

Why History Had To Wait For Holmes and Lewis

Written by Frank Lotierzo

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I recently finished my list of the twenty greatest heavyweights in boxing history, something I'd been working on for almost two months. One of the best things about boxing is the passion it stimulates among those who really love and follow the sport. No doubt there have been many intense arguments and debates involving family members and friends as to who would win between Fighter-A and Fighter-B or who should rank higher on the all-time list. Personally, I love when someone makes a case during one of those debates that challenges my opinion, citing an angle I may have overlooked.

That being said, I have one major pet peeve when it comes to determining the historical rank of fighters, and like all other opinions I hold, I'm more than firm. One of my strongest beliefs is that it's impossible to accurately rate a fighter historically until we've seen a majority of their career, or it can be said with certainty that their best days are behind them. Never has that been more evident to me than when I was evaluating the heavyweight fighters I was considering for my top-twenty list.

The biggest mistake any boxing historian or fan can make is trying to evaluate a fighter's place in history while he's in the midst of his career or immediately after he registered his biggest win or suffered a major defeat. It goes without saying that Roy Jones wasn't as good as he looked in his rematch with Montell Griffin, nor was he as bad as he looked against Glen Johnson in his last fight. Think of the different fighters and where they'd rank historically if they never fought again after a big win or disappointing defeat.

The boxing "What ifs" are endless. What if the Stock Market hadn't crashed in 1929, forcing retired lightweight champ Benny Leonard to return to the ring because he lost all of his money? How many titles could the late Salvador Sanchez have won if he had not died in a car accident at age 23? Muhammad Ali scored his biggest career victories during the 1970s, after his draft conviction was overturned by the United States Supreme Court. What if Ali lost the appeal and never fought again after 1967? Would he still be considered The Greatest, or at least one of them?

After arguing with myself for just under two months, my list was complete. The final edition of my top-twenty didn't turn out the way I had anticipated. I was totally shocked by where I slotted two fighters: Larry Holmes and Lennox Lewis. I followed Holmes throughout his entire career. During his title reign from 1978-1985, I was among those who constantly questioned his opposition. After many of Holmes' title defenses, I thought the result was more a case of his opponent losing than him winning.

I remember coming out of the Pittsburgh Civic Arena the night Holmes fought Renaldo Snipes. In that fight Holmes was seconds away from being counted out in the seventh round, courtesy of a big Snipes right hand. If someone would have told me that 24 years later I would anguish for weeks trying not to rank Holmes among the top five heavyweights of all time, I would have said they were out of their mind.

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I must confess I called more than a few boxing junkies who I routinely converse with, asking them to talk me out of ranking Holmes number four. Some of their arguments were compelling, but not quite enough to change my mind. Based on career accomplishment, skill and how I think he would fare against the rest of the field at his best, I ranked Larry Holmes number four on my list, which no doubt some will consider too high.

Lennox Lewis was another fighter I slotted higher than I would have thought. Just as I'm sure many will think I have Holmes too high at number 4, many will think having Lewis at 11 is too low. And that's a fair point, since I had Evander Holyfield (who was 0-1-1 against Lewis) ranked above him at ten.

I ranked Holyfield above Lewis because their rematch was very close on my card, favoring Lewis 7-5 in rounds, which means one round turned the fight. When they fought in March and November of 1999, Holyfield was years removed from his best fighting days, only capable of fighting in spurts, and it was still very close. The level of competition they fought was basically a wash, and the best name fighter they both defeated was Mike Tyson. Holyfield fought Tyson in 1996 and 1997. Lewis fought him in 2002. Bottom line, Holyfield's best wins out rank Lewis' in my opinion, although I submit it's very close.

My chief rationale for ranking Holyfield over Lewis was that Holyfield had the better chin. The ability to take a punch plays a bigger role in determining how far a fighter can go in the heavyweight division, more so than in any other division; and, in fact, it's not even close. The list of great heavyweight champions who didn't possess an outstanding/great chin is very short, so short that only one name is on it: Lewis. Holyfield was never knocked out in his prime. Lewis was stopped twice during his career by one-punch knockouts. That was more than enough to justify why I ranked Holyfield over Lewis.

I don't take issue with those who would put Lewis above Holyfield. In the ring he beat him twice and held the title longer without losing it and having to regain it. The point is, an overwhelming case can be made to support Lewis among the top-ten greatest heavyweight champs in history. But had I been asked in 1993 or 1994 if I thought Lennox Lewis would be remembered as an all-time great when his career was over, I would have said definitely not.

Seeing him struggle with a faded Frank Bruno before knocking him out with a lottery punch was one thing, but I thought seeing him get knocked out by Oliver McCall in two rounds with one right hand a year late sealed his fate. On top of that, Lewis, hurt badly, was being held up by referee Octavio Meyran when the fight ended.

It's what Lewis did after losing to McCall in 1994 that justifies his greatness. Lewis regained the title in 1997. From 1997 through 2003, Lewis defended his title against the best in the division, only suffering one defeat. In April of 2001 Lewis lost the title when he was knocked out by Hasim Rahman in the fifth round. Seven months later, Lewis reclaimed the title by knocking out Rahman in the fourth round. On February 6, 2004, Lewis retired, joining Jim Jeffries, Gene Tunney and Rocky Marciano as the only fighters to retire as heavyweight champion.

During their respective reigns as heavyweight champion, I didn't think Larry Holmes or Lennox

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Lewis would be regarded as one of the top-ten heavyweight champions in history. I was wrong, and that's why fighters cannot be fairly judged in the eyes of history until their best days are behind them.

The mistake I made with Larry Holmes is easy to see in hindsight. I didn't know that after he was almost knocked out by Snipes he'd go on to make nine more successful title defenses. Who knew in November 1981 that Holmes would make more successful title defenses (20) than any other heavyweight champion in history with the exception of Joe Louis? Who knew that when he retired he'd rank third (behind Louis and Ali) in the number of heavyweight title bouts won (21)? Not me. And that number should really be 22. In his rematch with Michael Spinks, Holmes lost a split decision. That verdict for Spinks ranks as one of the biggest robberies in heavyweight title fight history.

In the case of Lennox Lewis, he was stopped by McCall in his third defense a little over a year after winning the title. It was impossible to foresee that Lewis would reclaim the crown and rack up a 12-1-1 in his next 14 championship bouts through 2003, a record which should really be 13-1. The draw came in his first fight with Evander Holyfield, which he clearly won and ranks alongside Holmes-Spinks II as one of the worst decisions in a heavyweight title fight. When Lewis' career was complete, he ranked fourth (15) in number of heavyweight title bouts won, behind only Joe Louis, Muhammad Ali and Larry Holmes.

I have asserted for years that a fighter's place in history cannot fairly or accurately be evaluated until his best days are behind him. Once his best days have come and gone, only then do we know the magnitude of his accomplishments.

Since compiling my list of the twenty greatest heavyweights in boxing history, my position that a fighter must be at or approaching the end of his career before deciding his rightful place in history is stronger than ever. And just for the record, Larry Holmes and Lennox Lewis are two of the top dozen greatest heavyweights in boxing history. That's something I wouldn't have said on a dare about Holmes in 1981 or Lewis in 1993.