Whoever first said “the best offense is a good defense” must not have been a fan of heavyweight boxing.

It’s OK to be a cutie-pie like Willie Pep or Pernell Whitaker if you’re a little guy, but for large men it’s always better to succeed with a high terror quotient and a wide mean streak than with flawless technique. From John L. Sullivan to Jack Johnson to Jack Dempsey to Joe Louis to Rocky Marciano to Joe Frazier to George Foreman and Mike Tyson, the heavyweights who have most held the public in their thrall were big boppers who could turn out the lights with a single shot, then stand sneering over their fallen opponents.

The foremost exception to the rule, of course, is Muhammad Ali, but then Ali broke the mould in so many ways. “The Greatest” got his knockouts, sure, but for the most part they were the result of accumulated damage, the oddity in the bunch being his somewhat dubious wipeout of Sonny Liston in their rematch in Lewiston, Maine. There are still millions of people – come on, you know who you are – who believe that Liston took a dive, for whatever reason.

Chris Byrd, as gentlemanly a practicioner of the pugilistic arts as anyone to have climbed inside the ropes in recent years, was an alphabet heavyweight champion a couple of times, but he was a puffed-up super middleweight whose duck-and-dodge tactics, effective as they were, never quite translated to big box-office. He was the heavyweight Pernell Whitaker, which is to say he was less appreciated than he would have been had he remained at his original, lower weight. Byrd made his mark not with pulverizing power, but by making the other guy miss a lot and thus look foolish.

Which brings us to Malik Scott, the Philadelphian whose exquisite boxing skills have never been in question. But his ability to dispense punishment, as was the case with Byrd, has often been called into question, leaving him on the periphery of significant contendership.

Scott (32-0, 11 KOs), now relocated to Van Nuys, Calif., continued his lengthy transformation into a more dangerous dude with an eight-round unanimous decision over Raphael Butler (34-8, 27 KOs) Saturday night in Cabazon, Calif., on the undercard of a show headlined by heavyweight stablemate James Toney’s 12-round split decision over Fres Oquendo (29-4, 18 KOs).

It spoke volumes that Scott – whom I once dubbed the “King of the Eight-Rounders” – again was fighting an eight when, at 28, his talent should have positioned him for main-event status, if not for a shot at some splintered version of the title.

Scott still considers himself a work in progress, but old habits sometimes can be hard to break. When you’re 6-4 and 255 pounds, fans don’t want to see you peck-peck-pecking with a metronome jab when they’d rather see spectacular stoppages.

It has now fallen to trainer Joe Goossen, with whom Scott has been for seven bouts, to bring out the power and the aura of danger he believes lurks somewhere within the heavyweight division's gold standard for boring efficiency.

"You have to fight when you're with me," Goossen said earlier this year when queried about Scott's overly cautious style. "Have I ever developed a fighter that I took to the top who was consistently boring? If anything, I've proven that I can make safety-first fighters into more entertaining fighters.

"Mike Nunn was being booed out of the Reseda Country Club when I got him. I turned him into an efficient, hard-hitting counterpuncher. I didn't turn him into a brawler. I turned him into a smart boxer-puncher because that's what his body type and skill dictated.

"The same is true for Malik. He got to 25-0 on natural talent. You don't go undefeated that long unless you're special. With his youth, height, reach, speed and athletic ability, I knew he could be more than special. He just needed the right tools and mentality. I want that ugly duckling because I know he can be a swan."

Good analogy, but then Scott has always been a swan. Long, lithe and graceful, he glides around the ring almost effortlessly, snapping jabs and controlling the tempo with pure boxing skills. It is efficient, productive – and, from the fans' perspective, drab and unexciting.

But, hey, he's trying to make adjustments that will help him fill seats and rise more rapidly in the rankings.

"Joe is fantastic," Scott said of the fine-tuning in the gym that's being done by the veteran cornerman, younger brother of Scott's promoter, Goossen Tutor's Dan Goossen. "He's really improved my inside game. I'm cutting guys up on the inside with short uppercuts, short left hooks and short right hands. I'm going to the body a lot more.

"I'm still as quick as I was, but I'm not doing as much `leg' boxing as I was doing at one time. Joe taught me to use my ability to stand right there and make guys miss, then make them pay. He's definitely added to my arsenal."

All well and good. But Joe Goossen is attempting to draw out something in Scott that others have mined for in the past, with negligible results. If it quacks like a duck and waddles like a duck, it's probably a duck, right? Same goes for elegant swans. Maybe it's not possible to convert them into killer gamecocks.

As long ago as 2001, when Scott was still a member of the Main Events stable, his handlers spoke of rearranging his strengths so that he would be a more devastating puncher and, thus, more marketable.

"My coach (Anthony Jacobs) and dad (Leroy Scott) told me that I'm the most skilled heavyweight out there," Scott said after he stopped Robert Anderson in two rounds to run his professional record to 4-0, with three knockouts. "Once I get that explosiveness, all these other

guys are in trouble."

Since he uttered those words, Scott has won 28 straight bouts, only eight inside the distance. And the skeptics continue to wonder how long the metamorphosis is going to take, or whether all the blame can be laid at the doorstep of America's amateur boxing establishment.

Despite a lackluster performance at the U.S. Olympic Boxing Trials and Box-offs in 2000, Scott signed with Main Events and a marquee manager, Shelly Finkel, whose list of clients included such notable world champions as Evander Holyfield, Meldrick Taylor, Mike Tyson, Zab Judah and, yes, Whitaker.

While other promoters scouting the Trials and Box-offs saw Scott as a tall, somewhat robotic technician with little flair and punching power, Finkel saw someone who was limited by the dictums of USA Boxing, not by a lack of talent.

"I don't know about anyone else, but it was obvious to me that Malik had great athletic ability," Finkel said. "He just hadn't learned how to box. The (amateur boxing establishment) was showing him all this silly stuff. Everything was geared toward that goofy computer."

Scott, who is no longer with Finkel, admitted that he had been so thoroughly schooled in the prevailing amateur style that he sometimes found it difficult to try new things.

"Al Mitchell (who instructed Scott at the USA Boxing Education Center at Northern Michigan University) had me fighting out of a peek-a-boo stance, with my hands up high, so no (opponent's) points could get through," Scott said. "If I got the lead, I was instructed to run, run, run. Some of that carried over when I turned pro. I admit it. But by around my 14th fight as a pro, I had cut a majority of that (amateur) stuff out."

Maybe, or maybe not. Even as Scott continued to win, it became increasingly evident that he was not a priority for Main Events, which moved him ever so slowly. He didn't fight his first scheduled 10-rounder until April 5, 2007, his 28th pro outing and third with Goossen Tutor. That's an extraordinarily long apprenticeship, especially for someone whom even his most vociferous critics would agree has a chance to outpoint almost anyone on a given night.

"Main Events has a roster of fighters, and that roster included me, Calvin Brock and Dominick Guinn at heavyweight," Scott recalled. "It seemed to me that I was never the priority. I could never understand that, because I thought I was better than those guys.

"But, you know, everything happens for a reason. Somebody (actually, me) wrote that I was `King of the Eight-Rounders.' I'm fighting more 10-rounders now. Even when I was fighting eights, though, I was going 10 and 12 rounds in sparring with Lennox Lewis."

So, how much has actually changed? If Scott was No. 3 in a three-man heavyweight stable at Main Events, where does he stand with Goossen Tutor, which has the iconic Toney, undefeated knockout artist Chris Arreola and fast-handed Eddie Chambers? It could be argued that he actually has slid down a notch, and is now No. 4 with his current promotional company.

Mention any of this to Scott and he acknowledges that, yes, that criticism stings a little. But it only adds fuel to his fire to prove to the doubters that he is of championship timber, that a pure boxer in transition can make it big if only he can hike his knockout and entertainment ratios.

Some months ago, Scott paid me and ESPN.com's Dan Rafael a compliment – at least I'm taking it as such – by mentioning us by name as his inspirations to raise the level of his game.

"Come to my crib right now and you'll see negative articles about me all over my fridge," he told an interviewer. "I've got about six from Dan Rafael on there, but I save the best for my bedroom mirror. Right now I've got one by Bernard Fernandez where I can see it every morning when I get up. He wrote that I was on the road to being an underachiever. He said I wasn't on his list of top 25 Philadelphia fighters."

And here you thought Angelo Dundee and Lou Duva were the last of the great motivators.

In speaking now with Scott, his tone is conciliatory, not angry. He understands there is such a thing as constructive criticism, and he takes it as such when it is offered. Besides, the best way to shut up a skeptic is to prove him wrong.

"I actually get motivated more by the negative than by the positive," Scott said. "People will pat you on the back all the time when you're going good, then turn on you just like that if somebody puts you on your ass.

"That's why I have nothing but negative articles taped around my apartment. They make me feel like I have to do more to get those people to change their tune."

Not that Scott is boiling over with rage to quash the criticism. He understands that he has to walk it like he talks it, and he hasn't always done that.

"There is an element of truth to some of those negative articles," he admitted. "There have been times when I was too cautious. I have been called a safety-first fighter, and I can see where people would get that impression. At other times, those same people are, like, `Wow. Where has that guy been?'

"I'm not angry with the naysayers. I just need to remember some of what was said so that I can motivate myself to get better. It makes me work harder and harder."

Like Byrd, who at his best "clowned" opponents (which is to say, make them look silly), Scott has not always found it easy to be paired with higher-ranked opponents, especially the big hitters who prefer that the other guy come right to them and trade. It would be different if he had high rankings that would oblige high-visibility heavyweights to take him on, but he is nowhere to be found in the top 15 of all major sanctioning bodies, and his window of opportunities is gradually closing.

Ostensibly in his prime, Scott dares to believe that a rapid advance in the ratings and public consciousness is still achievable. He said the heavyweight division is not nearly as barren as

some would have you believe, and that all it will take for a rebirth is for the networks to take a chance on fresh talent instead of continually recycling the old standbys.

“Everything runs in cycles,” Scott said. “Things go round and round. As far as the heavyweights are concerned, I believe there are a lot of good, young fighters. You got me, you got Chris Arreola, Kevin Johnson, Chazz Witherspoon, Eddie Chambers. But we all have to fight each other.

“Let the young guys settle them among themselves. Look, Holyfield was great, but we need to stop having sideshows like him and (Nikolay) Valuev.”

It would be one thing if Scott was a trash-talker, but he calls himself a “humble warrior” who leaves it to his promoter to make his matches.

“I don’t feel like I need to call guys out,” Scott said. “I’ve been calling guys out since I was 12-0, something like that, and that crap hasn’t gotten me nowhere. I don’t need to say I’m going to beat this guy or that guy. Put me in the ring with them and I’ll prove it.”

***photo courtesy Jan Sanders