

Evander Holyfield Knows his Skills have Declined

Written by Rick Folstad

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You get the feeling Evander Holyfield finally grew tired of being a nice guy. After all, they kept asking him the same tough question, wondering why he was still here, still trying to win another championship, still hanging around on the outskirts of a division he once owned.

The four-time heavyweight champion of the world thinks he can make it five, though he may be the only one outside his immediate reach who feels that way.

Holyfield fights Larry "The Legend" Donald on Nov. 13 at Madison Square Garden. The fight card features four heavyweight fights, two heavyweight title fights, two heavyweight champions and two former heavyweight champions. And the biggest name on the marquee is Holyfield's.

But what's a 42-year-old doing in this mix? What does he have to prove? Why is he still fighting? Isn't he worried about it all catching up to him someday, worried about waking up some morning and slurring his words or getting lost two blocks from his house?

Holyfield understands the questions and patiently answers them. But after awhile, he grows tired of hearing them asked again and again and again.

"Everybody has their opinion," Holyfield says for the fourth or fifth time on a recent conference call. "But this is what I choose to do. For whatever reason I choose to fight, it's my decision and it's not illegal. I'm not concerned with what people think or say."

Of course, what the people in his corner think and say means something to Holyfield. That's why he's training with Ronnie Shields in Texas instead of with his old trainer, Don Turner, in Atlanta.

In his ninth-round TKO loss to James Toney last October, it was his corner that threw in the towel, and Holyfield hasn't quite forgiven Turner.

"He felt that way (to stop the fight) and it's OK," Holyfield said of Turner. "But I had a choice to move on and I moved on. I'm not angry with Don. I wish him well. That's what he thought was right."

But it's deeper than that.

"If you don't think I can do it, you shouldn't be training me," Holyfield went on. "When somebody says you're old and can't do it, they don't push you. This is a breath of fresh air."

Like Holyfield himself, Shields knows his fighter isn't the same man he was 10 years ago. And Shields hears the same questions that are asked of Holyfield.

"I've been pushing Evander hard and he's giving me everything he can," Shields says. "And on

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Nov. 13, the only person he has to prove to that he can still fight is Larry Donald."

But that's not good enough. The question still gets asked again and again. Why is Holyfield still here?

"You can look at my past fights and say my skills have declined and you're absolutely right," Holyfield says. "But what does that have to do with Nov. 13? The fact is, I have a choice (to fight) and why would anyone not give me a choice? Why do they have to say 'Make him sit down?' I'm not in a state of denial. All my life I've made adjustments."

Holyfield has finally heard enough. He's tired of justifying himself, especially to strangers. He says he has to leave to catch a plane, but you don't really believe it. You figure it's just a polite way of saying "why don't you leave me alone? I don't tell you how to live your life."

Larry Donald isn't so sure Holyfield should "sit down."

"Evander is a champion," Donald says. "And champions don't die easily."

This one sure doesn't.