

Lennox's Legacy

Written by Steve Kim
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This past Friday afternoon in England one Lennox Claudius Lewis announced his retirement from the ring. While it's bad for the business of boxing, since it prevents a badly needed heavyweight title fight that the general public will be interested in, it's a happy ending for Lewis who walks off into the sunset with his faculties intact and enough money for his grand children's children to live off of.

He calls it a day with a record of 41-2-1 with 32 knockouts. He was a two-time champion that unified the title during his second run as a champ and then retired as the recognized, linear champion. He also won a gold medal to boot in 1988 in Seoul, Korea, stopping Riddick Bowe.

Impressive credentials in any era, but the question persists, where do you rank Lewis? There are two factions with extreme views on this Brit, who is also Jamaican, but represented Canada in the Olympics and had most of his big fights in the United States. One side will say that Lewis was a reluctant soldier with a negative style and a shaky set of whiskers. The other will tell you that he is one of the all-time greats with his wins over the likes of Vitali Klitschko, Evander Holyfield, Mike Tyson, David Tua, Andrew Golota, Ray Mercer and Razor Ruddock.

So which is it? Is he the china-chinned guy in dreadlocks or an all-time great? Well, probably a bit of both, so the truth probably lies somewhere in the middle.

Was his chin shaky? Well, he did get KO'd twice in one-punch fashion by journeymen-level guys in Oliver McCall and Hasim Rahman. Now, once is an aberration, twice is a trend. KO losses to those two are telling. Sure other heavyweights have hit the canvas, but the truly elite have gotten up off the canvas. Joe Louis, Larry Holmes, George Foreman, Muhammad Ali, Rocky Marciano and Joe Frazier have all gotten their ass off the canvas to win fights. When Lewis hit the floor, he was there to stay.

But to his credit Lewis did avenge both of his losses in conclusive fashion to both McCall and Rahman in rematches. Of course the detractors would ask what business he had losing to those guys to begin with. Most of the other great heavyweights either lost to elite fighters in their prime, like Frazier did to Foreman, and then Foreman to Ali, or they lost well past their primes like Louis did to Marciano and Ali did to Leon Spinks. But during their primes, they weren't losing to guys the caliber of McCall and Rahman, no siree.

And it wasn't like Lewis was fighting in a great era of heavyweights either. But then again, besides the 1970's that featured: Ali, Foreman, Frazier, Jerry Quarry, Ernie Shavers, Jimmy Ellis, Jimmy Young, Ron Lyle and Ken Norton among others, has there really been a truly 'great' era of heavyweight boxing. Usually this division is dominated by one guy at a time.

That was surely the case of Louis, who's competition was so bad that it was called 'the Bum of the Month Club', or Marciano who was criticized for not having beaten any other great heavyweights in their prime, Holmes, was never given enough respect during his prime as he

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had a tough act to follow in Ali and Mike Tyson dominated an division replete with Don King promoted underachievers.

At least Lewis was in an era that featured the likes of Evander Holyfield, Riddick Bowe and Mike Tyson. Lewis basically beat 'the Real Deal' twice, with the first battle being a scandalous decision that ended up in a draw, Bowe would throw his WBC belt into the trash can rather than face Lewis as his mandatory contender in 1992 and Lewis, was originally paid about \$4.5 million by the Tyson camp to stay away from their man in 1996 before dominating him in 2002.

In between all this he would beat respected contenders like David Tua, Henry Akinwande, Tommy Morrison, Michael Grant, Frans Botha, Frank Bruno, Tony Tucker and Andrew Golota. In any era, that is not a bad resume. And remember, while he was losing on all three scorecards to Klitschko- and rightfully so- he did cause the nasty gash on his opponent with a punch and had seemed to have taken some control of their fight by the end of the sixth round with a huge uppercut that staggered Klitschko.

But even with all this work under his belt, respect has been hard to come by in America. Why? Is it because he's not American? I mean, if he was, he'd probably would have been on the box of Wheaties years ago. Maybe Americans are so jingoistic that we simply cannot give credit to a heavyweight champion that sounds like Margaret Thatcher. Is it his somewhat awkward and gangly style? Hey, not even his most ardent supporter will call him Willie Pep, but ask yourself this- what other 6'5, 245 pound heavyweight in the history of the game could do what he did on a consistent basis?

Again, I'm not saying he's a young Cassius Clay, but compare him to some of the other behemoths that have graced the canvas from Primo Carnera to Grant, and you'll see the Lewis is light years beyond anybody else with that kind of size. And you know what? It's effective and you can't argue with the results. Hey, I'd be the first to tell you he could bore you like PBS programming, but it's the results that count. Lewis is a classic example of substance over style.

So do I consider Lewis among the all-time elite? No. I simply can't overlook over his two losses to McCall and Rahman, one loss I can't excuse, but the second loss in South Africa to 'the Rock' shows that even in his prime he was more vulnerable in his prime than guys like Ali, Louis, Foreman, Holmes, Frazier, Marciano or even a Sonny Liston.

But I will say this, he makes a very strong argument for being right below that elite tier and based on his performances against his peers, it's clear that he is this past generations best big man.

And that makes him pretty damn good, if not an all-time great.