

Hooking off the jab

Written by Robert Cassidy Jr.
Thursday, 23 March 2006 19:00

One word comes to mind when I think about James Toney. Actually, it's two words, but they are pronounced the same. Waste and waist.

The latter is obvious once you look at his midsection. Does anyone recall how sleek Toney looked when he knocked out Michael Nunn to win the IBF middleweight title in 1991? Go find a picture, it will amaze you. It is almost Barry Bonds-like, without the muscle.

The former should be obvious to anyone who covered Toney in his prime. This was a fighter certainly worthy of being ranked among the best fighters, pound-for-pound, in his era.

Just seven weeks after beating Nunn, he decisioned Reggie Johnson. Nowadays, when a man wins the title, the victory tour lasts seven weeks. All Johnson did was go on to win world titles at middleweight and light heavyweight.

Toney's fights with Hall-of-Famer Mike McCallum – at least the first two – were classic chess matches. Toney then toyed with Iran Barkley to win the super middleweight title. And this came after Barkley had defeated Darrin Van Horn, Thomas Hearn and Robert Folley. He stopped Barkley, legitimately one of the toughest men in the sport, in the 10th round.

Toney held it together a little while longer, scoring a dramatic 12th-round knockout of Prince Charles Williams. But then he was thoroughly dominated by Roy Jones Jr. and was never the same fighter again.

I am not suggesting that Jones beat him so badly that Toney never recovered. That does happen in this sport of ours, but that's not what happened to Toney.

After that fight was when his waist began to turn him into a waste. It was no secret that Toney was not a conditioning buff, perhaps that's why his original manager – Jackie Kallen – had him fighting so often. There were hints of this when he struggled to beat the limited Dave Tiberi. Rumors abounded that Toney was taking diuretics just to make weight for that fight.

After going unbeaten in 45 fights, Jones hung the first "L" on Toney's career. Then Toney lost three times in his next 13 fights. And while he has been unbeaten since 1997, I am still wondering what could have been?

What could have been if James Toney trained as hard as he talks? What could have been if he fought a rematch with Jones? You see glimpse of the immense talent – you see it against Jirov, Holyfield, Ruiz and even Rahman.

But guys like Charles Oliver or Terry McGroom extended him. And Drake Thadzi actually beat him.

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There was a time when James Toney was a clear choice for the hall of fame. I'm not so sure any more. I'm not going to give him much credit for a win over a badly faded Holyfield or a steroid-induced beating of Ruiz. Look at what Roy Jones did to Ruiz without steroids.

When I think of James Toney, I'm not sure I'll ever get past the, "What could have been?"

Quietman speaks up. John Ruiz has a point. His team sent out a press release opining on Toney's underwhelming performance against Rahman. Their assertion is that it simply further proves that Toney was juiced up when he beat Ruiz and therefore strengthens the lawsuit they have filed against Toney.

"Toney looked sluggish against Rahman," Ruiz said. "He didn't have the same energy he did against me, but that's what steroids do. Toney had a lot of energy right through the last round in our fight. If I fought that Toney, I guarantee it would have been a completely different fight. He had to cheat to beat me."

It's hard to argue with that assessment when you consider that Ruiz had beaten Rahman. Only the people in Rahman's inner circle disputed that decision. Rahman hadn't been impressive against a quality opponent since knocking out Lennox Lewis in 2001.

When the suit moves into a court of law, Ruiz's legal team plans to show a tape of Toney's fight against Ruiz and then his fight against Rahman.

"Toney had less than six weeks to prepare for his fight against Johnny, yet, he showed a lot more energy, especially late in the fight, than he did at any point against Rahman," said Anthony Cardinale, Ruiz's attorney.

A stranger in a strange land. Spent time in San Juan, Puerto Rico for the World Baseball Classic. Anyone who was against the Classic clearly did not sit in Hiram Bithorn Stadium and witness the passion, on the field and in the stands.

The hottest ticket on the island was Puerto Rico vs. Cuba. Felix Trinidad and unbeaten WBO minimumweight champion Ivan Calderon were in attendance for that game, but were clearly reduced to undercard status. Calderon was wearing team Puerto Rico's World Baseball Classic jersey.

There is no shortage of boxing in Puerto Rico. I arrived a week after Miguel Cotto fought and Joe Mesi and Oscar De La Hoya were both training while I was there. There is also no shortage of coverage in the newspapers. Although my Spanish is very limited, this delighted me as I perused the two-plus pages of coverage in the daily papers each day. Although he hasn't fought in almost a year, Trinidad is still covered on a regular basis. At one point I had to ask Ray Sanchez, my intrepid Newsday colleague who is fluent in Spanish and English, if I had read correctly that Trinidad was making a comeback at 140 pounds.

No, he informed me. It was a story in which Tito was reminiscing about winning the 140-pound title.

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The baseball was played at Bithorn Stadium, which is named after the first Puerto Rican to reach the major leagues. The venue has also hosted a number of championship matches, including those of Carlos Ortiz, Jose Torres and Wilfred Benitez. I asked Ortiz what it was like to fight there.

“At the time I fought there it was the biggest place in Puerto Rico to fight,” he said. “Hiram Bithorn is a nice ballpark, it’s wide open. It seats about 20,000 people. I must have put 35,000 in there. When you fight in your homeland, something gets inside of you. It’s different. You feel love.”

From the mouths of babes. Often, my kids are sitting around when I watch the replay of a fight. Don’t get too bent out of shape. I watch plenty of Toon Disney and Noggin. As I was watching the replay of Fernando Vargas-Shane Mosley, I had asked my six-year-old to help clean up the mess that the 19-month-old had made. I was notified how unfair this was, since she hadn’t created the mess. Nonetheless, after what seemed like a tremendous effort, the task was complete. Clearly fatigued by this, she looked at me and stated, “Daddy, my head is screaming hot.”

I understand that she was sweating.

Moments later, an image of Fernando Vargas, swollen and lumpy, appeared on the screen. His corner was feverishly working over him. My six-year-old looked at the television and said, “Daddy, that man’s head is screaming hot.”

True, but with an entirely different meaning.