

HOLYFIELD: Too Proud, Or Too Broke?

Written by Ron Borges

Wednesday, 08 October 2008 19:00

Christmas will come early for Evander Holyfield this year and the song most befitting what's on his wish list is "Blue Christmas," because that's what it's going to be for him. A black-and-blue Christmas to be specific.

If Holyfield goes through with his plans to challenge WBA heavyweight champion Nikolay Valuev Dec. 20 in Germany for what even Holyfield admits will be the least amount of money he's ever earned for a title fight, it will be a reminder of the one sure bet in boxing - it always ends badly.

Boxing is the cruelest sport. It elevates a few of its practitioners to absurd levels of fleeting fame and fortune early in life and later beats them down as another, younger man beats them up to win the same illusion. There are many admirable things about boxers and many wonderful things about the sport, including its savage artistry, but one of those things is not the sight of another too-old former champion trying to hang on for one more payday.

Evander Holyfield doesn't want to admit it but that's what he's doing. He will be 46 on Oct. 19, an age that would make him the oldest heavyweight champion in boxing history if he were to find a way to defeat the 7 foot, 320-pound Valuev, which he will not. It would make him older than George Foreman was when, at 45, he cold-cocked Michael Moorer with one straight right hand to lift the spirits of middle-aged men around the world 14 years ago, but there is a significant difference between Foreman and Holyfield.

Holyfield became the greatest heavyweight of his time because he was a relentless warrior, one willing and able to take obscene amounts of punishment for the opportunity to deliver more of it back round after round. Foreman, on the other hand, was a one-punch knockout guy, a fighter who was blessed with the gift of concussive force so powerful that it could render an equally big man unconscious from one brief encounter with the end of his fist. Such power always gives you a chance because punching power is the last thing to desert a fighter.

Holyfield has never had that kind of power because he is a normal sized guy trapped in a world of giants. He became one of the greatest heavyweight of all time because he knew how to fight, was always ready and willing to fight and because he had more fight in him (plus superior hand speed and a better chin) than anyone else he was in with most of the time. On the few nights when that wasn't the case he usually had more heart and so that saw him through.

But that was more than a decade ago when, at 34, he twice destroyed the myth of Mike Tyson. Three years later a shadow of what he once was still twice went the distance against a giant named Lennox Lewis, a guy who would be a midget if standing next to Valuev today.

The relevant facts then are these:

* Holyfield is 6-6-1 in his last 12 fights.

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* He is 1-4-2 in his last seven title fights.

* He has not defeated an opponent of significance since he beat John Ruiz eight years ago and, truth be told, he's 1-1-1 against him, a guy who is 0-2 against Valuev.

Those facts say nothing about Valuev, who is a painfully pedestrian fighter on his best days. But this is not about Valuev. It is about what is important. It is about what Evander Holyfield is not.

* He is not, any longer, a top heavyweight.

* He is not, any longer, a ticket seller.

* He is not, any longer, a fighter with a future.

* He is not, any longer, a guy who can convince a top trainer to believe in him as a viable heavyweight fighter.

* He is not, most importantly, what he thinks he still is.

What he is, sadly, is what Joe Louis was at the end and Sonny Liston was at the end and Jack Johnson was at the end. He is Sugar Ray Robinson, Sugar Ray Leonard, Roberto Duran, Julio Cesar Chavez, Thomas Hearn, Willie Pep and oh so many others at the end. He is a sad imposter, a guy who can't quit because he can't see what he's become and won't see it until he leaves an arena wearing sunglasses at midnight.

Maybe he's doing it for the money, which he denies, because that's how most of these guys end up in the end - fighting for money rather than for glory. Holyfield claims that's not the case but he was the subject of a near foreclosure on his massive home a few months back and was sued for back child support payments which, if you understood the guy you would know is the last thing he'd come up short on if he could help it.

Holyfield had an explanation for all these things as he always does but there's no explaining why his long-time trainer Don Turner refuses to work with him any more and now Ronnie Shields has done the same. That's why he's looking for a new trainer. He's looking because they not only see what he cannot but they have told him what they see.

They see he's grown old at the most dangerous address in sports and they don't want to be there on the night it all goes blindly bad.

You get old in the major leagues and at the worst you're like poor Willie Mays staggering around under flyballs he used to catch with his eyes closed while in the outfield of the New York Mets.

You get old in football and you're Joe Namath with the Rams, unable to deliver a ball to an open receiver quickly enough and hence ending up on your head.

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You get old in basketball and you're Dr. J unable to elevate or Walt Frazier no longer able to make the pass at the right moment.

You grow old in boxing and you're a senior citizen being mugged. Big difference.

Holyfield doesn't see that even though in his last outing 14 months ago even he admits he couldn't out box a journeyman champion named Sultan Ibragimov, a fighter who won all but three rounds against Holyfield and four months later lost nearly every round against IBF champion Wladimir Klitschko.

He doesn't see it even though six years ago he lost all but three rounds to Chris Byrd, who has since been knocked out by a light heavyweight.

He doesn't see it even though he was .500 against Ruiz seven years ago and Ruiz is 0-2 against Valuev, the latest loss coming in August.

Holyfield claims he has a shot against a giant even though he has always struggled against big men, losing twice to Riddick Bowe and doing no better than a loss and a draw that the world declared was a robbery of poor Lewis when they squared off in 1999. In other words, against his two biggest opponents of any significance Holyfield came away 1-3-1 and that was more than a decade ago.

Once there was a time when Nikolay Valuev could have been eight feet tall and weigh 400 pounds and he wouldn't have lasted long with Evander Holyfield. He would have been hit so often and so accurately he would have toppled over from exhaustion, a skyscraper imploding from the beating of a wrecking ball.

Those times are gone. Today Valuev remains little more than a circus act with an improved jab but what Evander Holyfield has become is a rerun of so many sad boxing stories.

Certainly Holyfield believes he will win. If he watches tape of the ponderous Valuev he will see his many flaws and know how to take advantage of them. In his mind he will see the Evander Holyfield that once shone so brightly doing all manner of things to Nikolay Valuev never once realizing that that Holyfield is gone now and isn't coming back.

The one who is isn't really Evander Holyfield at all. He's just what's left of him.