

Respect, Finally, For Larry Holmes

Written by Ron Borges
Sunday, 08 June 2008 19:00

Larry Holmes cried. Who could blame him?

Arguably the most under-appreciated heavyweight champion in boxing history, Holmes seemed to fight all his life for people to see him for what he was – which was one of the best heavyweights who ever laced on gloves. It seemed they never would.

Finally, on a hot Sunday in Canastota, N.Y., boxing agreed. People may still argue where Holmes fits in the long line of heavyweight champions but he's in there somewhere now and far closer to the top than the bottom after having been inducted into the International Boxing Hall of Fame during its annual ceremony.

Like everything else in boxing there are two of them of course. There's the World Boxing Hall of Fame in Los Angeles (let's call it the WBHF just to keep with boxing tradition of too many of everything, including letters in the alphabet). The other is the International Boxing Hall of Fame (IBHF, if you will), which is the more recognized of the two. That is as it should be and Sunday they added Holmes to a list of fighters that is, frankly, too long but not when it comes to him.

The long road Holmes traveled from the steel mills around Easton, PA., to the onion fields that lie not far from the door of Canastota's Hall seemed to overwhelm him in a way no opponent could. Oh, a few beat him late in life when he would have been best served to leave boxing alone and one knocked him cold. But that was the night a young Mike Tyson at the top of his powers beat up a shadow who looked like Larry Holmes but really wasn't.

Holmes had had a similar experience when he beat up a shadow who once had been Muhammad Ali, reminding us all that boxing and life are really a circle. The difference was Tyson was exalted for what he did. Larry Holmes was hated.

Timing never seemed to be Holmes' strong point except when he was in the ring ripping an opponent to shreds with a jab that should have come equipped with a rubber tip at the end to make the fight a fair one. That left jab was a weapon, not just a range finder. It was a tool that helped lift him out of Easton and on to 48 straight victories before some judges in Las Vegas stopped him just short of tying Rocky Marciano's heavyweight record for consecutive victories without a defeat.

Holmes was often his own worst enemy and that was never more evident than when he insulted the memory of the long-dead Marciano, accusing him of having once fought a relative and of being something less than one of the greatest heavyweights in history even though he's the only one ever to retire undefeated.

In fact, he was inelegant enough to say at the time, "Rocky Marciano couldn't have carried my jockstrap."

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Boxing never forgave him for beating up Ali, even though Holmes cried when it was over and went to Ali's room to apologize. Ali, not surprisingly, laughed it off, saying Holmes had merely done his job but the larger world never wanted to see a job like that done on Ali, even in his dotage when he and the people around him should have known better.

Same was true when Holmes insulted the memory of Marciano, something he apologized for many times after, when no one was listening any more.

Holmes, as superior a boxer as there ever was in the division, suffered with both an inferiority complex and bad timing. He was the unfortunate who had to follow Ali's act, which was impossible, and a guy who desperately wanted to be recognized for his own skills and felt the best way to do it was to beat his drum even louder than Ali beat his.

The problem with no one ever beat a drum like Ali. Not Gene Krupa. Not Ginger Baker. Not Ringo Starr. Not any fighter who ever thumped a tub to make a headline. Certainly not Larry Holmes.

As good as he was, Larry Holmes couldn't win that fight and the frustration grew even as his greatness did. He said things he wished he hadn't to try and make the world listen and see who he was but he didn't have a mean bone in his body, except when he was inside the ropes.

Then he did his job, which is why he reigned for over seven years, the second longest title run in heavyweight history. He beat Ken Norton in an epic 15th round to win the title in a fight that remains vastly underrated. He defended it against all comers. He got off the deck when both Earnie Shavers and Renaldo Snipes appeared to have knocked him dead and won. He won 69 times in 75 fights, 44 coming by knockout, and his 20 title defenses is second only to Joe Louis' 25. So who could blame him if a tear rolled down his cheek on the day the boxing world finally fully embraced him?

"I'm sorry," Holmes said as around 1,000 people stood and cheered on the grounds of the IBHF. "I'm choked up a little bit. Why not? When you get to this point, when people come out to salute you like this it makes you want to cry. So if I cry, cry with me because I feel good."

Holmes had ever right to feel good because he was good. Very, very good in fact. Was he the best? No, but the list of names better is a short one among all the heavyweights who ever fought. In fact, it's a short one even among the ones he joined in the Hall of Fame on Sunday.

Holmes went in with an able class that also included junior welterweight champion Eddie Perkins, the long-underrated Holman Williams, middleweights Len Harvey and Frank Klaus, welterweight Harry Lewis, 19th-century Irish heavyweight Dan Donnelly, trainer Bill Gore, promoters Frank Warren of England and Mogens Palle of Denmark and journalists Dave Anderson and Joe Koizumi. For once the star was clearly Holmes, however. It's about time, he'd probably say.

"I didn't get into boxing to become heavyweight champion of the world," he said. "I didn't get into boxing to get into the Hall of Fame. I got into boxing to make money and pay the rent."

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He did a lot more than that, ultimately buying half of Easton, including both the courthouse and the jail house, which was typical of the way he prepared for a fight. He covered all the bases.

Holmes missed no one during his title reign, fighting the good, the bad and everyone in between. Sunday, Holmes said, "I wanted to give everybody the opportunity to fight (for the title)" and he did, in part because he always felt he'd been too long denied that opportunity himself.

Holmes was long dismissed as a second-class citizen among the heavyweights of his era. No Ali, no Foreman, no Joe Frazier, no Ken Norton. Perhaps that was because he served for a time as Ali's sparring partner and because for too long he had no one making his case for him. Who knows why, really?

That slowly changed when Don King began promoting him, a man about whom Holmes once said, "Don may have stolen half my money but he still paid me more than anyone else."

Holmes singled King out for praise for taking a chance on him when no one else would and for finally getting him his opportunity on June 9, 1978. That was the night he beat Norton with a 15th-round that may be the best there ever was in the heavyweight division.

The timing was slightly off even this last time in the limelight because his induction came one day before the 30th anniversary of that night. Holmes wasn't complaining about it though. This day he wasn't complaining about anything except a few of the critics who had for so long tormented him, led by the late Howard Cosell.

"I was determined to be the heavyweight champion of the world because I wanted to prove to those who said I couldn't do it, that I could do it," Holmes said Sunday, not long after receiving the Hall of Fame plaque that will forever state that he did.

Like nearly every other fighter past or future, he came back too many times, lured by the money and the memories. He retired after his second loss to Michael Spinks, who broke his string of wins at 48 in 1985, but came back for a \$3 million payday three years later to face Tyson, who knocked him out in the fourth round.

He came back at least three other times after that (you lose count after a while) and did well enough in his advanced years to lose two more title challenges to Evander Holyfield in 1992 and Oliver McCall in 1995, the latter at the advanced age of 45. What he always claimed in those days was that he wanted to fight George Foreman during his second title reign, a fight that could have been dubbed "Two Geezers at Caesars" if the 40-somethings had actually squared off.

Fortunately, they didn't so now they can square off together where they both belong, in boxing's Hall of Fame, where Foreman was inducted five years ago. They can argue all night long over who would have beaten who, but they both know one thing, the thing the boxing world finally conceded on Sunday – Larry Holmes could fight.