James Toney's *beautiful* - all 233 pounds on his 5'10" frame. A barrel-of-a-belly and loose flesh every place that's refused to shrink back with age and years of excess. But gliding around a ring, he's as much at home as Michael Phelps in the water – *Beautiful*.

It's the way fight people describe Toney - the grizzled trainers and veterans who've seen Archie Moore and Holman Williams in the 1940s.

Round after round, he's as fluid as a middleweight from the waist down - not a hint that he's lugging an anvil since he KOed Michael Nunn. His hands flow in a fight as easily as a pad drill.

Saturday, after 17 years and 74 fights, Toney brings his old school wiles to Madison Square Garden - the dream of every boy who's ever put on gloves - to dethrone John Ruiz for his Don King-manufactured WBA heavyweight title.

It's not the Garden that was the Friday night habit when Joe Louis defended his single heavyweight crown and boxing got more ink than baseball and basketball.

Toney doesn't rattle in the ring, and he certainly shouldn't get jitters fighting for a title. This is his 16th time. He's won 15 alphabet soup belts as a pro.

"Back in the day" that Toney is rightfully associated with, any conjecturing about his chances against a younger, heavier, 6'2" heavyweight champion would have been laughable. The suggestion of a beefed-up Ray Robinson against Louis would have brought a homicide charge.

Toney's retro: Old school in the ring and all swagger out of it.

Joe Walcott was an anomaly at 35. He was affectionately referred to as "grandpa" when he fought Rocky Marciano. Now sports fans don't blink at the thought of an athlete competing at the elite level in his late 30s.

George Foreman put that myth to rest, once and for all.

"Methuselah" always finds its way into the build-up for a Bernard Hopkins' fight. That gives way to admiration once the fight starts. His ability and 20-year-old physique is the only topic of discussion.

Boxing fans weaned on TV, instant gratification - sizzle - and the American obsession with athletes being a perfect V, are offended by Toney in their face: He's boastful, boorish, threatening, never PC, and makes no apologies for a gut. "Bring it, dawg, if you're man enough" is written on his face. John L. Sullivan had that same look over a 100 years ago.

Substance is more important than surface, but it's largely fallen on deaf ears when Toney's

mentioned. There are none so blind as those who will not see.

Lightening speed, ferocity and an armor-piercing punch get ratings. But a master plying his trade . . . *nothing* . . . except for those who love The Sweet Science. The ability to adapt, impose his will, relax in the eye of the hurricane, use only the energy necessary, and fight through the pain, doesn't register.

The fans' ideal is Superman in tights blazing out of his corner till his man's leveled; or flourishes so eye-catching they demand *Ole's*. God help him if he's hit – it's evidence of weakness – or heaven-for-fend, loses; he's yesterday's news – road kill. If you're Toney, with appetites and volatility on the Richter scale, the haters are legion.

But like the Dylan Thomas line, Toney will not "go gentle into the good night." It's a side reserved for those that have paid their dues.

Recently at an unpublicized luncheon for retired boxers - journeymen and champs - some broken and vacant - largely forgotten and in need of an aid now, Toney took time with each - knew their names and about their fights. His tone was respectful, and as gentle as father with a child. Their eyes shone, not for the attention but for the man it came from. They knew the wheat from the chaff.

But for those who worship at the altar of the body beautiful, nothing Toney does can be any good. All they see is waste – a thug. Instead of a celebration for a sorely needed shot in the arm to boxing for his Fight of The Year performance, there's only fault to be found with his opposition.

It doesn't matter that he only had a few weeks to train for Ruiz; Toney won't shrink from a fight, in the ring or out. Some insist he spoils for it. Vince Lombardi said, "*Winning* is everything" With Toney, *fighting* is everything; he loves it. It's like a gambler's addiction. Those 20 feet inside the ring is where he lives.

The presumption is: Hair trigger temper, he's dirty. He's too arrogant for that. He'll wreck a gym for a wrong word, but he never loses his cool in a fight. He's so sure he's going hunt his man down within the rules; he's never drawn in to tit-for-tat. Even though Freddy Roach has urged him to get payback.

Roach's words carry some weight with Toney. Few can say that; he marches to his own drum. It's why he talks at the press, not to them. He only respects those who've walked the walk. He's seen the former 126-pound contender not give in to Parkinson's symptoms and stand up to the hardest cases in the gym. Toney trusts Roach's know-how, and that he'll get the truth.

All the talk about Toney's ability to take a punch, slip them, work on the inside, and his ring generalship, means nothing. Armchair fans see only a slow tub of lard. Montell Griffin easily out sped him – twice. It happened. No excuses.

But when Barry Bonds whiffs twice; do they write him off. It's a clean slate Saturday.

There's no mystery about the scenario of the fight. Ruiz doesn't have Jones' hand or foot speed so he'll adopt Terry McGroom's blueprint: double and triple jab, step off to the right, jump in with his own right and clutch for dear life.

Toney will slip left and right, and allow Ruiz's momentum to work against him, falling back against the ropes and surgically pick him apart.

Toney hits the target of opportunity. He's a performance artist - works in the moment - not with set combinations, as Ruiz does. Fighters can't anticipate Toney. He's not an Earnie Shavers; he just keeps doing damage until the best-conditioned fighter can't take any more.

Until Ruiz runs out of juice about the sixth or seventh, he'll continue to do the same thing . . . That's all he can do; he's not equipped for a plan B or C. He's a trimmed-down, big-boned man who'll probably be 50 or 60 pounds heavier the day after he hangs 'em up. He had enough raw strength and determination to parley it in to being a heavyweight champion, and earning more than a construction job.

So to keep from wearing a hardhat, Ruiz will doggedly slog on.

For awhile, those double and triple jabs should slow Toney, though fall harmlessly over his right or left shoulder while he works his way in and times the jab. All Norman Stone's pleading will be useless. He's talking to a *learned* fighter, not a *natural*, like Toney. In the words of former batting champ "Wee" Willie Keeler: Toney "hits 'em where they ain't."

Once that's established, the handwriting's on the wall: only a question of how much of a beating Ruiz is willing to absorb . . . or how courageous Stone is with his charge.

It doesn't matter that the fight was taken on short notice, the years of dissipation, weight, injuries, and age. The bell rings; there's no excuses.

If Toney loses, every hater will come out like the Nazis have been vanquished: "I told you so!" If for one more day, "Lights Out" does what he's capable of, even casual fans will come to appreciate what it means to be old school.