Championship territory from the 1920s into the 1980s traditionally was rounds 11 through 15. It was a mountain which I believe many fighters are unprepared to climb in this era when championship rounds have dwindled to two.

It would have been interesting to see what would have happened if Bernard Hopkins and Jermain Taylor would have gone back to their corners after the 12th round knowing their were still three rounds to fight.

Oh, what those three extra rounds meant to boxing history!

Under today's 12-round limit, a light heavyweight would have upset Joe Louis; the greatest right hand punch ever to be thrown would not have been thrown; Sugar would not have melted, and the Hit Man would have escaped Sugar Ray's shadow.

Championship territory when it stretched to 15 rounds was a little too big for John Tate and just big enough for Jake LaMotta.

The championship landscape began changing when Deuk-Koo-Kim was injured fatally when he was knocked out in the 14th round in a WBC lightweight title challenge to Ray "Boom Boom" Mancini on Nov. 13, 1982 at Las Vegas.

WBC President Jose Sulaiman then ordered that as a safety measure title fights sanctioned by his organization would be limited to 12 rounds. The WBA and IBF eventually would follow suit, and today the 12-round limit is the standard.

The Journal of Combative Sport lists on its website more than 500 deaths in professional and amateur bouts worldwide in a 50-year period ending in 1982. Since the round a fight ended is not always listed, I could confirm only six deaths in fights that went past the 12th round, with the Mancini-Kim match being the only world title bout.

As far as safety goes, the 12-round limit appears to me to be cosmetic. Real safety measures include the fitted mouthpiece, thumb attached gloves; fights being stopped much earlier than they used to be, and a fourth ring rope that makes it harder for a falling fighter to hit his head or neck on a rope.

Twelve-round fights, however, are here to stay in this era of phony weight classes and what seems like hundreds of champions. I believe going 15 rounds is too much to ask of fighters in an age when money means much more than dedication to many of them. Besides, 12-rounds is a better fit for television schedules.

One of the first 12-round title fights was Larry Holmes' one-sided decision over Lucien Rodriguez in a WBC heavyweight title defense ont March 27, 1983 at Scranton, Pa. Holmes

would later fight in five 15-round IBF title bouts. The first scheduled 12-round WBA heavyweight title bout was Tim Witherspoon's 12-round TKO of Frank Bruno on July 19, 1986, at London. The first for the IBF title came when Michael Spinks stopped Stefan Tangsted in the fourth round on Sept. 6, 1986, at Las Vegas.

Now let us look at the six fights I mentioned above in which the outcome would have been different if they had been scheduled for 12 rounds.

Someone might say, of course, that if the fights had been scheduled for 12 rounds, they would have been fought differently. Well, everyone is entitled to his or her opinion, but I do not think in these instances they would have been fought differently.

Billy Conn, who had held the light heavyweight title, had just had a big 12th round against heavyweight champion Joe Louis, and the crowd at the Polo Grounds in New York City that night of June 18, 1941, was in an uproar. There was a sense that Conn was on the verge of springing a great upset . . . and he was. After 12 rounds, referee Eddie Joseph had it 7-5 and judge Marty Monroe had it 7-4-1 for Conn. Judge Healy saw it 6-6. Then Conn's recklessness and Louis' patience and power combined for a Louis knockout victory in the 13th round.

For 12 rounds Sugar Ray Robinson boxed rings around light heavyweight champion Joey Maxim on June 25, 1952, at New York's Yankee Stadium, and he was just nine minutes from becoming boxing's first triple champion since Henry Armstrong. It was a scorching summer night in which referee Ruby Goldstein needed to be replaced by Ray Miller in the 10th round, and Robinson was beginning to wobble from the heat. He managed to last through the 13th round, but then collapsed and could not answer the bell for the 14th round.

Years later I was talking to Maxim and mentioned how Robinson would have won if it had not been for the heat.

"I didn't have air-conditioning," Maxim said.

No one was thinking about an undefeated career for Rocky Marciano as heavyweight champion Jersey Joe Walcott controlled the action for 12 rounds on Sept. 23, 1952 at Sesquicentennial Stadium in Philadelphia. With three rounds remaining all three officials had crafty old Jersey Joe comfortably ahead – referee Charlie Daggett 7-4-1, Pete Tomasco 7-5 and Zack Clayton 8-4. A short right to the jaw – a picture perfect punch – in the 13th round erased the scorecards and made Rocky champion.

In the eyes of three judges Thomas Hearns was well on his way to winning what would have been the biggest victory of his fine career – a victory over Sugar Ray Leonard for the undisputed welterweight champion on Sept. 16, 1981 at Caesars Palace in Las Vegas. After being rocked by Leonard in the sixth and seventh rounds, the Hit Man turned boxer, and after 12 rounds he was favored 116-112 by Duane Ford, 117-111 by Chuck Minker and 117-112 by Lou Tabat. Then Leonard cast his shadow over Hearns forever by hurting him badly in the 13th round and stopping him in the next round.

The fans jammed into the Stokely Athletic Center at Knoxville were getting what they came to see the night of March 31, 1980. After 14 rounds, the only way hometown hero John Take could lose the WBA heavyweight title to Mike Weaver was by knockout. Then 55 seconds away from a victory celebration, Weaver landed a left hook to the jaw, and 10 seconds later Tate was an ex-champion.

On Feb. 14, 1951, Sugar Ray Robinson stopped Jake LaMotta in the 13th round and won the middleweight title. For 14 rounds and 2 minutes on Sept. 13, 1950, at Detroit, it looked like Robinson would be challenging Laurent Dauthuille. In the final minute, however, LaMotta hurt the Frenchman, then battered him to defeat with 13 seconds remaining in the fight.

“Of such extraordinary doings are champions made,” Ed Sullivan wrote in his column.

Ah, those 15-round fights!