

Leavander Johnson, Boxing and Validity

Written by Matthew Aguilar

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Leavander Johnson lies in a Las Vegas hospital today, having undergone surgery to repair a battered brain following a loss to Jesus Chavez over the weekend.

And you have to wonder, is boxing worth it anymore? Is it valid to continue a sport that is so dangerous, yet is so far on the periphery now that its point is almost lost?

Is it valid to continue watching and covering and cheering and encouraging a sport so overwhelmed with ills that, during times like these, recovery seems unlikely for either boxing or the fallen fighter?

What if Johnson had opted for another line of work 20 years ago? What if the opportunity to lace on gloves and enter the ring for profit was never presented to him? Would he still be coherent today?

What if boxing were to close shop right now, would that prevent other kids from stepping into the ring, as Johnson did – inviting a life-altering brain injury into an otherwise happy life?

All this doubt – and the sick feeling that accompanies it – comes around once every couple of years.

Ray Mancini vs. Duk Koo Kim seems to be the modern benchmark for such tragedies. It happened on Nov. 13, 1982, beneath a brilliant sun at Caesars Palace in Las Vegas. Kim, an unknown from South Korea, had scrawled “Kill or be killed” on a lampshade in his hotel room, and meant it.

He wasn't leaving without Mancini's WBA lightweight title belt. His determination cost him his life.

After a fierce war, Mancini drilled Kim in the 14th round with a sickening right hand. Kim crashed onto his back, beneath the lower strand of the rope, as the crowd cheered.

What is most unbelievable is that, with his brain already short-circuiting from the damage it had sustained, Kim got up from the knockdown instinctively. Everything in him told him to keep fighting.

Referee Richard Greene stopped the fight. Then Kim's brain stopped working completely. He died a couple of days later.

As a direct result of the Mancini-Kim tragedy, the WBC cut championship fights from 15 to 12 rounds in 1983. Didn't matter. In September '03, Albert Davila won the vacant WBC bantamweight title on his fourth try. His celebration was soon quelled when his opponent, Mexico's Kiko Bejines, slipped into a coma and died.

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Bejines, like Kim, tried to get up after he was knocked down and, as *KO Magazine* pointed out, he had a look on his face like, “Why can’t I do this?”

Doctors determined why he couldn’t do it: His brain had been destroyed.

The American Medical Association led the charge against boxing – and their argument was becoming more and more convincing to more and more people. Boxing fans braced for the familiar onslaught, knowing that this great sport would persevere.

Twenty-two years later, however, you have to wonder if the fight to persevere is a noble one.

Since then, we’ve had countless deaths, the most high-profile being Jimmy Garcia’s 1995 demise at the hands of Gabriel Ruelas.

But death is just part of the story.

What about Meldrick Taylor, who fought way past his prime and is incoherent these days? What about Wilfred Benitez, who is in a vegetative stage in his native Puerto Rico? What about Gerald McClellan, who sits blind and deaf in a wheelchair 10 years after suffering a brain injury in his fight with England’s Nigel Benn? What about Greg Page, a former high-profile heavyweight who is also in a wheelchair? What about Bobby Chacon, who, a few years ago was reportedly so punch-drunk that he was aimlessly collecting cans in a junkyard to support himself?

They are the “lucky” ones.

Boxing was defensible 50 years ago, when there was only one heavyweight champion and boxing was at the height of its popularity. The risk seemed to justify the reward.

It was defensible 30 years ago, when it was on the front page of every daily newspaper and everybody knew Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier and George Foreman, and the sport competed with football and baseball in popularity.

It was defensible 10-15 years ago, when Sugar Ray Leonard and Marvin Hagler and Thomas Hearns captured the world’s attention with their fistic prowess and charisma.

Today? There seems nothing but hopelessness. Mostly, because there are no stars – the whole reason we watched in the first place.

Oh, there’s the semi-retired Oscar De La Hoya – but he was the final beneficiary of the still-meaningful boxing competition at the 1992 Barcelona Olympics. A worldwide audience heard De La Hoya’s story – his mom passing away, his humble background. And they saw that good-looking mug.

Without TV and the Olympics, however, De La Hoya would have been as anonymous as Diego Corrales or Jose Luis Castillo or any of the other top lightweights are today.

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On the other hand, Corrales and Castillo would be stars if this were 1975 or '85.

There is no network television coverage anymore to showcase new talent, and, as a result, the interest is waning at a ridiculous rate.

The fan base is reaching senior-citizen proportions, and averages probably 45 years of age or older. Think about it: Older gents love boxing, and some probably still follow it.

Because they grew up with it. Because they were exposed to it.

Not because they had to spend \$40 on a pay-per-view show.

As a result, as people get younger, their fascination with boxing tends to lessen. The newer generation has no interest in buying Bernard Hopkins-Jermain Taylor – two more people it doesn't know - when they can watch the NFL and NBA and MLB for free.

How important is boxing today? Ask one person at work or on the street who the heavyweight champion is. Who the middleweight champion is.

Who Floyd Mayweather is.

They won't know. Guaranteed.

(Granted, most of us familiar with the sport don't know who the heavyweight champion is – an example of the confusion and shameful politics that is also contributing to the sport's demise).

Without Las Vegas and the multi-million dollar casinos, boxing would not exist. And how much longer before they jump ship and invest all their money into something more contemporary, like the Ultimate Fighting Championships?

It's getting to be a tough fight – defending this tired, dying sport. No interest and no help in sight. Not a good combination.

Besides that, the happy endings are getting fewer and fewer. The bad endings, such as the case with Leavander Johnson, have become the rule.

And you have to ask yourself, is it all worth it anymore?