

Cruising for some highlights

Written by Robert Cassidy Jr.
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The cruiserweight division has long been boxing's redheaded stepchild. It's afforded no respect and very little attention. How dismal has the cruiserweight division been? Both Michael Spinks and Roy Jones Jr. bypassed it completely en route to the heavyweight division.

On Saturday, the 9 p.m. opener of a Showtime card from The Theater at Madison Square Garden features a cruiserweight unification bout between WBC-WBA champ Jean-Marc Mormeck and IBF counterpart O'Neil Bell. The bout is typically being overlooked. But it may surprise some.

Mormeck became the first unified cruiserweight champ of any kind since Evander Holyfield when he decisioned Wayne Braithwaite in April. Braithwaite seemed ticketed for superstardom before being thoroughly defeated by Mormeck. And Bell won the vacant title by decisioning the always tough Dale Brown. He's also beaten former champ Arthur Williams.

So the cruisers have been disappointing you? Take a look through the short history of the division and you'll find that there have been some pretty good offerings.

December 8, 1979. Marvin Camel vs. Mate Parlov. Perhaps it was fitting that the first cruiserweight title fight in boxing history ends in a draw. They rematch four months later and Camel wins the first cruiserweight title. The weights for that first bout were 183½ for Camel and 189 for Parlov, a former light heavyweight champion.

June 15, 1986. Smokin' Bert Cooper vs. Henry Tillman. Cooper is the protégé of Smokin' Joe Frazier and Tillman is the man who bounced Mike Tyson from the 1984 U.S. Olympic Trials. This is before Cooper succumbs to drugs and bloats up to heavyweight. Tillman is still basking in the glow of his Olympic gold medal and in his previous fight captured the NABF cruiserweight crown with a first-round knockout of veteran Bash Ali. Cooper enters this fight with a record of 11-1 while Tillman is 10-0. Fighting out of a crouch and setting a furious pace, Cooper drops Tillman twice early and wins a 12-round decision for the NABF belt.

July 12, 1986. Evander Holyfield vs. Dwight Muhammad Qawi. It is Holyfield's 12th pro fight and Qawi's 30th

. Qawi had already reigned as a champion at 175 and won his second title at cruiserweight. Holyfield was just two years removed from an Olympic bronze medal. It didn't show. Holyfield set a blistering pace. They fight like lightweights. Of that bout, Holyfield said he prayed in the corner for the strength to keep fighting. He would deliver an astonishing 1,290 punches and capture a split decision over 15 (not 12) rounds.

Qawi has said: "I fought my heart out. I don't know why, but I predicted that I'd win in the 9th round. He was like slow motion in that ninth round. But then he came back. He got his second wind. But you don't get a second wind like that. We threw so many punches. It was non-stop

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action and he was bouncing around like nobody's business. I'm still puzzled on how he could take that kind of pressure and go the distance.

Holyfield would go on to immortality at heavyweight while Qawi would rise in weight and become an opponent. Qawi was inducted into the Hall of Fame two years ago and Holyfield will follow once he retires. Thus, this will be the first – and perhaps last – cruiserweight match in which both participants were hall of famers.

April 9, 1988: Evander Holyfield vs Carlos DeLeon. Not a distinguishing bout, but Holyfield wins by 8th-round TKO and becomes the division's first undisputed champion and it's biggest star. DeLeon, however, has won and lost the WBC cruiserweight title three times.

March 8, 1991: Bobby Czyz vs. Robert Daniels. Czyz wins a split decision to become a two-division champion. In what may have been his final premiere performance, Czyz neatly outboxes Daniels to earn the belt. Czyz is composed and experienced and outsmarts the champion much of the way. He resists each temptation to brawl and instead puts on a boxing clinic. Daniels, though, closes strong to make it interesting over the final three rounds. It is a case of too little, too late. Immediately after the bout, Czyz calls out Thomas Hearns but the match never materializes. As is the case with many cruisers, they both end up at heavyweight.

February 21, 1998: Juan Carlos Gomez-Marcelo Dominguez. Gomez becomes the first Cuban defector to win a professional world championship. Gomez, fighting primarily out of Germany, makes a division record 10 consecutive title defenses. Along the way he beats, Imamu Mayfield, Guy Waters and Al Cole. At 34-0, he relinquishes the title and moves up to heavyweight.

February 12, 2000: Wayne Braithwaite vs. Dale Brown. Braithwaite emerges with an eighth-round TKO and looks like he'll conquer the division. The bout is waged for the NABF title. Brown, a former Canadian Olympian, enters the fight 20-1-1 and having lost only to the elite of the division – Vassiliy Jirov. Braithwaite, who is 10-0 with eight knockouts, is thoroughly dominant, blitzing Brown with startling combinations. Brown is the only man to have met Jirov, Braithwaite, Mormeck and Bell. Braithwaite goes on to win the WBC title and then is upset by Mormeck.

December 9, 2000: Virgil Hill vs Fabrice Tiozzo. Perhaps the division's greatest upset. Hill, as a light heavyweight champion, gave Tiozzo his first career loss in 1993. The rematch takes place in Tiozzo's native France and Hill enters the ring at the age of 36. Tiozzo was making the fifth defense of his WBA cruiserweight title. Hill, a 15-1 underdog and a notorious light hitter, drops Tiozzo three times in the first round to claim the title.

"He touched me once and I didn't think it was very strong, but he touched me twice and I couldn't wake up," Tiozzo explained after his second career loss.

"He was looking for the jab, so I hooked him and then went over the top with the right hand," said Hill, a converted southpaw whose main power comes from his left. "In boxing anything can

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happen and you are only one punch away from success."

April 26, 2003: James Toney-Vassiliy Jirov. The champion Jirov is relentless in his attack and Toney is all class and guile. How is this for background, Jirov won a gold medal at the 1996 Olympics and was named outstanding fighter of the games. In facing Toney, Jirov may have been baffled but was never discouraged. He presses the action while Toney counters and – BOOM – in the 12th finally drops Jirov to cement his unanimous decision win and the title. The fight was closer than the scorecards suggested. This win, followed by a triumph over Holyfield, earns Toney "Comeback of the Year" and "Fighter of the Year" awards by The Ring. Both men head to the heavyweight division.