

Toney To Go Out On Own Terms-Pt. I

Written by Ronan Keenan
Saturday, 26 May 2007 19:00

Promoter Dan Goossen has been involved in the fight game business for over two decades and has played a role in making some of the sport's bigger events. He has handled the careers of some exceptionally talented fighters, manoeuvring them to the cusp of stardom.

David Reid, Gabriel and Rafael Ruelas, David Tua and Hector Camacho Jr appeared to have the necessary ingredients to become 'A-list' sports stars both in and out of the ring. Yet by a strange coincidence, each fighter's career stagnated after losing their 'breakout' fight.

Reid retired four bouts after suffering a brutal beating by Felix Trinidad; the Ruelas brothers never did live up to their billing as the next Alexis Arguello and Roberto Duran; after getting outclassed by Lennox Lewis, Tua's hopes of a second shot at heavyweight glory have been plagued by inactivity; and the less said about Camacho Jr the better.

Mother Nature has also played a role in Goossen's hard luck, with the office building and gym of his promotional outfit Ten Goose being levelled by the devastating Californian earthquake in 1994.

Yet the 57-year-old Goossen admits his biggest disappointment in boxing involved the ultra-talented Michael Nunn. Having guided Nunn towards the summit of pound-for-pound lists, the unbeaten fighter abruptly defected from Ten Goose in 1990 and was subsequently defeated by James Toney one year later.

The promoter maintains he could have helped Nunn become a legend.

"I felt that Michael Nunn could have gone down in history as one of the greatest 160-pounders of all-time," said Goossen in 2000. "I felt greatness was all over him. But he never reached the status I felt he could have."

And according to Goossen, it was a lackadaisical attitude to training that brought about Nunn's downfall.

"Michael had problems coming to training camp because he couldn't stay away from [his hometown in] Iowa," he said.

But the promoter believed his luck would change when he set up the California based Goossen Tutor Promotions in 2002 and ironically made Nunn's conqueror his first big signing.

However, Toney's career had been pretty turbulent since 1991 and he wasn't exactly the same fighter that starved Nunn.

ROCKY RIDE

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Having outclassed the competition at 160 pounds, the assertive Toney stepped up to 168 pounds and soon met a fighter he couldn't boss around. Roy Jones thoroughly humbled a weight-drained "Lights Out" in November 1994, forcing the Michigan native into a dark world of anger and depression.

Toney's anger with the loss left him prone to bouts of pronounced rage, which ultimately led to an acrimonious split from his longtime manager Jackie Kallen and a divorce from his wife. The psychological strain saw Toney indulge in profuse overeating, resulting in his weight swelling beyond 260 pounds on numerous occasions throughout the late-90s.

This turmoil also had a dramatic impact on his in-ring performances as the once razor-sharp reflexes and old school defensive techniques quickly diminished, leading to a shocking loss against the obscure Drake Thadzi.

Toney subsequently sleepwalked his way through monotonous bouts with unheralded journeymen as his career seemingly meandered along a path of self-destruction.

NEW BEGINNING

But joining forces with Goossen seemed to revitalize his wayward career, and both promoter and fighter knew they had an opportunity to make up for past frustrations.

"Dan has had a lot of fighters fight for the big prize but nobody brought it home," said Toney soon after joining Goossen's stable. "It's time for me to step up and bring it home."

Goossen also acknowledged the misfortune of his past.

"Before, I kind of felt I was jinxed," he told writer David Avila several years ago, confident that he had now found the fighter who could turn his promotional outfit into an industry leader.

And in 2003 it seemed as if Toney would live up to his bold promise as two stunning victories over the naturally bigger Vassiliy Jirov and Evander Holyfield led him to Fighter of the Year honors twelve years after he last won the award. Despite being the underdog in both bouts, Toney produced vintage displays to dominate the proceedings, utilizing subtle head rolls, sneaky uppercuts and sustained attacks to his opponents' ribs.

So what inspired "Lights Out" to suddenly produce such blinding displays of excellence?

"[The loss to Jones] kept on haunting me," explained Toney. "So I thought, 'let me come back and show that I really am a great fighter.'

"Also, getting with Dan was great. When me and Dan got together, he would say 'all you have to do is this and that, get yourself in great shape, and everything else will fall into place.'"

WEIGHTING AROUND

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Alas, the team's hopes for heavyweight domination have become more fanciful since 2003, as Toney has taken the name of his weight class a bit too literally since that flawless victory over Holyfield. He has won only two from six fights since then, while losing every battle with the scales.

A supposed tune-up bout with Rydell Booker left Toney with a badly torn bicep in his only outing in 2004.

Despite weighing over 230 pounds in his next outing, the 5'10" Toney outboxed the stubborn John Ruiz to claim a heavyweight title, only to be stripped of the belt when his urine sample showed traces of a banned steroid.

Nonetheless, Goossen's claims that Toney was "the people's champion" helped secure a title shot against Hasim Rahman, which resulted in an anticlimactic draw as both out-of-shape fighters failed to perform.

But the cigar-loving Toney really paid the price for his apparent lack of fitness against the 26-year-old brute Samuel Peter.

Even though most ringsiders believed Toney deserved the nod in their initial contest last September, the flabby veteran looked every one of his 38 years in the rematch four months later, finding himself on the receiving end of Peter's crude hooks in a rather one-sided points defeat.

While "The Nigerian Nightmare" did show an improved set of skills, Toney looked slow and unfit, despite his earlier claims of going to extra lengths to enhance his stamina.

Leading up to the bout, the three-weight world titlist hired fitness guru Billy Blanks of the Tae-Bo infomercial fame in a desperate attempt to improve his conditioning. Toney even distanced himself from his highly respected trainer Freddie Roach to spend more time with Blanks.

"He's been just showing up in my gym for sparring and he's been training at the other gym with Billy Blanks, working on conditioning," Roach told Maxboxing's Steve Kim before the Peter rematch. "Pretty much Billy's in charge of the conditioning end of it and he guaranteed me that he'll bring James in the best shape of his life."

But Toney's decision to make Blanks such an integral part of his team didn't impress many boxing insiders, especially after Toney entered the ring at a whopping 249 pounds.

"That come fight time Blanks was permitted to hold Toney's spit bucket in the corner and occasionally offer bits of salient advice was, as we see it, rather an insult to head cornerman Freddie Roach and any other real fight guy with whom Toney and Roach associate," wrote William Dettloff in *The Ring* magazine.

After delivering a rather incoherent post-fight interview, some observers even called for Toney

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to retire, citing his slurred speech as a sign of possible neurological damage.

(END, PART I)