

The Fascination With Mike Tyson Has Always Mystified Me

Written by Frank Lotierzo
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He's back. That's right, Mike Tyson is back. Only this is "The New Mike Tyson." The new Mike Tyson has declared Bankruptcy, lives in a modest house in Arizona, and only has two cars. The new Mike Tyson talks to the boxing press and even shows up and works out for them as scheduled. The new Mike Tyson doesn't travel with a 200 person entourage, and his training camp has only one voice, that of trainer Freddie Roach. Ever since signing to fight British Heavyweight Danny Williams in Louisville, Kentucky, a new Mike Tyson has emerged. The fight with Williams marks Tyson's first fight in the last 17 months, and only his second in the last 25.

Most observers view the new Mike Tyson as a welcome change. However, there is one thing that the new Mike Tyson definitely shares with the old Mike Tyson. Fortunately the new Mike Tyson has the same draw and star power as the old Mike Tyson. It's amazing how Tyson is still the biggest name and star in professional boxing. Some may try and argue that Oscar De La Hoya is on par with Tyson in star power and draw. I say no way. Let's see De La Hoya eight years removed from the last time he held a piece of the title, at age 38, fighting a journeyman and it be a PPV event.

How's this for proof of Tyson's Rock Star following. ESPN, the all sports cable network, has devoted daily features on Tyson since Sunday, six days before the fight. Some of the segments have been up to a full half hour. ESPN hardly ever covers the sport of boxing. In fact, ESPN's boxing coverage is so scarce, it doesn't even cover or promote the fights it airs weekly on sister station ESPN 2. Yet ESPN has dedicated almost an entire week to Tyson.

The rage over Tyson has always escaped me -- until I finally figured out that a lot of Tyson fans aren't boxing fans. They are simply Tyson fans. Following him and his career is the extent of their boxing reference and knowledge. Like with anything else, having the ability to crossover is the difference between those who are stars and those who are super-stars and legends. What makes Tyson special is that he draws people from all different walks of life to his fights.

I guess the fact that I'm a boxing purest makes it hard for me to comprehend the fuss over Tyson the fighter. I've always believed that who a fighter beat and how he fared versus the best fighters he faced spoke volumes about him. A careful review of Tyson's record clearly points out that the two best fighters he ever fought, Evander Holyfield and Lennox Lewis, both stopped him. Think about that, Tyson is 0-3 against the best fighters he ever fought. A strong case can be made that Tyson is more known for his losses than his wins. How many all time great fighters can that be said about?

Tyson was a fan favorite because he provided fans one thing they love to see when watching Heavyweight's fight -- knockouts. The caliber of the opponent didn't matter when Tyson fought, they just wanted to see him knock somebody out.

Another thing I never understood was the excuses many fans afforded Tyson when he lost. It was never what his opponent did to beat him, it was always because of what Tyson didn't do. In

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other words, only Tyson had any say in the outcome of the fight.

When reviewing Tyson's overall body of work, it looks impressive at first glance. He was the youngest Heavyweight Champ in history, and his record is made up of many early round knockouts. On the other hand, he is the youngest ex-Champ in Heavyweight history, and there are some names missing on his record of some of the better fighters of his era.

Three or four of his successful title defenses were against fighters that Larry Holmes stopped more than a couple years earlier. Yet when Tyson stopped those same fighters it was viewed as a monumental feat. Tyson also paid Lennox Lewis step aside money to clear the path for him to fight Bruce Seldon in 1996. Could anybody even fathom Ali paying George Foreman step aside money to clear the way for him to fight Henry Cooper? I'll answer that, Hell no. Ali could've never lived that down, yet Tyson does it and is provided excuses by his fans.

Evander Holyfield is the fighter of Tyson's era he is most measured against. When Tyson fought Holyfield the first time, Holyfield was coming off of the two worst fights of his career to date, yet he stopped Tyson. The Holyfield who stopped Tyson hadn't won a fight by stoppage in five years. In their rematch, Tyson was losing and feared being stopped for the second consecutive time by Holyfield. So he bit both of Holyfield's ears, later claiming retaliation for Holyfield head-butting him. Much to my amazement, there was a large faction of Tyson fans who actually bought his pitiful excuse.

Muhammad Ali lost the first time he fought his most bitter rival, Joe Frazier. Could anyone fathom Ali biting Frazier in their rematch because he was losing to him again? No way would Ali have had the excuses made for him by his fans that Tyson's followers made.

What Tyson did when he bit Holyfield was quit. To me, that's worse than being knocked out. By quitting, Tyson was admitting defeat and admitting that Holyfield was the better fighter. The fact that Tyson quit against Holyfield erases all doubt as to who was the greater fighter. However, many Tyson fans will try and argue that Tyson was the better fighter, which defies all reason and logic, not to mention objectivity.

Another question that jumps out when evaluating Tyson's record is, who is the best fighter he beat? The names Holmes and Spinks are impressive, but when Tyson beat them they were well past their prime, all that remained was their great name. How about the names Tucker and Ruddock? Yes, the two best fighters Mike Tyson beat in his career are Tony Tucker and Razor Ruddock. When Tyson defeated them they were both two big strong young Heavyweight's at the top of their game. However, neither of them will ever be considered great fighters by any respected historian. Tyson fans always bring up his unique combination of power and hand speed, which was better than any other puncher in Heavyweight history. That being acknowledged, it still only carried him past Tucker and Ruddock.

At age 20 Mike Tyson became the youngest Heavyweight Champ in history. What is overlooked is the fact that Tyson has not defeated a fighter who could even be considered outstanding since two days before he turned 25. On June 28th, 1991, Tyson decisioned Razor Ruddock over 12 rounds. Ruddock is the last top fighter he beat. I ask, how many other great

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Heavyweight Champions never beat a top fighter after age 24? The answer would be -- not one.

When grading Tyson on pure physical skill and talent, he ranks among the best ever. Tyson's physical ability has never been questioned by any skeptic or critic. What Tyson lacked was the toughness and confidence that the fighters considered the greatest of the greats had in abundance. Tyson has never got up off the canvas to pull a fight out. And it can easily be argued that when he confronted fighters who weren't scared or intimidated by him, he lost.

Throughout his entire 19 year pro career, Mike Tyson has been one of the biggest draws in history, right up there with Dempsey, Louis, and Ali. The problem is that some confuse being an attraction with greatness. Many among the Tyson faction have argued over the years that Tyson is the greatest Heavyweight Champ in history, or that he could've been. Those who voice that opinion couldn't be more wrong.

Forget about opinions and excuses, the fact is Mike Tyson lost miserably to the best fighters he ever fought. He never beat a top fighter after his 24th birthday, and quit in the biggest redemption fight of his career, his rematch with Evander Holyfield. Most great fighters have that one signature win that defines their career and solidifies their greatness. Mike Tyson doesn't. Maybe it's me, but I thought a fighter had to win the big fights in order to be considered great? Not lose them with a pocket full of excuses.

Look, this is not a hatchet job on Mike Tyson, but the facts are the facts. He was a great fighter in his prime, make no mistake about that. I have no problem saying he ranks among the top 15 greatest Heavyweight Champions to date. That being said, no way does he make my top ten. The draw of Mike Tyson has befuddled me since 1986. Tonight -- July 30th, 2004 -- he fights British Heavyweight Danny Williams. Williams represents Tyson's first fight in the last 17 months and only his second in the last 25. In his last title fight against Lennox Lewis back in June of 2002, Tyson wasn't in the fight after the second round and was stopped in the 8th. It's been 13 years since he last beat a top fighter, and he hasn't held a piece of the Heavyweight title in over 8 years. Yet at 38 years old and fighting a journeyman, Mike Tyson has once again dominated the boxing scene for the last week. The star and draw power of Mike Tyson is nothing short of astonishing.

Oh yes, the star and draw power of Mike Tyson totally mystifies me. It has since 1986, and I have no doubt it will continue too as long as he is still fighting.