

Who can claim the big one?

Written by Bill Knight

Tuesday, 21 March 2006 19:00

That heavyweight division is a separate animal, meandering along at its own pace, so many times chasing its own tail.

But when that tail wags, when one or two of the big boys shine, all of boxing benefits.

Fight fans like good fights, good boxers — at 118 pounds or 165 pounds or far north of the 200-pound barrier. But the general sporting public, those who drift in and out of boxing as if it were a singles bar, is in love with the heavyweights. Perhaps it is the auto racing mentality. No one can turn away from a good heavyweight fight. You are just glued to it, waiting for the next wreck.

Unfortunately for this fine sport, the heavyweight division is — as they might say in technical terms — a stinkin' mess.

It is no one's fault. There are plenty of big fighters out there chasing dreams, trying to make us fall in love with them and their careers, trying to convince us they are THE ONE. At the moment, though, all there are in the heavyweight division is questions, more questions and even more questions.

Saturday night's bangfest between Hasim Rahman and James Toney was entertaining enough. But, in the end, all it did was add to the questions.

There has never been a doubt about Toney's fighting skill. He is slick and talented. But, at 37, has he reached the point in his life and in his career where he simply does not want to train? Rahman seemed to have the same questions, almost wanting to help the man who has been a world champion from 160 pounds on up ... and up. After the fight, Rahman told HBO's Larry Merchant that Toney is a great fighter, that he must have had something happen to him in camp, that he would have been really hard to beat at 210, 215, 220.

Unfortunately, Toney said no, nothing was wrong in camp. He simply chose to enter the ring in that condition, a condition HBO's Jim Lampley described as "a fat tub of goo."

Toney's skills were still sharp. He could avoid Rahman's best shots, turning thunderbolts into distant lightning, turning big bombs into duds, into near misses. Oh, Rahman connected. But he never connected with the force that sent Lennox Lewis into la-la land. Toney decided to treat the last four rounds the way he apparently treated his training. He took them off.

And so the biggest question in Toney's corner has to be his will to train and be fit enough. Of course, there is also that other question. Can he really stand up to a good heavyweight's biggest bombs? Then again, who can?

But where is a good heavyweight, one who can toss those thunderbolts with the ferocity that

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makes the general public flock back to ringside?

Rahman has shown some pop. But he left the ring Saturday night in Atlantic City with plenty of questions, too. Can he really do this? Can he really hold onto that title belt against a solid heavyweight? He could not put an overblown middleweight away. Then again, no matter the weight, Toney still knows his craft and he will always be a hard target, a hard man to put away.

Rahman also got hit ... and hit and hit and hit. Toney did not have the heavyweight pop in those middleweight mitts to topple The Rock. But a bigger man would certainly have sent Rahman tumbling down with those shots. But, remember, Toney is slick and crafty. Could someone else land on Rahman the way Toney did?

Too many questions. Too many questions.

There were plenty of questions when it came to the decision, too. They could not even get a winner. Tom Kaczmarek and Nobuaki Uratani saw this one all even, a 114-114 draw. Toney did land plenty of punches, though none of them seemed to discourage Rahman in the least. John Stewart scored it 117-111 Rahman. Result? Draw. No winner. More questions.

Of course, the biggest questions involve more than just Rahman and Toney. The most logical question is the most basic. Is there anyone out there who is bigger than Dallas and who can fight?

Lamon Brewster and Chris Byrd and Wladimir Klitschko are big men with solid records. Brewster is 33-2, Byrd 39-2-1, Klitschko 45-3. But can any one of these men — or Rahman or Toney or anyone else — step onto center stage and capture the imagination of Joe and Josephine Q. Public?

Doubtful.

Somewhere out there a young giant is honing his skills, waiting to come into this division, grab it by the throat and pummel it into submission. Somewhere out there a young giant is working and sweating and dreaming in a little gym, getting ready to claim all the honors that come with being the biggest and baddest man on the planet.

Hurry up, big fella.

In the meantime, all we have is questions.

For those of us who enjoy boxing, the wait is palatable. No worries. We have plenty of good fighters — young and old and of all sizes — we can enjoy.

Ah, but for those boxing barflies, a talented heavyweight — young and strong and owner of a rock-your-marbles jab and a TNT hook — is the thing. He will be wined and dined and toasted, glorified on late night television and perhaps shoved into one of those motion picture bit parts. Every sports fan is waiting to plunk down some money to see him. Every celebrity or

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semi-celebrity is willing to use his or her clout to land ringside seats — to see and be seen.

It is all there. Waiting.

One last question.

Who can claim it?