

The Top Five Non-Heavyweights Of The Last 25 Years

Written by Frank Lotierzo

Wednesday, 28 May 2003 18:00

Over the past 25 years boxing fans have been subject to some outstanding/great fighters in all the weight divisions below the heavyweights. Below are the fighters who I believe are the top 5 non-heavyweight fighters over the last 25 years, (1978-2003). I'm sure there are names missing that will inflame some fans. However, I went with those who I think were the best fighters, with an emphasis on fighting. I'm not as impressed as some are with fighters who won multiple titles going up and down four or five pounds just to compile titles. I'm more impressed with fighters who can flat-out fight, and who proved this by fighting and beating other great fighters.

Every fighter on this list can box, punch, or move if they have to. In my opinion, the fighters below are complete and can win fights in a multitude of ways, which makes them stand out. Of course, all fighters have a weakness or an opponent they're vulnerable to, but you'll see the fighters below don't have many vulnerabilities. I also went with the fighters who won their first title in 1978 or later, or who were at their best after 1978. So obviously, going back only 25 years doesn't encompass the best years of Roberto Duran, who was at his best from 1971 thru 1978 as a lightweight. Alexis Arguello was another fighter I had trouble deciding whether or not to include since he won his first title in 1974. The fighters listed below are not listed in order as to their greatness. They are listed chronologically in the order that they won their first title

Sugar Ray Leonard -- Nov. '79. Where do you start with Sugar Ray? He was the darling of the 1976 Olympics, even before he captured the Gold Medal. Howard Cosell saw the talent and the story; Muhammad Ali's little brother without the political baggage. Ray Charles Leonard had it all. He was handsome and spoke well, flashed a Pepsodent smile and came from a modest background. However, his biggest attribute was that he could flat-out fight. Leonard could do it all, box, punch, had blinding speed and ring smarts, and he was as tough as any fighter and had a killer instinct. Ray was at his most dangerous when his opponent was hurt or showed him too much respect, and he was some finisher. He fought in one of the best non-heavyweight eras in boxing history, and his record is a virtual who's who list of great fighters.

From Leonard's pro debut in 1977 through his first retirement after his fight with Bruce Finch in 1982, Roberto Duran was the only fighter who bettered him. The Duran who beat Leonard by a majority decision in their first fight was still close to the top of his game (and that was razor close) and Ray did get him back 5 months later.

Forget the alphabet titles, Leonard beat undefeated Wilfred Benitez to win the welterweight title, lost it and won it back from the once-beaten Duran. Leonard then won the junior middleweight title from the undefeated Ayub Kalule, who was making his fifth defense. After winning the junior middleweight title, Ray vacates it and goes on to meet the undefeated Thomas Hearns to unify the welterweight title. This matched Leonard with a fighter who had accomplishments equal to his at the time.

The Leonard-Hearns fight was a fight for the ages, nicknamed "The Showdown." Hearns starts off very fast, scoring with his long hard jab, which keeps Leonard from getting inside to land

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clean. Hearns clearly has the advantage for the first five rounds, and up until that time it looks as if he is too big and strong for Ray. In the sixth round, Leonard gets inside and lands a stinging right-uppercut that shakes Hearns. From this point forward, Hearns becomes the prey and Leonard becomes the predator. However, Hearns regroups and maintains his lead in the fight, due to his under-rated boxing ability. Knowing that he is behind in the scoring, Leonard storms out of his corner at the start of the 14th round, opens up with a flurry of punches, and hurts Hearns. Leonard being a tremendous finisher, never lets Hearns recover, which leads to the fight being stopped late in the 14th round.

After making one defense of the unified welterweight title against Bruce Finch, Leonard retires with a detached retina. Leonard comes out of retirement 23 months later and stops ranked Philly welterweight contender Kevin Howard after suffering the first knockdown of his career during the fight. Leonard retires after the Howard fight.

After not fighting since May of 84, Ray is bitten by fighting again and comes back and challenges undisputed middleweight champ Marvelous Marvin Hagler who is unbeaten in over 11 years. Ray is laughed at when he tells everyone that he can take Hagler's middleweight title despite never fighting above 154 pounds. Leonard enters the ring with Hagler on April 6, 1987 as more than a 3-1 underdog. Hagler has longed to fight Leonard since he retired in 1982. In what is the biggest and supposedly the toughest fight of Leonard's career, he fights the most brilliant fight of his life. Look, this fight was very close. If you were rooting against Leonard, you can say he lost and really believe it. However, there can be no dispute, Leonard won the first three rounds, which cost Hagler the fight in my opinion. Hagler had to win seven of the last nine rounds and he didn't. This is the crowning moment in Ray's career; nobody ever thought this fight would be left to the judges before the bell for the first round. Leonard studied Hagler and knew exactly how to fight him. The boxing world thought the way to beat Hagler was to back him up, which Leonard showed was a fallacy. Hagler, being a counter puncher was vulnerable, as I like to say, when he had to be the Joe Frazier in the fight.

After Hagler, Ray fights and wins the super middleweight and light heavyweight title with a 9th round stoppage of light heavyweight champ Donny LaLonde. After LaLonde, a rematch with Hearns followed, and Ray is awarded a disputed draw. Six months after Hearns, Leonard fights Roberto Duran for the third time. Leonard handles Duran who is making the first defense of the middleweight title he won from Iran Barkley 10 months prior. Ray retires after Duran only to un-retire a year and a half later to fight Terry Norris. Norris shows Ray that it's time to move on, giving him a one-sided thrashing for 12 rounds. Once again, Ray can't accept that it's over (none of the greats ever can, that's part of what makes them great) and after a six-year absence and at age 41, fights Hector Camacho and is stopped in five rounds. Sugar Ray Leonard at his peak is without question one of the greatest fighters ever, regardless of weight division. In his true weight division, welterweight, I would only pick Sugar Ray Robinson to beat him, is that great enough for you?

Thomas Hearns -- Aug. '80. He was the same height as Michael Spinks; his reach is only two inches shorter than Muhammad Ali's. His right hand had the speed and impact of a missile, his left-hook was bone breaking and his uppercut could take another fighters head off. He was a legitimate welterweight who knocked out light heavyweights during his career. Along with his

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rival Sugar Ray Leonard, Hearns fought during one of the best non-heavyweight eras in boxing history. Also, like Leonard, Hearns fought everybody who was somebody and avoided no fighter. However, Hearns fights more resembled public executions than fights. Thomas Hearns blitzed through the welterweight division winning his first 28 fights, 26 by knockout.

In his 29th fight, Hearns challenged WBA welterweight champ Pipino Cuevas who had made 11 consecutive title defenses going into his fight with Hearns. After winning the first round, Hearns ripped Cuevas with a right in the second round that must've been heard around the world. It landed so flush and hard, Cuevas was out.

After making three title defenses, Hearns fought Sugar Ray Leonard for the undisputed welterweight title in what was the most anticipated welterweight championship fight in boxing history. Hearns had his way with Leonard in the first third of the fight until Leonard caught Hearns with a dynamite right uppercut to turn the tide of the fight in round six. After changing his style during the fight, Hearns out boxes Leonard before Leonard roars back to stop Hearns in round 14.

After the Leonard fight, Hearns vacates the welterweight division in favor of the junior middleweight division. In his fourth fight after Leonard, Hearns out boxes the crafty Wilfred Benitez to capture the WBC junior middleweight title. Hearns makes two defenses of the title and then makes his third against Roberto Duran. With a right hand reminiscent of the one against Cuevas, Hearns knocks out the never been stopped Duran in the second round. Duran has never been beaten so decisively in his career. Ten months later, Hearns challenges middleweight champion Marvin Hagler. In what is described by many as the most fierce eight minutes of fighting in boxing history, Hagler stops Hearns in the third round. Four fights after losing to Hagler, Hearns knocks out WBC light heavyweight champ Dennis Andries in the 10th round to win the WBC light heavyweight title. In his very next fight, seven months later, Hearns goes back down to middleweight and wins the WBC middleweight championship stopping Juan Roldan in the fourth round. In his first defense of the title, Hearns is stopped by Iran Barkley in the third round of a fight that he was totally dominating. In his next fight, Hearns decisions James Kinchen to win the WBO super middleweight title.

In his next fight, Hearns fights Sugar Ray Leonard for the WBC middleweight title. Three days before fighting Leonard, Hearns' older brother Henry is arrested for murder. Despite the turmoil in his personal life, Hearns goes out and gives his old rival a pretty good going over, putting him down twice in the fight. In what comes as a shock to most, the fight is scored a draw. Regardless of the decision, Hearns is looked upon as the winner by the boxing public. Leonard even admits two months later on the Arsenio Hall Show that Hearns deserved the decision.

Two years after the Leonard fight, Hearns wins the WBA light heavyweight title decisioning undefeated champ Virgil Hill. After the Hill fight, Hearns is decisioned by Iran Barkley over 12 rounds to lose the title. After the Barkley fight, Hearns retired and un-retired coming back to win the NABF and WBU cruiserweight titles.

Thomas Hearns was a freak of boxing nature. He was a devastating puncher, with fast hands, who also was an outstanding boxer. He carried his punch from welterweight up thru light

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heavyweight, which is nothing short of remarkable. He fought the best of his time, defeating all but Hagler. Hearns is an all-time great anywhere from welterweight thru middleweight! Hearns was a true warrior who provided boxing fans many memorable nights!

Marvin Hagler -- Sept. '80 "All I wanna do is destroy" That's what Marvin Hagler said after fighting middleweight champ Vito Antuofermo. The Antuofermo fight was declared a draw, despite most ringside observers having scored the fight in Hagler's favor. Hagler vowed he'd never leave it up to the judges again, and most of the time, he didn't.

Hagler started off his career going unbeaten in his first 26 fights. Included in those fights were a win and a draw with 1972 middleweight Olympic Gold Medalist Sugar Ray Seals. Unable to get fights, Hagler traveled to the middleweight boxing capital of the world at the time, Philadelphia. In his 27th bout, Hagler lost a controversial decision to ranked Philly contender Bobby "Boogaloo" Watts. Two months later, another Philly fighter, top contender Willie "The Worm" Monroe, decisions Hagler in a fight in which most at ringside felt he was out boxed. Within the next year and a half, Hagler stops KO artist Cyclone Hart and his rival Monroe twice. After stopping Monroe the second time, Hagler knocks out top contenders Mike Colbert, Kevin Finnegan twice, decisions Bennie Briscoe, and stops Sugar Ray Seals in the first round. Eight months after stopping Seals, Hagler fights Antuofermo for the middleweight title, which ended in a very disputed draw. From this point, Marvin Hagler turned into a wrecking machine.

After Antuofermo, Hagler fights three times, in the process he gets revenge against the fighter who gave him his first defeat, Boogaloo Watts, stopping him in the second round. Four months after the Watts fight, Hagler fights newly crowned middleweight champion Alan Minter, who won the title from Antuofermo. Taking out the frustration of the draw with Antuofermo on Minter, Hagler takes Minter apart in three rounds to become the middleweight champion. This would be the beginning of one of the most successful middleweight title tenures in history. Over the course of the next seven years, Hagler would defend the title 12 consecutive times with only one fighter taking him to a decision, Roberto Duran.

After making one successful defense of the title, Hagler defends against his nemesis Vito Antuofermo stopping him in five rounds. Over the next two years, Hagler defends the title five times. Included in those defenses are stoppages over the rugged Mustafa Hamsho, Tony Sibson and Wilford Scypion. After stopping Scypion, Hagler meets Roberto Duran who has just captured the junior middleweight title by stopping Davey Moore. Duran takes Hagler the distance, forcing Hagler to rally in the last three rounds to secure the decision. After Duran, Hagler stops the undefeated Juan Roldan in 10 rounds, and Mustafa Hamsho in three. This is the first time Hamsho is ever dropped in his career, including his first fight with Hagler. Hamsho made the mistake of intentionally head-butting Hagler, and Hagler made him pay. Six months after the Hamsho rematch, Hagler fights Thomas "The Hitman" Hearns. This goes on to be the pinnacle of Hagler's career as he destroys Hearns in three rounds in one of the most brutal and exciting title fights ever. Following the Hearns fight, Hagler takes on undefeated knockout artist John "The Beast" Mugabi. Mugabi puts up quite a fight before being stopped in the 11th round in another war. After the Mugabi fight, Hagler starts dropping hints that he's going to retire.

Five months after Hagler fights Mugabi, Sugar Ray Leonard holds a press conference saying

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he would be willing to face Hagler. Hagler has sought a fight with Leonard since Leonard's first retirement in 1982. On April 6, 1987, Marvin Hagler and Sugar Ray Leonard meet in what is the most anticipated fight since the Ali-Frazier trilogy. This is the fight Hagler has dreamed about. Leonard, who has studied Hagler over the last five years while doing the color for HBO boxing, had the perfect fight plan. Leonard saw Duran have success against Hagler with counter and lead right hands.

When they finally meet, Leonard comes out fast circling to his left forcing Hagler to follow him, while landing counter right hands. For the first three rounds, Hagler can't lay a glove on Ray and has clearly lost rounds one, two and three. Starting in round four, Leonard slows down coming off his toes. Over the next nine rounds, Hagler and Leonard fight pretty even with both fighters having their moments. Hagler clearly lands the harder punches, but Ray has his moments out speeding Marvin beating him to the punch. At the end of the 12th round, Hagler seems the more confident fighter waiting for the decision. When the decision is announced, Leonard is awarded a split decision. Hagler looks totally stunned!

Before the fight, Hagler consented to fighting with 10-ounce gloves instead of 8-ounce, in a 20-foot ring instead of an 18-foot ring, and 12 rounds instead of 15. All three things surely had an effect on the outcome of the fight, especially the 12 rounds instead of 15. Leonard was clearly spent at the end of the 12th, where Marvin definitely had more left if the fight were to continue.

Shortly after the fight, Hagler announces his retirement saying he is fed up with the politics of boxing. Hagler left the game for good. Marvin Hagler was a great fighter who fought mainly as a southpaw, but was very effective switching to fighting right handed. He could punch or box, he had great stamina, fought the best the division had to offer and had one of the best chins in boxing history. He is the only fighter I can say that I never saw hurt one time, even a little. Other than Leonard, Hagler never fought a fighter he couldn't beat and many feel he beat Leonard. Hagler without question will be remembered as one of history's greatest middleweight champions!

Michael Spinks -- July '81. On April 17, 1977, one of the most successful and accomplished light heavyweight boxing careers in history was launched. When Michael Spinks came out of the 1976 Olympics with a Gold Medal around his neck, it wasn't even certain that he would turn professional. It's lucky for boxing fans that history turned out the way it did. Michael Spinks could do it all, box, punch, fight at a distance or fight inside. He had height and reach, he could take his opponent out with any one of three power punches: his left hook, an uppercut or his overhand right, the "Spinks Jinx." He also had a long hard fast jab that he used offensively and defensively. After turning pro, Spinks took the light heavyweight division by storm.

As early as his 15th fight he stopped veteran and four-time light heavyweight title challenger Yaqui Lopez in seven rounds. In his 17th fight he devastated former two-time champ Marvin Johnson in four rounds. On July 18, 1981 in his 18th fight, Spinks won the WBA light heavyweight title by knocking down champion Eddie Mustafa Muhammad en route to a 15 round unanimous decision. Over the next two years, Spinks was the dominant fighter in the division stopping all the top contenders in a very talented division. Included in those stoppages

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were Vonzell Johnson, Murray Sutherland and Johnny Davis.

On March 18, 1983, Spinks fought WBC champ Dwight Muhammad Qawi (formerly Dwight Braxton) to unify the light heavyweight title. This was the most talked about and covered light heavyweight title fight in light heavyweight history. At the time, Qawi was going thru the division just as impressively as Spinks. The fight offered a contrast in styles, Spinks being the boxer puncher and Qawi the swarming pressure style fighter. In this unification bout, Michael Spinks put on a boxing clinic using his jab to keep Qawi from getting inside, and he moved laterally for 15 rounds, non-stop. Spinks won a unanimous decision to become undisputed light heavyweight champ.

After making three defenses of the unified title, Spinks hears the call of the heavyweight dollars. With not one light heavyweight in the division who can be considered anything more than an overwhelming underdog to Spinks, he vacates the title. Three months after giving up the title, Spinks challenges undefeated IBF heavyweight champion Larry Holmes who is 48-0 and on the cusp of equaling Rocky Marciano's perfect record of 49-0. On September 21, 1985, exactly 30 years to the day of Marciano stopping light heavyweight champ Archie Moore in his last fight, Spinks fights Holmes for the heavyweight title. In a stunning upset, Spinks shocks the boxing world by out maneuvering and out boxing Holmes to capture the IBF heavyweight title. In defeating Holmes, Spinks made history by being the first light heavyweight champion to win the heavyweight title. He also prevented a historical event by stopping Holmes from equaling Marciano's record.

Six months after winning the title from Holmes, Spinks fights Holmes again to defend his title. This time Holmes is better prepared and doesn't underestimate Spinks. The fight goes to a decision and Spinks wins a split decision to retain the title. Like the first fight, this ends in some controversy pertaining to the decision. Although most agree Spinks won the first fight, more than half of those who saw the rematch felt Holmes deserved the decision.

After making one defense of the title, the IBF strips Spinks for not taking part in the HBO heavyweight tournament. After being stripped of the title, Spinks fights Gerry Cooney who is coming back after a three year retirement. In what was billed as the Lineal Heavyweight Title, Spinks stops Cooney in five heated rounds. Six weeks after Spinks beats Cooney, Mike Tyson wins the HBO heavyweight tournament, capturing the WBA, WBC, and IBF titles.

On June 27, 1988, Spinks and Tyson meet for the undisputed heavyweight championship. Spinks, who is past his best days, and not a true heavyweight other than on the scale, suffers his only defeat as a pro. For the first time in his career, Spinks is knocked down, and then stopped in the first round. The following month after losing to Tyson, Spinks announces his retirement from boxing and never fights again.

There can be no question that Spinks has to rank as one of the four or five greatest light heavyweight champions in history. His career at light heavyweight is unmatched. Spinks fought during and dominated one of the best light heavyweight eras ever. He never lost a fight at light heavyweight, something no other light heavyweight champion can say. Spinks was also the first light heavyweight champ to win the heavyweight title, and he won it from a legitimate champion

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in Larry Holmes. On top of having a brilliant record, not losing until facing a true heavyweight knockout artist in his prime, Spinks had great skill and ability! He could do it all in the ring and was a very smart fighter and great at exploiting his opponents' weakness. Spinks is without a doubt one of the all-around best fighters we have ever seen.

Roy Jones -- May '93. When Roy Jones came out of the 1988 Olympics with the silver medal, he was nicknamed the "Heart Break Kid." Jones should have had the Gold Medal around his neck, for Jones was the victim of the worst decision in the history of Olympic boxing. He clearly outclassed his Korean opponent the entire fight, only to be denied the Gold by a 3-2 decision by corrupt judging. Jones would not be discouraged by the injustice; he turned pro shortly after the games.

Jones blazed through the middleweight division displaying speed and skill not seen since the prime of Sugar Ray Leonard. After going undefeated in his first 21 fights, Jones fights the once beaten Bernard Hopkins for the vacant IBF middleweight title. Jones goes on to out box Hopkins over 12 rounds to win the title. After making one defense of the middleweight title registering a second round stoppage of Thomas Tate, Jones challenges undefeated IBF super middleweight champ James Toney. Jones goes on to thoroughly outclass Toney winning a lopsided decision by six, nine and 11-point margins on the judges cards. Jones just totally overwhelms Toney with his speed and boxing ability. Jones goes on to make six defenses of the IBF super middleweight title stopping all six of his opponents. Three years after winning the middleweight title, Jones fights the 40-year-old, but still dangerous, Mike McCallum for the vacant WBC light heavyweight title.

Once again, Jones out boxes his opponent and wins a comfortable decision over McCallum by five, seven, and nine point margins on the officials' cards.

In his first defense of his light heavyweight title, Jones fights former Olympian, the undefeated Montell Griffin. Griffin surprises many by pressuring Jones from his crouching style and going to the body. After five rounds, Griffin is clearly out front in the fight, a situation Jones has never been in before. Like all great champions, Jones starts to figure Griffin out and starts taking control of the fight. In the 9th round, Jones appears to have control of the fight when he drops Griffin with a blinding combination, while Griffin is down on one knee Jones takes out his frustration hitting Griffin with a right hook that knocks him over. Jones is immediately disqualified and loses his title, but not for long. Five months later, Jones fights Griffin again and, in the most impressive performance of his career, Jones walks through Griffin, knocking him out in the first round to regain the title.

In the first defense of his title, he scores a vicious fourth round knockout over former champ Virgil Hill with a single right hook to the body. Following the Hill fight, Jones fights Lou Del Valle and suffers the closest thing to a setback since the Griffin fight. In a fight in which he is in total control, he gets knocked down in the eighth round on his way to winning another lopsided decision over a top contender.

Over the next four years, Jones fights 10 times, winning all the major belts in the light heavyweight division. In those 10 fights, he is only taken the distance three times by, Reggie

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Johnson, David Telesco and Julio Cesar Gonzalez. However, he is never seriously in trouble or challenged in those fights.

After years of teasing the fans and media about fighting a heavyweight, Jones fights WBA champ John Ruiz for Ruiz's title. Ruiz is thought to be perfect for Jones by many insiders, and Jones going in as more than a 2-1 favorite, justifies their perception. When Jones and Ruiz finally meet, it's not even close as Jones proves he is the superior fighter. Ruiz has no answer for Jones' speed and boxing ability and loses his title to Jones by a lopsided decision. With Jones defeat of Ruiz, he joins Michael Spinks as the only light heavyweight champions to beat the heavyweight champion. The only difference is that Spinks beat the true heavyweight champion, where Jones basically beat a titleholder. This, on the whole, is not as impressive as what Spinks accomplished. However, the way that Jones just totally outclassed Ruiz merits much praise.

Roy Jones has shown over his career that he can do it all. Jones has speed on par with any fighter in history, he can box, he has a tremendous left hook and his defense is fantastic due to his gifted speed. Jones is a remarkable fighter, and what's scary is that he's not done yet! Jones is as skilled as any fighter on this list. However, the one setback regarding Jones is that he has fought a very average grade of fighters from top to bottom, unlike the above fighters who fought and beat other great fighters throughout their entire careers. That being said, Jones has been superior to those he has faced. He's proven he deserves the benefit of the doubt, and had he been lucky enough to be born in a time with other outstanding/great fighters to confront, he would've more than held his own.

Fighter's who could have been included

Roberto Duran, Alexis Arguello, Ricardo Lopez, Julio Cesar Chavez, Pernell Whitaker

Writers Note

Before setting out to evaluate the top five non-heavyweight fighters over the last 25 years, I contacted eleven well-known and respected boxing writers. I asked them who they thought were the top five fighters over the last 25 years, excluding heavyweights. I also told them to use whatever criteria they wanted in ranking the fighters who should be among the top five. My only stipulation was that Evander Holyfield could not be included because he fought as a heavyweight an overwhelming majority of his career. I also let them know that Michael Spinks and Roy Jones were eligible because they will be remembered as light heavyweights. Sugar Ray Leonard was the only fighter that was on every ones top five. Below is the breakdown.

Sugar Ray Leonard - 11
Marvin Hagler - 9
Roy Jones - 8
Roberto Duran - 5
Julio Cesar Chavez - 5
Pernell Whitaker - 5
Thomas Hearns - 4
Michael Spinks - 2
Ricardo Lopez - 1

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Alexis Arguello - 1

Mark Johnson - 1

Mike McCallum - 1

Oscar De La Hoya - 1

James Toney - 1