

Keeping the Faith with Lamon Brewster

Written by Robert Ecksel
Sunday, 17 July 2005 19:00

When I think of Lamon Brewster, I see him demolishing Golota with a series of left hooks in Chicago. When I look at Lamon Brewster, I see one those prime and ready candidates that Vitali Klitschko needs to fight to reestablish credibility. Brewster can be ferocious in the ring – Golota can attest to that – so can Vitali's bro – but there's another side to "Relentless" Lamon Brewster. There's the man outside the ropes.

He too is Lamon Brewster.

The champ was born in Indianapolis, Indiana on June 5, 1973. He was oldest of four boys. I asked Brewster what it was like growing up in Indy.

"I guess my life for me was typical growing up in the ghetto," Brewster said. "I grew up, it was just drugs all around me. I've been in situations on several occasions where a lotta bullets were flying – for whatever reason – whether I had anything to do with it or just not. You could be at a party and people get to shooting. You could be at a club. Your friends think they have enemies and they get to shooting those enemies. You can be killed in fights with guns. Guns come into play. There's been so many times in my life where there's been this type of violence that it was normal to me growing up."

It's a miracle Brewster didn't get lured into the seductions of the street. I asked how he sidestepped that destiny.

"When I got out of school – I got out like 3:30 – I got home about 4:00 on the bus – my trainer was *at my door* at 5:30 and he wouldn't take no for an answer," recalled Brewster. "My coach, my little white coach, took the time every day to come get me and take me to the gym. I owe my life to him. He was an 86-year-old trainer named Bill Brown who used to hobo back in the Depression days with Jack Dempsey. He had 330 fights and he believed in me. He made me believe in me when even I didn't believe in me.

"Because he opened and closed the gym – we were the first ones in and the last ones out – by the time I came home *I was tired*. And you're not about to go run the streets when you've been in the gym. How I know that God had a purpose for me was that there were a lotta times during the day when I *chose* not to go and hang out with my friends and something would happen to them, whether somebody would get killed, somebody would be stabbed, somebody went to jail, somebody got caught with drugs on them. So it was like: Okay, wow, man. This is really keeping me out of trouble."

For those who haven't been there and done that, the wonders of the ghetto never cease.

"Everybody I pretty much knew growing up, my real true friends I would say, they dead, or they locked up, or they on drugs – because that's just the way it is in the 'hood. We're victims of our environments. Nobody ain't trying to get you no job. And when your mother can't make ends

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meet, it's really hard, man. And while she's sitting there trying to be strong and she's going down to the unemployment line and things like that, you're sucked in by the peer pressure. Because your friends decided to sell a little drugs, even though it was against the law, and guess what? He got money and he's in good and his mother can afford to have a car, you got the lights on, you can afford to eat every night. So it's really hard, man," Brewster said. "But I'm not going to judge anybody on what they do. That's what they do to survive. I'm not saying that it's right. I just feel like what I can stand for is a positive guy who says: Look, I made it out of the community. I made it out."

Brewster made it out, but he always revisits Indianapolis – and he can't believe his eyes.

"The crime is even worse now than it was when I was living there," he said. "They trying to close the community centers. I learned to box at these community centers. I learned just how to have social skills at these community centers. I really feel I owe my life to these community centers. That's where everything started for me. Now I come home and some of these community centers are closed down for whatever reason. Where do you think these kids gonna go? There's a little Lamon Brewster out there who ... thank God they had a community center out there when I was a kid."

Although I wanted to talk boxing, there was no point in dodging the issue of Brewster's faith. It's as big a part of his life as the fight game – the two are intertwined in his mind – and Lamon's not shy about bearing witness.

"I've always been into God my whole life," the WBO heavyweight champion said. "You seldom meet many poor black people who don't know God. My family's from the south and most southern people have that deeply rooted Baptist background – which is where I come from, a Baptist background, a southern Mississippi spirituality. I always went to church. I went to bible study. Growing up the only thing you know is what your parents tell you, and they always told me about Jesus, they always told me about God and His Son. And as I got older I learned to call on the Lord in my times of trouble. I mean he delivered me out of *a lot*."

He delivered Brewster out of a lot, but what he delivered him to was something special.

"I always wanted to be Bruce Lee," Brewster said, "but they didn't have martial arts in my community, so I practiced on everything in the house until my mother got fed up with it and said 'We're gonna take you down the street and try to get rid of some of this energy you have.' I was seven years old. So when she took me down the street [to the gym] I saw something I've never seen before. I saw the eyes of a whole bunch of men who were inspired to do something in life. As a kid you ain't inspired to do nothing but drink Kool Aid and watch cartoons, but seeing them muscles, I wanted them muscles too."

Was that what inspired the champ to become a boxer?

"I think the breaking point was my father," replied Brewster. "Like any child, you want to impress your father, you want him to love you, you want all your father's attention. And I was no different. Every time a fight came on television, every last soul in the house would just stop and

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be in front of that television. Not just everybody. I mean more importantly my father. I wanted my father to give me the same attention he was giving to that television set. The way he was hollering at that fight, I wanted him hollering at me, saying those great things.”

Brewster’s father loved boxing. He had a longstanding connection to the game, some of which he inadvertently passed on to his eldest son.

“My father used to have some boxing gloves,” Brewster remembered, “because he used to box when he was a kid. But he never wanted me to touch them. So every time he was going out the house I used to sneak in a look at those gloves and I used to like wonder: Wow! Why they smell like that? I’ve never smelled that before. It was a combination of like leather and sweat, but it’s something so – I can’t even think of the word – but there’s something so mannish about sweat and leather.

“So as a kid it just kinda got in my bloodstream. And then, a little down the road, my grandmother told me that my grandfather – who I never knew, because he died when my father was young – when my father was born, he held my father and said ‘My son’s going to be a fighter.’ Well, I didn’t know about none of that, but I just found it to be in my blood. It was just something that I felt I couldn’t avoid.”

Brewster believes it’s a good thing the boxing bug bit him when it did.

“It’s good to get a child when he’s young. That’s why it’s so important to always encourage kids,” the heavyweight champion said, “‘cause if a kid get in his mind he can do something, he’s gonna grow into a butterfly. Believe that. But if you don’t give a kid encouragement, he’ll stay a caterpillar. He’ll never morph.”

I wasn’t sure if it was my dumb luck or if Brewster just likes to talk, but I asked about the oft-told tale about how he ended up in California.

“I had just graduated from high school,” he said. “And I remember hearing my cousin say ‘I don’t know what I’m going to do. I need someone to help drive back [to LA].’ And before I even knew it I’m in her face: ‘Oh, I’ll help you.’ And then I kinda looked down at myself and looked up at the sky like – ‘What did I just say?’”

The very next day Brewster was on his way to California in a Volvo station wagon with “three bad little kids who listened to Sesame Street all the way there and two nannies that couldn’t even speak English and a cousin that I haven’t seen since she was holding me in Pampers. I had a pair of boxing gloves, a pair of boxing shoes, and about five dollars in my pocket ... and now I’m heavyweight champion of the world.”

I asked the champ if that was his first time in Cali.

“I have to be honest with you,” Brewster said. “I didn’t think I was going to California to live. I just thought I was just going to California. I was already pacing the floor trying to figure, ‘What am I going to do with my life? What am I going to do with my life?’ I asked my mother ‘What

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should I do?’ And it was really at that point my stepfather intervened and said ‘You gotta let him be a man. You can’t keep making decisions for him.’ When he said that, I looked at him like: I can’t believe he said that. Out of all the times in my life I needed somebody to make this life decision, now he’s saying *I gotta make it.*”

Brewster doesn’t regret the decision he made, with the help of the mother, his stepfather, and the Big Guy upstairs.

“I remember saying to the Lord: Lead me somewhere where I can be successful. Then I decided, hey man, I’m just gonna try this boxing thing. I said I’m gonna try to make it to the Olympics. But I know if I stay in Indiana I won’t make it ... So in my mind I had gone to the east coast, I had gone to New York, I had gone to New Jersey – just places where boxing was really something. And I ain’t never heard about boxing on the west coast in my whole life.

“When I was going to California it wasn’t with the true intention on being the champion I am now. I just said, ‘Well, I won everything in Indiana. I’m just gonna take my boxing gloves and see what the competition is like in California.’ And when I got out there my cousin was taking me to some gyms and right away guys saw my talent and they were like, ‘Wow, man, you’re a good fighter,’ and I found myself in a couple of tournaments and I won ‘em right away and I was knocking people out. And the next thing I know, I’ve got the city of Los Angeles behind me.”

LA might have been behind him, but Brewster was still only an amateur.

He told me “I contemplated boxing a lot of times in my life before I turned pro. I didn’t want to turn pro. I didn’t even want to box. I wanted to hang out with my friends, be able to have a life with them. They had all the fun. They had all the girls – regardless of the repercussions of drugs and going to jail. I mean, shoot, I even thought maybe going to jail would be cool, because it’s like people respect you more than a little. But that’s just a ghetto mentality.”

Brewster kayoed the ghetto mentality, got back to work and turned professional on November 8, 1996 against Moses Harris in Las Vegas. Lamon scored a first round kayo ... and he kept winning. That win streak came to an end with a unanimous decision loss to Clifford Etienne in Pittsburgh in May 2000. Five months and two fights later, Brewster suffered another UD loss, this time to Charles Shufford. But Lamon Brewster wasn’t done with boxing. Not by a long shot. He won his next five fights, setting up the career-defining bout with Wladimir Klitschko on April 10, 2004 for the vacant WBO title.

“When I came to Los Angeles I started training with Bill Slayton and he became not only my trainer, he became my father,” Brewster insisted. “And when you are coming to a state where nobody knows you, where you have no family, where you have no friends, you reach out for people, you need a mentor, and God brought me Bill Slayton. Bill talked to me like he did his son. He gave me money out of his own pocket so that I could continue to live in California, so that I could eat, so that I could buy shoes to run ... He had cancer and had it for a long time and didn’t really tell us about it. Two, three months before I’m getting ready to fight Klitschko, my trainer dies. So basically you clip my wings, but I could still fly.”

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The younger Klitschko still had a bit of a reputation in those days, while Lamon Brewster was the opponent, the underdog, the stepping stone – and then his trainer died.

“So now I have to find a trainer. And I’m like blind here, because I’m so used to Bill being everything for me. Well, all of the sudden you got me standing on my own feet without a crutch, and I’m lost. So I get this trainer to work with me, but that’s exactly what he was – he was a trainer – and I didn’t realize that I was already developed, that I was already made. But mentally I had not come into my own. And that’s something my trainer always used to say: ‘When you come into your own, nobody’s ever going to beat you.’ And I didn’t understand what that meant. But when I got this trainer, he wanted to bring in his ego; he wanted to bring in his style of training. But his style of training took away from what my trainer taught me. So you got a guy who is trying to fight for a world title, but is really confused. So, man, it was just a big mess,” Brewster said. “I won by the grace of God.”

Lamon was not at his best that night, but Klitschko was terrible.

Brewster continued: “When I went into that fight, the first thing I did when I came out there with that trainer’s style and [Klitschko] hit me, I was like, well, okay. But then he hit me again and again and again. I was like, ‘Hold up, man, this ain’t working.’ I mean I’m having conversations with myself in the middle of a world title fight. So next thing I know I got back to the corner and when I stood back up I said, ‘Okay, I’m gonna abandon everything, because none of what he’s showing me is gonna work. I’m just gonna go to war with this dude, ‘cause that’s all I can do.’

“So I went out there remembering the tapes of Joe Frazier and Roberto Duran. They put so much pressure on the dudes [they were fighting] that the dudes collapsed. And I knew I could punch. I knew that I could chop a tree down by going to the body. So I let him throw out them punches. Because one thing I did do was I managed to study tapes of Wladimir Klitschko and I noticed that he gets tired in the later rounds. So I was like, ‘I’m gonna make this dude punch. I’m gonna be in his face every second of every round and I’m gonna win this fight.’”

People forget that boxing – the most physical of sports – has a mental component too.

“So what happened was I got into the fight with Wladimir Klitschko and no matter what he threw,” Brewster said, “I just wasn’t going to let it deter me from winning that fight. So when I saw him getting tired I hit with a shot and when he couldn’t respond I knew I was going to knock him out, because I’m probably the hardest puncher in the division. A lot of people don’t know that, because before Wladimir Klitschko I used to just box people and then take them out, as opposed to just go out there and show how hard I can really punch. It’s like getting them drunk and then mugging them.”

Brewster got Klitschko drunk and then mugged him, before walking off with the WBO heavyweight title. His first defense of the crown, against his former sparring partner Kali Meehan, was also a bout that Brewster barely won.

“When I fought Kali I fought a guy who helped me get ready for Wladimir Klitschko, and he was a really nice guy, he was a true gentleman, one of the nicest guys that I’ve ever had the

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opportunity to train with. We talked and he gave me just all kinds of tips on how to fight a tall guy. So me and Kali stayed in touch. But then they turn around and here I'm fighting this guy. So I was like, 'how do you fight somebody that you have bonded with?' So it was like really difficult," Brewster said. "I go to camp, and I train, and I don't see this guy for a couple of months. I was fine until I got there. But when I saw Kali his two kids was with him and as soon as they saw me they ran up and put their arms around me and, man, I psychologically melted.

"And I got into the fight with Kali and I started throwing punches at this guy and I hit him with a good shot and hurt him ... and I thought about his kids! – and that really made me hesitate to really try to destroy this guy." The champion paused. "I don't blame you for doubting me. If I was a fan, if I wasn't Lamon Brewster and just knew of Lamon Brewster from those two fights, I would say the exact same thing: 'Hey, man, that Brewster – I don't know, man. I don't think he's gonna beat Golota. I think he's a bum.' I would just have something probably negative to say, just being a true fan."

Brewster has proven that he's no bum. In this era of splintered titles and lowered expectations, he's one of the heavyweight champions of the world. I asked him about his fellow champs, and the challenges they pose, starting with IBF champion Chris Byrd.

"Chris is very, very fast. He throws a lot of punches. He's very elusive. A fight with Chris is a fight where you have to do one of two things. Either you have to be prepared to fight him every second of every round or you have to be prepared to box him, because to stand in front of Byrd and just try to hit him with big shots – like every other dinosaur heavyweight has done – is pointless. He's proven that," said Brewster with a laugh.

What about John Ruiz?

"He has a very awkward style. He's a strong guy. He's a determined guy. And when you fight someone who's awkward, strong and determined, they're always going to give you a hard fight, no matter who they are," Brewster said. "But the thing with John Ruiz is that he's never ever fought anybody to this day – with maybe, and I say maybe, the exception of David Tua – who punches as hard as I do. And you can have all those skills and be awkward, but, man, when somebody can punch that hard to where you're body breaks down, your mind takes over your body and goes into that defensive mode, because you don't want to die, you don't want to get killed. I think that would definitely change his whole tactic. When you start getting hit so hard that it hurts even when you're in the corner, you change real quick about whether or not you want to be in the ring with that person."

And, even though he's on hiatus or sabbatical or sick leave or whatever from active duty, I had to ask Brewster about Vitali Klitschko, the presumptive man to beat in the heavyweight division.

"Vitali Klitschko is a good fighter. He's an awkward fighter, because he fights the European style, which a lot of Americans are not used to. But, thank God, because of my international experience in the amateurs both fighting tall guys and European styles, to me, Vitali Klitschko is a tree; and with any tree, you can't hit it once and think it's gonna fall. But if you just continue to chop, continue to chop ... well, then the tree will fall. It's a proven fact that a tall guy cannot

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outlast a smaller guy in a dogfight. I mean you cannot think for a second that a Great Dane will ever beat a pit bull in a dogfight. It would never happen.

“I’ll tell you one thing about Vitali. It’s no knock on him, but he has a Ph.D., and in the back of his mind he got that Ph.D. because he felt like somewhere along the line if boxing don’t work out he can go do something else. Well, I’m gonna make it such a fight where he gonna think about everything but boxing. He gonna think about trying to stay alive. Because this is what I got. I don’t have a Ph.D. I don’t have nothing. I got a school of hard knocks certificate.”

Brewster is such a levelheaded, good-natured, quintessentially nice guy, I wondered how he reconciled these qualities with the search-and-destroy mission that is boxing.

“First thing I want to say is God told the Israelites, ‘I’m going to give you the land of milk and honey.’ But he also told them that they have to go to war to get that land. So I’m not expecting to step in the ring and the guy’s just going to lay down. That isn’t going to happen,” Brewster maintained. “But God has given me the opportunity to get to the land of milk and honey, so that every time I win that’s a bigger payday and I can better take care of my kids, better take care of my wife, you know, better take care of my whole family. So for me it’s no different than him saying to the Israelites, ‘Hey, I’m giving you the land of milk and honey, but you gotta go take it.’ That tells me in order for me to live, to eat, somebody has to lose, and the only way I can do it is to defeat the guy I’m fighting. So it’s pretty much that type of deal.

“As far as being a fighter, it’s just a physical thing. I don’t hate that guy. I don’t want to kill that guy. But that guy’s standing in the way of my kids starving – and man I come from nothing. And I’m gonna let that guy beat me and go back to nothing? I’m gonna go back to not having heat, going back to boiling water so I can take a bath, just so somebody else can profit? I’m not gonna do that, man. Because if God had given me another talent, if he had given me a gift where maybe I could sing or maybe be a Wall Street broker, well then that’s what I would’ve did. But he didn’t give me that role. He gave me this role to be a fighter, to be a warrior, so I’m gonna use that to take care of my family, because I’ve seen my mother cry, I’ve seen my wife cry, and I don’t want to go buy my kids the cheapest shoes because that’s all I can afford and they’re going to have flat feet like their daddy. No, I don’t want that for them.”

Everything circles back, as things inevitably do, to the formative years of Brewster’s life.

“I used to wear two pair of sweat pants the whole year with like three shirts. On dress up day I dressed bummy just to be rebellious because I knew I couldn’t afford that stuff. I’m not gonna let my kids go that way. So if it means me getting in there knocking this man out who knows the dangers of being a fighter, then that’s what I have to do. That’s what I have to do to live. That’s what I have to do to be a father. I’m sure a lion when he’s protecting his pride, he doesn’t want just to kill, but he’s gonna defend his pride. And me defending my pride is to say, ‘I’m trying to get to the land of milk and honey and you’re in my way.’ Like Golota. He was in my way. I don’t have no bad feelings toward him. I wish him the best in his life, but he was standing in my way, he was trying to steal something from me, he’s trying to steal something that since I was seven, since I was a little boy, I’ve been working hard for. I’m not going to let no man take that from me.”

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Before closing my interview with the champ, I asked Brewster if he had a message for his fans.

“My message for the fans,” he said, “is that you can do anything in the world you want to do, no matter what it is you want to do, because I did it. I’m the world champion because I believed in myself, because I had faith in God, and that to me is the single most important thing. The thing I try to get across to people is: Look, I’m the guy down the street. I’m the guy who when your parents were buying you sneakers, I was thinking about maybe I could go to Goodwill and get some and clean ‘em up. So if I can make it, *anybody* – and I mean that – *anybody* can make it, but you have to believe in yourself. Nobody else is going to believe in you. You gotta believe in yourself. You gotta have confidence. You gotta have courage. Even if you’re scared to death you can do it. I went into fights when I was a kid when I was scared to death, but when I started throwing them punches, it dawned on me – hey, I can do it. And so I grew confident and was able to win fights against guys I didn’t think that I could beat. But because I started believing in myself, I could do it. I hope they put that on my headstone:

If you believe in yourself you can do it.

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