

## Audley Harrison: His Mission Is Incomplete

Written by David Payne  
Wednesday, 10 August 2005 19:00

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*"... a gold medal is a wonderful thing. But if you're not enough without one, you'll never be enough with one."*

Prophetic John Candy in "Cool Runnings"

Even before Audley Harrison beat up Jim Rockford wannabe Mike Middleton on his professional debut he's sought to defy the rules of boxing. Not the rules espoused by the referee, but the unwritten commandments that underpin the management of any fledgling professional's career.

At some point in his next three fights the prudence of that defiance will finally be revealed as the Olympian belatedly enters the business end of the heavyweight division. In 2001, an injury plagued year on from his momentous achievement in Sydney, the giant Londoner turned professional and opted to manage his own career, negotiate his own broadcasting contract and, in all reality, handpick his early opponents.

That's not the way it's meant to be.

Rare commodities like Olympic gold medalists are traditionally pursued, signed, nurtured and guided by established promoters. Harrison, as a six and half foot, articulate southpaw, was no different and it will be interesting to see if his appearance on the American circuit finally heralds the breakthrough fight he needs. Preceding his present reincarnation and relocation to Las Vegas, Harrison's career has been punctuated by injury, savagely criticised by jealous and bitter promoters, and undermined by creative but cautious matchmaking.

It's not all Harrison's fault; in many ways he was a victim of his own success. The BBC signed him to lead their return to boxing coverage on a much-publicised million pound 10-fight contract and the publicly funded broadcaster quickly became disillusioned with Harrison's technical style. Making four and six round contests the main event isn't sustainable either, but what was Harrison meant to do, turn down the contract? As Frank Warren candidly remarked in an interview I did with him last year:

*"... pick and choose his (own) opponents but the real problem was when they tried telling us this was the greatest fight on earth. It was like a circus, it was just cheerleading, they simply didn't have enough quality. And then you have Audley earning £100,000 a fight and it simply isn't bill-topping stuff, it isn't going to work. I'm not blaming Audley, if someone offered me those terms I'd have done the same."*

Having left British shores following the collapse of negotiations with British and Commonwealth champion Matt Skelton's promoter, the very same Frank Warren, and being embarrassingly dumped by the BBC, Harrison's second stint in the US looks more promising. American

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promoter Dan Goossen has provided some direction, activity and let's face it honesty to Harrison's path. Gone are the undersized European imports and in come capable gatekeepers like Robert Davis and, on the 18th, Robert Wiggins.

There are few promoters out there who would decline an invitation to be involved in Audley's career. As an undefeated, 18-0 (13 KOs), 6'6", 250-pound gold medal pedigree heavyweight in a division packed to the rafters with shop-worn veterans, exposed protégés and mediocre contenders, Harrison is a very viable product.

But can he actually fight? Or has his self-managed career, as his many detractors suggest, been little more than a carefully choreographed charade? A parade of diminutive underdogs designed to protect Harrison from risk whilst sustaining public interest?

Predictable but convincing, Goossen declared his faith in a recent presser: *"I believe the ability he possesses, and his speed, size and strength, matches up to any of the current world champions today."*

Big talk – an area in which Harrison previously required little assistance – but following months of vilification from the British press, TV networks, rival promoters and boxing fans, the 33-year-old will be warmed by the praise. Like most fighters Harrison doesn't appear to have ever lost faith or allowed the withering criticism he's endured dilute his self-confidence or bravado.

Speaking at last week's press conference Harrison suggested that *"boxing needs a dominant figure, my mission is incomplete."*

An interesting perspective considering the self-styled "A-Force" has yet to face a top twenty contender and is as old as all the current champions.

Fans counter that the Hersisia performance, the flashes of quality and respective records of opponents Krence, Calloway and Bonin are all evidence for his lofty aspirations. Cynics point to the failure to face domestic rivals like Sprott, Williams and Skelton – despite a pre-debut suggestion that he would win the British title in his 5th fight. The sceptics also bemoan his inactivity, age (he turns 34 in October), propensity for injury (he's lost almost two years so far) and a lack of concussive power.

Both perspectives have merit and whilst comparison with fellow Sydney Olympians like Paulo Vidoz (European Champion) and Samuel Peter are unfavourable, a quick glance at the resume of Michael Bennett illustrates the penalties for moving too fast. Despite that context, the overwhelming consensus is Harrison has to step it up, has to face hungry opponents. In conversation with SecondsOut.com, Joe Goossen was belligerent in his defence of Harrison's level of opposition and suggested the type of higher profile fighters fans and critics demand are proving hard to pin down.

*"What we're doing with Audley is keeping him busy until he has the chance to go out there against a top 10 fighter. I can tell you for a fact, F-A-C-T with capitals, that we tried to get Calvin Brock for this date but he turned it down. We also wanted to get Jameel McCline but he had no*

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*interest."*

On Thursday the 18th Harrison returns to the top of the bill in Goossen Tutor's "Night of the Olympians" bill, facing off against hot and cold Rhode Island heavyweight Robert Wiggins. It would be easy to hang the veteran tag on the 36-year-old southpaw, but as he's just two years older than the prospect in the fight it's hard to justify. However, Wiggins is as live an opponent as Harrison has faced and will bring experience, his lefty stance and some credible history to the ring.

A split decision loss to Monte Barrett on four days notice takes on revised kudos following Barrett's reinvention as a serious contender in the division and Barrett finished the fight marked up. Add victory over then-prospects Derek Bryant and Eric Kirkland, a points defeat to DaVarryl Williamson in which he broke Williamson's jaw, and a proud record of having never been knocked out (the Kirkland defeat was due to a swollen eye), and Wiggins' credentials are watertight.

Wiggins also comes to the fight on the back of a victory over the fabulously named Courage Tshabalala in a fight that encouraged his promoter, Joe DeGuardia, to suggest he'd rediscovered his focus for the sport. *"Robert showed his grit and toughness and I'm glad he's rededicating himself the way he has,"* said DeGuardia. *"When he's on top of his game, Robert Wiggins is a force to be reckoned with for any heavyweight in the world and that's what he showed again tonight (against Tshabalala)."*

A preceding points defeat to 5-fight novice Kevin Johnson offers balance, but Johnson isn't without potential himself.

Should Harrison becomes the first fighter to knockout Wiggins in his 25-fight career and move on to the *"Jameel McCline type opponents"* he's promised before the end of the year, then maybe, just maybe, the late-blooming North Londoner can have the last laugh.

If he were to fight for and win a strand of the heavyweight title in 2006, at the age of 34 it would be an incredible achievement and a reflection of both his ability and arguably, dissenters prepare to nod your head here, the weakness of the division.