

Superfight: Sugar Ray Leonard vs. Thomas Hearns

Written by Randy Gordon

Thursday, 16 September 2004 18:00

Your anniversary. Your wife's birthday. Valentine's Day. Your kid's birthday(s). These are dates you had best remember. Or, put another way, these are dates you had better not forget!

I have a thing for remembering dates. In my head, months and days are swirling around and around. With me, however, it's not just important, better-not-forget dates of my ever-expanding family. Roni's birthday. Shari, Traci and Ali's weddings. Andrew, Mel, Michael, David and Greer's birthday's. Anniversaries. With me, I remember boxing dates. You say a day of the month and I recall an important fight that happened on that date.

January 23. February 25. March 8. March 31. June 9. June 20. September 25. November 22.

Right now, I have September 16 on my mind. September 16, 1981, to be exact. September 16, 2004, is the 24th anniversary of one of the most exciting nights of boxing I have ever had the privilege of attending and, in this case, being a part of.

On September 16, 1981, in a makeshift arena that was the parking lot of Caesars Palace in Las Vegas, Nevada, "Superfight" took place. In one corner stood the swift-handed, fleet-footed, once-beaten WBC welterweight champion of the world. In the other corner stood the undefeated knockout artist, the WBA welterweight champion of the world. In an era that produced many highly-anticipated fights, this was perhaps the most highly-anticipated one of all.

Sugar Ray Leonard vs. Thomas "Hit Man" Hearns.

Leonard was 29-1, his only loss being the 15-round decision to Roberto Duran 15 months earlier. He eradicated that defeated less than 10 months earlier with perhaps the finest outing of his career, shutting out and stopping Duran in the eighth round of their title bout which is known as the "No Mas" fight. Just three months earlier, Leonard and Hearns had fought in Houston, Texas, but not against each other. They were the star attractions in a title doubleheader. If both won their bouts, they'd go on to face each other in one of the most anticipated matches in the history of boxing.

Hearns took his 31-0 record into the ring first. Twenty-nine of those victories had come by knockout. His opponent was the tough Pablo Baez. Hearns upheld his end of the promotion, putting Baez to sleep in the fourth round. He made it look easy. It was then Leonard's turn. He was in against WBA Jr. Middleweight champion Ayub Kalule and his 36-0 record, 18 of those wins coming by knockout.

The contest was competitive throughout the first eight rounds, with Leonard holding a slight edge. The promoters and their families were edgy. A mega-million dollar fight loomed if Leonard won. There were no talks of Hearns-Kalule. Suddenly, in the ninth round, Leonard broke through. His speed and power were unleashed in a blur against the Ugandan. In a

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heartbeat, the fight was over. Leonard had won. He was now the WBC Welterweight Champion and WBA Jr. Middleweight Champion.

“Superfight” would now happen. The date: September 16, 1981, at Caesars Palace in Las Vegas, Nevada.

I was then the Editor of Ring Magazine and a boxing analyst for ESPN. I was asked by promoter Dan Duva to serve as Statistical Analyst for close-circuit TV commentators Marv Albert, Dr. Ferdie Pacheco and the legendary Don Dunphy. My seat on fight night put me between Marv Albert and the ABC-TV crew of producer Alex Wallau (who is currently the head of ABC Sports) and the legendary Howard Cosell. It was a night I'll remember forever.

At the pre-fight production meeting in producer Mike Weisman's suite, Dr. Pacheco asked a question of Weisman. Before Weisman could answer, Dunphy chimed in with, “I'd appreciate it a lot if you'll keep your comments to a minimum, Ferdie. I find you talk more than you should during a fight. You abuse your role as a color analyst!” Silence fell upon the room. I looked at Pacheco. Albert looked at Pacheco. Weisman looked at Pacheco. Pacheco glared at the 70'ish Dunphy with fire in his eyes. Before “The Fight Doctor” could speak, or yell, or scream at Dunphy, a calming Albert hand on Pacheco's arm calmed him down. As we walked out of Weisman's suite, Pacheco was still fuming.

“That son of a bitch!” he muttered over and over. “That old son-of-a-bitch! The nerve of him! I think I'll talk throughout the fight!” Albert and I just looked at each other and rolled our eyes. Pacheco just kept muttering.

“That son of a bitch!

* * *

The fight card began late in the afternoon, somewhere around 4:00. Without the TV lights above the ring, it was nearly 115 degrees at ringside. The main event was still around four hours away.

I arrived shortly before the start of the first undercard fight, and was joined in the next half hour by Albert, then Pacheco, then Dunphy. Nowhere was it hotter than down at ringside by us. Ferdie had a big hello for both Albert and me. When Dunphy showed up with a “Hello boys, hot enough out here for you guys?” Pacheco merely nodded his head slightly. Ice would not have cooled off the tension between those two!

We did microphone and voice checks during the heavyweight prelim between prospect Guy “The Rock” Casale and veteran Bobby Halpern, a fight won by Casale on a TKO.

The ABC-TV crew of Howard Cosell and Alex Wallau showed up shortly after the arrival of our closed-circuit announcing team. Cosell, who drew one of the biggest ovations of the night from the still-filing-in-crowd, was dressed in one of ABC's cheap-but-colorful sport jackets, emblazoned with the ABC logo. In his mouth was one of the longest cigars I have ever seen.

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It was shortly before the start of the fight card that a honeymoon couple approached the ringside gate which separated the ringside ticket holders from the working press.

“Mr. Cosell, Mr. Cosell!” called the pretty, new, young wife. “Mr. Cosell, Mr. Cosell! She called, waving a fight program.

I tapped Cosell—who was wearing his headset while reading a local newspaper—on his right shoulder. He looked at me.

Howard, a young lady is frantically trying to get your attention. He turned to look at her. Then he turned to thank me. He stood up and walked towards the newlyweds.

I watched as he approached her.

“Mr. Cosell, Mr. Cosell. My husband and I are on our honeymoon. We’re big boxing fans and also big fans of yours. Could you please sign this program for us?”

“Of course, my dear. I’ll gladly sign it. What are your names?” She told him. He signed the front page of their program. Then he shook both of their hands and kissed the young bride on her cheek. The joy on her face was obvious and her smile was radiant as her husband took a photo of his new bride with the heavyweight champion of sportscasters.

As he walked back to his ringside seat, Cosell said, in a loud voice to the newlyweds, “This must be a bigger thrill than the honeymoon itself!”

Columnist Dick Young shook his head and said to Cosell, whom he was at verbal war with for years, “You’re an egotistical maniac, Howard!”

And you’re just a jealous bastard!” Cosell shot back.

* * *

We sat through the searing desert heat for several more hours and a few more undercard fights. Included was a knockout victory for teenage sensation Tony Ayala. Finally, it was time for the main event.

I took a thermometer which the TV production crew had given me and placed it on one of the ring’s turnbuckles. I left it there until it was time for Leonard and Hearns to make their respective ring walks.

Although the setting of the desert sun had “cooled” the arena to 92 degrees, the television lights had jacked the ringside temperature up by 35 degrees. Inside the ring, it was 127 degrees. Picture getting into your car on a summer day after it had been baking—windows up—in the sun for hours. Picture getting into that car and staying there in that heat for close to an hour. Now picture working out in the car! It was unthinkable that any two athletes could perform the way they did in such stifling, searing heat, the night of September 16, 1981.

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I looked around. The arena was packed. Flashes on cameras were going off all over the arena. Most fans were on their feet, waiting for the fighters. On my left, Howard Cosell was doing his stand-up open.

“HELLO AGAIN EVERYONE. THIS IS HOW/AHD COE/SELL.”

On my right were three sweating announcers on whom I was placing frozen bottles of water and mopping with towels provided by the hotel. I was wearing a suit and tie and could not have been wetter had I jumped in the pool at Caesars Palace. The judges were in place. The ring was clear, except for referee Davey Pearl and ring announcer Chuck Hull.

Then came the voice of Mike Weisman in our headsets.

“The fighters are on their way!”

[Read Part 2](#) as Randy Gordon provides his **Ringside account of Leonard-Hearns**