

THE WEEK THAT WAS IN BOXING HISTORY

Written by Bernard Fernandez
Thursday, 18 June 2009 19:00

Special dates, such as anniversaries and birthdays, ought to be commemorated. They need to be commemorated. Just ask any husband who loses track of such an occasion and attempts to ease his wife's disappointment with a day-late gift of flowers or a box of chocolates.

Boxing has been around long enough that just about every week is speckled with anniversaries of notable events, but this week is more crowded than most. There is a saying: You can't know where you're going unless you know where you've been. So it is appropriate that, in this most celebratory of boxing weeks, we take a stroll down memory lane. Lest we forget.

On June 15, 1984, Thomas Hearns knocked out Roberto Duran in two rounds to retain his WBC super welterweight title, one day shy of the "Hitman's" 33rd birthday.

Also on June 15, IBF super flyweight Robert Quiroga outpointed "Kid" Akeem Anifowshe in a mesmerizing 1991 bout that had tragic consequences, and in 1996 Roy Jones Jr. stopped Eric Lucas in 11 rounds only hours after Jones demonstrated his crossover dribble in a minor-league basketball game.

On June 16, 1946, the "Raging Bull," Jake La Motta, took what officially went into the books as a 10th-round technical knockout of Marcel Cerdan to win the middleweight championship; on the same date in 1983, a supposedly declining Duran again revitalized his career and won the WBA super welterweight title by savaging Davey Moore en route to an eighth-round TKO.

On June 18, 1941, Joe Louis hung onto his heavyweight crown by taking out Billy Conn in the 13th round of a fight the smaller Conn was leading on the scorecards; on the same date in 1963, Cassius Clay, as Muhammad Ali was then known, averted a huge upset when he stopped Henry Cooper on cuts in the fifth round, the round after Cooper had floored and badly hurt the American sensation with a crushing left hook. Clay gained precious time to recover when a tear in his right glove was detected between rounds, requiring a change of gloves.

On June 19, 1936, Max Schmeling knocked out the previously undefeated Joe Louis; exactly 10 years later, Louis stashed Billy Conn in eight rounds of their long-anticipated rematch.

JUNE 15, 1984

In his book, *Four Kings*, a wonderful read authored by George Kimball that chronicles all eight head-to-head bouts involving Sugar Ray Leonard, Marvelous Marvin Hagler, Thomas Hearns and Roberto Duran, Kimball describes how Hearns employed his own "hands of stone" to put the Panamanian legend down and out in just two rounds in perhaps the most one-sided of those eight classic matchups.

During a 34-year career that spanned 119 bouts, Duran (103-16, 70 KOs) was stopped only four times. Three of those defeats, however, came on technical knockouts. There was the No

THE WEEK THAT WAS IN BOXING HISTORY

Written by Bernard Fernandez
Thursday, 18 June 2009 19:00

mas surrender to Sugar Ray Leonard, an aberration in which an ill-conditioned Duran lost to Pat Lawlor and a third-round pummeling at the hands of William Joppy when the great Duran was 47 and a shadow of his former self.

Only once, though, was Duran counted out. It happened in the outdoor stadium at Caesars Palace, in 90-degree heat, and for Hearns' 154-pound title.

Starting quickly, Hearns dropped Duran twice in the opening round, first with a right hand to the jaw and then with a crushing body shot. It was a wobbly Duran who made his way back to his corner, but one who was committed to taking the fight to Hearns in the second stanza.

Meeting fire with fire while still badly shaken proved to be a tactical miscalculation on Duran's part. Hearns, eager to seal the deal, delivered as picture-perfect an overhand right as he ever had landed, a lightning bolt to Duran's cheekbone. The challenger pitched forward onto his face, unconscious.

Gil Clancy, the color commentator for the CBS telecast, knew from the outset that this was not to be Duran's night.

"A fighter can enter the ring and age overnight, and that's exactly what happened to Roberto Duran," said Clancy, whose writing off of Duran proved to accurate for the moment, but premature in the long term. "He didn't have it from the opening bell."

JUNE 15, 1991

Sometimes, the more exhilarating the action, the greater the potential for tragedy. It happened in the Nigel Benn-Gerald McClellan war, and it happened in San Antonio when Robert Quiroga held onto his IBF super flyweight title after 12 rounds of sustained, back-and-forth action with Nigeria's "Kid" Akeem Anifowshe.

For good reason The Ring magazine selected Quiroga-Anifowshe as its Fight of the Year, but that distinction was shrouded by the unfortunate circumstances that soon enveloped Kid Akeem and, a bit later, Quiroga.

Anifowshe began vomiting blood less than a minute after the decision was announced. Rushed to a local hospital, he underwent surgery to relieve pressure on his brain. He never fought again, retiring with a 23-1 record, and his life thereafter was brief and turbulent. There were reports that, despondent over the sudden end to his boxing career, he turned to drug trafficking. He was deported back to Nigeria where he died under mysterious circumstances on Dec. 1, 1994.

The victor, Quiroga, did not fare much better. On Aug. 16, 2004, a passer-by on a San Antonio highway flagged down a police officer after finding a mortally wounded Quiroga, who had been stabbed multiple times, lying next to his car. A member of a biker gang, Ricky Merla, pleaded no-contest to murdering Quiroga and is serving a 40-year sentence.

THE WEEK THAT WAS IN BOXING HISTORY

Written by Bernard Fernandez
Thursday, 18 June 2009 19:00

JUNE 15, 1996

Given the fact that Eric Lucas later ascended to the WBC super middleweight championship, the low regard in which he was held by Roy Jones Jr. heading into their bout for Jones' IBF super middleweight title in Jacksonville, Fla., doesn't necessarily mean that Lucas was just another member of RJ's bum of the month club. Even quality opponents appeared to be totally outclassed when Jones was at the peak of his powers.

But Jones, whose passion for basketball often seemed to exceed his ardor for the sport that made him rich and famous, couldn't have been more obvious in expressing his disdain for Lucas when he played 14 minutes for the Jacksonville Barracudas of the United States Basketball League earlier in the day. He scored eight points and turned the ball over three times in a 13-point victory over the Treasure Coast Tropics.

Jones never tried to pull off another same-day basketball-boxing doubleheader, but he did work out with the New York Knicks on Dec. 28, 2007, a few weeks in advance of his Jan. 19, 2008, bout with Felix Trinidad at Madison Square Garden.

Of Jones the wannabe shooting guard, then-Knicks coach Isiah Thomas commented, "His shot was a little suspect, but nobody got close enough to him. I don't think anybody wanted to challenge him for fear that he may punch him."

Jones has caught his share of heat for not always focusing on what should have been his foremost athletic endeavor, but then a fascination with basketball also led NFL wide receivers Terrell Owens and Randy Moss to try their hand at minor-league hoops. Owens, then a member of the San Francisco 49ers, briefly played for the Adirondack Wildcats; Moss, then with the Minnesota Vikings, had a stint with the Pennsylvania ValleyDawgs.

JUNE 16, 1946

Jake La Motta never did cotton much to pretty boys. You'd have to figure he would have tried his bullish best to rearrange the matinee-idol features of Oscar De La Hoya had they come along in the same era. But La Motta, a brawler with a cruel streak that served him well in the ring, got his chance to uglify a dashing Frenchman, Marcel Cerdan, in his bid to seize Cerdan's middleweight championship in Detroit.

When he finally finished dispensing punishment to Cerdan – who suffered a dislocated arm in the first round and didn't come out for Round 10 -- La Motta led on the scorecards by wide margins of 51-39, 49-41 and 48-42, respectively.

A rematch was arranged, but on Cerdan's flight to the United States for the return engagement his plane crashed in the Azores, killing everyone on board.

JUNE 16, 1983

Roberto Duran was, some observers agreed, finished or very nearly so as a top-tier fighter. Oh,

THE WEEK THAT WAS IN BOXING HISTORY

Written by Bernard Fernandez
Thursday, 18 June 2009 19:00

sure, he had stopped the great Pipino Cuevas in four rounds in his most recent bout, but that victory was less than a year removed from back-to-back losses to Wilfred Benitez (which was understandable and maybe even forgivable) and Kirkland Laing (which was neither). Duran was 32, with high-mileage on his pugilistic odometer, the normal wear-and-tear on his body presumably increased by his alarming penchant for packing on 40 or more pounds between fights, flab that then had to be taken off. Repeat that process too many times and it can shorten a fighter's prime by years.

Moore, on the other hand, was something of a ring prodigy. He had won the WBA 154-pound title in only his ninth professional bout, a sixth-round beatdown of Japan's Tadashi Mihari, and he entered the matchup with Duran undefeated at 12-0 and with a streak of nine knockouts. Only 24, his time was thought to be now; Duran's had passed.

What was shown to be in the past tense, however, was Davey Moore's brief tenure as an elite, world-class fighter. Duran exposed his opponent's inexperience during eight rounds of measured violence, pounding his face lopsided until referee Ernesto Magana took mercy and finally waved the massacre to a halt.

Moore was never the same after his shellacking by Duran, going 6-4 in his last 10 bouts before retiring, at 28, in 1988. The Panamanian mauler, meanwhile, went on to fight another 18 years.

JUNE 18, 1941

Unlike Joe Louis, who was outstanding from the moment he began punching for pay, Billy Conn was something of a late bloomer. He lost six of his first 14 bouts after turning pro, at 17, before he went on a 26-0-1 tear, with victories over such premier fighters as Fritzie Zivic, Babe Risko and Teddy Yarosz, to establish himself as a force to be reckoned with in the light-heavyweight division.

Conn won the 175-pound title by outpointing Melio Bettina on July 13, 1939, and he began to think he could scale the highest mountain in boxing – the heavyweight title held by the mighty Louis. Toward that end, and after seeing Louis in a tough fight with 183-pound Bob Pastor, Conn vacated the light-heavyweight championship in May 1941 to challenge Louis.

The matchup drew an enthusiastic crowd of 54,487 in New York's Polo Grounds, although few in the audience gave Conn much chance of remaining upright once he tasted Louis' power. Louis was as confident of success as were his backers, a presumption that very nearly cost him once he discovered he had underestimated the smaller man's speed and boxing ability.

"Conn was a clever fighter," Louis was quoted as saying in his autobiography. "He was like a mosquito; he would sting and move."

At the end of 12 rounds, Conn led on two of the scorecards, 7-5 and 7-4-1 (fights were scored by rounds in New York then) and was even on the third, 6-6. He guessed, correctly, that he was ahead. All he had to do to pull off the shocker was to continue doing what he had been doing.

THE WEEK THAT WAS IN BOXING HISTORY

Written by Bernard Fernandez
Thursday, 18 June 2009 19:00

But Conn figured a knockout would make the upset all that much sweeter, so he moved in to finish Louis off. Instead, Conn – on the short end of a toe-to-toe exchange -- got finished off as Louis, who was defending his championship for the 18th time, unleashed a flurry of blows until Conn sank to the canvas and was counted out.

Asked by a reporter why he had unwisely tossed caution to the wind, Conn famously responded, “What’s the use of being Irish if you can’t be (stupid)?”

Conn was philosophical about what had transpired. He understood that, even had he won, the heavyweight crown merely would have been on loan from perhaps the best heavyweight boxing had seen up to that point. He acknowledged as much in asking Louis, “Why couldn’t you let me hold the title for a year or so?” To which Louis responded: “You had the title for 12 rounds and couldn’t hold it.”

JUNE 18, 1963

Brash, talented and inordinately cocky, young American Cassius Clay brought an 18-0 record into his bout with cut-prone Englishman Henry Cooper in London, a matchup in which Cooper seemingly had as little chance at victory as he did at avoiding the scar tissue around his eyes being re-shredded.

Nonetheless, 35,000 Brits turned out in Wembley Stadium to cheer on “Our ‘Enry,” whose only hope was to connect with one of his trademark left hooks before Clay made him a candidate for another transfusion.

Although Clay later would change his name to Muhammad Ali and would go down in history as one of the best, if not the heavyweight ever, at this stage of his career he was at least somewhat vulnerable. He had been knocked down for the first time as a pro, by Sonny Banks on Feb. 10, 1962, and he was coming off a disputed 10-round decision over Doug Jones.

Cooper, who was nicked over his right eye in the second round and gashed on his left eyebrow in the third, knew he was desperately fighting time as well as Clay. He had reason to believe he had landed the biggest punch of his career when he floored the favored 1960 Olympic gold medalist with a leaping hook late in Round 4. Clay went down in a heap and, woozy, was up at four, but the bell rang before Cooper could attempt to press his advantage.

Then fate, or luck, or a savvy trainer intervened. Clay’s trainer, Angelo Dundee, advised referee Tommy Little that his fighter had a tear in his right glove and it would have to be replaced. Cooper to this day insists the delay took four or five minutes, more than enough time for Clay to fully recover from the knockdown, but others say only 65 seconds elapsed before the fifth round began, which would have given Clay minimal additional rest.

Did Dundee help out his guy by manipulating the damaged glove until it split even more open? Hey, the suggestion that he did is now part of the legends of both Ali and Dundee. In any case, Clay fulfilled his prediction of a fifth-round stoppage with a rapid-fire burst of combinations that turned Cooper’s face into a crimson mask.

THE WEEK THAT WAS IN BOXING HISTORY

Written by Bernard Fernandez
Thursday, 18 June 2009 19:00

JUNE 19, 1936

With a 27-0 record that included 23 wins inside the distance, Joe Louis had every reason to think he was invincible in the ring, or as close to it as it ever gets. Former heavyweight champion Max Schmeling didn't appear to have the goods to slow down the Louis Express, much less derail it.

But Schmeling, in analyzing film of Louis' fights, told the press that "I see something," dropping vague hints that there was indeed a chink in the Brown Bomber's arsenal. That warning went unheeded, most notably by Louis who trained lackadaisically in expectation of another quickie blowout.

Schmeling, however, has been correct in determining that the key to defeating Louis was to capitalize on his habit of dropping his left hand low after throwing a jab. He rocked Louis with a succession of overhand rights in the 12th round until Louis went down along the ropes and was counted out by referee Arthur Donovan.

JUNE 19, 1946

The much-anticipated rematch between Joe Louis and Billy Conn proved to be anticlimactic. Seven years and a day had gone by since their first meeting, the gap between bouts lengthened by World War II, and when the two men entered the ring at Yankee Stadium, it was evident at the outset that Conn's best chance at victory had come and gone in 1939.

It was Louis who uttered one of the most famous lines in boxing history prior to the return engagement when, of Conn, he said, "He can run, but he can't hide." Conn still could move around fairly well, but he was able to evade Louis for only so long; in the eighth round, the heavyweight champion caught up with him long enough to score another devastating knockout.

Still, the "Pittsburgh Kid" was celebrated by many who saw something, well, noble in his widely separated attempts to vanquish the larger, stronger Louis. He remained a folk hero in his hometown and beyond until his death on May 29, 1993, when he was 86, and the inspiration for another classic line, this one from the Academy Award-winning 1954 film, *On the Waterfront*.

Budd Schulberg's screenplay had Rod Steiger, as the older brother of Marlon Brando's Terry Malloy character, telling Brando how gifted a fighter he had once been.

"You could have been another Billy Conn," Steiger said.