

Can Roy Jones Find His Rhythm?

Written by Aaron Tallent

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What can you say about a fighter who is returning to the ring after being savagely knocked out in back-to-back fights? All you can wish for is that he makes it out of the ring with his dignity and health intact, even if it is Roy Jones, Jr.

When he defeated John Ruiz for the WBA heavyweight title just two and a half years ago, his possibilities seemed endless. Now, the majority of the boxing faithful is already saying Junior is not willing to accept the end of his days in the ring.

But Jones' career is not over. It is merely out of synch. Other all-time greats have been in this spot and overcome it. Like those other fighters, part of it is Jones' fault. Part of it is circumstance.

His career decisions over the past couple of years have made me question the legacy he will leave. After winning the heavyweight title and becoming the first middleweight in a hundred years to do so, Jones vacated the title to go back down to light heavyweight to fight Antonio Tarver.

Part of his reason for doing this is understandable. If pay-per-view blockbusters with Evander Holyfield or Mike Tyson were not available, facing Antonio Tarver seemed like a healthier move than getting in the ring with a Corrie Sanders or Monte Barrett.

However, the heavyweight champion is boxing's most coveted title. Once a fighter wins that, finding the motivation to fight 175-pounders has to dwindle. When Michael Spinks won the IBF heavyweight title from Larry Holmes in 1985, he ultimately vacated it for financially lucrative fights with Tyson and Gerry Cooney. Despite a sparse couple of years, he never made the journey back down to 175 pounds.

Then there was the weight loss. Hefty heavyweights always say that gaining and dropping weight very quickly is physically and mentally damaging. Imagine if it is for a division that boxer has already conquered. By the time he entered the ring for the first fight with Tarver in November of 2003, Jones' body had lost some of its foundation, but so had his career.

Those three fights following the Ruiz bout were the first and second acts of a story of a fighter who has lost his way. An all-time great takes a fight that he thinks is going to be easy and then puts too much pressure on himself physically. He wins the bout but loses respect. In the second bout, he comes out trying to prove too much too fast. He is knocked cold with a great punch. To find his rhythm, he returns to the ring too soon and is knocked cold again, this time in a much harsher fashion. The sports world calls for his retirement, but the fighter has to give it one last go, if only to learn something about himself.

Now the third act is here, and it reeks of irony. A fighter notorious for minimal risk is chancing his health, his career, and his legacy against an opponent who seems to have his number. That

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heavyweight title may now be a footnote to his career, and his place in boxing history now rests on shaking ground.

Yet, all-time greats do not receive their place in history just through virtuoso performances, but through overcoming adversity. If Jones convincingly beats Tarver Saturday night, his standing will be secure.

He is not the only fighter whose career has been resurrected from the doldrums. When financial woes forced Sugar Ray Robinson back into the ring in 1955, the return was not so easy. He started off shoddily, dispatching Joe Rindone in six rounds. Then, Sugar Ray lost an embarrassing 10-round decision to Ralph Jones, a fighter whose career record was 52-32. Two months later, Robinson had to struggle for a split decision with Johnny Lombardo. Even his handlers were suggesting he quit.

According to Robinson, Edna Mae, his wife, pointed out the fact that he was trying too hard with each punch instead of patiently taking apart fighters. Once he brought this tactic back into focus, his career found its rhythm. Sugar Ray reeled off three straight victories before knocking out Carl "Bobo" Olson in two to regain the world middleweight title.

Roberto Duran's career went through similar dire straits. After quitting against Sugar Ray Leonard at "No Mas" in 1980, Duran tried to rebound with two easy decisions over journeymen. Then he lost the WBC light middleweight title to Wilfred Benitez in January of 1982. To make matters worse, Duran then lost a split decision to the extremely inconsistent Kirkland Laing. It was *The Ring's* "Upset of the Year" for 1982 and reason enough for Don King to cut Duran loose.

Hanging up his clothes seemed to be the general consensus amongst his peers, but Bob Arum picked up his contract, and Duran decided to give it one more year. He scored two victories and then in June of 1983 knocked out Davey Moore for the WBA light middleweight title. His comeback is one of boxing's great stories.

And, while Jones can find reassurance in Duran and Robinson's careers, he can also learn what not to do if he finds his magic again. Both fighters hung around way too long; Robinson until he was 44; Duran until he was 50. Jones has always stated that he will not box when it is apparent he should retire. Regardless of what happens Saturday night, he should keep that vow in mind.