

Twelve Years Ago, A Crying Shame

Written by Bernard Fernandez
Sunday, 08 February 2009 19:00

If you follow boxing long enough, you're apt to see more than your share of strange sights. No. 1 on my all-time list of Ripley's Believe It or Not moments came on Nov. 6, 1993, the night that "Fan Man," the nom de guerre of a publicity-craving individual named James Miller, decided to grab his 15 minutes of fame by arriving by powered paraglider into the ring for the second bout between WBA/IBF heavyweight champion Riddick Bowe and Evander Holyfield. Miller circled high above the outdoor stadium at Caesars Palace for nearly 10 minutes before deciding to drop in on the fight in the seventh round. His chute became tangled in the overhead lights, causing Miller to land on the top strand of the ropes, after which he tumbled awkwardly into a group of spectators and security guards.

Holyfield, who appeared to be running on empty, took advantage of the 20-minute break in the action to recharge his batteries and rally for a majority-decision victory. That was too bad for Bowe, whose pregnant wife, Judy, fainted in reaction to the ruckus going on around her. It also speaks volumes about the jinxed life of the unfortunate Mr. Miller (who committed suicide in 2002) that, with thousands of spectators in attendance, the ringside seats he toppled into were filled by Minister Louis Farrakhan and his Nation of Islam security guards, who were none too pleased to have some unidentified white guy arrive in their midst from out of the sky. "Fan Man" was beaten unconscious by big, burly dudes brandishing walkie-talkies as makeshift clubs.

"It was a heavyweight fight," Miller said afterward, "and I was the only guy who got knocked out."

But the race for second place to "Fan Man's" shenanigans boils down to the Mike Tyson-Evander Holyfield "Bite Fight" of June 28, 1997, and the Feb. 7, 1997, rematch at the Las Vegas Hilton between Lennox Lewis and the man who had upset him 28½ months earlier, Oliver "The Atomic Bull" McCall, for the vacant WBC heavyweight title.

The 12th anniversary of Lewis-McCall II came and went a few days ago, a fact I probably would not have picked up on if I hadn't happened to rummage around in my voluminous files and come across the tearsheet of the story I authored for the Philadelphia Daily News about the bizarre ending to a most bizarre evening of boxing.

McCall, who admits to first experimenting with drugs at the age of 13, had a history of strange and disturbing behavior in and out of the ring. Only six weeks prior to the rematch with Lewis, he picked up a 20-foot Christmas tree in the lobby of a Nashville hotel and hurled it in a drunken rage. So apprehensive was Dino Duva, Lewis' American co-promoter, that he pleaded with McCall's promoter, Don King, to replace McCall with a challenger for Lewis who at least was more emotionally stable.

But McCall passed a drug test administered by the Nevada State Athletic Commission prior to the bout, which was allowed to proceed in the expectation – well, at least in the hope – that everything would come off without a hitch. As it turned out, such optimism proved unfounded.

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McCall, whose behavior was eccentric under the best of circumstances, appeared to suffer some sort of episode during the fight. His demeanor became increasingly erratic and he was making little or no effort to defend himself when referee Mills Lane finally stepped in and awarded Lewis a technical-knockout win 55 seconds into the fifth round.

“It was almost as if he wanted to get knocked out,” Lane said. “He didn’t put up any semblance of defending himself so I figured, that’s enough. Something’s wrong. I thought to myself, ‘This boy needs medical help.’”

Not only did McCall spend the last two-plus rounds wandering around the ring, his arms at his sides, muttering to himself, but on several occasions he was observed with tears tricking down his cheeks.

If there’s no crying in baseball, as Tom Hanks once famously observed in the 1992 movie, “A League of Their Own,” there sure as heck isn’t supposed to be any in boxing – at least while the fight is going on.

“In the third round, he got in close and then seemed frustrated, and then he just backed off and put his arms down,” Lane said in recounting his own perplexed reaction to what he was seeing. “I thought he was playing possum, but then I saw his lips quiver and I thought, ‘My God, is he crying?’”

George Benton, who served as McCall’s lead trainer that night, didn’t know what to tell his man once he returned to the corner, which turned out to be a chore in and of itself. McCall used up precious seconds of the one-minute rest period after both the third and the fourth rounds before plopping down on his stool, the second such delay ending only when Lane took him by his arm and guided him. Twice Lane felt obliged to ask McCall if he even wanted to continue.

“I gotta fight, gotta fight,” McCall replied even as he declined to engage Lewis, who was more than a little flummoxed himself by all the strange goings-on.

The immediate aftermath was nearly as unusual as what had transpired in the ring, with talk arising that all or part of McCall’s \$3.1 million purse would be withheld or attached by the Nevada State Athletic Commission. King and McCall’s manager, Jimmy Adams, moved swiftly to retain a Las Vegas-based psychiatrist to determine if the fighter had really gone off his rocker (the shrink concluded that, while McCall had indeed experienced some sort of freak-out, he was not in fact insane), and almost everyone weighed in on a fight like no other.

“Lewis was in there with a lunatic,” yelled Benton, who didn’t know what to say to get McCall to snap out of whatever trance he had entered. “He was talking incoherently, and he’d been doing that all week. It started a long time ago and I think it caught up with him.”

McCall, in his dressing room, depicted himself as someone powerless to control unseen forces that were determined to see him fail.

“Y’all got what you wanted,” he proclaimed to no one in particular. “I hope you’re happy. Now

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they can put me in prison.”

This was hardly what you might expect of someone who had laid the first loss of Lewis' career on him with one of the sweetest one-punch knockouts you'll ever see. When McCall's perfectly timed counter right hand exploded on Lewis' jaw in the second round on Sept. 24, 1994, in London's Wembley Arena, it brought him possession of Lewis' WBC heavyweight championship belt and a new-found respect for a Chicago journeyman who perhaps was best known to that point as maybe the toughest and most resilient of Mike Tyson's many sparring partners.

McCall's shocking upset of Lewis also underscored just how important it is to formulate the right plan, and for a focused and determined fighter to execute that plan to perfection.

Hall of Fame trainer Emanuel Steward was sought out by King to work with McCall and harness the talent that many boxing insiders knew was there, but was being frittered away through all the nuttiness. Steward initially was hesitant because of his high personal regard for Lewis, although to that point he hadn't actually been involved with him.

“I was a big fan of Lennox since the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics,” Steward told me. “I trained (eventual gold medalist) Tyrell Biggs when he beat Lennox in '84. Tyrell, who was from Philadelphia, was living and training in Detroit then, training with Tony Tucker.

“But even though we beat Lennox (who took gold in the super-heavyweight division at the 1988 Seoul Olympics) in '84, I liked him a lot. You could see the potential he had. He was this big kid with a lot of power and a lot of natural talent that hadn't been refined.”

For all his warm and fuzzy feelings for Lewis, however, Steward felt he had technical problems that were not being addressed by his trainer at the time, Pepe Correa. And those technical problems, Steward concluded, could be exploited by McCall, provided he laid off the booze and the drugs long enough to do what needed to be done.

“Lennox had a habit that when he jabbed, he put his right hand all the way across his face, almost to the left side of his jaw,” Steward said. “Then, when he threw a right hand, it took him a little bit longer to bring it back and re-set to throw it again.

“He also had a slow, lazy jab, which he didn't really snap off. It was used more to measure where his opponent was before he threw that big right hand. When I had McCall, we based our strategy on trying to catch Lennox when he threw the right hand. Lennox had been destroying everybody with that big right, but the flaw was there for everybody to see. I don't know why nobody else picked up on it, or was unable to take advantage of it if they did see it.”

Once McCall went to camp with Steward, the heretofore wild child allowed himself to accept a measure of discipline for perhaps the first, and last time, in his career.

“Oliver was totally loyal to me when we trained. I never had any problems with him,” Steward said. “He finally had some stability, and that's because I put the time in with him. That was the difference. Every day I cooked for him. He came to my house and we talked about boxing and

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about life. I babied him.”

Steward also revamped McCall from a free-swinging slugger into a different sort of fighter than anyone had seen before. Certainly, Lewis didn't expect to mix it up with that much of a new and improved McCall on fight night.

“Oliver wore white shoes for that fight,” Steward said. “He was more like a Sugar Ray Leonard. He had never fought that way before. I trained him for speed. He moved better, he punched crisper.”

And he waited for just the right moment to exploit the chink in Lewis' armor, which he did when Lewis went to throw that huge right hand in the second round. But McCall's right got there first.

“First thing I told Oliver when I started to work with him was, ‘Lennox is a better fighter than you. He's bigger and stronger. He has a better amateur background. Really, he has a better everything. But he has a weakness, and I will train you to beat him by taking advantage of that weakness.’”

To his credit, Lewis learned from his mistakes. He let Correa go and went shopping for the best trainer available, believing that that person was the man who had just helped a lesser fighter, McCall, defeat him.

Steward jumped at the opportunity to work with Lewis, even though he had prepped Briggs to beat him in the 1984 Olympics and then McCall to take him out as a pro a decade later.

“I still thought Lennox was the best heavyweight in the world, or at least he could be,” Steward said. “And when I did begin to work with him, I set out to eliminate the flaws I had seen in his before.

“I knew he needed a snappier jab. He needed better balance and conditioning, and to not be overly aggressive. He also needed top sparring partners because you adjust to the level of your competition, and I knew he did not have the right sparring partners when he was getting ready to fight Oliver the first time.”

It was a vastly different Lewis who entered the ring at the Las Vegas Hilton on Feb. 7, 1997, and, unfortunately, a vastly different McCall. For whatever reason, the Chicago native was over-anxious and mentally unprepared to replicate his watershed conquest of Lewis.

“He obviously was trying to deal with a situation he couldn't handle,” Steward said of McCall. “I really think he had some sort of nervous breakdown that night. His corner people were yelling at him, calling him crazy and stupid, but it had just the opposite effect of what they were trying to do. He just went deeper into his shell instead of coming out of it.”

Steward also was having fighter-control issues. Try as he might, he couldn't quite prod Lewis – who still might have been remembering the way he had previously been dispatched by McCall – into turning it loose. The Englishman was wary of McCall's strange behavior, believing it was an

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act to lure him in for another putaway shot.

“Lennox was still very suspicious, cautious and confused,” Steward said. “He didn’t commit as fully as he could have, or should have.”

Since they last squared off, Lewis and McCall have gone their separate ways. Lewis retired after defeating Vitali Klitschko on cuts on June 21, 2003, and will be inducted into the International Boxing Hall of Fame in Canastota, N.Y., on June 14.

McCall has continued to have his ups and downs both in and out of the ring. He has been through four rehabs, spent time in a mental institution and been restrained with a stun gun by Nashville police after having trespassed in a public housing development. For all his troubles, though, the father of seven remains at least a fringe contender at age 44, his 51-9 record including 36 victories inside the distance. In his most recent ring appearance, he was outpointed over 12 rounds by Juan Carlos Gomez on Oct. 19, 2007, in Berlin, Germany. To this day, he maintains that his mondo bizarre act was just that, an act, and that he was ready to again drill Lewis had not Lane decided that enough was enough.

Sounds almost crazy enough to be believable.