

The Real Roy Jones Jr.

Written by Rick Folstad
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Say a short prayer for Antonio Tarver. They've located the real Roy Jones Jr. Or at least that's what they tell us.

It's not an excuse, but Roy wasn't ready last time. He just wasn't himself. Of course, they tell us that, too.

He wasn't mentally ready, physically ready or even remotely ready. He was distracted, sore, not amused. And it showed. There was the Mike Tyson distraction, the up-and-down weight problem, the over training.

It looked like Jones showed up for the fight just to chalk up some rounds, break a sweat, knock the guy out, get paid a few million and go home to the dentist. After all, his tooth was killing him and he couldn't take pain killers. They create controversy when they show up on post-fight drug tests.

So he quietly sucked it up. Or so they tell us.

Besides, who was Antonio Tarver? He was just a bump in the road, a poor guy standing in the middle of the railroad tracks trying to stop the Jones train as it steam-rolled its way toward another win, another title.

Too bad Jones wasn't ready for the fight.

It's easy to get beat that way, easy to lose the luster that comes when you're declared the best in the world, when you know you're the best in the world.

But somehow last November, a fight broke out and Jones didn't seem too interested in it.

Tarver, who lost a majority decision that night, had come close to derailing the Jones legacy and myth. And now we know why.

Roy wasn't ready and RJ never showed up.

"On a scale of one-to-10, Tarver was a 10 that night and Roy was a four-and-half or a five," said Jones' long-time trainer, Alton Merkerson, by way of a conference call. "It was the worst performance of his career. But he'll be ready for this fight."

"This fight," is Jones Tarver II and it's scheduled for May 15 at the Mandalay Bay Events Center in Las Vegas for Jones' WBC light-heavyweight title. And if Roy isn't around to talk about it, Merkerson does.

"Roy has something to prove in this fight," he said. "It's gotten a little personal with Roy. He

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has no problem with his weight and he'll be stronger than he was in the first fight."

Three days before that first fight, Merkerson said Jones sat on the couch in his hotel room biting a towel. He needed a root canal, but if he took anything for the pain, well, the commission wouldn't have been too understanding.

But the tooth is fine now and at 35, Jones still has some of the magic he had at 25. But even Merkerson will tell you that age takes something away.

"He hasn't lost his speed, but he has lost some of his ability to maneuver," said Merkerson, an honest trainer trying to find the right words in a suspect game. "His ring generalship isn't what it was. But he's at his best weight right now and he doesn't have to work to put weight on or take it off."

Still, Merkerson says he saw something special the night of that first fight.

"Roy had no legs in that fight," Merkerson said. "And he was hit more in that fight than he was hit in any other fight in his entire career. It's so easy to give up. But he did whatever it took to win. He pulled it out."

And this time?

"For this fight, he's 100 percent on track."

Or so they tells us.