention. In his fourth pro-bout he stopped rugged Chuck Wepner who was already a seasoned pro and main event fighter. By the end of 1972 Foreman was the No. 2 ranked heavyweight in the world with a gaudy record of 37-0 (34). On January 22, 1973, as a 3-1 underdog, Foreman stopped undisputed heavyweight champ "Smokin" Joe Frazier 29-0 (25) in two rounds. Foreman put Frazier down 6 times in 5 minutes of fighting in what would have to be

regarded as one of the most awesome exhibitions of punching power ever seen. After two successful title defenses over Joe "King" Roman and Ken Norton Foreman loses the title after being stopped in eight rounds by former heavyweight champion Muhammad Ali. After a 14 month layoff following the defeat by Ali, Foreman returns to the ring with a 5th round stoppage of hard punching Ron Lyle. Following the Lyle fight Foreman scores four consecutive knockouts over the division's top contenders including former champ Joe Frazier. On March 17, 1977 Foreman, the top ranked heavyweight in the world, loses a 12 round decision to third ranked Jimmy Young. The Foreman who fought Young is a different fighter than the one who fought Frazier, Norton and Ali. He fights Young very passively, not showing his previous aggression. Still affected by the Ali fight, he questions his stamina and lets the fight slip away. Foreman retires shortly after Young with a record of 45-2 (42). The Foreman title tenure lasted just under two years making two successful title defenses.

Larry Holmes (1973-86)
After being defeated by Duane Bobick in the finals of the 1972 Olympic trials, Holmes turned pro. Without the Gold Medal around his neck he labored on undercards and worked as a sparring partner for heavyweight champions Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier. On June 9, 1978, five years after his pro debut with a record of 27-0 (18), Holmes wins a 15 round split decision over newly appointed WBC heavyweight champion Ken Norton 40-4 (32). In his decision over Norton, Holmes displays a left jab not seen in the division since the heyday of Muhammad Ali. Over the next seven years, Holmes makes 20 consecutive title defenses, only Joe Louis with 25 made more. During the course of the Holmes title reign, he defeated the best of what would be considered a very mediocre heavyweight division, scoring wins over the Zanon's, Evangelista's, Rodriguez's along with impressive wins over Shavers, and old Ali and the undefeated Gerry Cooney. On September 21, 1985 after compiling a record of 48-0 (34), one shy of the 49-0 record that Rocky Marciano retired with, Holmes loses the heavyweight title when he is upset by light heavyweight champ Michael Spinks by unanimous decision. Holmes would meet Spinks again seven months later losing a split decision, this time in a fight that most media and fans felt that he won. Holmes announces his retirement in his dressing room immediately after the fight with Spinks with a record of 48-2 (34). The Holmes title tenure lasted seven years, making 20 successful title defenses.

ACCOMPLISHMENT SUMMARY

When comparing the title tenure of Foreman and Holmes, its quite apparent that the numbers favor Holmes. Holmes held the title five years longer and made 18 more successful title defenses. As heavily as the numbers favor Holmes, they may not tell the whole story. In his title winning effort, Foreman had to beat the just turned 29-year-old Joe Frazier who was undefeated and the undisputed king of the heavyweights. Holmes won the title from the newly appointed WBC champ 34-year-old Ken Norton. Norton had already suffered four defeats, including being stopped by Jose Luis Garcia and Foreman! However Holmes, owning a huge advantage in title tenure and number of title defenses, carries much clout. That being said, can anyone deny that had Foreman fought during the Holmes era, he would have dominated. Foreman's title tenure was stopped by Muhammad Ali who is considered by many to be the greatest heavyweight champion ever, based mainly on his defeat of Foreman. In fairness to Foreman, he won the title from an all-time great (Frazier) and lost it to an all-time great (Ali). If Holmes fought in

Foreman's era, would he have beat a prime Joe Frazier, or a prime George Foreman, not to mention a close to prime Ali? This is not to diminish the incredible title reign of Larry Holmes but, it does show that the overwhelming numbers he posted as champion don't tell the complete story! Regardless, career accomplishment must go to Holmes, in spite of the fact that some perceived the era to be mediocre. He did what great champions do, beat everybody who was available to fight at the time. There is a lot to be said for making 20 consecutive successful heavyweight title defenses.

WHO WOULD HAVE WON Foreman 1973-74 vs Holmes 1978-80

Obviously this is very subjective. Most times when great fighters face each other and it's a close call, styles usually play a big role in who wins. I happen to place great importance on the actual head-to-head confrontation. When I evaluate fighters in trying to decide who would win, I take them from what I thought was their very best and try to picture how a fight between them would turn out. Picking the winner in a prime Foreman vs prime Holmes match-up basically comes down to, whether Holmes can make it to the 7th round. If Holmes can extend Foreman to the 7th round and beyond his chances for victory improve significantly because of his better boxing skills and stamina. The very best Foreman was the version we saw in between his fights with Frazier and Ali. The Foreman who fought after Ali during the '70s was a different fighter. After the Ali fight he fought more measured, trying not to go out like a sprinter, he worried about his endurance, thus rendering himself less effective. The Foreman pre-Ali never would have lost to Jimmy Young, he would have tore after Young like he did Ali (some look at the Young fight as to why Holmes would do well with Foreman). The difference is that Young couldn't have endured the same assault as Ali, and I question whether Holmes would've been capable either. The best Holmes was the one who fought between Norton and Ali. Seeing how Norton, Weaver, and Shavers were able to get to Holmes and hurt him, leads me to believe the pre-Ali Foreman, who was bigger, stronger, more aggressive and a much better puncher, would have been able to get to Holmes and hurt him enough to corner him and stop him inside of four or five rounds.

WHAT SHOULD BE A BIGGER FACTOR

This is an individual preference, it isn't an exact science. I just don't think the numbers tell the whole story in every instance. Rocky Marciano retired undefeated, so if Foreman or Holmes fought the fighters that Marciano fought, could they have gone undefeated? Sonny Liston only made one successful title defense, Ezzard Charles made eight, and most historians rank Liston over Charles. How about other sports? Jerome Bettis has rushed for over three thousand more yards than Earl Campbell. Who would you rank higher? From my perspective, when I see a ranking of all-time athletes, regardless of the sport, I believe that No. 1 should be better than No. 2, and 2 should be better than No. 3. If someone ranks Joe Louis above Muhammad Ali, I think it should be because they feel he would've beat Ali had they met on their best night, not because he was champ longer or made more title defenses. Basically, when you must rate one fighter over another, what do you choose from, who had the more accomplished career or who wins if they fought?