

## This is the real deal, Evander

Written by Robert Cassidy Jr.

Tuesday, 26 September 2006 19:00

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I hope that this will always be my enduring image of Evander Holyfield. It is June of 1997 and Mike Tyson has twice bitten Holyfield's ears. The second time he severed the top portion and spat it to the canvas. Chaos broke out in the ring. After harnessing the pain and assessing the whirlwind, this is what Holyfield did – he wanted to continue the match.

*What?*

A piece of his ear had been bitten off and he wanted to continue under the Marquess of Queensberry rules. With that gesture he epitomized everything we should look for in the heavyweight champion of the world – tough and classy. They don't make them much tougher than Holyfield. He was going to continue beating the bully, but he was going to do it by the rules.

Holyfield the fighter has always embodied the warrior's spirit. It is why he is revered in this sport. But here is the problem with heroes in athletics and Holyfield is as much a sports hero as anyone who has ever competed. They let you down. Whether it's Mickey Mantle or Michael Jordan, they let you down because they are human.

They may be supermen when we watch them perform, but when that is done, they are men, just like us. Evander Holyfield could never let me down once he stepped inside the ring. But the man, now 42 years old, is fighting again and that is a letdown.

We live in a country where free will is an invaluable asset. For the most part, a man is free to do what he chooses. As long as it is within the laws of the land – and the rules of his sport – who am I to interfere? Who is anybody?

I have heard the conviction in Evander Holyfield's voice. It is hard to disagree with a man whose convictions allowed him to become heavyweight champion of the world four times. It is hard to disagree with this man when he says:

"I'm sure there's a lot of other people who are 22 and 23 who can't do what I do, and have worse records."

He is right, to a point. Boxing is not often a sport that lends itself to statistics. But let's play the numbers game with Holyfield.

\* Since December of 2001 he has gone 2-3, with his knockout of club fighter Jeremy Bates breaking a three-fight losing streak.

\* Since November of 1997 he has gone 3-5-2.

\* Since November of 1992, when he suffered his first loss after winning 28 straight bouts, he

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has gone 11-8-2.

What was Evander saying about records?

The first time it was suggested that Holyfield retire was in 1992 by his then-trainer Lou Duva. It came after the first of his three battles with Riddick Bowe. Holyfield resisted and soon Don Turner was working his corner. Fair enough. Holyfield continued and he beat Bowe in a rematch and then thrilled us with wins over Tyson and Moorer.

But all these years later, look what those three fights (and others) have done to Bowe. Is it just a matter of time for Holyfield? I hope we never find out.

When Holyfield lost a lackluster decision to Larry Donald at the Garden in November of 2004, the New York State Athletic Commission suspended his license. The stated reason was poor performance due to a deterioration of skills. Holyfield fought the suspension – would you expect anything less? – and was cleared medically to fight again. After that, the commission placed him on “administrative suspension,” which means he can’t fight in New York but other states are now free to license Holyfield.

This spring, I was covering the Yankees in Spring Training and watched veteran pitcher Al Leiter retire. When camp opened, Leiter, 41, was vying for one more big-league season. Early on, when the pitchers are ahead of the hitters, Leiter was performing nicely. The Double-A and Triple-A hitters in camp were flailing at his cut fastball. But then something happened. The big-league hitters began to catch up. Once Leiter realized that he was only fooling the minor leaguers, he walked away from the game.

In November, Holyfield fights Fres Oquendo, who is no Jeremy Bates. Bates is the equivalent of a Double-A hitter. Oquendo may never be a champion, but he is a legitimate heavyweight. Leiter walked away with a bruised ego. The fear in this corner is that Holyfield may walk away with more than that. He is clearly not the same fighter who beat Michael Moorer, the last quality opponent he knocked out. That was 1997.

When the subject of the “administrative suspension” is broached, Holyfield says, “I think it’s disrespectful to embarrass a person by saying ‘You’re not smart enough to take care of yourself, so I have to take care of you.’”

This is not about intelligence. This is not about respect. Holyfield may be the most widely respected fighter in the game. This is about not being able to distinguish the forest from the trees. This is about a man whose singular mission in life has driven him to enormous success but who has reached a point in his career where the mission is now working against him. I think there is enough circumstantial evidence to reach that conclusion – the names are John Ruiz, Chris Byrd, James Toney and Larry Donald.

I think Evander Holyfield is smart enough to take care of himself. But I think what has made him a great fighter – a tremendous belief in himself – is what is obstructing his logic. The same could be said for Joe Louis, Sugar Ray Robinson and Muhammad Ali.

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In boxing terms, Holyfield and Arturo Gatti have defined courage over the last two decades.

But do you know what it takes even greater courage to do? Listen. Listen to the objective voices, not the one that is inside of your heart, imploring you, like it always has, to succeed. Not to the voices that may have an interest in you stepping back inside the ring.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if the lasting image we all had of Muhammad Ali was the one of him standing triumphantly, defiantly, after whupping Joe Frazier in the "The Thrilla in Manilla?"

Wouldn't that be wonderful?

But what is the lasting image, right now, that we all of Muhammad Ali?

Evander, please listen.