

Lennox Lewis Marched To The Beat of His Own Drummer

Written by Chris Gielty

Sunday, 08 February 2004 18:00

Lennox Lewis has always been difficult to figure out, as a boxer and as a man. While the paying public craves the intellectual certainty that comes with putting a label on an athlete who has been painted in broad black and white strokes, real life is more a canvas made up of infinite shades of grey. Lewis always defied easy categorization, perhaps explaining why it was hard for so many to truly embrace the dominant heavyweight of this generation.

He always marched to the beat of his own drummer, and it often left boxing fans disappointed. Between the ropes Lewis' rhythm often seemed to have more in common with the easy lull of a reggae beat than the menacing clatter of a military march. When spectators willed Lewis to use his imposing physical might to wreak vengeance on an opponent, Lewis often tended towards introspection -- a tactician first and brawler only as a last resort.

Born in London to Jamaican parents, as his teenage years approached Lewis was taken to Canada by a single mother who wanted something better for her son. A foreign transplant in a southern Ontario town, the pattern was set early for the career of an athlete who never seemed to belong to anybody.

Though he learned to box in Kitchener, Ontario and won a gold medal for Canada in the Seoul Olympics, Canadians felt betrayed when Lewis chose to sign his first professional deal with pint-sized, English maverick, Frank Maloney. As the young heavyweight sailed back across the ocean to pursue his professional career, many Canadians waved good riddance. It mattered not that Maloney's offer was the only one that provided certain financial security to the single parent family. These were details irrelevant to the narrative spun on the sporting pages of tabloid newspapers.

As the trajectory of his career began to unfold, events did not follow the script that had been written by the money men. Until he disposed of Mike Tyson late in his career, Lewis was never truly embraced by the English. Compared to the beloved Frank Bruno, who was only too happy to play the part of the gregarious giant with whom microphones had a love affair, Lewis often seemed calculating, distant and aloof. In short, Lewis was not Frank Bruno and many in Great Britain never forgave him for it.

And in truth, it was never really on the cards that he would be embraced by the boxing fraternity in the USA, where most of his major bouts took place. Put simply, he wasn't an 'American' and the heavyweight title was an unofficial American institution. As the years rolled on Lewis, out of necessity, took to calling himself a "citizen of the world" when questioned about his true nationality.

Regardless of his origins, on his best nights it was impossible to overlook Lewis' sheer dominance. His gold medal winning Olympic performance against Riddick Bowe, when Lewis first truly burst onto the world stage, was a harbinger of what was to come, though few paid enough attention to take note.

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Bowe schooled Lewis in the first round of the Olympic final, using his inside mastery to draw first blood. Sensing he was over-matched technically, his singlet stained with his own blood, Lewis raced across the ring as the bell rang for the second and through sheer physical dominance willed Bowe to submit. It was a performance that made a mockery of claims in years to come that Lewis lacked the heart and courage of a truly great champion.

With the news of his retirement still only days old, it is natural that the debate as to where Lewis fits in amongst the all time greats has intensified. Along with Rocky Marciano and Gene Tunney, he is only the 3rd heavyweight champion to retire, title intact. But where does the name Lennox Lewis fit in the list of all time greats, a lineage that stretches back to John L. Sullivan and includes the likes of Ali, Joe Louis, Marciano and Jack Johnson? It is not an easy question to answer.

Lewis' legacy will always be tainted by his only 2 losses, which came at the hands of comparative journeyman. Though in keeping with Lewis' enigmatic persona, perhaps the losses say as much about the man as his victories.

His first loss came at the hands of Oliver McCall, a physically strong, but uncelebrated former sparring partner to Mike Tyson who had an unhealthy relationship with illicit drugs. The night McCall beat Lewis to the punch with the leg-numbing right hand that ended Lewis's first title reign, it appeared that Lewis might be nothing more than a young pretender destined to never truly learn his craft.

But rather than deluding himself as so many had in the past after staring defeat square in the face, Lewis hired the man who had masterminded his downfall -- Emanuel Steward. It was a master stroke by Lewis that demonstrated the strength of character and self-awareness that would always serve him well. In Lewis, Steward had a diamond in the rough, and though few believed him at the time, the man from the Kronk knew greatness was within their grasp.

There can be little doubt that Emanuel Steward turned Lennox Lewis' career around. Without Steward, Lewis would surely have never scaled anywhere near the heights to which he would eventually climb.

And rarely is it ever mentioned that the world probably may never have seen the best of Lennox Lewis. Though Lewis himself liked to compare himself to fine wine that just got better with age, the truth is that by the time Lewis became a master technician, his physical prime may have been close to receding. Starved of an elite trainer and top flight sparring through most of formative years as a boxer, Lewis was approaching 30 by the time Steward took to refining raw talent into a truly world class caliber package.

Still, there was plenty of time left for Lewis, under Steward's tutelage, to reach the peak of the mountain. The major victories early in Lewis' career - notably over Razor Ruddock and Frank Bruno - were a cocktail of technical naivety mixed with explosions of frightening physical power. Particularly against Ruddock, Lewis served notice that when the threat seemed greatest, he was at his most brutal. In the early hours of a London morning Ruddock entered the ring as a credible heavyweight contender and left, only minutes later, fumbling about for his senses after

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being chopped down by Lewis right hands.

It was a pattern that repeated itself 5 years later. Andrew Golota stepped through the Atlantic City ropes as possible heir apparent to the heavyweight throne, having effectively just ended Riddick Bowe's career after a pair of brutal contests. HBO had designs on Golota at the time as the possible future of the division. Feeling he had been disrespected by HBO, who Lewis believed was viewing him as a man on the way out, Lewis entered the ring bent on making a point. Lewis destroyed Golota within one round, serving notice he was still a major player in the division.

In some ways history repeated itself years later when Lewis exacted revenge on Hasim Rahman. Rahman had knocked out a complacent Lewis 7 months earlier to take the undisputed heavyweight title from Lewis. Again, the loss in Carnival City, South Africa may have said as much about Lewis as any of his victories.

Lewis believed he could not lose in South Africa, such was his superiority over the rest of the division, and his preparations had gone accordingly. It was a monumental miscalculation.

Momentarily separated from his senses and, for the time being, permanently separated from his heavyweight titles, Rahman chose to add insult to Lewis' injuries in the build up to the rematch. While much of the boxing press cast Rahman's jibes at Lewis and his sexuality as a breath of fresh air, the anger within Lewis seethed.

As Lewis claimed last week, the return bout with Rahman was his finest hour. "My best win has got to be Rahman because he disrespected me continually. It really ignited the spark in me to go in and unload, and brought that hunger back out in me."

In the rematch a focused Lewis disposed of Rahman with consummate ease. Lackadaisical and under prepared in the first fight, letter perfect and devastating in the rematch, it said so much about Lennox Lewis. Perhaps his greatness will always be open to question due to the lapses in concentration he could not resist, but on his night Lewis could have lived with any heavyweight the ring has ever seen.

Of course, where Lewis truly fits into history with fighters like Dempsey and Tunney, Louis and Schmeling, and Frazier and Ali can never be definitively answered, though it will surely be fuel for debates that take place in years to come in the trendiest uptown coffee shops, as well as the most wizened of old dives in forgotten about neighborhoods. Perhaps where Lewis fits in amongst the great heavyweights is a debate best left to the experts and charlatans alike.

One thing is clear. In the manner in which he conducted himself, respecting the sport that made him what he is, refusing to be seduced by the cancerous corruption that eats away at the boxing industry, in the way he faced defeat with honesty, and in trying to remember what it is to act with integrity, Lennox Lewis had few contemporary peers.

Lewis has said that he is retiring "out of respect for boxing," aware that he risks his legacy and what he stood for by fighting on when the sole motivation is now monetary gain. It is somehow

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ironic, then, somehow sad and somehow fitting that for so long the boxing fraternity did not respect Lewis.

But in a way it makes sense. Boxing is a sport that sometimes worries too much about things like legacy and too little about the here and now, too little about things like the fact many of its greatest practitioners are protagonists whose stories have endings which are poisoned by tragedy. It is human nature that the big picture often gets obscured by the action which is immediate. Even still, perhaps in boxing it happens too often.

This Friday past Lennox Lewis the boxer's story wound to its conclusion. It had a happy ending.

It was a story that was not always easy to decipher -- sometimes it was characterized by complacency, at other times uncertainty. When mediocrity looked to be manifest, brilliance shone through, even moments of greatness. Sometimes it felt like a slow waltz, sometimes like jazz that seemed to be going nowhere. Unpredictably, it was often in those moments when the senses exploded and it seemed to defy anything that had gone before it, to resemble something that might be labeled greatness.

In the end it was a story made up of many shades of grey. In the end, it was a lot like life itself.