

Revisiting Hagler-Leonard

Written by Frank Lotierzo

Monday, 06 September 2004 18:00

With the Hopkins-De La Hoya fight less than two weeks away, many have compared the similarities it shares with the Hagler-Leonard Super-Fight of 1987. It's been 17 years since Sugar Ray Leonard upset Marvin Hagler, winning a split decision as a 4-1 underdog. Like Leonard, De La Hoya is an underdog going in against Hopkins. For De La Hoya to score a Leonard type upset, he'll have to fight almost as brilliantly against Hopkins. I thought this would be a good time to look back at the Hagler-Leonard fight and how Leonard defied the odds makers.

Understanding an opponent's fighting style and identifying what he is vulnerable to provides a fighter a big advantage over his opponent. When Fighter-A can lure Fighter-B into fighting a fight that takes him away from what he does best, Fighter-A will most likely have his hands raised when the fight is over. That is exactly what happened on Monday April 6th, 1987, when undisputed Middleweight Champion Marvin Hagler defended his title against former Welterweight and Jr. Middleweight Champ Sugar Ray Leonard.

In my lifetime, with the exception of Joe Frazier in his first fight with Muhammad Ali, I can't recall another fighter being better prepared mentally and physically for his opponent than Ray Leonard was for Marvin Hagler. Leonard knew exactly what he had to do in order to make Hagler fight his fight. Leonard was so in tune with Hagler, it was as if he knew what he was thinking.

As an HBO commentator, Leonard did the color commentary for the Hagler-Duran bout in November of 1983. Leonard said it wasn't until Hagler defended his title against Roberto Duran that he saw a vulnerability in Hagler that he could exploit, but he kept it to himself. Leonard revealed after the fight that he noticed Hagler could be hit with lead rights, and that he wasn't nearly as formidable when he had to assume the role of the aggressor for the whole fight. Hagler was a counter-puncher who was at his best when his opponents moved to him. All you have to do to confirm this is look at Hagler' title defenses during his seven year reign as champion. Only two fighters went the distance with him, Roberto Duran and Ray Leonard. Ironically, they were the only two fights in which Hagler was forced to be the aggressor the whole fight.

What Leonard showed the boxing world in his fight with Hagler, was that Hagler wasn't that great at cutting off the ring. He tended to follow more than stepping in front of Leonard to block his escape route. The only time Hagler was able to corner or pin Leonard against the ropes was when he tired and started slowing down. By Leonard moving and using the ring, Hagler wasn't able to take advantage of his most significant advantage, his physical strength. Because Hagler had to constantly keep his feet moving in order to track Leonard down, he was never able to mount a sustained offense, especially in the early rounds. Leonard continually beat Hagler to the punch and was just about always a step ahead of Hagler, forcing him to reach and sometimes miss wildly.

Revisiting Hagler-Leonard

Written by Frank Lotierzo

Monday, 06 September 2004 18:00

Some have inferred that Leonard's punches were nothing but pitty-pat punches that lacked power. What amazes me about that is, Hagler had one of the best chins in history. If Leonard's punches had nothing on them, why didn't Hagler just walk through them so he could force Leonard to fight instead of Box? Another ridiculous statement made over the years is that Leonard should've fought Hagler like a man. In other words, Leonard should've nullified his own strengths and made it easy for Hagler.

Suggesting that Leonard should've fought Hagler like a man is one of the most ignorant statements I've ever heard about a fight or fighter. Maybe I'm wrong. I guess Ali should've fought Frazier and Foreman toe-to-toe like a real man. Looking back, maybe De La Hoya should have traded and slugged it out with Trinidad?

The style in which Leonard fought Hagler wasn't a surprise to any knowledgeable fight observer. It was the only style he could employ. On top of that, it was the style Leonard fought in every fight of his career, with the exception of his first fight with Duran. If Hagler was shocked by Leonard trying to keep the fight from becoming a slugfest, shame on him. Was there ever a doubt that Leonard was going to use the bigger ring that he demanded? Leonard knew the bigger ring enabled him to avoid the stationary type fight that Hagler was going to try and make him fight. In order for Leonard to score the upset, he knew that the less trading he did with the Hagler, the better his chances of winning.

As for Hagler, he knew that to win he had to make it a street fight. Cutting the ring off and not allowing Leonard to get in and out while fighting in spurts is what Hagler had to prevent. Both fighters knew what they had to do to win the fight. The deciding factor was Leonard was physically able to carry out his strategy, which prevented Hagler from executing his.

Another thing that was overlooked prior to the fight was that Leonard had a much better chin than given credit for, and Hagler wasn't the "catch and kill" knockout artist that he was perceived as being after his fight with Hearn. In order for Hagler to stop Leonard, he would have to catch him with a monstrous shot that froze Leonard to where he wasn't able to move or get away. Had Hagler hurt Leonard to that capacity, he probably could've finished him. The problem was Hagler was never able to land that bomb to incapacitate Leonard enough to finish him.

The bottom line is Sugar Ray Leonard out-fought and out-thought Marvin Hagler. He set the pace early by moving and boxing, using his greater hand and foot speed to its fullest advantage. In those first three or four rounds, Hagler couldn't get near him. Starting around the fifth round, Hagler began to get closer and scored as Leonard started to slow.

There is absolutely no doubt that Leonard was up 3-0 after three rounds. At best Hagler won 5 of the last 9 rounds. That makes it 7-5 Leonard or 115-113. On top of that, there was not a 2-point round in the fight. Although Hagler was the aggressor in the fight, he wasn't the effective aggressor. An effective aggressor is Frazier versus Ali in their first fight, or Duran versus Leonard in their first fight. Not Hagler versus Leonard.

Lastly, some have said that a reigning champ shouldn't lose his title on such a close decision.

Revisiting Hagler-Leonard

Written by Frank Lotierzo

Monday, 06 September 2004 18:00

The problem was, despite not having the title, Leonard was the star and bigger personality which neutralized Hagler being the champ. However, that had no bearing on the fight. Sugar Ray Leonard was just a little sharper and more effective than Marvin Hagler the night they fought. The only negative about the way Leonard fought against Hagler is from a few scorned Hagler fans. They're mad at Leonard because he didn't cooperate and make the fight easy for Hagler.

Give Ray Leonard all due credit for dictating the tempo and terms of the fight that took place inside the ring. The last time I checked, Hagler and Leonard were paid millions as professional boxers. There was no bonus check for street fighting. As two professional fighters at the highest level, Sugar Ray Leonard out boxed Marvin Hagler and won a very close, but clear decision.