

Brains Count in Boxing: Praise Where It's Due

Written by Frank Lotierzo
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Sometimes when watching a fight and hearing what the commentators say, or listening to statements made by a few of the ringside press, I have to bite my lip. The urge to yell at the TV or challenge my colleague's remark is very hard for me to ignore. Something you'd fully understand if you knew me personally.

The biggest and most anticipated fight last year was the undisputed middleweight championship bout between champion Bernard Hopkins and challenger Oscar De La Hoya. Leading up to the fight, the thought shared by most was that De La Hoya was going to move and try to box Hopkins. This meant Hopkins would have to track De La Hoya down in order to take advantage of his physical advantages being that he was the bigger and stronger fighter.

Everybody, I included, turned out to be wrong about how the fight unfolded, at least for the first seven rounds. Hopkins went on to win the fight by stopping De La Hoya with a left hook to the body in the ninth round. However, during the fight it was often repeated how Oscar De La Hoya had fooled the boxing community and stayed right in front of Hopkins and fought him, instead of moving away and trying to box him. Since the fight, whenever Hopkins De La Hoya is discussed, it's usually mentioned how De La Hoya stood his ground and was fearless against Hopkins.

However, that is a very misleading statement. I just have one question for those who say Oscar De La Hoya didn't move away or run from Hopkins. Did you even see the fight? Saying De La Hoya didn't run from Hopkins is as off the mark as saying Muhammad Ali defeated George Foreman because he outboxed him. When in reality what Ali did was out tough Foreman, since he was too strong to box. At least according to Ali.

Why would De La Hoya have to run or step back and away from Hopkins?

Maybe I saw a different fight, but for the first seven rounds Hopkins didn't even pressure or move toward De La Hoya once. If he did, I must have missed it. Before the fight Hopkins told everyone that he was going to fight a "catch and kill" style fight against De La Hoya, stressing he would accomplish against De La Hoya what former middleweight champ Marvin Hagler was unable to against Sugar Ray Leonard 17 years prior - and that was make De La Hoya have to fight. As it turned out, it was Hopkins who fooled everybody, not De La Hoya.

Since De La Hoya wasn't being chased or pursued, why would he have to move away from a fighter who literally made no attempt to go after him? Actually, if De La Hoya didn't go to Hopkins there would not have been much of a fight for at least the first six or seven rounds. The reality is De La Hoya didn't move away from Hopkins because he wasn't forced to.

It's amazing how sometimes a fighter will get credit for things during a fight in which he had no control of, and other times he'll be admonished for fighting the perfect fight.

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A fighter who fought a perfect fight but was somewhat admonished afterwards was Lennox Lewis in his November 2000 title defense against the dynamite punching David Tua. In his bout with Tua, Lewis couldn't have been more perfect from a style perspective. However, he was taken to task by some for not fighting more aggressively and engaging Tua more after the fight. Although the fight wasn't very exciting, Lewis shouldn't have been blamed for fighting a textbook perfect fight. Lewis took what Tua gave him and fought the fight that gave him the best chance to win, while reducing Tua's chances of winning to minuscule at best.

It's moronic to think Lewis should've gone after Tua once he had control of the fight, which he did by the end of the second round at the latest. It was obvious by no later than the third round that Tua was going to need a Mike Weaker type Hail Mary shot to win. Lewis held a seven inch height advantage, a sizeable reach advantage, and was a much better boxer. Also, Lewis had the title, which meant Tua would have to take it if he wanted to be champ. Lewis knew after the first couple rounds that as long as he kept his jab in Tua's face and didn't back straight up against the ropes and remain stationary, Tua couldn't really get to him unless he made a mistake.

Yet after the fight he was criticized because the fight wasn't the 1990s version of Foreman Lyle. And I'll bet those who ripped Lewis for the way he fought would have been the first to call him a fool had he been knocked out going toe to toe with Tua. Why would Lewis, who doesn't possess a chin solid enough to tempt fate, take unnecessary chances against a puncher like Tua, in essence making the fight even more dangerous than it already was? On top of that, Tua has a cast-iron chin. The odds of Lewis, despite being a good puncher, knocking Tua out were pretty long. And by trading with Tua, Lewis foolishly would have given Tua his best chance of pulling the upset.

How come it is often the case that the fighter who is fighting the fight he needs to win is the one who is blamed if the fight isn't exciting or action packed? If Lewis is winning the fight easily by simply keeping Tua off by sticking out his jab and stepping back or to the side once in awhile, isn't the burden on Tua to make him fight, especially if he's lost every round? Where does it say Lewis has to make it easy for Tua?

Those who blamed Lewis for the bout not being more of a war and slugfest blamed the wrong fighter. It's Tua's fault that all Lewis had to do to nullify him was stick his jab out and slightly change directions once in awhile. Remember, Tua allowed Lewis not to have to fight him off or take any chances.

Can any insightful boxing observer imagine Lewis holding off Dempsey, Marciano and Frazier by just pushing his jab out and taking a step or two to the side? He couldn't even get away with that against Ray Mercer. I blame Tua for not forcing Lewis out of his comfort zone and making him trade. It should have been paramount for Tua in his first and only title shot to somehow expose Lewis' biggest vulnerability against his own best weapon, his two handed punching power. At least I certainly think it should've been.

The same things apply to the Hagler Leonard bout. Sugar Ray Leonard is constantly ridiculed for not standing right in front of Hagler and banging with him, although Leonard did stand and

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trade at times and got the best of Hagler. Blame Hagler for not forcing Leonard into having to fight him to win instead of allowing him to box him silly at times.

In their first meeting in a non title bout, Esteban De Jesus outboxed an out of shape and under prepared Roberto Duran, handing him his first defeat. Duran and De Jesus fought two more times with the undisputed lightweight championship on the line. Against an in shape and focused Duran, De Jesus wasn't able to box and keep Duran off him and was stopped both times. The deciding factor was De Jesus had to box Duran to have a chance to win, but Duran forced him to fight, and Duran never lost fights at lightweight.

When fighters step into the ring their goal is to fight the fight that plays to their strengths and what they do best. Any fighter who wins a big fight because he fought the only fight he could in order to have a chance to win should never be criticized because it wasn't Zale-Graziano I or II in terms of excitement.

De La Hoya had no reason to back away from Hopkins, yet gets credit for not running from him during their bout? The reality is De La Hoya shouldn't be praised for what he didn't do. Lewis was ripped for not going to war with Tua, but the only way Tua could have won the fight was by forcing Lewis into a war. However, Lewis didn't let him. Lewis deserves high praise. Thinking counts in boxing, and praise should only be given out when it is earned.