

“Boxing’s Greatest Fighters” is a List Only Sugar Could Put Together

Written by Aaron Tallent
Sunday, 22 January 2006 19:00

Bert Sugar has remained boxing’s foremost authority for decades now. Love him or smirk at him (sometimes both), he has served as the sport’s resident historian, rehashing tales from the turn of the century with his whiskey-soaked flair. Even when the heavyweight champions are unrecognizable, the mystique of Sugar’s fedora shading an unlit cigar remains constant.

There are other boxing journalists with a national platform. Ron Borges, Jerry Izenberg, and Dan Rafael are just a few, but Sugar was to *Ken Burns’ Unforgivable Blackness: The Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson* what Shelby Foote was to *The Civil War*

. Part of it is due to his caricature, but most of it is because of his colorful ability to tell a story.

Which is why most boxing aficionados lick their chops at the thought of the newly released edition of Sugar’s coffee table book, *Boxing’s Greatest Fighters*. Sitting around, placing a fighter’s standing in the annals of boxing is a sports fan’s guilty pleasure. However, only a historian along the lines of Sugar could put together a list of the top 100 fighters of all time that dates back to the days of John L. Sullivan.

The criteria for his rankings is not simply based on size, speed, or power. It is also based on the accomplishments and the era in which that particular fighter competed. One more important factor is that the fighters are ranked based on their peak form. As Sugar put it:

“Because so many greats end their careers not with a bang, but with an ‘L,’ as in loss, we would be forced to conclude, erroneously of course, that an Alvin Green was better than an Ezzard Charles, or a Trevor Berbick better than a Muhammad Ali, or a Chester Slider better than a Henry Armstrong, on and on and on, so many greats ending their careers with an ‘L.’”

Hats off to Sugar in that regard. Any yahoo could put together a list of rankings based on won-lost records and spend an entire book justifying his decision. Instead, Sugar explains his rationale on the front end and spends the rest of his 350 page book focusing on the rich histories of his chosen few.

His all-time greatest pound-for-pound fighter is no surprise. Sugar Ray Robinson is a given. The rest of the list can be up for debate. Joe Louis is ranked higher than Muhammad Ali, which could be expected after watching Sugar discuss his top ten heavyweight rankings on *ESPN: Ringside*

few months ago.

a

Reading through the list, it is apparent that he pondered heavily on the placement of each fighter. Also in that *ESPN* report, Sugar said Larry Holmes was the number ten all-time heavyweight and Evander Holyfield was on the cusp of the elite ten. However, in his book, Sugar ranks Holyfield ahead of Holmes because of his amazing cruiserweight career as well.

“Boxing’s Greatest Fighters” is a List Only Sugar Could Put Together

Written by Aaron Tallent

Sunday, 22 January 2006 19:00

While he does praise the fighters for their superiority in the ring, Sugar is by no means boxing’s James Lipton. He shows the boxers for what made them great, but is not afraid to explain what hindered their careers either. For many greats of the first half of the 20th century, the problem was alcohol. There is no telling what Harry Greb, Mickey Walker and Lew Jenkins could have accomplished had they not been heavy drinkers.

Others, like Wilfred Benitez, demeaned their greatness by their refusal to properly train.

Another area where Sugar sets himself apart is the rich historical tidbits that he offers about each fighter. The book tells you which fighter coined the phrase, “Bringing home the bacon,” and which fighter served as bagman for Arnold Rothstein and the 1919 Chicago “Black Sox” scandal.

There are points though where it feels as if Sugar does not tell enough. Today’s readers will not feel shortchanged in the histories of boxing’s golden age fighters, but they may think some of the reports on modern champions do not mention important bouts. For instance, Sugar sums up Marvelous Marvin Hagler’s career without a word on his watershed fight with Thomas Hearns or his brutal bout with John “The Beast” Mugabi.

The book could have also used another once-over in the editing and fact-checking department. In many of captions highlighting the notable wins and losses each fighter, there are many chronological and statistical errors that could have been fixed with simply another read.

Nevertheless, the new version of *Boxing’s Greatest Fighters* is a must for any boxing fan who desires to learn the full history of the sport. The book is also an indirect commentary that boxing’s golden years are long passed. In the past 20 years, only eight boxers have been added. If boxing was on a level playing field, the amount of great fighters added to this book would be twice that amount. Sugar’s last edition of this book was released in 1984. One can only hope for a renewing era that renders this edition obsolete much sooner than twenty years from now.