

## Something Different: Kind Words for John Ruiz

Written by Robert Cassidy Jr.  
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John Ruiz takes far more shots out of the ring than he ever will inside of it. To be brief, he is probably the most criticized heavyweight champion since James J. Braddock. (Hang in there John, they may make a movie about you yet.)

Based strictly on his style, the WBA heavyweight champion has been routinely chided by the media and derided by many of his opponents. It seemed that Fres Oquendo and Hasim Rahman hurt Ruiz more with words than they did punches. On April 30 at Madison Square Garden, he defends his title against James "Lights Out" Toney, the former middleweight and super middleweight champion.

To the growing list of insults, Toney offered this during an interview published on the internet: "John Ruiz, he must be half-(gay) because he likes to hold and hug on people."

Ruiz, who has twice won the heavyweight title, is not particularly pleasing to watch inside the boxing ring. But that is his worst sin. As promoter Don King likes to say, "All he does is win."

That is, somehow, remarkably true. Opponents approach a Ruiz fight much the way American League hitters now approach the New York Yankees starting rotation. Suffice it to say, there is no fear factor. Kirk Johnson, Oquendo and Rahman were of the opinion that a signed contract to face Ruiz was like holding a winning lottery ticket. Yet, after 12 rounds or less, Ruiz turns out to be the winner.

They say in boxing that punchers sell tickets while stylists sell hot dogs. That may have once been true, but I don't recall many people running to the concession stands during a Pernell Whitaker fight.

In the ring, Ruiz is neither a puncher, neither a stylist. While he can hurt an opponent, he lacks that type of one-punch power that enralls fans. Generally, he enrages those fans who do not live in Massachusetts or Puerto Rico. They are enraged because there is little rhythm to a Ruiz fight, few multi-punch exchanges. I've tried very hard to appreciate what Ruiz does inside the ring. He's determined, he's gutsy, he fights hard.

"Well, it does seem like no matter what I cannot catch a break," Ruiz said last week during a conference call. "But it does not matter. My main thing is to go out there and win. That is what boxing is. You go out there and you fight and you win. It is not about looking pretty."

As for the media – myself included – the attacks are generally not personal (although I can't speak for all those who have covered a Ruiz fight). Still, it can be difficult to report on a 12-round, clutch-filled, methodical contest. There are few positive spins.

But here is the positive spin. It's Ruiz the man. They call him The Quiet Man, and he is generally that. He doesn't have Mae Zedong tattooed on his body; rather, he has his children's

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names embroidered across his boxing trunks. His name hasn't shown up in the police blotter; instead, he has started a charity that benefits the homeless.

Ruiz is usually accessible to the media and easy to speak with. While many opponents disrespect him, he only recently began stooping into the gutter to fire back. He was content to allow manager Norman Stone (who has shown up in the police blotter) to fire back. Now, he's convinced that trash-talking sells more tickets.

"When I first started this journey to becoming the world champion, I thought just by fighting alone would actually make me a commodity," he said. "I always told my manager. You go do the talking or whatever, I am just going to do the fighting. But it seems like at this point in my career, I finally realized that you have to trash talk to actually get some attention."

That a world champion must make such an admission is a poor commentary on today's sports culture. We shudder when a convicted rapist is holding the heavyweight title or we complain that an alleged steroid user is hitting home runs at a record pace, and here we have John Ruiz – The Quiet Man, the quiet champion – and that is not enough.

The erratic behavior of Stone has been far more abhorrent than anything we've seen from Ruiz. If you can't appreciate what he does in the ring, appreciate who he is outside of it. Do that and you just might start rooting for him.