

## What IF: Sonny Liston vs. Mike Tyson

Written by Frank Lotierzo

Wednesday, 19 January 2005 18:00

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What IF former heavyweight champions Sonny Liston and Mike Tyson faced each other on their best night? Imagine Liston and Tyson staring each other down seconds before the first round. Other than possibly former heavyweight champ George Foreman, Liston and Tyson were the masters at psyching out their opponents before the fight. Ironically, it was Liston's lead that Foreman and Tyson both emulated when it came to playing the intimidation game.

In recent years Sonny Liston and Mike Tyson have often been compared to each other. They both were tremendous two-handed punchers, and both demonstrated a sturdy chin. They also had their share of run-ins with the law, and both served time in prison. It seemed the safest place for them was in the ring, with its legalized mayhem. However, there were also several differences in how they were brought along and how they were perceived by the public.

The fanfare was night and day different for Liston and Tyson when they turned pro. Liston didn't have the PR machine behind him that Tyson had. In fact, Liston was the anti-Tyson of his era. Liston had to fight all the top fighters of his era one by one before finally getting a shot at heavyweight champ Floyd Patterson, and the title shot was still three years overdue. Whereas Tyson had an image manufactured by millionaires and marketing companies. Tyson could pick and choose opponents he could look impressive beating. Thus, the Tyson marketing machine had him in position to fight for the title a little over a year and a half after he turned pro.

Sonny Liston fought at a time when fighters could fight every month and still not garner much exposure. Tyson had the benefit of having HBO and Don King promote and show all of his fights shortly before he won the title, and then during his title tenure. Liston's career was handled by the mob. When Liston was coming up - and even after he reached the top - the media and the fans were hoping he'd lose. On the other hand, Tyson was the crowd's darling just about his entire career. Tyson was always hyped to be bigger than life, whereas Liston was just feared because of what he did to the top heavyweights of his era.

Charles "Sonny" Liston took up boxing in prison. When Liston was paroled in 1952 after an armed robbery conviction, he started fighting competitively as an amateur. In 1953 he won the National Golden Gloves. Sonny turned pro in late 1953 and won his first 7 fights before losing a decision to Marty Marshall in his 8th fight, a fight in which he suffered a broken jaw. Liston would go on to fight Marshall two more times, stopping him and decisioning him. After doing a couple more prison stints over the next few years, Liston was the top-ranked and most feared heavyweight in the world by 1958.

For the next four years Liston was avoided by heavyweight champ Floyd Patterson. During that time Liston was going through all the top heavyweights - opponents who Patterson's management team had kept their fighter away from. After Liston chased Patterson for over three years, they finally met in September of 1962. After two minutes of the first round Liston did to Patterson what many thought was inevitable - he destroyed him and took his title. Ten

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months later Liston defended the title against Patterson and needed only two more seconds to repeat his title winning effort.

Seven months later Sonny would lose the title to Cassius Clay as a 7-1 favorite when he didn't emerge from his corner for the seventh round. In the rematch 15 months later, Clay - who had changed his name to Muhammad Ali - defeated Liston, stopping him in the first round of a bizarre fight. A fight in which Liston never was given a count, yet was declared a knockout loser?

After losing to Ali, Liston would fight for five more years, going 15-1 (14). His lone loss would be a KO defeat to contender Leotis Martin in his next to last fight. Seven months after defeating Chuck Wepner in his final fight, Liston was found dead in his Las Vegas home due to a drug overdose. The two defeats by Muhammad Ali tarnished Liston's legacy forever as an all-time great heavyweight champ. However, his skill and fighting ability will never be in question.

Mike Tyson's path into boxing was similar to Liston and many other fighters who went on to become champions. He was a troubled youth who found his way into trouble by hanging out and fighting in the streets. Like Liston and Foreman before him, Tyson was a man-child who had no trouble bettering grown men in street fights as a young teenager. Tyson was eventually brought to legendary trainer Cus D' Amato to be evaluated as a fighter. D' Amato was best known for managing and training former heavyweight champ Floyd Patterson. Under the tutelage of D' Amato, Patterson became the youngest champ in heavyweight history at 21.

Although D' Amato died a year before it happened, 30 years later Tyson captured the title at age 20, eclipsing Patterson's record.

After losing in the finals of the 1984 Olympic trials to Henry Tillman twice, Tyson turned pro in March of 1985. Tyson blew through the heavyweight division, demonstrating a combination of speed and punching power never seen before. On November 22nd, 1986, Tyson became the youngest heavyweight champ in history when he stopped WBC Champion Trevor Berbick in two rounds. Nine months after beating Berbick, Tyson became the unified champ when he won a 12 round decision over IBF Champion Tony Tucker. After making six defenses of the unified title, Tyson was upset by 42-1 underdog Buster Douglas in Tokyo Japan. When Douglas knocked out Tyson in the 10th round in February of 1990, he forever shattered the aura of invincibility that surrounded Tyson.

After the loss to Douglas, Tyson had his ups and downs in and out of the ring. Out of the ring he was convicted of rape and spent three years in prison from 1992-95. When Tyson was released from prison he returned to the ring and captured the WBA and WBC titles a little over a year later. In his first defense of the WBA/WBC titles, he was stopped by long time rival Evander Holyfield in 11 rounds. In the rematch seven months later, Tyson would lose to Holyfield via disqualification when he bit both of Holyfield's ears. Tyson said after the fight that he bit Holyfield's ears in retaliation for Holyfield head-butting him during the fight. After losing to Holyfield, Tyson would challenge for the heavyweight title once more. In June of 2002 Tyson was stopped by heavyweight champ Lennox Lewis in eight rounds. Since losing to Lewis, Tyson has been a non-factor in the heavyweight title picture.

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### The Style Match up

A Liston-Tyson confrontation is fascinating from a style vantage point. Both Liston and Tyson sought the knockout exclusively to win their fights. They both had to be moving forward to be most effective, although it was less of an issue for Liston. Liston moved forward behind a ram-rod, left jab. Tyson moved in with his hands held up to his chin with side-to-side head movement. Liston fought at a more measured pace, looking to set everything up off of his powerful jab. Tyson fought in spurts. Sometimes he would rush in behind a two handed assault, and other times he would work his way in underneath his opponent's jab.

Both Liston and Tyson had knockout power in both hands. Their power was pretty close, but the difference was Tyson had the faster hands and was a little more accurate with his punch placement. However, Liston had the better inside-outside game. Tyson had to be on his opponent's chest to be effective. On the other hand, Liston could neutralize movers and boxers with his jab and reach. Liston was also effective inside throwing short hooks and uppercuts. Although they were both considered sluggers, both Sonny and Mike were better boxers than generally given credit for by most writers and fans.

It's safe to say that neither fighter faced a fighter like the other. The closest fighter Liston fought to Tyson was Floyd Patterson. Although Patterson wasn't as big or powerful as Tyson, he did have the speed and fought out of the peek-a-boo style like Tyson, and was least effective when forced back, like Tyson. On the other hand, the only fighter Tyson fought who was somewhat close to Liston was Lennox Lewis. Both Lewis and Liston could fight at a distance or inside. Lewis was bigger than Liston, but wasn't as tough mentally and didn't have a jab in quite the same league as Liston's. As far as styles go, Liston was vulnerable to fast-footed boxers with lateral movement, and was at his best if his opponents came to him, which not too many tried. Tyson was most effective versus fighters that moved away or ran from him, but was at a disadvantage when facing a fighter who could force him back.

### Who Would've Won

A Liston-Tyson confrontation comes down to two things: who would've backed up, and who would've been the least intimidated by the other. I know this may not be popular, but I just can't envision Liston being intimidated by Tyson. Liston had no fear of Clay/Ali, and on top of that he kept going after a hard puncher like Cleveland Williams, who was in his prime at the time, even after having been nailed by bombs from Williams. Liston also chased down Marty Marshall despite having a broken jaw for the majority of the fight. This is in contrast to Tyson, who would go into long defensive shells and stop throwing punches when faced with an opponent who attacked him with big shots. I believe in a battle of wills, Sonny convinces Mike that he's not going to win easier than Mike convinces Sonny that it's not his night.

The fact that I think Liston wins the psychological warfare translates into the physical fight and how it plays out. I think Tyson may try to jump on Liston like he did Holyfield and Lewis at the onset. The first round or two would be incredible. Tyson would probably come on very quickly, almost recklessly, and his movement and fast hands might provide him with a measure of success. But then he'd face his first problem, Liston wouldn't fall. And, of course, Liston always fired back.

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All it would take would be a few of those telephone pole jabs to take all the starch out of Tyson mentally. I also doubt he'd have the nerve to pull any ear-biting, arm-breaking crap with Liston. Once Tyson gets second thoughts about coming in with impunity and starts to think his way through the fight, he's in trouble. The moment Liston senses that Tyson has some reservations, he'd pick up the pace and apply even more mental and physical pressure.

The way I see it, Liston stops Tyson. He had the jab reach and power, along with the style, to neutralize Tyson and his greater hand speed. On top of that, Sonny takes away Tyson's biggest weapon, the intimidation factor. It says here that Tyson is the one who harbors self-doubt, and it is Tyson who would be unsure of himself during the stare down as he faced Liston in the center of the ring before the bell for round one.