

James Toney's Saturday Night Fever

Written by Rick Folstad
Monday, 02 May 2005 19:00

For most of Saturday night's fight, James "Lights Out" Toney looked like a guy patiently waiting to catch a bus. He knew he was at the right stop, he knew he had the right change in his pocket and he knew it was only a matter of time before the bus came around the corner.

That was Toney, a throwback fighter with the cold, calm look of a man who knew exactly what he was doing and where he was going.

His win over John Ruiz was decisive and complete, a better fight than most of us expected considering a Ruiz fight is generally a hug-fest interrupted by an occasional jab or right hand.

Ruiz, unaccustomed to standing ovations, loud applause or rousing cheers, has single-handedly put more people to sleep than the Capone gang.

But not Saturday night. Not with his beloved WBA heavyweight title on the line at Madison Square Garden and a chunky, former middleweight champion standing on the other side of the ring threatening to take it.

Instead of lulling us all to sleep, Ruiz tricked us, pulled a rabbit out of someone else's hat. He suddenly turned his hands loose, avoided cuddling and gave us a pretty good fight. He may have lost the decision to Toney, but you'd like to think the white collars at HBO found it in their hearts to toss him a little bonus money for his efforts.

Right.

His sudden change in style probably would have worked, too, if he hadn't been going up against a bald-headed, overweight, trash-talking, cigar-smoking father and former middleweight champ.

"They can line up all the other heavyweights in a row for James now," said fight trainer Larry Goossen, brother of Toney's promoter, Dan Goossen. "Against Ruiz, Toney proved he's one of the best counterpunchers the fight game has ever seen. I thought he won the fight going away."

Brotherhood aside.

"I talked to Toney a few weeks before the fight and he had no doubt he was bringing home the title," Goossen said. "To do what he did after his long layoff, his injuries and only four weeks of training was unbelievable. There are not many fighters around like him any more."

While Toney had the look of a guy on his way to a movie for most of the fight, Ruiz at times looked like someone who suddenly found themselves being mugged after stumbling into a bad part of town late at night. Eyes and mouth open wide, a confused, startled look on his face.

Toney's expression, meanwhile, rarely changed throughout the fight. It was the same kind of

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look you might get from an insurance salesman quietly explaining the pros and cons of term life. Expressionless, emotionless.

If Ruiz ever rocked him, Toney didn't show it. There was never panic in his eyes or desperation in his punches. He was methodical and aggressive, a guy going to the office and doing his job with nothing else on his mind but his work.

"He has that blank look on his face," Goossen said. "You could be kicking his a**, but you're not sure. He doesn't show any pain or tiredness. Nothing. It's scary."