

Who Is The Greatest?

Written by Ron Borges

Tuesday, 23 June 2009 19:00

Picking the greatest anything is far from easy. That includes naming the greatest boxer even when, at first blush, you assume there is Sugar Ray Robinson and everyone else is fighting for second place.

In this corner that continues to be the prevailing opinion, although from time to time it seems difficult not to bring Henry Armstrong into the conversation at some point, but recently I was part of a panel of international boxing journalists asked to come up with nominees for the greatest fighters in the original eight weight classes – heavyweight, light heavyweight, middleweight, welterweight, featherweight, bantamweight and flyweight. Among those also voting were Al Bernstein, the long-time American broadcaster, Colin Hart, nearly equally long-time British boxing writer for the Sun, Jean-Phillipe Lustyk, head of boxing for Eurosport and Thomas Hauser, Muhammad Ali's biographer and a regular ringside observer. It was an eclectic group to be sure and one willing to argue a bit over who belonged on the list.

Originally there were to be 10 heavyweights and six to eight fighters in the other categories but by the end things got heated enough that we finished with 12 heavyweights and 10 in the other weight classes, which was a step up for the flyweights, who started off with only six slots available to them.

The list of nominees becomes public this week and then will begin three months of internet voting by boxing fans around the world culminating in a three-day event Oct. 2-4 at the Paris Hilton in Las Vegas in which the greatest of the great will be flown in for a series of events ending with a black-tie dinner.

The creator of this concept, Paul Nicholson, has run similar such balloting and events both in the UK and Australia to select the greatest soccer players and teams (he'd call them footballers), cricket players and rugby players as well as the naming of Australia's greatest athlete. Recently he decided to bring the concept to the United States and name the greatest boxers in history but the nature of the sport added a new, international flavor to the voting.

"Boxing is a little different because so many of the greatest stars are global names," Nicholson said. "Ali is American but he belongs to the world. The same is true of so many of the names on the lists.

"This is the kind of thing that really generates huge amounts of debate. It starts slowly but once the voting begins and the word starts to get out there's a snowballing process. When stupid opinions surface, things really start to flow. The longer it goes on, the more heated things become. We've had people in some countries begin to organize efforts for a particular athlete. It's quite interesting."

One thing Nicholson has found surprising at the other "Greatest Ever" events he's organized are the number of legends who attend, mingling with star-struck fans and rekindling for a few

Who Is The Greatest?

Written by Ron Borges
Tuesday, 23 June 2009 19:00

days their brilliant past.

“It’s quite remarkable the number of legends who show up,” Nicholson said. “It’s a chance to be in the sun again.”

After a week of spirited debate and several rounds of voting, a “final” list was drawn up. That list raised enough debate among the voters that several more votes were taken and the decision was made to expand the categories by two fighters in most cases and three in a few to end up with lists that hopefully will satisfy most voters.

Very likely however, the first thing some will say is “Why wasn’t Sam Langford or Sonny Liston on the list of heavyweights. Are you guys crazy?” I thought so.

Another critic will counter, “How is Pancho Villa not among the top 10 flyweights (beats me),” and someone else will argue that “You idiots left off Kid Gavilan from the welterweight category and put Oscar De La Hoya on it? You been hit in the head a few too many times yourself?” Perhaps so.

Those are the kind of debates that will rage along with one over who the final selections should be. As the judges and Nicholson learned during the nominating process, it is a lot easier to argue about who should or should not be on such lists than to actually make the final cuts.

So, for better or worse, here were the names that finally emerged out of the balloting and battling. In a press release Nicholson, to his credit, made the following notation: “The debate amongst the judges was passionate and sometime furious concerning the nominations of the individual fighters. While the fighters nominated in 90 per cent of the cases were unanimous there was significant disagreement in some key areas that led to more discussion and extra balloting. The final nominees were selected by majority decision.”

In other words, every fighter on the final list was not there by acclimation. In some cases, he got there despite quite hearty acrimony. So it goes in a democracy where, unlike in places like Iran, you don’t get shot for disputing the final decision.

“I don’t think that there are any terrible omissions but there was, and will remain, disagreement among the jurors,” Hauser told Nicholson. Hopefully he’s right about that.

So below are the categories and lists. The debate begins now and internet voting starts later this week by going to www.greatestever.com .

The website has a list of things on the left hand side and one need only go to the “Vote” category and click on it to begin the process. For fans looking to attend the three-day event at the Hilton in October there is also information there on pricing and how to register. One good thing is that a portion of the proceeds will go to the Retired Boxers Foundation, a charitable organization that helps retired fighters cope with life after boxing, a sport that carries with it much pain but no retirement benefits.

Who Is The Greatest?

Written by Ron Borges
Tuesday, 23 June 2009 19:00

There will be an amateur fight card, poker tournament, signings and other events scheduled but before any of that can happen the votes must first be cast. So here are the names. Let the arguments begin.

HEAVYWEIGHTS (12): John L. Sullivan, Jack Johnson, Jack Dempsey, Joe Louis, Rocky Marciano, Muhammad Ali, Joe Frazier, George Foreman, Larry Holmes, Mike Tyson, Evander Holyfield, Lennox Lewis.

LIGHT HEAVYWEIGHTS (10): Bob Fitzsimmons, Georges Carpentier, Gene Tunney, Archie Moore, Ezzard Charles, Billy Conn, Bob Foster, Michael Spinks, Roy Jones, Jr., Joe Calzaghe.

MIDDLEWEIGHTS (10): Stanley Ketchel, Harry Greb, Tony Zale, Sugar Ray Robinson, Marcel Cerdan, Charley Burley, Carmen Basilio, Carlos Monzon, Marvin Hagler, Bernard Hopkins.

WELTERWEIGHTS (10): Mickey Walker, Jimmy McLarnin, Barney Ross, Sugar Ray Robinson, Emile Griffith, Jose Napoles, Sugar Ray Leonard, Aaron Pryor, Thomas Hearns, Oscar De La Hoya.

LIGHTWEIGHTS (10): Joe Gans, Benny Leonard, Tony Canzoneri, Henry Armstrong, Ike Williams, Carlos Ortiz, Roberto Duran, Julio Cesar Chavez, Pernell Whitaker, Floyd Mayweather, Jr.

FEATHERWEIGHTS (10): Abe Atell, Kid Chocolate, Willie Pep, Sandy Saddler, Alexis Arguello, Salvador Sanchez, Azumah Nelson, Jeff Fenech, Marco Antonio Barrera, Manny Pacquiao.

BANTAMWEIGHTS (10): Panama Al Brown, Kid Williams, Manuel Ortiz, Eder Joffre, Ruben Olivares, Carlos Zarate, Wilfredo Gomez, Jeff Chandler, Hozumi Hasegawa, Orlando Canizales.

FLYWEIGHTS (10): Jimmy Wilde, Benny Lynch, Pasqual Perez, Ricardo Lopez, Michael Carbajal, Chartchai Chionoi, Vic Darchinyan, Sot Chitalada, Khaosai Galazy, Miguel Canto.

So who do you like? Who do you hate? Who doesn't belong and who is missing? Most important, don't forget to vote for somebody.