Written by Frank Lotierzo
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On March 15th 1996 at the Convention Center in Atlantic City, Samoan bomb thrower David Tua (22-0) knocked out heavyweight prospect John Ruiz (25-2) in 19 seconds. I remember sitting ringside that night thinking Tua was so destructive he was frightening. The 225-pound Tua who blitzed Ruiz was a human wrecking machine.

Who would have believed back in 1996 that Ruiz would win a piece of the heavyweight title twice and Tua would only challenge for it once? As of this writing John Ruiz is scheduled to make the third defense of his WBA title against James Toney. Since the press conference announcing the fight, Ruiz bashing has become the latest fad in boxing.

I'm sure most fans think Tua-Toney or Golota-Toney would be more compelling than Ruiz-Toney. What I find compelling is the fact that neither Tua nor Golota has won a piece of a world title since turning pro. Ruiz, suffering one of the most humiliating defeats a fighter could in the ring, has gone 16-2-1 in 19 fights since.

Forget for a second that Ruiz has overachieved throughout his career. The resolve he showed fighting with no psychological baggage after his drubbing by Tua says a lot about his character, which goes quite a long way in professional boxing. I respect Ruiz for that alone. And for those who think overcoming what happened to him against Tua is no big deal, you've just been informed - it's a very big deal, because boxing history is replete with fighters who never overcame a devastating knockout defeat.

During the years 1994-96, Lennox Lewis was often accused by many writers and fans for fighting with trepidation after he was knocked out by Oliver McCall. It took the better part of two years before Lewis silenced the critics who thought he was worried about getting KOed again. And he wasn't nearly as brutalized by McCall as Ruiz was by Tua.

Only former three-time heavyweight champ Evander Holyfield and former pound-for-pound king Roy Jones have defeated Ruiz since 1996. After losing a unanimous decision to Holyfield in their first fight, Ruiz went 1-0-1 in the next two and even dropped Holyfield in their second fight. Obviously, the Holyfield who fought Ruiz was years removed from his physical prime, but he was still dangerous.

After retaining his title with a draw against Holyfield in their third fight, Ruiz defended it against the once promising Kirk Johnson (32-0-1). Johnson, who is much more skilled than Ruiz, left the ring as he entered it, without the title. Ruiz was leading on all three official's cards when Johnson was DQ'd in the 10th round for repeatedly hitting low.

In his next defense against undisputed light heavyweight champ Roy Jones, considered the best fighter in boxing at the time, Ruiz was the betting underdog. Jones specifically handpicked Ruiz as the fighter to try and make history against for one simple reason: he knew he held the style advantage. Because he is not exceptional at any one thing, Ruiz is vulnerable to a great

boxer/and or a great puncher. Because he doesn't posses a devastating punch, Ruiz can't force a great boxer (Jones) to fight. He's also always right in front of his opponent, making him a sitting duck for a great puncher (Tua).

Jones outboxed Ruiz over 12 rounds and won the WBA heavyweight title. However, by referee Jay Nady not allowing any inside fighting, a majority of the bout was fought from outside. Ruiz being forced to fight outside had his only advantage (physical strength) nullified, giving him no chance.

After losing the title to Jones, Ruiz won a 12-round unanimous decision over former heavyweight champ Hasim Rahman to win back the WBA title left vacant by Jones' going back down to 175. This was the same Hasim Rahman who knocked out Lennox Lewis to win the title in 2001. In case it's been forgotten, it took Lennox Lewis two fights to attain a victory over Rahman.

Ruiz has defended the title twice since reclaiming it. He stopped Fres Oquendo (24-2) in the 11th round in his first defense. Only David Tua and Chris Byrd beat Oquendo before he fought Ruiz. In his last defense Ruiz won a 12-round unanimous decision over a very fit and determined Andrew Golota (38-4-1). In that fight Ruiz overcame two second round knockdowns and a point deduction for hitting on the break to keep the title. Golota, who does everything in the ring better than Ruiz, once again failed to win a fight he should have won. In the end Ruiz's will overcame Golota's skill. The only thing John Ruiz does better than Andrew Golota is what matters the most. He wins.

Winning actually means something to John Ruiz, something that cannot be said about too many of today's so called heavyweight elite. He should be applauded for that instead of ridiculed for it. So what, he wins ugly. Who cares that he can't float like a butterfly or sting like a bee like Ali used to, or pulverize his opponents like Louis did? It could easily be argued that John Ruiz is the least physically gifted fighter among the top ten heavyweights in the world. Yet he's made a career out of beating them – in contrast to Tua and Golota who don't always beat the fighters they should. Luckily for Ruiz, fights and titles are won in the ring instead of being decided by computers and video games.

There are too many fighters who underachieve and squander their ability. Ruiz is the polar opposite. Despite lacking great boxing skill and power, he wins when he's not supposed to. The wrong fighter is being blamed for Ruiz's success. I'll take winning ugly any day over losing with style, and so would you.

David Tua and Andrew Golota were blessed at birth with extraordinary skill. It's easy to marvel at Tua's toughness and two-handed power and Golota's boxing ability and athleticism. But neither of them have come close to living up to their potential; whereas Ruiz has exceeded his. If Tua could say that, Chris Byrd's title would his. And the same applies to Golota. Had Golota shown a fraction of Ruiz's grit in their fight, he would be fighting Toney on April 30th instead of Ruiz.

Either today's upper tier heavyweight crop is at an all-time low or Ruiz isn't quite as awful as

some imagine him to be. I know one thing for certain that can be said about Ruiz. The fighter who takes the title from him will have to fight him to do it - showing that the better fighter wearing boxing gloves on paper won't cut it.

It's possible Ruiz wouldn't have been called heavyweight champ in any other era. Salute him for seizing his time, opposed to the countless others who squandered theirs. On March 15, 1996 , the winner was the loser and the loser was the winner.

Get off Ruiz and respect him for what he's overcome and accomplished.