

Antonio Tarver: Life is Unfair

Written by Greg Smith

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Life is often counterintuitive. Today, corporate chiefs reap massively disproportionate rewards through golden parachute clauses even if they ruin the financial lives of stockholders. Moreover, their hardworking, loyal employees sometimes get the shaft in surprise layoffs and unfunded pensions. It's the survival of the fittest, and even the most disciplined and focused get the short end of the stick despite doing everything they're asked to accomplish. If you're on the labor side of the equation in Corporate America, you're at a structural disadvantage. A stable, honest job can be hard to find and hard to keep. Today, college age children are often urged to pursue solid computer science degrees with starting salaries of \$60,000. If they work hard and make the right contacts, they should reap what they sow. Unfortunately, in an age of increased outsourcing and globalization, multi-billionaire Microsoft moguls Bill Gates and Steve Ballmer now heavily recruit talent from foreign countries. Another brilliant and controversial multi-billionaire, Oracle chief Lawrence Ellison, has openly admitted that recruiting efforts for software talent are focused outside of the United States more than ever as well. A lot of those good paying software jobs have been shipped to India. In today's corporate world, Johnny got outsourced before he even graduated.

Life is unfair.

Similarly, but infinitely more brutal, being on the labor side of the equation, boxing often carries unnecessarily complex ramifications and connotations. The life of being the managed instead of the manager is rife with more pitfalls than triumphs in boxing. Promoters and managers walk away with significant chunks of money, and the fighter often doesn't know how much they're making in the process. Many boxers end up on the skids wondering not what opponent hit them, but how their money and health deteriorated so fast.

Since late 2003, Antonio Tarver has emerged upon the boxing scene in a refreshing and unprecedented way. In his first fight with Roy Jones, he took Jones to places he'd never been before. Roy had to dig deep not only to win, but to survive. Many boxing people, including Antonio, thought Jones didn't win. Most didn't expect Tarver to be a big challenge for Jones in the first place, either. Jones was riding the crest of the wave off of his win over John Ruiz, and Tarver just seemed to be another notch in the belt as Jones was beginning to plan and execute the risk and rewards of closing out his career. To see Roy Jones bite down on his mouthpiece and gut out the final rounds of a tough war was something boxing fans wanted to see for a while. Montell Griffin was giving Roy a very difficult time in March 1997 before Roy gained control of the bout, but was eventually disqualified. A few months later, Roy erased all doubts about his status and dominance in their rematch when he destroyed Griffin in one brutal round. Most boxing pundits, including myself, thought Roy would be better prepared for the Tarver rematch, and "The Magic Man" would magically disappear early in the fight just as Griffin did.

We were wrong.

Antonio Tarver's one punch KO of Roy Jones on May 15, 2004 was one of the most significant

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events and accomplishments by any boxer in this decade. No controversy, no excuses, or post-fight urinalysis issues. Simply put, Roy Jones got clocked. I was in disbelief, and watched the KO several times into the wee hours of May 16. I hadn't watched an upset KO repeatedly into the early morning hours since George Foreman's right hand landed on Michael Moorer almost ten years before. The end was so abrupt and complete, it was hard to fathom. Roy Jones' market value popped like a dot com balloon, and Tarver's market value increased like Apple Computer when the iPod hit the shelves.

In boxing, however, success is often a quarterly phenomenon. If you don't plan and execute consistently, fans will sell you out just like stockholders will sell their stock when they don't think they're investing in a sure thing. Tarver hit it big with his win over Jones, but his market value plummeted during a year when he should've garnered Fighter of the Year honors because he didn't continue to cultivate his skills or keep an eye on the competition. Tarver, despite possessing superb one punch knockout power, was unexpectedly out-hustled in a controversial decision to then-journeyman Glen Coffe Johnson on December 18, 2004.

Not surprisingly, when Tarver lost to Johnson, many automatically questioned the authenticity of this win over Jones. Johnson, a journeyman with a 41-9-2 record at the time of their first bout, was able to starch Jones as well, and Tarver's biggest career win was devalued accordingly. Boxer's reap what they sow if they're lucky. Antonio was not only devalued by fans, but was reportedly having financial problems as well. The Magic Man was back on square one.

In the months following Tarver's controversial loss to Johnson, he was uncharacteristically quiet. Some interpreted Tarver's silence as that of a man who was not only a one hit wonder, but also as a fighter who was exposed as an insignificant belt-holder who couldn't deal with luck and success. In reality, Tarver was on a mission of redemption. He was able to secure a rematch with Johnson, and went to work like a true pro.

When he stepped into the ring in Memphis on June 18, he was a more focused and better prepared fighter than the Tarver we saw a week before Christmas last year. I scored the rematch 117-111. I also felt as though Antonio might've been able to stop the concrete-jawed and iron-willed Johnson if he would've sat down on his punches more and applied quantity instead of quality. Regardless of the nature of the win, Antonio's stock should've been rejuvenated. But, ironically, Antonio's market value and leverage aren't what they should be, and his prospects for the future are both unnecessarily complex and tricky.

First, Tarver-Johnson 2 wasn't deemed worthy of pay-per-view status. It turned out to be a good action fight, but the outcome was definitive. Many fans don't think the outcome of a rubber match would be much different. Therefore, Tarver's search for a high yield opportunity in his division appears fleeting. To make matters worse, Roy Jones' market value is at an all-time low, so securing a meaningful rubber match with Roy is virtually out of the question. Roy is a businessman first and a fighter second, and the risks and rewards associated with facing Tarver again don't fit into the mindset of Roy Jones, regardless of any rhetoric we might hear from Tarver's fellow Floridian. The light heavyweight division is currently as anemic in talent as the middleweight division was just one year ago. Options are limited.

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Speaking of middleweights, if Bernard Hopkins gets by Jermain Taylor in a few weeks, I actually don't believe Bernard will pursue a mega-bout with Tarver. Antonio is a huge light heavyweight, and I think Bernard was rooting loudly for Glencoffe Johnson on June 18, if he was considering a move up to 175 to close out his astonishing and circuitous journey from ex-convict to all-time great middleweight champion.

On a different note, even though Antonio is a big light heavyweight, moving up in weight appears to possess diluted options as well. A bout with cruiserweight king Jean-Marc Mormeck would be interesting only to hardcore fans, and few would watch it. A move to heavyweight probably carries more risks than rewards.

Antonio Tarver has done everything that's been asked of him. He's beaten every fighter he's ever faced. He's clearly and sometimes dramatically avenged his three career defeats. Unfortunately, it's not enough. After his rematch win over Johnson, boxing fans weren't discussing how he would do against Foster, Conn, Moore or Spinks. Like other boxing writers, I believe if he would've knocked Johnson cold like he did Jones in their rematch, his place in light heavyweight boxing history and contemporary marketability would've been more compelling. Instead, he merely did what odds makers expected him to do: Avenge a defeat.

Antonio Tarver is at a strange fork in the road that shouldn't exist. His choices should be simple, and he should reap significant dividends. In the next few months, Tarver and his team will have to do some creative and innovative marketing to land a big payday and a signature win before the ubiquitous reality of Father Time looms like the Grim Reaper. Otherwise, he'll go down in history as just another belt-holder in a lost era, and a fighter who never captured the imagination of the boxing historians and the buying public.

Boxing, like life, is unfair.