

Fab Four: Duran, Hagler, Hearns and Leonard

Written by Ed Schuyler

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There have been legendary rivalries between two fighters – the 20 fights between Jack Britton and Ted “Kid” Lewis, the six meetings of Sugar Ray Robinson and Jake LaMotta and such three-bout series as Muhammad Ali vs. Joe Frazier, Floyd Patterson vs. Ingemar Johansson, Riddick Bowe vs. Evander Holyfield, Tony Zale vs. Rocky Graziano and Barney Ross vs. Jimmy McLarnin.

Boxing’s most entertaining, most controversial and possibly most dramatic series, however, involved four fighters – Roberto Duran, Marvelous Marvin Hagler, Thomas Hearns and Sugar Ray Leonard.

I rank the first Leonard-Hearns fight, a battle of unbeaten champions for the undisputed welterweight title as the best fight I ever covered. Duran’s “No mas” loss to Leonard in their second fight, ranks alongside Mike Tyson biting Evander Holyfield’s ears when it comes to shocking endings.

The Leonard-Hearns on Sept. 16, 1981, at Caesars Palace in Las Vegas was everything a fight fan could ask for. The two fighters wove a brilliant tapestry of ebb and flow, of power and finesse. After 12 rounds the three judges favored Hearns by 4, 5 and 6 points.

“You’re blowing it son, you’re blowing it,” Angelo Dundee told Leonard after the 12th round. Sugar Ray got the message, and he battered Hearns in the 13

th
round, then stopped him in the 14

th
. Of the scoring, Leonard said, “I always felt the end results are what counts.”

Leonard, a publicist’s dream, with a winning smile and a winning way with the public and the media, was one of the meanest men I’ve ever seen when the bell rang.

He and Hearns would fight again when with diminished skills they would box a 12-round draw in 1989. It was an action fight, but it paled in comparison to their battle of unbeaten champions.

Just dictating what happened in the first round of Hearn’s middleweight title challenge to Hagler on April 15, 1985, at Caesars Palace, left me breathless. It was three-minutes of toe-to-toe action that had the crowd roaring.

Despite his menacing appearance – shaved head and Fu-Manchu beard – Hagler was not a brawler, but a boxer-puncher who patiently took opponents apart. Some critics believed he was too cautious. Although he had outpointed Duran over 15 rounds in 1983, he was criticized for making the fight closer than it should have been, for giving the fading Duran too much respect. Hagler obviously was determined to silence critics and make the Hearns match a showcase fight. At the opening bell, the 5-foot-9½ Hagler rushed at the 6-1 Hearns.

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“There’s only one way to fight Thomas Hearn,” Hagler said after the fight. “I cut Thomas Hearn down like a tree.”

Hearn had knockout power in either hand – he had knocked Duran cold with a right to the head in the second round in 1984 – but he could not slow Hagler, although he landed several hard shots. Hagler had him wobbly at the end of the round. The second round was only a tropical storm compared to the hurricane opening round. Then in the third round, Hearn’s welterweight legs could no longer carry his heavyweight torso, and the fight ended. Officially it was technical knockout because referee Richard Steele didn’t count to 10. Hearn had to be carried to his corner. “In 15 years I haven’t seen that much action in three rounds,” Steele said, “ever.”

Two fights after Hearn’s match, Hagler fought Leonard in what was his 13th defense of the middleweight title on Aug. 6, 1987, at Caesars Palace. For his first fight in two years, 330 days, Leonard got \$11 million, while Hagler was guaranteed \$12 million plus a percentage.

I gave Leonard little chance, and had Hagler winning by five points. One judge favored Hagler by two points, but Leonard won the fight by two and eight points on the other two cards. I thought Hagler landed the most effective punches, but Leonard won several rounds on late-round flurries.

Impressing the judges is an important part of fighting, and Leonard did it to the hilt. It was an impressive performance against a great fighter by a man who had been away as long as Leonard had. I had the fight even after four rounds in which the left-handed Hagler for some reason fought right-handed. That apparently was the strategy decided on by him and his corner, Goodie and Pat Petronelli. If Hagler had a fault, it was he didn’t adapt when his strategy was not working.

The first time I covered Leonard was when he won the light welterweight gold medal at the 1976 Olympics in Montreal, and it was there in Olympic Stadium that he defended the WBC welterweight title against Roberto Duran on June 20, 1980.

While Duran was justly criticized for quitting in the eighth round against Leonard six months later in New Orleans, he probably has not gotten enough credit for his 15-round unanimous decision victory. At 29 and 5-7½, he beat a younger (24), taller (5-10) and faster opponent. Leonard, of course, helped Duran by fighting the Panamanian’s fight, perhaps out of anger. Duran said outrageous things before the fight, and once he gave the finger to Leonard’s wife.

While all three judges favored Duran, they had difficulty making up their minds. A total of 19 rounds were scored even. Harry Gibbs of Britain scored it 6-5-4 (145-144); Ramon Baldeyrou of France saw it (6-4-5) 146-144; Angelo Poletti of Italy called it 3-2-10 (148-147). I remember writing in a column that the next morning at breakfast Poletti probably looked at the menu, then ordered everything on it.

Leonard and Duran would fight a third time, and Leonard would win a one-sided decision in 1989.

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While Duran's action in the "No mas" fight cannot be forgotten, I've chosen to forgive him. He gave me too many thrills and too many good stories to have them wiped from memory because of what I consider a momentary mental glitch, not a faint heart. The Maestro of Machismo was getting embarrassed. To me, his was the reaction of street fighter at the other end of pole from biting ears.

I rate the Duran of the 1970s, when he dominated the world's lightweights, as the best fighter I covered. He also was a great character.

Duran, who grew up tough on the streets in Panama, preferred to talk to the media through an interpreter, although he understood and spoke some English. Once he was asked what he thought of the Canal Treaty. His answer: "What Canal?"

There is a story that Duran once knocked down a horse. Another story has it that after Duran knocked out Pedro Mendoza in the first round at Managua, Nicaragua in 1975, Mendoza's wife, or girlfriend, climbed into the ring and berated Duran. So he decked her.

Leonard had a best record of 4-1-1 in the round robin while Duran had the worst at 1-4. Hagler finished at 2-1-0, and Hearn was 1-2-1.

Jack Britton finished on top in his 20-fight welterweight series with Ted "Kid" Lewis at 4-3-1, with 12 no-decisions. Ray Robinson was 5-1 against Jake LaMotta. Edges of 2-1 went to Muhammad Ali over Joe Frazier, Floyd Patterson over Ingemar Johansson, Riddick Bowe over Evander Holyfield, Tony Zale against Rocky Graziano and Barney Ross over Jimmy McLarnin.

While the Bowe-Holyfield fights provided lots of action, the appearance of Fan Man during the seventh round in the second fight assured the series of becoming part of boxing lore.

A much more recent three-fight matchup that has the stuff of legend was Marco Antonio Barrera vs. Erik Morales, with Barrera winning twice.