Intro by Charles Jay
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I remember having a talk with a young writer who, by virtue of his membership in the Boxing Writers Association of America, happened to be a voter for the International Boxing Hall of Fame. The subject matter involved the candidacy of flyweight Betulio Gonzalez and featherweight Barry McGuigan.

I extolled the virtues of non-Hall of Famers like Holman Williams, the Cocoa Kid, Peter Kane, Kid Norfolk, Ken Overlin, Al Hostak and Ernesto Marcel - all outstanding fighters who competed in divisions which had some depth at the time, and who had either held world titles, or, in the cases of Williams, Cocoa and Norfolk, never got the opportunity because of racial considerations. I argued that, as legitimate candidates, they were head and shoulders above Gonzalez and McGuigan. The writer countered with, "But Gonzalez won the world title three times."

Well, yes and no. Gonzalez won a share of the world flyweight title on three different occasions, but he also LOST eight title fights, meaning he was, among other things, the likely beneficiary of an atmosphere created by the existence of sanctioning bodies, which fostered the splitting of titles. He received more opportunities to fail than nearly anyone.

The case could hardly be made that Gonzalez was clearly the world's best fighter in a deep division for any sustained period of time. The same can be said for someone who is being inducted this year. McGuigan was a good fighter, but he was never the world's best featherweight; if he were active in an era with just one champion in each division he would invariably rank below Azumah Nelson and perhaps others.

It's not that this writer lacked knowledge. Rather, he lacked perspective.

We have not quite yet gotten to the point where we are inundated with Hall of Fame candidates whose perceived success was a byproduct of the proliferation of world titles available through additional weight divisions and additional sanctioning bodies. But that day is coming very soon, and when it happens, they're going to have to be put into a whole different chronological category in order to maintain a semblance of legitimacy in the voting process. You simply can't use the same criteria in comparing fighters of 10-15 years ago with fighters of previous eras. In the 1940s and 1950s, you could be a great fighter and still not have held a world championship, because generally there was just one titleholder, less attention was paid to the junior divisions, and there were a lot more participants who fought a lot more often.

In the "sanctioning body era" (from 1976 and forward, when these organizations became dominant), it is rare to find a fighter possessing any degree of true worthiness who has not had a shot at a world crown.

Was Herbie Hide a better heavyweight than Roland LaStarza or Jimmy Young just because Hide was a "champion," but neither LaStarza nor Young were? Of course that would be a ridiculous notion.

But for many of the young writer/voters who make up the electorate for the Hall of Fame, and who are products of an era where there are more than five dozen world champs at any given time, that is the only culture they are familiar with; the only period they are comfortable contemplating.

There are so many guys winning titles in different weight divisions over the course of recent history that it would be understandable if it is regarded almost casually. That's why it is important to put people like Henry Armstrong and Sugar Ray Robinson in their proper frame of reference. As many people are aware, Armstrong held the featherweight, lightweight and welterweight titles. For the moment, let's forget about the sanctioning bodies, which provide many a "back door" method to pad a resume; you'd be hard-pressed to find any fighter of recent vintage who established himself as the absolute best in three different "senior" weight divisions.

Then consider that Armstrong came within a whisker of winning middleweight honors, and show me who has gotten close to that feat in such disparate weights as those four divisions (which had 34 pounds between all of them), without employing any gimmickry.

I'm not even going to discuss Armstrong's simultaneous ownership of his three titles, because that accomplishment has never been approached and is in all likelihood unapproachable. Armstrong was an anomaly in an age of fighters who, by the standards of today, may be considered anomalies themselves. He beat Petey Sarron to win the featherweight belt. Then, just seven months later, he beat Barney Ross for the WELTERWEIGHT crown, after having fought FOURTEEN fights in the interim. He then won the lightweight championship in his next fight, actually GAINING a half-pound to do so. Comparing any of today's "stars" to Armstrong carries with it a degree of insult that is not insignificant.

Some fans and media people marvel at Oscar De La Hoya's ability to win championships in six different weight classes, from 130 pounds all the way to 160. It's not that it should be completely discounted, but it deserves an asterisk. Let's go "retro" for a moment - projecting today's landscape into yesterday. Armstrong, during his multiple title reign, certainly would have annexed belts at 130, 140 and 154, without having to go through the back door to do it. And having boxed to a draw with Ceferino Garcia, do you seriously think he would have been denied a crown at 160 if the time during which he fought had made four different middleweight titles available?

As for Robinson, if four different chances at a junior welterweight title were out there, you know he would have won at least one of them, as well as something at 154 and 168 pounds. If he gave Joey Maxim life-and-death in a light heavyweight championship fight (indeed, he was winning after 13 rounds), would he not have been able to beat a lesser man for a title at 175 pounds if it had been split four ways? And few people realize that Sugar Ray fought almost his first two dozen pro fights hovering not far from 135 pounds, during which time he beat Sammy Angott. Who's to say he couldn't have been a lightweight champ if he had been able to follow a

Miguel Cotto-like path to a title shot?

Under the 21st-Century dynamic, both Armstrong and Robinson may well have earned themselves seven world titles each.

And don't even get me started with Roberto Duran. He may have won titles at 126 and 130 if they were flying all over the place at that time. After all, Marcel lost to him about a year before he fought for a featherweight title for the first time. And Duran banged up Hiroshi Kobayashi only three months and one fight removed from Kobayashi losing his WBA super featherweight (130-pound) championship. Duran skipped the 140-pound division altogether, and may have snuck into the path of least resistance to win something at 168 pounds, if he had chosen to go that route. He could have won seven titles, and maybe even eight, if those opportunities had presented themselves.

Alright - I'm getting a little carried away with myself.

What's the whole point? Don't ask me - I'm just the warm-up act. Here's Hank . . .

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As a matter of fact, on March 1, 1940, a phenomenon of ring history named Henry Armstrong entered the ring in Gilmore Stadium in Los Angeles, probably at 142 pounds, and battled as tight as a pin crack against fierce-punching Ceferino Garcia for the middleweight title as recognized by the New York State Athletic Commission and the State of California. After ten rounds, the California limit for world title bouts at that time, the decision was announced to a breathless audience - a draw. Nobody has ever come closer to the ownership of four world titles than "Hammering" Henry did that night.

Some fifty years before that, lanky Bob Fitzsimmons started a trend which set a standard to be matched in future years, some in more impossible fashion and at other times with more ease. On the evening of January 14, 1891 at the Olympic Club in New Orleans, for the largest purse ever offered prior to that time, Fitzsimmons vanquished Jack Dempsey, "The Nonpareil," in thirteen rounds to become the middleweight champion of the world. That fight generated almost as much national interest as the John L. Sullivan-Jake Kilrain bout the year before. But this fight started the Australian on a tour which eventually culminated with the ownership of three world titles. The next crown he donned came after his 14th-round knockout of James J. Corbett at Carson City, gaining the heavyweight title in 1897. Six years later he took George Gardner over the hurdles to win his third title, the light heavyweight championship.

Between the super-athletic achievements of Fitzsimmons and Armstrong, two sterling champions of the ring laid claim to three different weight division titles. The Crescent City's Tony Canzoneri pulled it off first. He started his quest to dominate the world titles on February 10, 1928 when he took the featherweight crown from Benny Bass. Later he startled the boxing community with a first-round knockout over Al Singer to win the lightweight bauble. Finally, while still holding fast to the 135-pound title, he squeezed into the junior welterweight throne with both titles, after he scored a third-round knockout over Jackie "Kid" Berg. And thereby lays a story of

fringe benefits.

Tony Canzoneri lost his junior welterweight title to Johnny Jadick but won it back from Battling Shaw, again becoming the possessor of both titles. Along came Barney Ross, who copped both titles in a Chicago ten-rounder; Illinois at the time disallowed the longer limit. Fans took cheap shots at the junior titles in those days, so nobody paid the second title any mind. But Ross in fact was a double champ and defended the junior title regularly after winning it. Oddly, it was the more valuable lightweight title he relinquished in order to campaign for the welterweight crown. He captured the 147-pound title by decisioning Jimmy McLarnin, giving Ross world title number three. Outside a claim made by Harry Weekly, who beat Jerome Conforto in New Orleans for the vacant junior welterweight title in twelve rounds, the 140-pound division was set in longtime idleness after Barney Ross won the welterweight crown.

But it remained for Henry Armstrong, who came after Canzoneri and Ross, to achieve the supreme act of showmanship. He carried out the unparalleled heist of ownership of three world titles simultaneously. The importance of his historical triumphs is accentuated when one realizes his performance came at a time when there was singular recognition of world titles and the junior titles were nonexistent.

Many years were to pass before Emile Griffith, after gaining the welterweight title, won recognition of the new junior middleweight crown, at least in certain quarters, before winning the middleweight championship from Dick Tiger in 1966. His acquisition of the junior middleweight title was given credibility only by Austria, and thus was a feeble claim; it was, however, a claim Emile won by beating Teddy Wright in 15 rounds in Vienna in 1963 and defending it in Copenhagen by stopping Chris Christenson in nine rounds the same year. The popular holder of the 154-pound crown was Denny Moyer, who Emile had licked twice in the past, thus giving support to his claim of the title to some of his followers.

Two recent entries into the Three Title Club are, of course, Wilfred Benitez and Alexis Arguello. Both have performed eminently and history will paint them as great athletic figures. Because of junior titles, some separated by as little as three pounds, others will soon join the growing list of triple crown holders. Seemingly, the flyweight grouping, with the juggling of five pounds, would have a good shot at it. Sugar Ray Leonard, Tommy Hearns and even Roberto Duran are in the running. Surprisingly, Duran, because of the lightweight crown once in his pocket, may become the next ring elitist. Wilfredo Gomez is talented enough to snare the next two higher weight classification titles.

It is convenient at this point to speculate as to who may be the first to step outside the three title zone and acquire a fourth title. Some had Tommy Hearns the prospective winner of four titles, before he even fingered his first brass ring with a sensational knockout over Pipino Cuevas in Detroit. His supporters claimed his height and potential growth piggy-backed with enough natural ability to cut a swath which would lead him to the light heavyweight division. Being more realistic, it appears that Arguello, who has already staked a claim on three world titles, would give the junior welters a run for their money. Alexis has the height and reach, he can sock, and with his newly disciplined boxing style, backed by vast experience, he would find support in many circles.

Anyone for five titles?

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