

## Heavyweight Battle Not 'The Fight of the Century'

Written by Frank Lotierzo

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Tonight in New York City, boxing's most recognized and famous venue will host not one, but two world heavyweight championship fights. I guess that means there will be two world heavyweight champions in the Garden defending their world titles. And I thought there was only one world?

I can only speak for myself, but when I hear of Madison Square Garden, I automatically associate it with being the host of the world heavyweight championship. There have actually been four different Gardens since 1879. The second edition of the Garden was the first to host a heavyweight title bout, but only three took place there in the 35 years it was in business.

It's the third and fourth venues that are really linked to heavyweight history. The third Garden hosted eight of Joe Louis' title defenses between 1938 and 1947. And it was also the venue where Muhammad Ali made his last title defense against Zora Folley in March of 1967 before being exiled for 43 months for refusing induction into the United States Army.

"Smokin" Joe Frazier opened the current Garden, the fourth, in March of 1968 when he stopped Buster Mathis in 11 rounds. Three years later Frazier won his fifth straight title bout at the Garden. On Monday night March 8th 1971, Madison Square Garden was the venue where the "Fight Of The Century," aka Frazier vs. Ali took place. The first fight between Ali and Frazier is without a doubt the biggest and most celebrated fight in boxing history. Not only did Frazier hand Ali the first defeat of his career that night, he won the biggest fight and sporting event of the nineteenth Century.

Tonight, the same Garden that hosted "Fight Of The Century," hosts "Battle For Supremacy." In the title bouts, John Ruiz will defend his WBA title versus top contender Andrew Golota, and Chris Byrd defends his IBF title against Jameel McCline. In addition, there will be four heavyweight bouts featuring three former champs, (Holyfield, Rahman, McCall) and three fighters hoping to position themselves for a title shot (Barrett, Beck, Meehan).

Three of the four fights leading up to the two title bouts look very competitive on paper. What makes this card some what intriguing is that the fights are not setups and could go either way. Larry Donald, Holyfield's opponent, has been fighting pro since 1993 and is 41-3-2. However, every time he was one win away from a title shot, he lost. At 37, this is definitely his last chance to position himself for a title shot. Holyfield still dreams of becoming undisputed heavyweight champ again. But at age 42 and having gone 2-4-2 in his last eight fights, Holyfield is not a serious title threat. Holyfield could lose to anybody at this time, and Donald has never been in a better spot to possibly get that elusive title shot.

Hasim Rahman lost to WBA champ John Ruiz in his last shot at the title. His opponent, Kali Meehan lost to WBO champ Lamon Brewster in his only title shot. Another fight that could go either way. However, Meehan should be better based off the experience he gained during his fight with Brewster. Oliver McCall probably is the biggest favorite on the card. He is most likely

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too hard and seasoned for Davarryl Williamson. It's doubtful he can hurt McCall, despite being a pretty good puncher. McCall can win by knockout or decision, but he should win.

The two title bouts almost mirror each other. Chris Byrd has held the IBF heavyweight title since December of 2002. On top of that he's defeated Vitali Klitschko, the current WBC heavyweight champ and the fighter considered at the top of the heavyweight food chain. In August of 2002 he took the bullets out of possibly the biggest gun in the division, David Tua, winning a one sided decision. Four month's later he made Evander Holyfield look older than his 40 years while out-boxing him and capturing the vacant IBF title.

His opponent Jameel McCline is 6'7" and weighs 270 pounds. However, he doesn't always fight like a big man and has shown that he can be overwhelmed in the big spot. But he does have some ability and since Byrd is not a puncher, I can see McCline fighting with a sense of urgency. And Byrd has had trouble against the bigger heavyweights he fought. Even in the fights he won against them, he was never really in command. Byrd has a ton of experience, and is very loose and cunning in the ring. Not to mention that he is strong willed and has a huge heart that makes up for what he gives away physically. McCline has the size to cause Byrd all kind of trouble. This fight is no walkover for Byrd and the size disparity makes it a compelling matchup.

John Ruiz is a two time WBA heavyweight champ and is 4-2-1 in title bouts. However, he gets admonished for what he can't do. But never gets praise for all that he has accomplished without being close to the most talented heavyweight in the division. And, like with Byrd, there is a faction of boxing fans that can't wait to see him lose the title.

He's not a knockout artist, nor is he a very good boxer. Ruiz is a mauler who leads with his chin sometimes. He pushes, grabs, holds, and takes his opponents out of their game most of the time. By the time the round ends, his opponents are frustrated and annoyed, and he's landed the only one or two clean punches in the round that the judges remember.

Andrew Golota, Ruiz's opponent, is getting his second title shot in two fights. Golota is the opposite of Ruiz, in that he has underachieved and has yet to claim a piece of the heavyweight title. On paper, Golota should handle Ruiz. He's strong and throws tight three and four punch combinations. Golota is also a good boxer and can punch with either hand, not to mention he can also fight on the inside.

Where Golota pails in comparison to Ruiz is in the character department. Ruiz never gets discouraged and is willing to fight and do whatever is needed to win. Opposed to Golota, who has quit in the middle of fights he was winning, or came undone when facing the pressure of fighting the world's most dangerous heavyweights.

Basically, Ruiz vs. Golota is a contest between Ruiz's grit and determination against Golota's skill and ability. It's very easy to envision Ruiz's toughness overwhelming Golota and reducing his skill to a non factor. On the other hand it's not hard to envision Golota's power and superior ability being too much for Ruiz to overcome if Golota can hit him at will. That's what makes it a very interesting fight with the end coming in any one of a slew of different scenarios.

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Holyfield vs Donald ? Either Donald gets his first title shot and saves Holyfield from himself, or Donald proves again that he isn't a money fighter and we are tormented by Evander for at least one more fight.

Rahman vs. Meehan ? Either Rahman continues in his quest for another title shot, and will be rewarded for fighting and remaining active, or Meehan will become a legitimate contender and is that much better from the experience of already being in a tough title bout.

McCall vs. Williamson ? Either McCall is in line for another decent pay day, or Williamson is in line for another decent pay day.

Byrd vs. McCline ? Either Byrd was telling the truth on his conference call saying he couldn't get up for his last couple fights. And he must be regarded as no worse than the third best heavyweight in the world. Or, McCline fights like he wants to be the heavyweight champ and his size was just too much for Byrd.

Ruiz vs. Golota ? Either Ruiz out toughs Golota and retires him. Only for it to be reasoned by some the next day that Golota was a dog, and Ruiz didn't win, Golota lost. Or, Golota finally in his last shot wins a piece of the title that some always thought he could. Leading some fight observers to say the following day, " I told you Ruiz was no good and would end up losing the title."

The "Battle For Supremacy", no, it's not "The Fight Of The Century," but four of the five fights are interesting match ups and should be competitive and worth checking out ?