

Can Holy Spark Boxing's Next Revival

Written by Evan Korn

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The last time Evander Holyfield graced the ring, his face had become a magnet for Larry Donald's left hand. Round after round, Donald, a career underachiever, was the matador holding up the red towel, as Holyfield could do nothing but flail away like a blind man trying to hit a piñata. As the rounds kept piling on, the Madison Square Garden crowd chanted "Holyfield" in perfect three-syllabic harmony. Behind the encouragement, there was this sense of resignation in their cheer. They realized, as so many of us did before, that it was finally over, that the man who defied physical logic time after time was finally going out to pasture. 15,000 strong had Holyfield's bags packed, ready to purchase him a one-way ticket to Sunset City.

Ron Scott Stevens, head of the New York State Athletic Commission, also attempted to derail the Holyfield Express before it careened off the tracks, medically suspending the 1984 Olympian.

"Evander Holyfield's skills have deteriorated to a point where we don't think he should be allowed to fight," Stevens said. "He thinks he knows what's best for him. We're not sure he is in a position to make that assessment."

Holyfield, defiant as he was against the likes of Riddick Bowe, Mike Tyson, George Foreman, and Michael Dokes, had other ideas.

Nearly two years later and having passed a fully battery of medical tests, Ol' Man Holy decided to give it one last shot. Enter Jeremy Bates. Bates, a West Virginian insurance salesman who looked like a dead ringer for one of those roly-poly-baldheaded WWF wrestlers from the 1980's, was the perfect foil. The human punching bag played his role to perfection, leaning back into the ropes only to be peppered with repeated combinations to the head by a seemingly rejuvenated ex-champion. By the end of the second round, Bates had enough, the bout was halted, and the uproarious cheer from the surprisingly large crowd inside Dallas' American Airlines Center signified that some crushes never die. While Holyfield was the center of the boxing universe on that night, the only thing this mismatch proved beyond a reasonable doubt is that boxing will always find a home for stiffs like Bates.

But for all of Bates' faults inside of the ring (there are too many to list), his inability to put up any resistance gave a modicum of mainstream relevance to boxing. Holyfield, for his diminished skills and increased delusions, is perfect for the public indifference that ails boxing.

Having come through the ranks in the mid-1980's, he benefited from boxing's presence on mainstream television. Kids who watched him 20 years ago but strayed from boxing once fractured titles and pay-per-view mismatches became more prevalent, now are the talking heads of sports talk radio. They are the ones, who after turning their backs on pugilism, will be sucked back to our sport if Holyfield continues this perceived resurgence.

Just envision this scenario: Holyfield, sometime late in 2007, fights one of these gargantuan

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Russian guys with a "title." Las Vegas would be packed with high rollers, news outlets would be flooding the strip like soccer moms to a mega-mall on Christmas Eve, and celebrities who could not tell a jab from a foul shot would flood ringside seats. Boxing, for 36 minutes or less, would become the center of the sporting universe.

What's the worst that could happen? Holyfield would lose, the celebrities would head back to LA on their private jets, and boxing would be back where it was, with a devoted fan base. The same bigwigs who were humping Holyfield's comeback all along would call it a fraud, say that boxing is finished, and continue with highlights of Arena Football or the Senior PGA Tour.

If Holyfield were to somehow make something of this comeback, we could be looking at the resurgence of the heavyweight division, where a name like Brewster would remind the public of more than the Richard Pryor vehicle, "Brewster's Millions." Then again, dreaming of a rejuvenated Holyfield is probably just wishful thinking. But in a sport starving for attention, maybe Evander Holyfield, for better or worse, is the cure.

Championship Rounds

10th – While Holyfield's comeback will turn a few heads, the best heavyweight matchup of the year takes place on Sept. 2, when James Toney and Samuel Peter tango. Whoever loses this one heads to the back of the line. In Toney's case, the back of the line might mean retirement.

11th – Is it me, or should we be seeing Jeff Lacy's face on the back of a milk carton sometime soon?

12th – Rumor has it that Emanuel Augustus/Courtney Burton II is scheduled Sept. 1 for the season finale of ESPN 2's "Friday Night Fights." While it isn't the mega-fight that Augustus and his cult following of fans wanted, at least the Brownsville, Texas native will get the opportunity to reverse one of the most egregious decisions in recent boxing history. For Burton, who has lost four of his last five fights via the short route, maybe it's time to start thinking about a different career path.