

Antonio Tarver: Master Of Second Chances

Written by Ronan Keenan
Sunday, 03 June 2007 19:00

Mason Dixon had run out of challenges in the sparse heavyweight division.

Even though he had convincingly defeated every viable contender, the champion felt he wasn't getting enough respect from the boxing world and ultimately decided that beating a legend like Rocky Balboa would be the best way to boost his sagging popularity. But Dixon took the challenge of the old warrior lightly and endured an embarrassingly torrid time against his aged opponent.

They say it's funny how life imitates art, but Antonio Tarver probably doesn't find it so amusing.

The light heavyweight champion had just triumphed over the best the division had to offer in Roy Jones and Glen Johnson when he was offered the role of Mason Dixon in the recent Rocky Balboa movie.

Tarver felt he was one of the more underappreciated titlists in the sport and thought that an appearance in the Hollywood blockbuster and a subsequent victory over the 41-year-old former middleweight king Bernard Hopkins would give him the recognition he desired.

But just as his on-screen persona was unprepared for Balboa, Tarver apparently underestimated the challenge of Hopkins and lost his title in an embarrassingly one-sided contest last June.

This Saturday, Tarver will return to the ring after a 12-month hiatus against Elvir Muriqi, 34-3 (21 KOs), in a twelve round bout at the Connecticut Convention Center to be televised on Showtime Championship Boxing.

It's a pivotal moment in Tarver's career, but the Floridian has already had a few of those in his 38-year life.

Born to a single-parent mother in Orlando's tough inner city, Tarver had a wavering interest in boxing before deciding to concentrate on obtaining a college sports scholarship instead.

"When I was fourteen I gave up boxing and concentrated on other sports," he told writer Thomas Hauser. "I played quarterback and wide receiver in football and shooting guard on the high school basketball team. In my mind, I was good. But I wasn't as good as I thought."

After failing to secure a college scholarship, the 19-year-old Tarver was left without direction in his life and soon turned his attention to drugs.

"I abused drugs for about seven months," he admitted. "I was out of school, running around with the wrong crowd. I was doing lace [a mixture of crack and marijuana]. And what happened was, in my mind, the drug became the only value that mattered. My responsibilities become

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secondary to the drug. I began to change as a person. I was acting crazy.”

But after listening to a talk given by former heavyweight titlist and drug abuser Pinklon Thomas to participants of the South Phoenix drug program, Tarver suddenly realized his calling in life and set his sights on Olympic gold.

The path to the Olympics wasn't easy and after failing to make the 1992 Games and with a young son to support, Tarver again became despondent with boxing.

“I went into that nutshell,” he said. “I'm thinking about quitting. I'm thinking of my little boy. Thinking about my age.”

Nonetheless, it wasn't long before he returned to the gym and, fuelled with a renewed sense of desperation, blitzed his way to the '96 Olympics in Atlanta. But again the 27-year-old Tarver was unsuccessful in meeting his expectations, losing a decision to eventual winner Vassiliy Jirov in the semifinals.

Tarver turned professional soon after, but his failure to capture a gold medal coupled with his advanced age sullied his attractiveness to top promoters, meaning he would have to climb the ranks the hard way.

A June 2000 clash with Eric Harding was supposed to be the launchpad for Tarver's slow moving career, but his plans were again derailed as he took a brutal beating en route to a wide points loss.

Still, disappointment again proved to be enlightenment for the Floridian.

“[The Harding fight] was a wake-up call,” Tarver recalled. “He broke my jaw. I knew I was hurt bad. There was pain from the bottom of my feet to the top of my head. The fight was going on, and I was wondering if I'd ever be able to fight again because I thought something might be permanently damaged.

“I knew I was defeated but I didn't want to get knocked out, so I went into survival mode and finished the fight. Then, after the loss, I asked myself, ‘How bad do I want it? What am I willing to do to get it?’ I started taking better care of my body and working harder.”

His improved dedication soon paid off as he viciously knocked out Harding two years later in a victory that dramatically increased his profile.

Consequently, Tarver was awarded a title shot in 2003 against the veteran Montell Griffin and he took the opportunity with earnest, flooring his opponent to claim the vacant championship. But, as is the case with Tarver, every high is followed by a low and his initial meeting with pound-for-pound king Roy Jones provided that setback.

Despite pressing the action and appearing to do enough to hand the passive Jones his first clean loss, the points verdict went against Tarver in what was a hotly disputed decision. Yet

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Tarver knows how to make the most of second chances and in the rematch six months later he landed a flush southpaw left cross in the second round that sent Jones comatose to the canvas and shook up the sport's hierarchy.

However, just when Tarver seemed a lock for fighter of the year honors, he produced a lackluster display that resulted in him being outworked by the underrated Gelncoffe Johnson in December 2004. But the master of the rematch returned in the summer of the following year to convincingly outpoint Johnson utilizing a sharp jab and higher workrate.

Tarver's name quickly returned to the pound-for-pound lists, but his mainstream appeal was still lacking.

"I don't understand it," he said in May of last year. "I beat every guy that I ever faced. I knocked out the great Roy Jones. I defeated handily the fighter of the year in 2004 [Glen Johnson], and I get no credit for those victories. So my thing is this – I won't be appreciated until I step away from the game."

A high profile victory over Bernard Hopkins was supposed to be the remedy for Tarver's woes, but yet again a jaded performance resulted in a clear-cut defeat. Whether he underestimated the threat of Hopkins or was too busy thinking about his movie career, Tarver looked like a fighter who had lost all motivation for the sport as he tamely stood in front of his opponent while getting repeatedly tagged by unanswered one-twos.

Maybe the loss will stir fresh motivation into Tarver's aging body as it has done in the past, but the former champion knows that he won't get many more second chances in the sport.

"I am in the final chapter of a storybook career, especially when you consider what I had and where I started from," he stated last month. "I have accomplished a lot and done it all. But I am not through. This last run, it is all about getting the respect of my peers and proving I am one of the greatest light heavyweight champions of all time.

"In some ways, I feel like a new fighter. I feel rejuvenated. Something was missing before. But I am married now and back with [former] trainer Jimmy Williams. So, in some ways, this is a new start for me."

Still, it hasn't taken him long to find disappointment in his comeback, as his bout with Muriqi was scheduled to be nationally televised on the ABC network last April before being scrapped amid rumors that Tarver would not be able to make the 175 pound weight limit.

But Tarver, 24-4 (18 KOs), vehemently denied such accusations and claims his enthusiasm for boxing is greater than ever.

"I want to build my legacy and I want to be remembered forever," he said. "And no matter how old I get, I want 'champion' to be attached to my name, forever and a day. That's something that no one can take away from me. And I want to be in Canastota, [the International Boxing Hall of Fame] and I want to be recognized among the greats. I think I deserve that."

If Tarver wants to greatly enhance his standing, a triumph over the red hot titlist Chad Dawson

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would be an affirmative start. But his intentions of facing Dawson are unclear, even though it would seem a logical step since both fighters are sharing the same card on Saturday.

“There is no competition between me and Chad,” Tarver stated last week. “We aren’t going to fight unless I want to fight because [Dawson’s promoters] don’t got enough money to pay me to fight, so if they keep their mouth shut I might give them a break after June 9. That’s only up to me.”

Refusing to fight Dawson would only do further harm to Tarver’s credibility. And to then make it back onto pound-for-pound lists the self-proclaimed ‘Magic Man’ would need an effort only Rocky could conjure up.