

Larry Holmes vs. Gerry Cooney

Written by Aaron Tallent
Sunday, 08 January 2006 19:00

Most boxing writers, myself included, put Larry Holmes in the top ten of greatest heavyweight champions, and at the top of the list of the most unappreciated. For much of his career, Holmes fought in a hollow and low-paying heavyweight division. Finally, on June 11, 1982 in Las Vegas, Holmes faced his blockbuster and career defining opponent in undefeated Irish Catholic Gerry Cooney. Unfortunately, much of the interest in this fight rested more on race than on talent.

For some, Cooney may have been a “great white hope,” but his talent was not ballyhooed beyond his ability. He had a devastating left hook, which had stopped 22 of his 25 opponents by knockout. Holmes himself said Cooney hit harder than Mike Tyson. In his three prior fights, Cooney had taken six rounds to dispatch Jimmy Young, Ron Lyle, and Ken Norton.

Coddled, Cooney had earned a number one ranking without facing a prime contender. This frustrated Holmes, who had scrapped for everything he had since his childhood in Easton, Pennsylvania. An early sparring partner of Muhammad Ali, he had turned professional in 1973, trudging through five years with little attention before finally earning a title shot with WBC champion Norton. In a classic bout, Holmes won the title by a razor-thin split decision.

By June of 1982, he had successfully defended the title a total of eleven times. Still, he would never escape the shadow of Ali, despite having embarrassed him when the two fought in 1980. When discussing Cooney, an embittered Holmes called the challenger a “Great White Dope.” Cooney only fueled the fire, telling Holmes after a heated exchange in Mexico City in 1980, “You need me more than I need you. Don’t forget that.”

Sad, but true. Not a lot of money could be made facing fighters like Mike Weaver, Alfredo Evangelista, and Trevor Berbick. With Cooney, Holmes had a chance to take home an eight-figure purse.

Race issues aside, any championship with two unbeaten fighters has tremendous drawing power, especially if there is an element of unknown. Holmes possessed arguably the stiffest left jab in history and superb ringmanship, but he was 33 going into the fight. And he had been put on the canvas twice during his title run. Many questioned whether still had enough for the younger Cooney.

However, little was known about Cooney’s chin or his stamina. During his sheltered career, he never taken a hard shot, or even fought past eight rounds. In fact, Cooney had only fought a total of six rounds in the past two and a half years.

The bout was held in a 32,000 seat stadium erected in a Caesar’s Palace parking lot, with millions more watching around the world. The two started the fight tentatively. The first round ended with neither landing a meaningful punch. Midway through the second, Holmes threw a punishing jab, followed by an overhand right that nailed Cooney in the jaw. The challenger stumbled around the ring before dropping to his knees. When he returned to his feet, Holmes

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did not press forward as the round ended.

In the third and fourth rounds, Cooney began landing his vaunted left hook, jarring Holmes. He told HBO years later, "He (Cooney) hit me so damned hard, I felt it – boom – in my bones."

By the ninth, however, Cooney was tiring. One of his left hooks went below the belt. Referee Mills Lane warned him not to do it again. Moments later Cooney put a left hand right into Holmes' groin and Lane deducted two points.

"I didn't do it intentionally," Cooney later said.

In the tenth, Cooney rallied for a full assault on Holmes. The two relentlessly traded punches throughout the entire round, bringing the crowd to its feet. At the end, the two nodded at each other in respect.

The next three rounds proved that Cooney's best was behind him. In the eleventh, another point was deducted for another low blow. By then, Holmes was landing punches with ease, while an exhausted Cooney ploddingly telegraphed his hooks and jabs. In the waning seconds of the thirteenth, Holmes sent Cooney to the canvas with a brutal barrage of shots.

Cooney made it to his feet but his trainer, Victor Valle, had seen enough. He stepped in the ring and hugged his protesting fighter, saying "That's enough son. That's enough."

Holmes held his title for three more years, extending his record to 48-0, before losing a controversial decision to Michael Spinks in 1985. He has fought off-and-on since then, his last fight taking place in 2002.

Cooney fought only five more times, retiring after suffering a knockout to George Foreman in 1990.

Cooney now runs Fighters' Initiative for Support and Training (F.I.S.T.), which assists both retired and active fighters. Holmes has made numerous appearances on its behalf.

Once bitter enemies, the two have since become friends and worked together for a noble cause.