

James Toney: Little Big Man

Written by Rick Folstad

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If he wasn't in the fight game, James "Lights Out" Toney could probably make a good living selling used cars or working as a carnival barker on the midway, pitching the fascinating assets of the Bearded Lady.

Toney is the guy who would have sold you snake oil from the back of a covered wagon 150 years ago, convincing you his magical elixir cured baldness, head colds and the heavy guilt associated with infidelity.

A former middleweight champion, Toney (67-4-2, 43 KOs) is a big talker who now goes to bed dreaming of someday becoming the heavyweight champion of the world. It's a logical step up for a man who loves to eat and talk trash, and Toney is experienced and gifted in both areas.

Someone who doesn't understand the concept of pulling a punch, he always comes at you armed and dangerous, beating you silly with verbal jabs if you leave yourself open.

When he fights Jameel "Big Time" McCline (30-3-3, 18 KOs) on Feb. 7 at the Mandalay Bay Convention Center, we'll find out if this crazy dream of his really has a chance of some day becoming a reality. At 6-foot-7 and 260 pounds, McCline fits comfortably in the division and will offer the final proof of whether Toney is a legitimate heavyweight contender or just a guy who moved up in weight class because he likes his pasta spicy and in large portions.

Toney's recent win over Evander Holyfield didn't tell us much about how he'll fit in with the rest of the heavyweights. Long overdue to be put out to pasture, Holyfield is to the heavyweight division what Anna Nicole Smith is to Playboy magazine. They both looked great in their time, but they're not much fun to watch anymore.

Despite giving up about 40 pounds and eight inches in height, Toney doesn't appear to be intimidated by McCline. Of course, an Army of attacking Huns would have a hard time intimidating Toney.

"I never thought about fighting this guy," he said this week at a press conference at Mandalay Bay attended by both fighters. "He is not on my level."

C'mon, James. Narrow it down for us. Who is?

Toney also said he was going to hit McCline so hard to the body that he'd do the Heisman Trophy pose.

"He's going to do a Heisman right up there in the ring," Toney said. "I'm going to hit him so hard he's going to ..."

It wasn't a pretty image.

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But that's just James Toney taking over, putting on a show and selling tickets, taking some shots at McCline four weeks before they really count. But maybe it gives him an edge he needs.

As for McCline, he said he feels like a "kid in a candy store." It's not an original line, but McCline knows he can't beat Toney in a battle of words. It's foolish to try.

"This is part of who James is," McCline said. "I won't let it bother me. Talk is cheap."

Of course, that depends on who's talking.