

Evander Holyfield: Most Significant Heavyweight of the 90's

Written by Frank Lotierzo
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Fourteen years ago on October 25, 1990, Evander Holyfield became the Undisputed Heavyweight Champion of the World. Holyfield turned pro in 1984 and won the Cruiserweight title in July of 1986 from the very tough and formidable Champ, Dwight Muhammad Qawi, in only his 12th fight. Many historians regard the Qawi-Holyfield title bout the best Cruiserweight fight in the history of the division. Something I fully endorse.

As Cruiserweight champ, Holyfield spoke often about fighting for and winning the Heavyweight title. At that time not many viewed that as realistic. Most fans and boxing writers were becoming intoxicated by the emergence of a twenty year old Heavyweight named Mike Tyson. Tyson was going through the Heavyweight division in much the same manner that Joe Louis did before he was stopped by former champ, Max Schmeling.

Holyfield was easily accepted and regarded as being head and shoulders above any other Cruiserweight in the world. It was only when he talked about fighting Tyson for the Heavyweight title that he wasn't taken seriously. The thought of Tyson losing to another Heavyweight wasn't even a thought, let alone a Cruiserweight who was built like a super-fit Light Heavyweight.

The presence of Tyson practically engulfed Holyfield. Even in a Heavyweight division with no Tyson, Holyfield was viewed as being too small and light physically. Another common belief was he lacked the strength and punch needed to defeat the upper-tier Heavyweights. Despite the doubts and negativism hurled his way, he was never deterred and continued cleaning out the Cruiserweight division.

After a couple of years of speculation, Holyfield abandoned the Cruiserweight division and began fighting as a Heavyweight. In March of 1989, not even a full year after moving up to Heavyweight, Holyfield scored his biggest win when he stopped former WBA Heavyweight Champ Michael Dokes in the 11th round. The Holyfield-Dokes fight was one of the better Heavyweight fights in recent memory. Holyfield had his hands full with Dokes and was tested physically and mentally throughout the fight. By the end of 1989, Holyfield proved he was at least a man among men in the Heavyweight division.

When the first Heavyweight ratings of 1990 came out, Evander Holyfield was first in line for a shot at Mike Tyson's undisputed Heavyweight title. By mid January of 1990, Holyfield was on the verge of signing to fight Tyson. The only obstacle remaining was Tyson had to beat Buster Douglas in his next title defense in early February. Since Douglas never beat a top Heavyweight prior to fighting Tyson, and folded in his last title shot against Tony Tucker, Tyson beating Douglas looked like the safest bet in history.

On February 10th, 1990, Tyson was knocked out in the tenth round by the 42-1 underdog, Buster Douglas. After months of lawsuits, broken contracts, and buy outs, resulting from Douglas' contract with Don King, Douglas was finally free from him. Douglas signed to make his first title defense against number one contender Evander Holyfield for 25 million dollars at the

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Mirage in Las Vegas.

On the night of October 25th, 1990, Evander Holyfield knocked out Buster Douglas with a perfectly timed right hand counter in the third round to become undisputed Heavyweight Champion of the World. In his first defense, Holyfield won a unanimous decision over 42 year old former Champ George Foreman, the same Foreman that Mike Tyson declined to fight in June of 1990. Holyfield's second defense was scheduled to be against Mike Tyson in November of 1991. The fight was cancelled when Tyson injured his rib training.

From 1990-99, Evander Holyfield was the most important and significant Heavyweight in the world. Holyfield was involved in just about every big PPV Heavyweight bout during the 1990's. He fought everybody and gave boxing some of its most thrilling and exciting fights as champion. Seven of his fights between 1992 and 1999 were against the three greatest Heavyweights of the era—Riddick Bowe, Mike Tyson, and Lennox Lewis.

Holyfield lost and won the title from Bowe, won it and defended it against Tyson, and drew with and lost it to Lewis. He also fought every other top Heavyweight in the division. Despite being the smaller fighter in stature in just about all of his fights as Heavyweight champ, he was always the biggest man in the ring.

At his best he could fight non-stop, and had the ability and savvy to change and adjust his style depending on the opponent. He had a way of figuring out what his opponent didn't want to do, and gave him as much of that as he could. Inside his chest was the heart of a champion, and he could never be counted out in any fight. Not to mention he had a cast iron chin and a will to win that exceeded his own limitations.

Evander Holyfield was thought to be too small and lacking the strength and power to ever be a top Heavyweight fighter in the 1990's. Not only did he prove he was a legitimate Heavyweight, in my opinion, when at his best only former Champ Larry Holmes ranks above him in the last 25 years.