

Heavyweight Greats Who would've defeated Lennox Lewis

Written by Frank Lotierzo
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When it comes to ranking fighters in the all-time pantheon of boxing, it usually breaks down into two categories. One is career accomplishments and longevity, and the other is head-to-head confrontation. Over the years I've had this debate with many friends, fans, and Boxing/Sports writers. I would say that a majority of the time most favor longevity and accomplishment over who would've actually won in an actual head-to-head confrontation. That is probably the fairest way to rank fighters, but I think debating who would beat who is the more fun and compelling discussion. And at the very least, everyone has a strong opinion on whatever side they come down on.

In this column, I'll match former heavyweight champ Lennox Lewis versus six past heavyweight greats (From Joe Louis to present) who I think would've defeated him if they faced each other on their best nights. Some of the fighters I pick to beat Lewis didn't have quite as accomplished a career as he did, but this is based on head-to-head, who I think would've won prime vs. prime. I won't get bogged down in arguing this guy beat that guy, and that guy lost to so and so. It's not objective or fair to take fighter A from his best fight, and compare him to fighter B in his worst fight to make your case. The only time I'll bring up a certain fighter that one or the other faced is to make a style correlation.

When I rate heavyweights, I go from Joe Louis on. Personally, I don't feel comfortable rating fighters pre Joe Louis. I consider Louis the beginning of the modern era. There are plenty of films and tapes of the pre-Louis heavyweights, but I don't feel comfortable forming an opinion based off of those grainy and choppy films that are missing several frames. For all I know James Jeffries could've beaten Muhammad Ali, Jack Dempsey, and Lennox Lewis all on the same night, one after the other. Or, Jeffries may have lost to Michael Dokes and Tim Witherspoon. I just don't feel justified ranking fighters from 100 years ago that I never saw for more than a five minute highlight clip. Some have no problem going off of those old films and forming strong opinions, I do. Starting around the Louis era the film and audio quality improved tremendously. There is plenty of good film available on the fighters from Louis forward, and I feel that it's more than adequate to get a good feel for them regarding their overall ability and greatness.

Below, I've matched recently retired heavyweight champion Lennox Lewis with six past great champions from 1937 on, based on who I would pick to beat him. In this hypothetical, I'm matching them based off of their perceived prime and best showing. Remember, I'm not as blown away by the size of Lewis, or today's heavyweights as much as some are. On top of that, Lewis fought like a smaller man when he faced a tough fighter, or a big puncher a majority of the time. I think Lewis' size may actually work against him versus some of heavyweight histories past greats. The fighters below are the past champs who I think would've defeated Lewis if both were at their best in chronological order.

Joe Louis 1937-41 vs. Lennox Lewis 1997-2002

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In a Louis vs. Lewis clash, I see Lennox's jab keeping Joe at bay for a short time. However, Joe is too fast and sharp of a puncher not to get inside and hit Lennox on the chin. Once Joe was on the inside, he'd work Lennox's body with crisp left-hooks. Once Joe is in close, it's just a matter of time. Lennox is such a huge target, I can't see him eluding the Louis assault. No way he stands up to Joe's power. Maybe early on Lewis might catch Joe, but I doubt he'd fight aggressively facing a fighter with the two handed power and speed of Joe Louis. In a Louis-Lewis match up, I think Lennox's size advantage would actually work against him. Looking over the career of Joe Louis, you'll find that he fought the best against the bigger opponents he faced, and literally dismantled them. Louis fought three men on five different occasions who were over 6'4" and weighed over 240 pounds and knocked them all out. No doubt Lennox Lewis was better than those big heavies that Louis fought, but the point is Joe Louis feasted on the big boys. I think Joe beats Lennox to the punch and freezes him in his tracks, and then goes in and finishes him.

Louis stops Lewis

Sonny Liston 1958-62 vs. Lennox Lewis 1997-2002

This is a very intriguing match up. Liston had the jab, reach, and power to more than offset Lewis. These two fighters are close in power and speed, but Liston had the better jab and hook. Lewis had the better straight right and their uppercuts are probably a wash. Liston was the better and more aggressive boxer. Sonny would've pushed the fight with his jab making Lewis back up. Again, I see Lewis being cautious versus Liston like he was with Tua. Only Liston had more weapons than Tua and was more dangerous. Liston also had a much better chin than Lewis, and was only counted out vs Leotis Martin, (He wasn't knocked out vs Ali in 1965, he was on his feet when the fight was halted) when he was probably 40 years old. Liston stood up to the bombs of Cleveland Williams twice when both were in their prime, and never flinched. I'm more confident that Liston could have stood up to Lewis' best than I am Lewis holding up under Liston's best.

Liston stops Lewis

Muhammad Ali 1964-67, 1970-75 vs. Lennox Lewis 1997-2002

In an Ali-Lewis hypothetical fight, I don't see Lennox presenting many problems for Ali. Lewis was too big, too cautious and slow to bother Ali. Plus, Lennox is a huge target for Ali's accurate combinations. Ali could pick his spots to go in and out, or stop and plant when he wanted. Ali would take Lewis to school and give him a complete boxing lesson. He was just too fast and good of a mover and boxer for Lewis. Another advantage Ali had was better stamina, and the ability to fight at a brisk pace from bell-to-bell when he was in top shape and focused. Ali was more vulnerable to smaller quick fighters like Jones, Young, and Ellis. How would Lewis win? He can't out box Ali, and he didn't punch good enough to get him out with one shot. Lewis' bread & butter punch was his right hand, Ali was vulnerable to the left-hook. He was never dropped by a right hand. Only Shavers really rocked Ali with big rights, and that was in late 1977 when he was almost 36 and shot. Lewis' only shot is to catch Ali with a big straight right hand at center ring and KO him, not a likely scenario. I can't see Lennox's right hand being any

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more dangerous to Ali than the hook of Liston and Frazier or any power punch in Foreman's arsenal. Even an old slow Ali ate plenty of rights from Shavers and didn't go down. I just don't see Lewis ever stopping Ali, which is the only way he could've won. Considering the fact that Ali had one of the greatest chin's in heavyweight history, it's virtually impossible for me to envision Lewis ever knocking him out. Lewis just doesn't have enough in his overall arsenal to beat a peak and focused Ali. Ali had it all over Lewis both mentally and physically.

Ali wins a one sided unanimous decision or stops a tired and beaten Lewis late in the fight.

George Foreman 1972-74 vs. Lennox Lewis 1997-2002

This fight has been discussed a lot recently. In a Foreman-Lewis fight, I see Foreman stopping Lewis. Lewis may be the better boxer, but versus Foreman it would never be a factor. It's even debatable that Lewis had the edge in hand speed over a 1970's Foreman. Foreman would've charged out of his corner and taken the fight right to Lewis. Lennox would be forced to fight, which would lead to his downfall. He doesn't have the punch or chin to hang with Foreman. Lennox could no way trade with Foreman, and he wasn't a good enough boxer to stay away from him. Lewis isn't even the bigger man. Lewis in his prime was in the 230's to mid 240's. Foreman was between 217 and 232 in the 1970's. He weighed 217 for Frazier and 232 for Lyle. Do you really think Foreman is the smaller man when he's only spotting 10-15 pounds to Lewis? I don't. Foreman is only two inches shorter, but he is the overall bigger and stronger man. He also had the superior chin. Foreman was the better puncher with either hand, and there is no doubt about who was tougher. Foreman was super tough mentally, something that is often overlooked by many. I just don't believe Lewis had anything to deter Foreman with. Lewis' only shot would be to get Foreman deep into the fight and tire him out. However, Lewis doesn't have the chin or the toughness to hold Foreman off to be around late in the fight. And don't buy that smoke that Foreman blows that Lewis is the greatest ever. Foreman is a huckster and a salesman who is just selling you his humble image. I know many who know Foreman personally, and I have been told by them that no way Foreman thinks Lewis is the greatest. In fact Foreman always says that Joe Louis is the greatest heavyweight champ ever. Joe Frazier is the greatest heavyweight champ under 6 feet tall, and Muhammad Ali is the greatest man to ever box.

Foreman goes through Lewis and stops him.

Larry Holmes 1978-82 vs. Lennox Lewis 1997-2002

This is another intriguing match up. Again, I don't know how Lewis wins. Holmes was the faster and better boxer with a much better chin and stamina. No way Lewis could match or offset Holmes' jab. Holmes also had better legs. This is another fight in which Lewis' size would work against him. He's just too big for Holmes to miss. Like Ali, Holmes could pick his spots in the fight. Only Holmes would be more prone to trade with Lewis at center ring because he has the right hand power to get Lewis out. Holmes, like Ali may not have been a one punch banger, but their accuracy would enable them to hit Lewis more than he's ever been hit consecutively. I just don't think Lewis' chin holds up under a continued assault of sharp pin-point punches by

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Holmes. And lastly, Holmes has the chin and the heart to shake off a big Lewis right hand. On the other hand, once Holmes had Lewis in trouble, he'd get him out.

Holmes stops Lewis in the later rounds.

Evander Holyfield 1990-93 vs. Lennox Lewis 1997-2002

I know this will not go over well with some, but I just think the best Holyfield beats the best Lewis. Unlike most hypothetical fights, we did see Holyfield-Lewis twice. However, can anyone in their right mind say that Lewis fought the same Holyfield who fought Douglas, Foreman, Holmes, and Bowe twice. I don't think so. In their first fight, a poorly prepared and smug Holyfield showed up and was completely out thought and out fought. In the rematch a better prepared Holyfield lost 7-5 in rounds and 115-113 on points on my card. In this fight, both fighters were equally ready. Yet Lewis fought defensive and Holyfield pushed him around the ring. The only thing a less than prime Holyfield couldn't cope with was Lewis' reach. However, a Holyfield who is capable of fighting the whole round every round would overwhelm Lewis with a high volume of punches. It's impossible for Holyfield to win a decision when he is only capable of getting off in spurts, which was the case in 1999. In the two fights they had, Holyfield was never hurt or shook once. He only lost a close decision in the second fight when he was clearly past his peak. Since Lewis can't knock Holyfield out, I can't help but think that a Holyfield age 30 or younger could out work him and win a decision. In my opinion, Holyfield lost to Lewis in 1999 more because of what his own limitations kept him from doing, than what Lewis did. Lewis couldn't control a severely eroded version of Holyfield. Knowing that to be a fact, I don't think it's a reach suggesting that he loses to a peak Holyfield.

The best Holyfield decisions the best Lewis.

Below are two fighters who I would pick to beat Lewis if they fought each other at their absolute peak. However, I do not do it with the same conviction and impunity as I do with the above. The above listed fighters I would pick to defeat Lewis every time without reservation. Another words, If I had to, I'd bet everything I own that those former champs would beat Lewis in an actual confrontation. That is not the case with the fighters listed below. Although I would favor them to beat Lewis, I can easily envision a scenario where Lewis defeats them. In fact, in the below match ups, Lewis' size and reach give him the advantage from a style stand point.

Rocky Marciano 1952-55 vs. Lennox Lewis 1997-2002

I'll admit right at the start that Lewis has a huge advantage over Marciano from a style vantage point. Marciano never fought anyone like Lewis, but on the other hand, Lewis never fought a fighter as tough and determined as Marciano. The closest fighters Lewis ever fought to Marciano are Tua and Tyson. I think Marciano is better than both of them. To those who dispute that, your main argument is size and weight. What sways me is the fact that Tua lasted all 12 rounds with Lewis, and that was without having a clue on how to get inside and cut off the ring. Tyson took a beating after the first round with Lewis, and was happy doing so. I don't see Marciano following Lewis around the ring in a trance like Tua and just looking for one shot. I also don't see Marciano submitting to Lewis like Tyson did after one tough round. Marciano was

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better than Tua, and tougher than Tyson. Seeing Lewis being KO'd by McCall and Rahman with one punch, leads me to have no doubt that Marciano can knock Lewis out if he catches him. One thing is for sure, Marciano would never stop trying to get inside on Lewis. Lewis gets the nod over Marciano mainly based on size by most. The fact is Marciano was a better puncher with either hand than either McCall or Rahman, who both knocked Lewis dead. Denying this is plain and simple short sighted, and more of just focusing and being influenced by the size of today's heavyweights.

I would take Marciano over Lewis, but I wouldn't bet my life on it.

Joe Frazier 1969-71 vs. Lennox Lewis 1997-2002

Frazier versus Lewis has some similarities to Marciano versus Lewis. Only Frazier had faster hands than Rocky and cut the ring off better. Frazier also faced a better jab than Lewis had in all three fights with Ali. Lewis' jab may have been harder than Ali's, but it was no where near as fast or accurate, and he didn't throw as many. Frazier made Ali miss with plenty of jabs in all three of their fights. Just ask Ali and Angelo Dundee, they have both admitted so often in public. Ali has been quoted as saying that Frazier was much tougher to hit than people think. Frazier was also great at cutting the distance and getting inside. He would've been vulnerable to getting caught coming in with Lewis' right hand, a punch Joe was vulnerable to early in a fight. However, if Frazier can get through the first couple of rounds with Lewis, which I think he could've. I see him knocking Lewis out after beating on his body and then coming up top with the hook to the head. Frazier would get inside better than Tua and do damage, and he wouldn't fold after one tough round like Tyson. Frazier also has plenty of power in his hook to put Lewis to sleep for the count of 10.

I like Frazier over Lewis, but I can definitely see a scenario where Lewis wins. If Frazier is around after the second round, it's all down hill for Lewis.