

Toney Will Join Exclusive Club With Win Over Ruiz

Written by Frank Lotierzo
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On April 30, former IBF middleweight, super middleweight, and cruiserweight titleholder James "Lights Out" Toney (68-4-2) challenges John Ruiz (41-5-1) for the WBA heavyweight championship. With a victory, Toney will accomplish something only two fighters in boxing history - Bob Fitzsimmons in 1897 and Roy Jones in 2003 – have been able to do, which is win the heavyweight title after capturing their first championship as middleweights.

In reality, Fitzsimmons accomplished the more significant feat. Ruby Robert defeated the legitimate world heavyweight champion in James J. Corbett. Jones beat a good heavyweight fighter (Ruiz) who merely held a piece of the title. For Jones' feat to be comparable to that of Fitzsimmons, he would have had to beat the best heavyweight in the world at the time, Lennox Lewis - a fight Jones deliberately priced himself out of.

In my opinion, fighters who win fractured titles in higher weight divisions receive too much praise. That's why Toney will be regarded as one of the great pound-for-pound fighters in history if he beats Ruiz and captures a portion of the heavyweight title.

James Toney is a throwback fighter, meaning that he fights similar to some of the pre-1960 Hall of Famers and champs. He's an outstanding counterpuncher who uses multiple head and shoulder feints and possesses the ability to keep his feet planted while making his opponent miss. Toney is also very versatile, able to throw every punch in the book. When in shape, he can get off some terrific three and four punch combinations and also knows how to work the body.

Since turning pro in 1988, Toney has never been stopped or even badly shaken in 74 fights. On the two occasions he's been down (against Jones and Reggie Johnson) it was because he was off balance, not hurt. Toney, who boasts an outstanding 11-1-1 record in title fights, has won belts at 160, 168 and 195 pounds, and has scored wins over seven world champions.

Despite Toney's remarkable accomplishments, it's not easy to define his rightful place in boxing history. He first won the middleweight title in May of 1991 and held it until early 1993, going 6-0-1 in title bouts. But as an in-depth evaluation of his tenure clearly points out that he wasn't a dominant fighter while reigning at 160.

Toney was trailing by four, seven, and eight points on the judges' cards when he stopped undefeated IBF champ Michael Nunn in the 11th round to win the crown. In his first defense he was dropped by Reggie Johnson and barely held on to eke out a split decision. In his third defense, he drew with former junior middleweight champion Mike McCallum, a fight some of the working press scored for McCallum.

Three months later he won a gift decision over Dave Tiberi, in a fight many Toney fans wish they could forget. Tiberi outfought Toney for at least seven of the 12 rounds. One judge scored the fight 117-111 Tiberi, but the other two judges overruled him with 115-112 tabulations in favor of Toney. Tiberi was so disgusted with boxing after the fight that he retired and never

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fought again. I saw this fight in favor of Tiberi, as did the network broadcasters and many of the ringside press covering the fight.

Two months after that disputed verdict, Toney won a unanimous nod over Glenn Wolfe, then captured a majority decision in the rematch with McCallum, in what turned out to be his last middleweight title defense. In December of 1992 Toney vacated his middleweight title and moved up to fight at 168 pounds.

In February of 1993, in only his second fight at super middleweight, Toney stopped IBF champion Iran Barkley, then, after two successful defenses against Tony Thornton and Charles Williams came the fateful encounter against Jones. A week before that fight, Toney had to lose more than twenty pounds just to make the 168-pound limit. For twelve rounds Jones boxed rings around a lethargic Toney, scoring a flash knockdown en route to winning a one-sided unanimous decision and the title.

Toney moved up to the light heavyweight division after that loss. In his maiden voyage at 175, Toney lost a hotly disputed decision to future champ Montell Griffin (14-0) in February 1995; it would be more than eight years before Toney emerged again as a force in boxing. During that time Toney won 21 of 23 fights, along with a couple of nondescript regional titles. His two defeats were a unanimous decision loss in a rematch against Griffin and a majority decision to Drake Thadzi, a fringe contender with a 28-8-1 record.

The rebirth of James Toney officially began on April 26, 2003. In what was his 72nd professional fight, he fought IBF cruiserweight champ Vassily Jirov (31-0). Against the undefeated Jirov, Toney may very well have been at his best, fighting brilliantly in winning a unanimous 12-round decision to annex his third world title. Toney boxed, threw three and four punch combinations, countered off the ropes and made Jirov pay for leaving himself open when he dared to go to Toney's body.

It was the most complete fight of Toney's career. He followed that up six months later against Evander Holyfield, the four-time heavyweight champ and former cruiserweight titleholder.

It was supposed to represent Toney's first fight with a "legitimate" world-class heavyweight.

But the Evander Holyfield who fought James Toney looked like a hollow fighter as he stood in his corner waiting for the opening bell. The 41-year-old had very little left but his name. On several occasions Toney stood right in front of Holyfield, doing nothing. But one could see Holyfield actually having to think about what to do, instead of instinctively reacting. That is the look of a "shot" fighter. Mercifully, Holyfield's corner threw the towel into the ring to halt the proceedings at 1:42 of the ninth round.

Toney looked sensational against Holyfield, but what does beating a former great with nothing say about him as a heavyweight? Since the Holyfield win, Toney has received a plethora of favorable attention from the media. Some scribes have even gone so far as to place him at the top of the heavyweight heap - something that in my opinion borders on the moronic, considering all Toney had done was beat a fighter who couldn't offer even token resistance.

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James Toney is without question one of the most skilled and talented fighters in boxing today. He can do everything. On top of that he has a great chin and world-class toughness and heart; traits possessed in abundance by a majority of boxing's all-time greats. But as I've mentioned, Toney remains very hard to categorize from a historical perspective.

His reign as middleweight champion was respectable, but nothing more. In his only big fight at super middleweight he was taken apart by Roy Jones. And Toney's weight problem was not Jones' fault. Despite the fact that he stayed active, Toney wasn't really a factor at light heavyweight or cruiserweight.

The wins over Jirov and Holyfield constitute his current resurrection. But heretofore, his only significant mark has been made as a middleweight. He's been involved on both ends of some controversial decisions in his 17 year career. He's split two fights against marquee opponents (Jones, Holyfield), and those fights are hardly accurate barometers. The truth is, he wasn't as bad as he looked against Jones and he isn't as good as he looked against Holyfield.

Assuming for the moment that Toney defeats Ruiz, I imagine the case supporting his legacy might go something like this.

"James Toney took part in 75 fights, in and of itself an anomaly in this day and age. Of those bouts, he lost only four, and has competed at a world-class level for fifteen years and counting. A model of durability, he never lost by stoppage and was knocked off his feet only twice. On top of that, he's a member of two very exclusive clubs: as one of a handful of fighters to win world championships in four different weight divisions and, most importantly, one of only three men to capture a title in the two most historically prestigious divisions, middleweight and heavyweight."

The fact that he and Roy Jones vanquished the same heavyweight – a partial champ at best – to win that fourth title will surely be glossed over.