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Monday, 08 June 2009 19:00

Lennox Lewis has never been to Canastota, N.Y., the picturesque central New York hamlet that is the home of the International Boxing Hall of Fame. But the three-time former heavyweight champion, who'll be there this weekend to formally join the ring legends he lists as his heroes, has expected to make the trip ever since the IBHOF opened its doors for the first induction ceremony in 1990.

In fact, Lewis has been marking time to Sunday's stamp of immortality since Feb. 6, 2004, the day he announced his retirement as an active boxer and the clock on the mandatory five-year waiting period for enshrinement began to tick.

Asked if he always knew he would become a Hall of Famer, Lewis doesn't bother with a bunch of aw-shucks false modesty. He earned his ticket to Canastota, he believes, an assertion that even his occasional critics would be foolish to dispute. But beyond that, the British-born, Canadian-reared son of Jamaican immigrants believes his name should be included whenever talk turns to those holding membership in an even more exclusive club, the one reserved not just for mere Hall of Famers -- the heavyweight section of which includes the perhaps marginal likes of Ingemar Johansson and Floyd Patterson -- but for the very best of the best. If you want to get into one of those Willie, Mickey and the Duke-type debates about who rates higher in heavyweight boxing history, Jack Johnson or Joe Louis or Rocky Marciano or Muhammad Ali, please make sure that Lennox Lewis at least draws a mention.

"It's not even me saying that," Lewis told me in a telephone call from Jamaica, where he was enjoying the tropical breezes and clear, blue waters of his ancestral roots before heading north. "It's the public, the fans. People tell me I'm on that list, that I deserve to be on it."

As far back as 2000, when Lewis was sequestered in his Pocono Mountains training camp preparing for a title defense against Frans Botha that ended in an emphatic, second-round technical knockout of the overmatched White Buffalo, his trainer, Emanuel Steward, noted that the big Briton was not so much fighting contemporary opponents as the standards established by his esteemed predecessors.

"He'll beat everybody they put in front of him, but the challenge is for him to become all that he can be," Steward said of Lewis. "Right now he's fighting more for his place in boxing history than any particular opponent."

Like Larry Holmes, who had the unenviable task of trying to fill the massive footprints left by his immediate predecessor, the charismatic Ali, Lewis was someone many American fight fans could appreciate only through the perspective of time and distance. He was a jumble of Jamaican, British and Canadian influences, which made it difficult for him to be categorized as belonging to any particular nationality. He spoke in measured, scholarly tones, with an accent that vaguely suggested cast membership in *Masterpiece Theater* rather than a lead role in the trash-talking demolition derby of the ring, which led to the stereotype being reinforced through

those HBO commercials that depicted him as a tea-sipping, chess-playing intellectual instead of a merchant of menace.

Most of all, though, he was perhaps unfairly depicted as being a somewhat lesser presence than the blunt instrument that was Mike Tyson or the overachieving Everyman that was Evander Holyfield, a bulked-up former light-heavyweight who did not enjoy the benefit of having come packaged in a 6-5, 245-pound body. We were enthralled by the pure violence emanating from the snarling Tyson, and captivated by Holyfield's warrior spirit that enabled him to conquer larger, more physically imposing men. Lewis, on the other hand, was seen as colorless, occasionally tentative and, oh, yeah, possessed of a crystal chin that was shattered by overhand rights delivered by Oliver McCall and Hasim Rahman.

But Lewis chipped away at the biases and prejudices until he stood alone as the finest heavyweight of his era. During his 14-year professional boxing career, the 1988 super heavyweight gold medalist at the Seoul Olympics posted a 41-2-1 record, with 32 victories inside the distance, that included defeats of, among others, Razor Ruddock, Tommy Morrison, Golota, Michael Grant, Ray Mercer, David Tua and Tyson. He was 1-0-1 in his two bouts with Holyfield, and he avenged his only two losses with emphatic putaways of McCall and Rahman.

The only big name of his era whom Lewis did not meet and defeat was Riddick Bowe, but then Bowe was trounced by Lewis in the title bout of the Seoul Olympics. Maybe that's why Bowe and his manager, Rock Newman, managed to steer clear of Lewis in the pro ranks even as they hurled invectives in his direction.

Bowe has announced another comeback, at age 41, and Lewis said one of his few regrets is that he didn't get the opportunity to reprise his Olympic success against "Big Daddy" for major bucks.

"Even now, a fight between us would be interesting," Lewis said. "I admit to thinking that maybe I should come back and take care of that unfinished business. But it could never happen. My skill level is vastly superior to his. It always was. I would have beaten him bad back then, and I would beat him bad now.

"Rock Newman knew Bowe couldn't beat me. Bowe knew. Or maybe they didn't know and just made a poor career decision.

"I could never figure out why they couldn't find a way to make a fight between me and Bowe. If a man beats you in the Olympics, you should want to come back in the pros and show it was a fluke. You should want to settle the score, to get your revenge. You need to get back on the horse again. I got back on the horse against McCall and Rahman. Bowe didn't even attempt to get back on the horse against me."

Lewis decided to permanently dismount when he was 38, following his sixth-round TKO, on cuts, of Vitali Klitschko on June 21, 2003. Klitschko, a late replacement for Lewis' originally scheduled opponent, Kirk Johnson, had his moments until ring physicians determined that the crimson seepage from the multiple gashes around his eyes was too severe for the Ukrainian to

continue.

It was the realization that he was continuing to fight for those multimillion-dollar purses, rather than for love of the sport or to enhance his already-assured legacy, that prompted Lewis to step away, despite a clamor for him to get it on again with Vitali Klitscho.

Of suggestions he was ducking a rematch with the older of boxing's Klitscho brothers, Lewis dismisses the notion as ridiculous.

"He definitely was losing ground," Lewis said upon announcing his retirement. "He had shot his load. I felt I would definitely have knocked him out in the next couple of rounds.

"He kept saying he got stopped on a cut. Will you please tell him I'm the one who created the cut? In fact, not one cut, but five cuts around his eyes. I didn't hug him to give him the cuts. I punched him."

In a perfect world, Lewis now acknowledges that he should have stepped away following his eighth-round knockout of Tyson on June 8, 2002, in Memphis. That would have been a fitting sendoff, and against the man who, even more than Bowe, Lewis had marked at the top of his to-do list. Tyson is the guy who chewed a chunk out of Lewis' left thigh during a New York press conference that turned ugly. He's the one who went on television and vowed to eat Lewis' unborn children.

"I'm getting rid of the last misfit in boxing," Lewis had said of his quest to prove, once and for all, that he was a better, more complete fighter than Tyson, or at least the rusted remnants of what once had been Iron Mike.

"I had been trying to get out for a while, but I couldn't, not without Mike Tyson on my resume," Lewis continued. "If I hadn't fought him, everyone would have wondered how it would have turned out between us. I needed to finish that part of my history."

Despite the gnawing suspicion that the Tyson takedown was exactly the right moment for him to exit the arena, there were more millions to be earned with his fists even though his passion for boxing had ebbed. He had become, against his better judgment, just another mercenary in a business that devours those who stay too long in the pursuit of another payday, no matter how lucrative that payday might be.

"If you can't give 110 percent and have the same kind of hunger and drive that you had at the beginning, you shouldn't really step back into the ring," Lewis said. "A lot of people don't have the hunger, they're just doing it for the money. Money isn't everything."

Lewis said he is content in retirement. He is the father of two children, both born after Tyson had vowed to munch his offspring for lunch, and they're as much or more a source of his joy than anything he achieved inside the ropes. He is able to keep his hand in boxing as a color commentator for HBO, and each morning brings the satisfaction of knowing that he no longer has to push his body in preparation for the next fight, because there is no longer a need for a

next fight. He is financially secure, even in this troubled economy, free and clear of the chasms into which most if not all of the fortunes amassed by Tyson and Holyfield plunged.

“It’s great,” he said of the life of a retired gentleman boxer. “I’m glad I went out on top. I’m still in the sport, doing the commentating for HBO. And nobody wants to beat me up anymore.

“I’m just happy raising my family and setting new goals for myself. Life shouldn’t end for anyone when one part of it ends. Boxing is what I did, it isn’t necessarily who I am. Not completely, anyway.”

It’s difficult to fault Lewis for his decision to step away and stay away. He was a child when he watched his all-time favorite fighter, Ali, shock the seemingly invincible George Foreman in the “Rumble in the Jungle” on Oct. 30, 1974. Even then, Lewis had an idea that his role model should have quit right then, when his legend was at its apex. And, if not then, surely after Ali had survived Joe Frazier in the “Thrilla in Manila” on Oct. 1, 1975, the rubber match of their incomparable trilogy.

But Ali lingered for six more years and 10 bouts, paying a terrible price for staying too long at the fair. Lewis now admits he ignored the lesson he should have learned from Ali by not quitting boxing after his thumping of Tyson. Vitali Klitschko provided the proof he needed that a fighter should only fight on as long as his heart is in it.

“I probably had a couple of more good fights left in me, but I didn’t see the point,” Lewis said. “But I just didn’t see the point in going on any longer.

“I mean, look at Evander. He’s doing it for money. I don’t care what he says, he’s doing it just for money. And money can’t be the only reason for doing what fighters do. Getting in the ring should also be about proving something to yourself. It should be about personal pride and making your mark.

“Fighters who retire, they come back because they have nothing else to do and they go back to doing what they know. They come back for money. I feel sorry that some of them find themselves in that situation.

“If you’re in your 40s, and you’ve made as much money as Evander did, you shouldn’t need to fight anymore. You shouldn’t *want* to fight anymore. You need to know when to step away and let the young guys take over. There has to be life after boxing.”

Lewis never said that his era was the golden age of heavyweight boxing. Of his prime, he noted that the level of competition had already fallen a notch from when Ali, Frazier, Foreman, Ken Norton, Ron Lyle, Jerry Quarry and Earnie Shavers represented a figurative high-water mark.

“The movie they released a couple of years ago, *When We Were Kings*, brought that whole era back into focus,” Lewis said in 2000. “The top guys today would not have survived with the likes of Ali, Foreman, Frazier and Norton. We’ll never see their likes again, certainly not anyone like Ali.”

Now, as a boxing commentator, Lewis is obliged to admit that, beyond Vitali and Wladimir Klitschko, there is a steep falloff from even a decade ago to a group of contenders that would have been no more than pretenders when he was fighting. Putting a pretty dress on a hog doesn't necessarily transform Miss Piggy into, say, Jessica Alba.

Author Thomas Hauser once observed that in Ali-Frazier III, the combatants were fighting for much more than the heavyweight championship of the world; they were fighting for the heavyweight championship of each other. With that in mind, Lewis believes that, blood ties aside, the Klitschko brothers should engage in a unification showdown that would determine not only who is the finest heavyweight on the planet, but the best in the family.

"They're good," Lewis said of the Klitschkos. "If I was their mother, I probably would wish the same thing (that the brothers keep their vow never to fight each other). But this isn't tennis.

"Boxing needs someone to be the definitive No. 1. I think one or the other should step aside, or they should fight each other."

Lewis stepped aside five-plus years ago. Now he's stepping forward, joining the company of the larger-than-life figures he admired then and still does. That is reason enough to come to Canastota, and to join the inner circle of heavyweights who have lifted themselves, and boxing, to a higher level.

"It's an amazing honor to be inducted alongside your childhood heroes," Lewis said. "It's a feeling you really can't explain. I'm very happy to be among the great men that came before me."

And how does he imagine he would fare against those great men, prime on prime?

"I don't cross eras," he said. "Oh, I guess I have imagined what it would be like for me to fight them. But they had their time and I had mine. I really try to leave it at that."