

Needed In The Corner: A Good Boxing Mind

Written by Frank Lotierzo
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One of the most popular conversations today between boxing fans and writers is, how come it seems there aren't that many great fighters today. Many things can be pointed to as why the fighters aren't as good as they were as recently as the 1980's. Although painful to admit, in most cases it's true. Today's fighters, as a whole, aren't as good as those of the recent past. This rings most true in the weight below the heavyweight division.

Right now, the best fighters are campaigning in the weight divisions 135 through 154. And if you think about it, the fighters of today between 135 through 154 don't come close to those who dominated the 1980's. A close look at today's middleweight and light heavyweight divisions suggests that they are at all-time lows regarding outstanding fighters. The middleweight division has one fighter, Bernard Hopkins, who will be regarded as a hall of fame fighter. With Roy Jones' departure to the heavyweight division, the light heavyweight division has no fighter that can be considered hall of fame caliber. With the title reign of Lennox Lewis drawing to a close, who are the emerging heavyweights that show any promise of being anything special? If one is out there, I haven't seen him. Supposedly, we are living in a time where the fighters are bigger, stronger, and better trained. The heavyweights are bigger, but they are definitely not better, or better conditioned. They get exhausted fighting 12 rounds today; what if they had to fight in the 15 or 20 round era? In the divisions below heavyweight, I haven't seen what could be considered an outstanding level of fighting or technique. Other than the five or so outstanding/great fighters currently fighting, I'd say the rest are mediocre to slightly above average.

With the absence of great fighters, the training and fighting techniques are even more important. Having many fighters who are pretty close in skill and ability is where a good trainer or boxing mind can make a huge difference in winning and losing! When I attend fights, I try to listen to the advice the corner is giving the fighters in between rounds. You can also do this watching the fight on TV since most of the time the broadcast network will have the corner miked. I can only speak for myself, but from what I've heard, it doesn't seem like much instruction is being given.

Having a good boxing mind in the corner to instruct the fighter can be the difference between getting a multimillion dollar payday and title shot or becoming a journeyman. A fighter needs someone in the corner to help him make adjustments in his strategy in the brief minute in between rounds. As recently as the Gatti-Ward third bout, we saw Arturo Gatti break his right hand in the fourth round. When it became quite obvious that Gatti was in pain and could only use the right defensively, why wasn't Ward instructed by his corner to punch at Gatti's right. Why not try and injure it even more? By Ward punching at Gatti's injured right hand, he may have been able to render it even less effective, giving Ward a better chance to pull the fight out.

How often do we see fighters go after their opponents cut when the bleeding starts? This isn't cheating, this is part of boxing. I've never heard anyone complain when a fighter goes after his opponents cut when the bleeding starts. In fact most fighters, and fans expect it. In the same

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fight, didn't Gatti tell his trainer Buddy McGirt that he thought he broke his right hand? Gatti told McGirt this so McGirt could tell him what to do, and Gatti followed McGirt's instruction and went on to win the fight. The corner of Gatti is a perfect example as to how a corner can make a big difference in the outcome of a fight. Gatti's trainer Buddy McGirt is a great example of having a good boxing mind in the corner who can think on his feet, and can instruct his fighter on how to cope with the unforeseen crisis that often occur.

We saw poor corner advice in the Tua-Rahman rematch. Why was Tua's corner telling him to jab up and down? That's the last thing Tua should have been doing, trying to match Rahman's jab when Rahman was killing Tua with the jab. Tua should have been told to give Rahman some head movement in order to make some of his jabs miss. They also should have implored Tua to go to Rahman's body before looking for the big hook or overhand right to the head. Tua fought the exact same fight he did five years prior when he fought Rahman and didn't make a single adjustment. The worse part is, Rahman was in poor condition and was there to be beat. Tua and his team should have been working on cutting off the ring and taking away Rahman's stamina and legs, and then going for the knockout. Maybe Tua isn't capable of doing this, but it wasn't even suggested between rounds. The other side of the Tua-Rahman example is the Ibeabuchi-Byrd fight. There can be no denying that Chris Byrd is one of the smartest ring technicians fighting today. That's why he is so successful, despite not having dynamite in his hands or being a huge man. He knows how to fight! To date the only fighter who has fought him the right way is Ike Ibeabuchi. Yes, Wladimir Klitschko beat him, but he beat him more so with his height and reach, while Ibeabuchi broke his style down. Ibeabuchi knew exactly how to fight Byrd. He didn't go to the head first. He was taught that going to Byrd's head with your lead punch is a waste of time, because you'll never hit it, especially in the early going. What Ike did was go to the body to take Byrd's legs away. He also took one of his escape routes away by leaning to one side or the other when he had Byrd cornered. By Ike knowing that Byrd could only go one way to escape, he knew where to punch. This led to Byrd taking the worse beating of his career. Ibeabuchi provided the textbook on how to fight Chris Byrd. I know this to be a fact because I spoke with Chris a few weeks after the fight. He admitted Ike knew exactly how to fight him. Not all fighters can punch or are as strong as Ike but, they would give themselves a much better shot to beat Byrd if they followed Ike's blueprint.

Today's fighters need a boxing person to help them adjust and implement things into their fight plan to offset what the other fighter is successful doing or is comfortable doing. I don't care who the fighter is, there is something he prefers not to do in the ring or doesn't like having done to him by his opponent. Even if the fighter is a great talent, a smart trainer will come up with something to take away from him, thus giving his fighter a better chance.

Look what George Benton did for Leon Spinks in his first fight with Muhammad Ali. Benton knew the jab was a huge part of Ali's game, and he wanted Leon to somewhat nullify it and take it away. What he did was instruct Spinks to jab at the top of Ali's left shoulder early in the fight. What this did was make it hurt for Ali to jab later in the fight, which enabled Spinks to get closer to Ali so he could go to the body and slow him down without getting his head knocked off by Ali's jab, while coming in.

Why is it that we never see fighters double and triple jab? Is it possible they've never had it

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embedded into their heads to do so? Most of the time the second and third jab gets through. Another thing I don't see fighters doing today is jabbing to the chest. This makes it easier for a fighter to penetrate his opponent's defense if he can't get to his head. This can sometimes make the fighter being jabbed at feel vulnerable and tentative.

One of the most effective things fighters did at the turn of the 19th Century was to hit their opponents wrist, trying to injure the opponents hands making it hurt for the fighter to punch. Rocky Marciano went onto an undefeated career beating his opponents on the shoulders and forearms, making it hurt for them to punch back and hold their arms up. Stanley Ketchel was known for hitting fighters on their joints making them hurt trying to fight him off. All of these techniques are legal, however nobody uses them. This is not dirty fighting; this is what is called taking what the opponent gives you. There is always something to hit. Two of the most successful football coaches in NFL history are Don Shula and Joe Gibbs. Shula averaged 10-plus wins per season for 33 years. Gibbs has the second highest playoff winning percentage in NFL history for any coach who coached 10 or more playoff games. Anyone who follows the NFL knows that Shula and Gibbs were known for making half time adjustments. In other words, taking away the opponents strengths and finding their weaknesses or vulnerabilities.

Why don't more trainers and fighters work on these type strategies more? I know that Eddie Futch did, and Emanuel Steward and Angelo Dundee do. Why is Emanuel Stewart so helpful with Lennox Lewis? Because he saw what Lennox's strengths were and has added on to them. The other side of that is he can instruct Lewis what to do to neutralize his opponent's strength, forcing him to try something else or another way. Styles and strategy are the two most overlooked things in boxing today.