

Polarizing Fighters: Believing Isn't Seeing - Part 2

Written by Frank Lotierzo

Thursday, 06 January 2005 18:00

Yesterday - in [Part 1](#) - I looked at fighters who, due to their popularity and fan base, cause reality and perception to be blurred. Today I'll look at a few fights where the outcome has been over or understated as a result of an intense like or dislike for one of the fighters involved.

Spinks W-UD Holmes - First Fight: Right Decision

September 21 is a significant date in boxing history. It was on September 21, 1955 that heavyweight champion Rocky Marciano stopped light heavyweight champion Archie Moore in the ninth round. A few months after fighting Moore, Marciano retired as the only undefeated heavyweight champion in boxing history with a career record of 49-0 (43 KOs).

On September 21, 1985, thirty years to the day after Marciano-Moore, light heavyweight champion Michael Spinks won a 15 round unanimous decision over heavyweight champion Larry Holmes. With his victory over Holmes, Spinks became the first light heavyweight champion to defeat the reigning heavyweight champion. He also prevented Holmes, who entered the fight 48-0, from equaling one of boxing's most notable achievements.

In the eyes of some, including Holmes, he was robbed and deserved the decision. Yes, it was a close fight, but Holmes, like any other fighter, doesn't deserve a decision he didn't rightfully earn in the ring. And in his first fight with Michael Spinks, Holmes legitimately fell a little short. It's possible this fight may have come down to whoever won the fifteenth round won the fight. Being even after fourteen rounds was the absolute best case for Holmes, even if his relatives were scoring the bout. However, in the fifteenth round Holmes was tired and always a step behind Spinks, who beat him to the punch, scoring with some accurate flurries that clearly won him the round.

If Holmes wants to blame someone, he should look in the mirror. He fought a completely different style versus Spinks than in his previous 48 fights. Holmes thought because he was fighting a smaller fighter he could fight as the aggressor and go for the knockout instead of boxing him. Spinks proved Holmes picked the wrong night and the wrong opponent to change his style. Holmes was beaten to the punch and countered by Spinks throughout the fight. Although Spinks never hurt Holmes, he made him miss many of his punches, making him appear unsure on how to attack. Something he never experienced before in his career.

The bottom line is Michael Spinks outthought and outfought Larry Holmes - who at age 35 was not at his best - in their first fight. Again, a close fight, but definitely a Spinks win. Seven months later Holmes and Spinks fought again. Spinks won a split decision that really was an outright robbery. Holmes should have made history regaining the title. In their rematch, Holmes defeated Spinks more convincingly than Spinks beat him in their first fight.

Leonard W-SD Hagler: Right Decision

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In one of the biggest and most anticipated non-heavyweight fights in history, Sugar Ray Leonard came out of retirement to challenge undisputed middleweight champion Marvin Hagler. Leonard had only fought once in the previous five years due to a detached retina and was a 4-1 underdog the night he fought Hagler. Hagler was the undisputed middleweight champ for the past seven years and hadn't lost a fight in the last eleven. Although Hagler was the reigning champ, Leonard being the bigger star and presence made the title secondary. Throughout most of Hagler's career he was overshadowed by Sugar Ray Leonard, and he wanted to fight Leonard before he retired.

Before consenting to the fight, Leonard made Hagler agree to a 12 round distance instead of 15 rounds, and a 20 foot ring instead of an 18 foot ring. Could there be any doubt Leonard wanted Hagler to have to cover the most distance in the shortest time allotted to catch him? There is simply no excuse for Hagler being surprised by Leonard's fighting tactics or not being fully prepared for him moving and trying to use the ring. Forget the pre-fight concessions Hagler made. Hagler must have been so confident of beating Leonard that he didn't think less rounds and a bigger ring would matter.

The boxing fans who dislike Leonard always talk about what he didn't do, but they never mention what Hagler did. Hagler just happened to do slightly less than Leonard. Leonard haters constantly say his punches were nothing more than pity pat slaps. I don't see it that way, but for argument sake I'll accept that as reality for the moment. Marvin Hagler took a punch as good as any fighter I have seen. In 67 fights I never saw Hagler remotely close to being hurt. Murderous punchers like Cyclone Hart, Thomas Hearns and John Mugabi were able to find his chin during their fights with him, and nothing happened. If Leonard's punches were nothing more than pity pat slaps, why didn't Hagler just walk through them in order to get to Leonard and force him to fight? The reason is Leonard's punches had enough on them to earn Hagler's respect and to keep him from taking big risks in the most important fight of his career.

The Hagler-Leonard bout was a close fight. But a fight that ends in a close decision can still be a clean win for one fighter. I have respect for both fighters and consider them all-time greats. I was kind of pulling for Hagler because I thought a loss would hurt his career more than it would Leonard's. So I tried to con myself that Hagler won, but couldn't do it. In a simple recap of the fight, Leonard clearly and without question won no less than three of the first four rounds. And in all probability, he probably took the first four. The fact is Hagler couldn't do anything until Leonard started to slow down. Plus Hagler did a terrible job cutting off the ring. He basically followed Leonard instead of staying in front of him. After the third round Leonard was up 3-0, at the least, with nine rounds left. I don't care if you are Marvin Hagler's twin brother, there's no way he won six of the last nine rounds. The absolute best scenario is Hagler won five of the last nine rounds, which would make the fight 7-5 or 115-113 Leonard.

The other thing generally overlooked is Leonard's rounds were more clear-cut than Hagler's. There were only a few rounds where Hagler took it to Leonard. And there were times during the ninth, tenth and eleventh rounds that Hagler had Leonard pinned against the ropes and landed some big punches, yet Leonard was never close to being in trouble. Remember, it was Hagler who was the presumed puncher in this fight. If he didn't dominate Leonard when he was stationary and right in front of him, how did he better him when Leonard wasn't cornered or

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against the ropes?

I know it hurts some Leonard haters, but against Hagler, Sugar Ray Leonard won the boxing match he planned and Marvin Hagler never made the bout the fight he wanted it to become. Leonard beat Hagler in a very close fight the night they fought. Did he prove he was the better fighter? Only on that night.

Trinidad W-MD De La Hoya: Wrong Decision

The welterweight unification bout between champions Sugar Ray Leonard and Thomas "The Hitman" Hearns took place on September 16, 1981. The Showdown, as it was called, was the biggest and most anticipated welterweight title bout in boxing history. Today it is regarded as a classic between two all-time great fighters in their prime.

Eighteen years later, champions Oscar De La Hoya and Felix Trinidad met for the undisputed welterweight title on September 18, 1999. The De La Hoya-Trinidad unification bout is only eclipsed by Leonard-Hearns in terms of the coverage and hype surrounding a welterweight championship fight. Unlike Leonard-Hearns, which exceeded expectation as a great fight, De La Hoya-Trinidad was nothing close to a great fight and didn't live up to expectation. Another contrast between these two historic fights is De La Hoya-Trinidad ended in controversy, something that cannot be said about Leonard-Hearns.

The most memorable thing about the fight was the decision in favor of Trinidad. Like most close De La Hoya bouts that go to the judges, the media and fans are split as to who won. Those who like De La Hoya can't see how he didn't get the decision, and those who disdain him think Trinidad won going away. This was another big fight where there wasn't much speculation on what each fighter had to do to win. De La Hoya had to use the ring and box, while avoiding toe-to-toe exchanges if possible. For Trinidad it was simple - keep De La Hoya in front of him and take away his space and force him to fight.

The way the fight unfolded, it was obvious that Trinidad missed the segment authored by Joe Frazier and Roberto Duran on how to cut off the ring, in the tape they should produce titled "How To Force A Mover/Boxer To Fight." Trinidad followed De La Hoya instead of getting in front of him, which allowed Oscar the room he needed to box. During the first nine rounds De La Hoya did exactly what he wanted. He moved and kept Felix from getting set to punch, which was key. Trinidad, despite always forcing the fight and applying pressure, he has to have his feet set to punch with power. By Trinidad following instead of taking away De La Hoya's escape routes, he was vulnerable for his quick offensive scoring spurts during rounds one through nine.

I'm tired of hearing some fans/writers/commentators say Fighter X ran and only threw pity pat punches. Go back and review every fight where that was said afterwards. I'll bet anything that it was widely assumed that the fighter who is accused of running was thought to have no chance if he fought stationary and traded. And just as Hagler had to know with Leonard, Trinidad had to know De La Hoya wasn't going to make it easy for him by taking him on at center ring and trading.

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After ten rounds De La Hoya had to be up 7-3 in rounds at the worst. During the last two rounds De La Hoya did all he could not have to fight Trinidad. However, while De La Hoya was running and not fighting, what did Trinidad do? He didn't stagger De La Hoya or hurt him. De La Hoya at least fought the fight he planned on fighting and Trinidad didn't make him fight his fight.

During the first nine rounds De La Hoya beat Trinidad to the punch and won many of the exchanges, sometimes making Trinidad miss badly. No, he didn't shake him or put him down, but he scored with clean punches and combinations. In Boxing 101 it says if Fighter A is scoring with clean punches and Fighter B is only moving forward but not landing, the round goes to the Fighter A. Landing punches, even if they are not damaging blows, counts more than not landing or missing. Just because a fighter is moving forward, it doesn't automatically mean he's the effective aggressor. Effective aggression is how Frazier fought Ali all three times or how Duran fought Leonard in their first fight.

Oscar De La Hoya out-boxed Felix Trinidad when they fought. He won the fight 7-5 or 115-113. The simple fact is Trinidad didn't make De La Hoya fight. Trinidad didn't become effective moving forward until De La Hoya tried to sit on what should've been a significant lead. De La Hoya looked bad fighting not to lose during the last three rounds, but he absolutely won more rounds than Trinidad.

Against Felix Trinidad, Oscar De La Hoya was able to box and keep the bout from turning into a fight. While Trinidad wanted it to be a fight, he was unable to make it one. And that's why De La Hoya won. Notice that I didn't say he proved he was the better fighter. But he was a little better the night they fought. In Trinidad's defense, I think getting down to 147 affected him and possibly prevented him from being at his best. At 147 De La Hoya had the advantage, but I doubt I'd bet on him fighting Trinidad above 147.

Lewis W-6 TKO Klitschko: Legitimate Lewis Win, No Controversy

The 2003 heavyweight title fight between champion Lennox Lewis and top challenger Vitali Klitschko is the most recent bout where fan bias has completely blinded some boxing fans. Lewis retained his title when the fight was stopped after the sixth round due to a terrible eye cut suffered by Klitschko during the fight. Countless championship fights have ended under the exact same circumstances throughout boxing history. However, because Klitschko was leading 58-56 or 4-2 on all three judges' cards when the fight ended, many Klitschko fans assume that he was on his way to certain victory. How scary is that? I would be willing to bet many title fights were won by the fighter who was slightly behind at the halfway point in the fight.

When fighters climb through the ropes, their intent is to hit and incapacitate or injure their opponent resulting in a stoppage win. Maybe I missed it, but I don't believe Vitali Klitschko enter the ring with a cut eye when he challenged Lennox Lewis. Klitschko's cut was the result of a punch landed by Lewis. End of story. I'll bet Thomas Hearns' wishes the cut he opened over Marvin Hagler's eye in their 1985 war was a little more severe and led to the fight being stopped.

That's boxing!

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The fact that Klitschko was ahead in the fight means nothing when all is said and done. What matters is he couldn't finish the fight because of the damage done by Lewis' gloved fist. Tell me about the scoring if the fight goes to the distance. Meldrick Taylor was two seconds away from beating Chavez when he was stopped. What could have been a Hall of Fame career ended right then and there. "Big" John Tate was less than a minute away from a showdown with WBC champ Larry Holmes. In his title defense against Mike Weaver, Tate won almost every minute of the fight. Unfortunately, Weaver landed a big left hook in the last minute of the fifteenth round that won him the title and ruined Tate's career.

That's boxing too!

Sure, Klitschko won more of the six rounds he and Lewis fought. But does that prove he was the better fighter or that he wins if the fight continues? If I need to answer that, you ended up at the wrong website. This is boxing, better than Google hunting and fishing. Ask yourself two questions. (1) Who prepares for a fight with more urgency, a fighter who has yet to fight for a world title, but is on the verge of fighting for it, or a fighter who has held a piece of the title for the better part of ten years, not to mention contemplating retirement after scoring what he believes is the victory that solidifies his legacy? Google is just a click away if you're unsure. (2) Who would you as a fighter rather be? The fighter who was down two points half way through the fight, but won because a punch you landed injured your opponent and he couldn't continue, resulting in you winning the bout? Or the fighter who was leading halfway through, but lost because your opponent landed a punch that resulted in you not being able to continue? I know what line I'd be in: that long one. Wonder how many Klitschko fans would say he wasn't the champ if he won the title in the exact fashion he lost the fight.

Instead of some fans beating the "what if" to death, how about asking how Klitschko could hit Lewis with more power punches than any other fighter ever did in his career, and still couldn't drop him, let alone knock him out. It's not like Lewis has never been knocked out in his career. And this was a fight in which Lewis weighed a career high and obviously underestimated Klitschko and overestimated himself. The names McCall and Rahman indicate that Klitschko wasn't the first fighter Lewis ever played cheap.

If some fans want to say Lewis didn't prove he was the better fighter during the bout - not that Klitschko did - that's a fair point. However, don't even joke that Lewis' victory over Klitschko is the least bit tainted, because it's not. On June 21, 2003, Lewis stopped Klitschko by TKO in the sixth. Again, a punch thrown by Lewis is the reason why Klitschko couldn't continue and the fight had to be stopped. Lewis won. End of Story!

There is nothing in sports or much else better than a great fight. True boxing fans are a rare breed. Most follow it intently and are loyal almost to a fault regarding some of their favorite fighters. But I would just once love to hear an Ali fan admit that he was flawed as a pure boxer, or a Tyson fan admit that Holyfield was more eroded and washed up when they fought. How about a Roy Jones fan considering that maybe his chin is suspect, because nothing else makes sense regarding how his last two fights ended.

Does it really hurt a Hagler fan to admit that Leonard was a little sharper when they fought? Is a

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De La Hoya-hater so blinded by his dislike that he can't see Oscar fought the fight he wanted against Trinidad and in return Trinidad didn't? And I would just love to hear one Vitali Klitschko fan either admit Lewis won, or say if Vitali won the way Lewis did, they wouldn't consider him the champ.