Written by Joe Rein
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Ray Charles' "Busted" on the car radio was perfect. Tax day, April 15. Nobody in boxing had any money . . . They'd be filing late, anyway. So, the Wild Card Gym wouldn't be a sweatbox to cover the 1 P.M. hype for James Toney's heavyweight title shot against John Ruiz at Madison Square Garden in New York on April 30.

The press release should have spelled MSG without caps. Toney was old school, and deserved to be marqueed in that Friday night beacon of light on 52nd and Eighth that was home to Joe Louis, Ray Robinson and Willie Pep.

The turnout at Wild Card was modest. The media enveloped Toney as soon as he appeared in doorway.

It came with the territory for Toney. Everything he said was a sound bite – Tex Cobb in hip-hop. Toney didn't run his mouth to screw up his courage. He talked the talk and walked the walk. A Spartan regime was not what he was about. It was four words: "I love to fight."

No wonder Toney fought so well on the inside, turning in every direction, dodging cameras – bodies jockeying for position. Normally it was a feeding frenzy, but there was a certain noblesse oblige with how they interviewed Toney: each waiting his turn, not to trigger a volatile response . . . like his reaction to a questioner on a recent teleconference. "I love the press. I ain't got no problem. If you gonna talk about boxin', I don't like stupid questions!"

I thought I was at a Jenna Jameson shoot. "Take off your shirt! Take off your shirt!" Shouts came from all over the gym.

Toney had to be cajoled like a reluctant stripper. He donned gloves and - bare to the waist, wearing trousers - he went through the motions on a heavy bag for the photo op.

When Toney hurt his Achilles training for Jameel McCline, his skin was taut over cannon-ball muscles. He was still the same mass, but the muscles didn't stretch the flesh. It was padded armor plate.

Every mike in his face got a lead for the late edition or something pungent for TV. When he was asked about the other contenders, he said "They want to play fight. I don't play boxin'. You can play football, you can play baseball, you can play basketball, but you can't play boxin with me, because *you will* get hurt."

When a Latino reporter - with an "I'm-thrilled-to-be-here" look on his face - posed a five-minute question in Spanish, Toney asked, "Excuse me?" It was his only reply without a challenge in it.

Toney runs his words together with blunt force. "They not pay'n to see John Ruiz. They pay'n to see James Toney. There's a *big* difference. James Toney *fights*, John Ruiz *hugs*. April 30th he

come with that huggy-bear stuff, it's gonna be and easy night for me. I'm gonna knock him out.

"I'm gonna make boxin' fans happy. I'm gonna get rid of this guy . . . and his corny-ass manager. I'm going to bomb him out of there quick. Make him miss; make him pay. He ain't never seen a fighter like me. When he should have knocked Holyfield out, he didn't; I did. April 30th I'll be the new heavyweight champ of the world.

"After this, it's gonna be about "Lights Out" boxing, Goossen Tutor. I will fight anybody the fans want to see me fight. I *won't* turn down *noth'n'*. I'm not the one duck'n. I'll fight anybody, anywhere, anytime - Klitschko, Byrd, Brewster, whoever."

When it was suggested that he showed respect for Ruiz at the press conference announcing the fight, Toney said "I was givin' the man props for the opportunity. I have no respect for Ruiz. I have no respect for any man in the ring. They want my respect; they'll have to *whip* my ass. And that didn't happen since I was born, 37 years ago . . . and that was a doctor."

One reporter waved the red flag. "Aren't you just a fat middleweight?" It was a Joe Pesci moment. Toney paused, looked him straight in the eye, and said: "I'm a middleweight with heavyweight nuts."