

Heavyweight History's Missing Page

Written by Frank Lotierzo
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On October 31, 1992, Lennox Lewis stopped Razor Ruddock in two rounds. Without a doubt, this was the signature win of Lewis' career at the time. From a physical vantage point, it maybe his most impressive win ever. Exactly one week later, November 13, 1992, Riddick Bowe decisioned undisputed heavyweight champ Evander Holyfield to capture the title. This was without a doubt the signature win of Bowe's career. What a great seven days of heavyweight boxing, having four of the top five or six heavyweights in the world fighting each other.

The best thing about the end of that week was, starting November 7, boxing fans were led to believe that we could start looking forward to the Bowe-Lewis clash for the undisputed title. If you remember that was the plan in making those two fights, so the winners could face each other. Going into those two bouts, Holyfield was undefeated and held the true title after making three successful defenses against Foreman, Cooper, and Holmes. Ruddock was coming off two good showings against Tyson, Bowe and Lewis were both undefeated and Tyson was sitting in the Marion County Correctional Institute.

The purported Bowe-Lewis title bout had it all, but unfortunately, a guy named Rock Newman decided that he had other ideas. Newman, Bowe's manager, convinced him to do the Cus D'Amato-Floyd Patterson shuffle. That would be making title defenses against weak opposition to make the most money. I guess that's looking out for the fighter by getting the max dollars for the least risk. However, it really screwed the fans and cheated boxing out of what could have been one of history's super fights between the two best heavyweight champions of all time who stood over 6'4".

Take a second and think back to the year 1974. On January 1 of '74, George Foreman was the undefeated heavyweight champion, Muhammad Ali was the top ranked contender, Joe Frazier was the second, and Ken Norton was the third. At the time, they were without a doubt the top four heavyweights in the world. All boxing needed was a way to shake out who was really the best fighter of the four. Back at that time the best fighters actually wanted to fight each other, imagine that. It meant something to be the champ to all four fighters and none of them took the easy way out.

With all four fighters wanting to prove they were the true champion, it wasn't hard getting them to agree to face each other. So a two-fight mini tournament was held. In the first fight, Ali and Frazier were to meet in a rematch to settle their score. The second fight would see Foreman defending his title against Norton with the winners to face each other to decide who was the undisputed heavyweight champ.

On January 28, 1974, Muhammad Ali evened the score with Joe Frazier and won a 12-round unanimous decision at Madison Square Garden. On March 26, 1974, heavyweight champ George Foreman walked through Ken Norton in two rounds to retain the title in Caracas Venezuela. With Ali and Foreman both winning, the stage was set for them to meet for the undisputed title, and unlike Bowe and Lewis, they fought.

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On Tuesday night October 30, 1974 in Kinshasa Zaire, Muhammad Ali stopped George Foreman in the eighth round to become the second fighter in history to regain the heavyweight title. The Foreman-Ali fight is no doubt a fight for the ages and one of boxing's most memorable. Think if there was a Rock Newman around then managing Foreman, look what we may have been cheated out of!

If you think about it, that's sort of what Newman did by not following through with the purposed plans that were on the table to make Bowe-Lewis happen. Bowe-Lewis had the makings of a truly great fight. As I said earlier, they are probably the two best heavyweight champions in history who stood over 6'4", and they both could fight!

If you're like me, you hate not really knowing who was the better fighter. For every person who says Lewis was better and would have won, you can find another who says Bowe was better and he would have won had they fought at their best. Picking between Bowe and Lewis as to who was really better is quite a task. For every argument, there's a counter argument.

Boxing is the great sport that it is because of the signature fights and rivalries that it has showcased over its long, storied history. Fights like Greb-Tunney, Robinson-LaMotta, Zale-Graziano, Ali-Frazier, Pryor-Arguello and Leonard-Hearns, to name a few. I know, as you read this you're thinking how could he leave out this one or that one, believe me I didn't, but I know you know the inference I'm making.

Riddick Bowe vs. Lennox Lewis had the potential to be mentioned in the same vein as those mentioned above. Think about it, in Bowe and Lewis you had two heavyweights who were around 6'5" who could fight, and were only separated by two years on their birth certificates. They both showed outstanding boxing ability and they both could hit. Heavyweight history has never seen a generation that boasts two heavyweights 6'5" with outstanding skills. Plus, there was a rivalry between them dating back to when they fought for the Gold Medal in the 1988 Olympics.

Without speculating, what do we know about both fighters and their careers? We know that Lewis stopped Bowe in two rounds in the 1988 Olympics to capture the super-heavyweight Gold Medal. However, any objective observer would have to admit that the stoppage was premature, and the referee did a horrible job officiating during the entire bout. On the other hand, I have no doubt that Lewis was on his way to winning the fight regardless of the premature stoppage. Lewis was the more experienced fighter and was competing in the Olympics for the second time. So, lets clear the Olympic fight up once and for all. Lewis was the more experienced amateur, the fight was stopped too quickly, but it didn't change the outcome. Lewis was on his way to winning it anyway.

When they turned pro, both were showered with high praise and were predicted to be can't miss prospects. Bowe received more notoriety, but that's probably because he fought in the States from the start of his career. Lewis fought many of his early bouts in London. They both were moved along at about the same pace and scored some impressive wins along with a few stinkers.

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Early into their pro careers, it seemed that Bowe was advancing a little better and faster than Lewis. I remember from about mid 1990 on, Bowe started garnering more attention and most of the boxing magazines and commentators were projecting Bowe to be the better fighter. They felt this way because Bowe appeared to be the more complete fighter and had less perceived holes in his game.

By October of 1992, Bowe and Lewis were approaching the biggest fights of their careers and seemed to be on a collision course. When Lewis devastated Ruddock in two rounds on Halloween night 1992, he appeared to have arrived and at the very least showed he was Bowe's equal or maybe better. The following week, Bowe fought the best fight of his career in taking a 12-round decision over the undefeated, undisputed heavyweight champion Evander Holyfield. With Bowe's performance against a prime Holyfield, he showed that maybe he was all that he was built up to be. However, off Lewis' knockout of Ruddock, Lewis showed that Bowe could not be truly declared the world's best heavyweight without defeating him.

Coming off their signature wins, the boxing public was split as to who would win when they finally met. Some automatically assumed Lewis would win, based on the Olympic win, and some thought Bowe, due to his better progression in the pros. Regardless of what side you came down on, a compelling case could be made to support your opinion.

In my book, it's almost criminal that we never got to see it! Bowe-Lewis is a fight that would have cleared up a lot of confusion and answered many questions. Maybe we would've have gotten to see it two or three times just so the slightest doubts could've been quelled and eliminated. Without a doubt, this is one of the biggest travesties in heavyweight history.

Since we were cheated out of this potential super-fight, what do we have to go on to base an opinion as to who was the better fighter? The way history unfolded, there can be no doubt that when ranking them, Lewis has to be ranked above Bowe in heavyweight history. He had the longer career, beat more quality fighters and participated in 18 world heavyweight title fights, opposed to only four for Bowe. The statistics clearly favor Lewis, but does that mean he was the better fighter and would've defeated Bowe if they fought on their best night?

They were close in height, reach, and weight. These two are so similar and evenly matched, it's almost impossible to give one a decided advantage over the other when breaking down their fighting styles. I guess Lewis has to get the nod when it comes to jab and right hand, and Bowe gets the nod with the left-hook and right-uppercut. Regardless of which fighter you feel gets the nod over the other in certain categories, I think the fighter who has the edge is only by a minuscule margin. The one thing that stands out to me is that Lewis was effective moving to or away from his opponent. Bowe was most effective when he was pushing the fight.

I know that the Holyfield that Bowe beat in their first fight was better than any fighter that Lewis ever fought or defeated was. I also know that Lewis devastated Golota and Golota retired Bowe. Lewis just lasted much longer and has accomplished so much more than Bowe. On the other hand, I can't see Bowe at the top of his game ever losing to McCall or Rahman, let alone getting knocked out by them with one punch.

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It's also a fact that Bowe beat a prime Holyfield much more cleanly and decisively than a supposed prime Lewis beat a shot Holyfield, but that doesn't mean Bowe was better. It's also a fact that other than Holyfield, Bowe didn't beat any other top fighter that comes close to some of the top contenders that Lewis beat.

When it comes to assessing Bowe and Lewis, I can draw three solid conclusions. One, I don't know who would've won had they fought in 1993. Two, Lewis without a doubt has to be ranked above Bowe in heavyweight history. Three, boxing is missing a significant page of heavyweight history due to Bowe and Lewis never facing each other.

Writers Note

The short career of Riddick Bowe totally mystifies me. Other than Holyfield and Golota he wasn't in any wars. Actually, he was shot after the third Holyfield fight, a fight in which he was only a couple seconds away from being counted out. Bowe had all the talent and ability in the world, especially for a fighter 6'5". The one thing he didn't have was self-discipline. I believe this had much to do with his early demise. Never have we seen a heavyweight balloon up so much in weight between fights as Bowe. Often it was reported that Bowe was up over 300 lbs after fights.

I believe this was a major factor as to why he eroded so quickly. After ballooning up so high, he would go on starvation diets and cut off his fluid intake to get his weight down. Not only does this weaken a fighter, but also the reduction in fluid around the brain increases the damage from the impact of getting hit. With no fluid around the brain, there's no protection for the brain when it slams into the skull. Multiply this by how many times he was hit during sparring and during the fight. I believe this was the major contributor to his rapid erosion.

When fighters dehydrate themselves, they are playing with fire. Lack of fluid around the brain leads to many problems. Most fighters cut their fluid intake to get down to weight and this is why most of the ring deaths involve fighters below heavyweight. Since heavyweights don't have to make weight, they usually don't deprive themselves from fluids like the lighter weight fighters do who are under tremendous pressure to make weight. This is a serious health issue in boxing and isn't addressed enough. I believe this was a major factor in why Riddick Bowe had such a brief prime.