

The Lesson of Donald Curry

Written by Patrick Kehoe

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Sitting beside ABC ringside announcer Chris Schenkel, WBA welterweight champion Donald Curry sat pensively, beaded in sweat, quizzically wearing a plastic crown on his head, a coiled cobra stitched at the right breast pocket level of his golden robe. He figured he was worth “a million dollars per fight” and wanted everyone listening to know it, having reduced Welsh hard rock Colin Jones, 26-2-1, to rubble to register his 16th stoppage in 21 unfettered outings as a professional. WBC champ, Detroit’s Milton McCrory, had by comparison jousted 24 championship rounds with the Welshman, earning a draw and a split decision win over their two fights. By dusting Jones in promoter Frank Warren’s adopted warren of Birmingham, England, Curry had sent a defining message to the rest of the top flight welterweights: behold the one, true king! Thus, Curry’s curious head prop, a crown, hackneyed symbolism for an American in England. Then again Curry and his team understood even kings only get so much direct live satellite face time with the madding crowds, loyal subjects or not.

“I’ve started to prove myself to boxing and I think I have reached that bracket... they’ll have to give me four or five million in a few years.” At 23, Donald Curry was so young, so talented, so easy to fit into all the possible mega fight scenarios that his promoter Bob Arum could envision or rival Don King could look to exploit as a profitable foil. The sky did indeed seem the limit for what awaited the diffident Curry in the balance of the 1980s. Much was made of the fact Curry looked still immature, his body not hardened to a finalized weight of modeled musculature. He was often quoted as saying he walked around at about 156. So, campaigning, reigning and ruling at welterweight seemed, for now, just the opening overtures of the legendary career in the making for the silent but deadly one from Fort Worth, Texas.

With professional boxing having lost the superstardom of “Sugar” Ray Leonard and Top Rank itching to reverse Don King Productions omnipotence, Curry was about as impatiently indignant at his semi-celebrity as an introvert could be, even on national television, displaying his near genius for wide eyed beer bellies man of whom had probably never heard of “The Lone Star Cobra” until that very afternoon, January 19, 1985.

An elegant, economic and snapping puncher with a penchant for working inside to the body before exploding back outside, Curry proclaimed, “I’m the king of boxing!” His jab was piston precise; when he got his left hook to the ribs, opponents were basically boxing on borrowed time. Yet time strips us, denuding even the gallant and the exceptional. Though on that January day in 1985, it did indeed look like he might be right, his tepid bravado out of character, searching for validation though it was. Unifying the title at welterweight then cast a longer shadow? What else could Donald Curry’s destiny look like?

Sometimes greatness penetrates as a luminous brilliance, dispelling the blandness of tempering mediocrity and even forms of sporadic excellence which together constitutes the yearly and decadal pallor of so many boxing scenes, tussling ego to bruising ego, titles or no titles won or lost. You can be beyond brilliant for a fight and many have been; then what? Yes, sometimes greatness appears like a searing glimpse, a flashpoint of definitive exposure, only to flare, a

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problematic course made clear. But typically, ring greatness comes to us as quality over time, the persistence of distinguishing ability and accomplishment. Always though, greatness presents itself as self-defining, that which stands apart from the ordinary, as if insisting upon a questing nature that seems to compels its very presence.

Eleven months on from the Jones fight in England, many granted that though Sugar Ray Leonard's greatness was struck down by his eye problems, there was, at least, Curry as a successor, a talent to literally help carry the sport along with an aging but always idiosyncratic Roberto Duran, a come of age Marvin Hagler and the hard to like but impossible to dismiss marvel of Larry Holmes. In large part, Curry's opportunity was predicated on Duran and Hagler and Holmes being formidable but aging figures, seen as the last of a great generation, regal but collectively soon to pass into historical significance. The gold toothed kid from Brooklyn called Tyson was the rampaging matador in heavyweight boxing, but Donald Curry matched up with rival Milton McCrory, as Sasoon smooth, aesthetically devastating, and nineteen days before Christmas, about to prove, below the heavies, the 1980s was his decade for the taking.

No wonder, no name seemed beyond a possible hypothetical coupling with Curry, mandatory(ish) nuisances such as Davey Hilton or Carlos Trujillo had been floated until resuscitated 140 pound titan Aaron Pryor's name filtered down. The Lone Star Cobra himself had designs on Mike McCallum and his WBA jr. middleweight thrown. Then, Mount Hagler might be scaled? Why not? Such was the daring thoughts of manager Dave Gorman, aided and abetted by most of the still working boxing press right after the Las Vegas Hilton Hotel ring was flooded with concerned Nevada state officials, the ringside doctor, trainer Emanuel Steward, and a traumatized Team McCrory just a few seconds shy of two minutes into the second round. One of Donald Curry's left hooks had splattered the dreams of the Kronk team regaining the welterweight division. McCrory would not be the next Thomas Hearns. Though both undefeated titlists had come to fight having weighed 146³/₄ there was no other way to make equivocations between the two fighters.

Curry's sensational way of proving his having been a 4 to 1 favorite confirmed him, in that instant of dominance, as the hot property in boxing. We must remember it was the decade of Vanity Fair and Ronald Reagan and junk bond speculation, the vice of prospective splendor rampant. Surface and substance, the image and the meaning of things cast equal shadows of significance and meaning. In the wake of the McCrory win, Curry was certainly more than enough style to seem the very foundation of substance. Who doubted talent and promise had won out and would not his youth fill into middleweight greatness, over time?

But manager Gorman was soon out, replaced by Akbar Muhammad. Few properly appreciated that Curry tended to train heavily at the close of training camps like a preppy high school scholar finally away at college cramming for his ring exams. Dropping weight too quickly, the tone and solidity of his frame and the viability of his motor capacity became visibly compromised. At weigh-ins following the McCrory win, Curry looked drawn and almost adolescently pre-formed. The rapier-like quality to his jab began to need visible assertions to generate force and the reflexive shuffling movement of his legs vanished almost altogether. The man who had entered the ring at the Las Vegas Hilton Hotel against fellow undefeated welterweight titleholder and Emanuel Steward protégé Milton McCrory to see who was the

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next-gen welterweight, the man who succeed Leonard and Hearn as the welterweight mainstay for what was predicted to be the balance of the decade, suddenly looked like an impersonator. And up into the ring he climbed, prohibitive favorite to best England's dangerous Lloyd Honeyghan, September 27, 1986.

The marvel in the making, Donald Curry, was unceremoniously slaughtered. Trainer Paul Reyes couldn't understand what was happening even as Curry was being lambasted almost pillar to post by the close of the third round. Bob Arum, who was working on a Marvin Hagler mega-extravaganza, was left dumbfounded. The fall of boxing royalty had taken just six rounds. His left eyelid was ripped open and his body beaten, but it was his heart that was battered beyond the bruising. That cut of the left eyelid actually forced the hand of referee Octavio Meyran to call in the ringside doctor necessitating the official stoppage of the contest. Curry's face – a mixture of shocked fatigue and relieved wonderment – signaled the true end of the battle.

Had he stayed too long at welterweight? Did the death of his grandfather some weeks before disrupt the critical final phase of his preparation? Or was he just overrated, finally failing when pushed into a contest of moral danger and physical attrition by a strong, talented, relentless foe with no fear of the occasion? The questions became manifold and began to form fit Curry as a new skin.

You can tell when greatness materializes only to vanish in the form of a fighter's abilities embodied and fights performed short of expectation because for that kind of fighter, when the crash comes too soon, the rest of their career is an endless series of post-mortems and speculative analysis. And right up to his loss to Terry Norris, in 1991, that was all too true in the case of Donald Curry.

We might now call this an exaggeration of things past. But we would risk not giving true credit to what was, because of what ultimately came to be. And looking at Donald Curry's career we are tempted to say it did not really bare out the qualities of greatness. We might say, at his very peek he simply came undone or for some was exposed by Lloyd Honeyghan's overachieving and Mike McCallum's left hooking dismissal, as he tried to move to jr. middleweight and a more natural sense of hydration. And in a sense those are defensible positions; great fighters must and do win their epic encounters. That would be to say truly great fighters must prevail during those moments when their greatest challenges materialize. Fort Worth's Donald Curry, undefeated, untroubled welterweight champion, aged 24, really was the king of boxing, all future tense and coming attractiveness, the budding generational man in boxing. And then he wasn't? Wherein lay the greatness?

All of this makes you wonder about the best and the brightest of the younger guns around today. Manny Pacquiao? Juan Diaz? Miguel Cotto? Chris John? Steve Molitor? Edison Miranda and Jermain Taylor, for that matter! Each of them are flying high and looking good, with endless speculation about the big fights they will be fighting very, very soon. They all seem to be reaching for what they deserve, for that which must surely prove their qualities, perhaps, their greatness.

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Things can't look any brighter?

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