

The Real Deal and His Fountain of Youth

Written by Benn Schulberg
Sunday, 20 August 2006 19:00

It turns out that Evander “The Real Deal” Holyfield has more cat-like qualities than the nine lives it seems like he’s used to reach this dwindling twilight of his career. Maybe it’s just the fact that I was in diapers when Evander embarked on his professional career, but it feels like the man’s been fighting forever. The critics, who seemed to include everyone except Holyfield himself, have been begging him to retire for years to avoid further embarrassment and punishment based on his sad performances dating back to his nauseating holding sessions with John Ruiz.

We all knew that he had nothing left and was destined to become a journeyman for younger prospects to pad their resume with. At least we thought we knew. After dismantling the hapless but game Jeremy Bates, an insurance salesman by day, Holyfield proved not only that he wasn’t too old to beat up on bums (no offense Jeremy but I’d stick to the day job), but that maybe (I can’t believe I’m saying this) he’s not even too old to once again regain the heavyweight championship.

That may sound farfetched considering how terrible Holyfield has looked in losses against James Toney and Larry Donald, not to mention accumulating more rust to the ongoing, natural rusting process known as aging due to the near two-year layoff to heal his ailing left shoulder. After the Donald debacle, the New York Commission said enough’s enough and suspended Holyfield’s license indefinitely in order to protect him from his own self-destructive path. Holyfield, though, blamed his sub-par efforts not on age-related diminished skills but rather age-related physical ailments. Instead of taking time to heal the shoulder, Holyfield, beloved for his warrior, never-say-die mentality, fought on courageously only to serve as a punching bag for his opponents.

“With the shoulder injury that I had, I thought that I could fight with the pain but I got tore up in there,” explained Holyfield. “There was nothing I could do.”

When Evander was finally forced to put down the gloves in New York in 2004, those begging the former champ to quit could finally breathe a collective sigh of relief knowing that the torture that had become watching “The Old Washed-Up Deal” was in its final stage.

Not so fast though. This is Evander Holyfield after all. This is the man who came back from a heart condition to capture the heavyweight championship and who simply won’t accept “impossible” as an answer. It would take more than the efforts of the New York Commission to ban “The Real Deal” as the stubborn veteran refused to give up his quest to become undisputed champion and telling him that he couldn’t fight anymore only made him that much more determined to comeback and prove his harshest critics wrong.

Holyfield’s decision to fight again was bordering on insanity at the time. Why would a 43-year-old, four-time world champion who lives in the Atlanta version of Versailles and who has more money than he’ll ever need (even with all the kids and mothers he has to support) want to continue to risk his health? His decision sounded sadistic to me unless of course

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Holyfield miraculously stumbled upon the fountain of youth during his period of rest and recuperation.

It was apparent from the opening bell against Jeremy Bates that there was a drastic improvement in Holyfield and that maybe he had in fact found that fountain of youth. He danced, he moved, he jabbed, he threw fast, accurate combinations, and he finished his opponent off with a punishing barrage. How could he look so good even if it was against a punching bag in Jeremy Bates? On Saturday night in Dallas, Holyfield somehow rose from the dead and showed us "The Real Deal" of old, at least for the two rounds it took him to dispatch of this sacrificial lamb.

Memories of the spry Holyfield knocking out Buster Douglas to capture the undisputed heavyweight crown were dancing in my head Saturday night when to my amazement I watched as this aging shadow mysteriously came to life in fantastic fashion. Was it a miracle or was it just the fact that Holyfield was well rested and finally healthy, fighting without any pain for the first time in along time?

"I overcame the injuries," proclaimed Holyfield. "I'm so glad to get back into the ring and show the people that I was boxing bad not because I was too old, but because of my injuries."

After acing the first test of his comeback, Holyfield says he's ready to tackle a top-ten opponent and inch closer to his unwavering vision of glory. There's no reason why Holyfield shouldn't be back in the mix overnight considering the sad state of today's heavyweight division and the fact that he's the "money man" that the now ruling Soviet bloc will be gunning for.

Chris Byrd, one of those top-ten contenders, disagreed with Holyfield's belief that he's ready to challenge the big names of the division (if you can call them big names) despite his upstart performance.

"He needs one or two more fights before he tackles the top-ten. There are some tough guys in the heavyweight division these days," cautioned Byrd.

I don't know about tough guys but young guys definitely, especially compared to Evander, who with one or two more fights will likely be closing in on 45 years old. That's ancient in boxing unless you're the ageless Archie Moore who was a remarkable specimen who defied all odds by winning the light-heavyweight title at the age of 39. There's also hope for Evander considering what old George Foreman did to Michael Moorer years ago, and more importantly, what Holyfield himself showed us Saturday night during his brief return.

You can call me an idealist but I'll be damned, "The Real Deal" isn't finished after all and the once unthinkable is now hard not to think about. If Evander can actually pick himself up, dust himself off, and remove the rust of the long layoff who's to say that he can't reach his dream of becoming a 5-time world champion? It's ironic that the man who we all thought was a shot fighter after losing miserably to the average-at-best Larry Donald may now be the greatest hope for an American-born fighter to regain the heavyweight championship.

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What do you think the odds of him ever regaining the title looked like before this past Saturday night in Dallas when Evander finally came back to us as he always promised he would? Let's just say that if you did put a considerable bet down and Holyfield does in fact win the title again then congratulations to you on one of the greatest investments imaginable. But his promise has not yet been completely fulfilled and like an unrelenting predator, Holyfield refuses to stop until he's not only a champion, but the undisputed heavyweight champion once more no matter how old people say he is.

"I don't think the clock ever turned," Holyfield explained. "I'm trying to let people know that age is just a number as long as you're willing to pay the price."