

21 Years Ago, The Rise And Eventual Fall Of Mike Tyson Coincided

Written by Bernard Fernandez
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The accepted timeline of the Roman Empire stretches from 753 B.C., when the city was founded by Romulus, to 1461, when the Ottomans conquered Trebizond, the last Greek state. That means the Romans were the most formidable force on earth, or very nearly so, for 2,214 years, even longer than a legion's worth of title reigns by sword-wielding Joe Louises, Bernard Hopkinses and Joe Calzaghes.

At which point during those 23 centuries the glory of Rome began to recede is, of course, speculative, although some historians have attempted to pinpoint it to an exact day: Sept. 4, 476, when Romulus Augustus, the last emperor of the Western Roman Empire, was deposed by Odoacer.

For a time, boxing's great conqueror of the mid- to late 1980s, Mike Tyson, bestrode his domain as imperiously as Julius Caesar once did his. No man could stand in defiant opposition to the Beast of Brownsville and hope to survive. "I wouldn't be surprised if he went 100-0," Tyson's trainer, Kevin Rooney, said a few days before the nearly 22-year-old wrecking machine was to put his undisputed heavyweight championship on the line against undefeated former champ Michael Spinks.

Chortled promoter Don King, whose hold on the seemingly invincible titlist would extend well beyond the loosened grips of Rooney, manager Bill Cayton and assistant manager Steve Lott: "I'm scared for Spinks. I just hope he don't get hurt, I hope he don't get too brutally beaten, have too many ribs smashed."

But like the mighty Caesar, Tyson should have bewared the Ides of March, or, in his case, the Ides of June. Because even if an empire doesn't necessarily collapse on a single day, there comes a point when it ceases to rise and has nowhere to go but down.

For Tyson, the peak of his power and the beginning of the end may well have come on the same date: June 27, 1988, the night the most destructive, intimidating force heavyweight boxing had seen blew through Spinks as a Category 5 hurricane might blow away a flimsy shack on an exposed Louisiana shoreline.

On the 21st anniversary of the apex of Tyson's era of terror, which was culminated by his 91-second annihilation of the unfortunate Spinks, two other undefeated fighters met, also in Atlantic City Boardwalk Hall, in what might be generously termed as a little man's recreation of that storied event. But the main-event combatants of "Latin Fury 9," WBO super bantamweight champion Juan Manuel Lopez and challenger Olivier Lontchi, aren't Tyson, or Spinks for that matter, and the buzz they generated on a pleasant but not particularly historic evening of boxing was more that of an eight-volt battery than the nuclear power plant represented by Tyson-Spinks.

OK, so maybe Tyson-Spinks wasn't, as then-Atlantic City Mayor James Usry had proclaimed,

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“the greatest sporting event in the history of the planet.” But it was big enough that it drew an on-site audience of 21,785, some of whom paid scalper’s prices significantly higher than the face value of \$1,500 for ringside seats, and so many celebrities that it took ring announcer Michael Buffer 20 minutes to introduce the 92 most notable among them. Donald Trump ponied up a record \$11 million site fee to outbid, ironically, Caesars Palace, and the \$12.3 million live gate and \$67 million gross (mostly from closed-circuit; pay-per-view was still in its infancy then) also set new standards.

No one could have known that the man Rooney had figured to win 100 straight bouts would be so psychologically fragile and physically vulnerable at the end of his career that he was stopped in back-to-back fights by the unimposing likes of Danny Williams and Kevin McBride, and that his vast fortune and not-so-vast emotional well-being would have dripped away as steadily as might an ice sculpture under a hot sun.

Blame for Tyson’s inexorable slide from grace has been attributed to any number of presumed culprits, from King to new co-managers John Horne and Rory Holloway to Desiree Washington, who accused him of raping her during a beauty pageant in Indianapolis, to the prosecutors who got him convicted of that charge, the No. 1 chair being Greg Garrison. Non-apologists weighing in on the debate have suggested that Tyson, as an adult, should be held mostly or entirely responsible for his more self-destructive tendencies. But whether you choose to see him as a victim or a victimizer, the bottom line remains the same: Julius Caesar met a grisly end and so, too, in a metaphorical sense, did Tyson.

Not that many could have foreseen any of this at the postfight press conference after Tyson, still the unquestioned master of all he surveyed, stepped to the podium and explained just how easy it had been for him to jinx Spinks.

“I hurt him with the first punch I threw,” Tyson boasted. “He wobbled a little. But I knew he would try to fight back.

“There were only two things he could do: try to get lucky (with a big punch), or try to run around all night.”

Spinks, who never fought again and shortly thereafter retired with a 31-1 record, conceded that Tyson had “tremendous punching power” and that the second of the two knockdowns he registered, a short right to the temple, “hit me on a spot on top of my head that would have made anybody lightheaded.”

Someone asked Rooney – apparently unaware that he had worked Tyson’s corner for the final time – about undisputed cruiserweight champion Evander Holyfield, who on July 16, 1988, was to make his heavyweight debut against James “Quick” Tillis.

“What about Holyfield?” Rooney asked in a dismissive tone. “There’s a hundred of them out there, always a new one. Bring ’em on.”

What soon were brought on for Tyson were a succession of trainers, lawyers, lawsuits,

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controversies, wives, lovers, sycophants and a public that began to wonder why the reformed street thug had reverted to his sinister roots.

Lott, part of the purge of Tyson's former handlers that had been set in motion even in advance of the Spinks fight, said the fighter found it increasingly difficult to distinguish right from wrong as he attempted to deal with his wife of 4½ months, television actress Robin Givens, the manipulative King and new "friends" who saw the champion as their own shortcut to easy street.

"When Mike got away from us, all of a sudden he was acting wild," Lott said earlier this week as he recalled the dizzying lead up to and the slow but steady descent from the Spinks fight. "You have to give it to King. He used the same skill and precision to restore all the negative layers of Mike's Brooklyn past that Cus (D'Amato) and Jim (Jacobs) had peeled away, the layers of hate, racism, disrespect, contempt and surliness. Don put those back on because he knew that was the way for him to gain control.

"The advantage Don had was that Mike remembered how to be a punk, a scumbag. Don helped Mike gravitate back to being that."

Lott's take on what had happened might be a bit self-serving. But Tyson made it easier for that version of his personal and boxing history to be accepted as at least somewhat factually correct.

In a Sports Illustrated article published just prior to his showdown with Spinks, Tyson took the reporter on a tour of the blighted Brooklyn neighborhood that had spawned him and which he still considered to be the source of his insatiable need to rule through fear and intimidation.

"I was happier then," Tyson said of his days as a street predator. "Every day I was living on the edge. I was wild and free. I love coming back. Do you understand? When I'm here, I feel like a warrior."

A warrior, it seems, forever on the prowl for easy marks.

"I robbed people," Tyson conceded. "Who? Anybody who was a victim. We'd rub drunks' fingers in the snow so we could pull off their rings. We'd wait outside the grocery store and offer to help women carry their bags to their car, then when we were handing them their bags, we'd reach into their pocketbooks and steal their wallets."

By any reckoning Tyson was an incorrigible youth, a member of a street gang known as the Jolly Stompers. He was stashed away for society's benefit in the Tryon School for juvenile delinquents when a counselor, an ex-boxer named Bobby Stewart, recognized his potential greatness in the ring and brought him to the attention of D'Amato, a crusty septuagenarian who had overseen the careers of world champions Floyd Patterson and Jose Torres. The 13-year-old with the troubled past and devastating punch became the ward of D'Amato and his sister, Camille Ewald, who made it their mission to recast him not only as a future champion, but as socially acceptable as might be accomplished in the more tranquil environs of Catskill, N.Y.

When the kid with iron in his fists began his professional career with a string of savage

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knockouts, everyone dared to imagine that the next great heavyweight had indeed arrived.

“Mike got into a couple of scuffles, like that parking-lot thing in Los Angeles (he groped a female attendant), but nothing really major,” Lott said. “He was around nice people, so he was learning to be nice. He did commercials for Pepsi-Cola, for Nintendo. He did a public-service commercial for – don’t laugh – the FBI and the Drug Enforcement Agency to keep kids off drugs. He was selected by the New York Police Department for a billboard campaign all over the city that had a big picture of Mike and the words, ‘It takes a bigger man than me to be a New York City cop.’”

But how are you gonna keep ‘em on the farm once they’ve seen the big city? Especially when they’re from the big city?

D’Amato was 77 when he died in 1985 and Jacobs was 58 when he died on March 23, 1988, following a lengthy bout with leukemia that Tyson later was to say he had no knowledge of.

Tyson had signed a four-year extension of his contract with Jacobs and Cayton on Feb. 12, 1988, but Jacobs’ death shook him hard; he loved and respected Jacobs, but wasn’t particularly close to Cayton, whose demeanor toward the wild-child was gruffer and less conciliatory.

The marriage to Givens, whom some have depicted as more of a gold-digger than the miners who flocked to Sutter’s Mill in northern California after rich veins of the precious metal were found there in 1849, had already begun to change Tyson. So, too, did the expanding influence of King, who sought to wrest as much control from Cayton, Lott and Rooney as he could so that he could become the most influential voice in the direction of Tyson’s career.

Shortly before Tyson entered the ring to lay waste to Spinks that warm June night in 1988, he had Cayton served with legal papers revealing his intention to terminate his managerial contract, which was to pay Cayton and Jim Jacobs’ widow, Lorraine, a combined 33 1/3 of Tyson’s purses through Feb. 11, 1992. A compromise eventually was reached whereby Cayton would not retain the duties of a manager and he and Lorraine Jacobs would receive 20 percent of Tyson’s purses until the expiration of the contract.

Only two days after Spinks had been disposed of in typically brutal fashion, Tyson announced that he was “burned out” on boxing and wanted to spend more snuggly time with Givens at their \$4.5 million Bernardsville, N.J., estate, where the neighbors included Jackie Onassis, Malcom Forbes, Meryl Streep and Whitney Houston.

The “retirement” never took root, of course. Tyson was too much of a cash cow to walk away then, still too talented to lose even if his heart and mind were beginning to wander. The knockout victories continued, for a while. But Buster Douglas showed in Tokyo that a disinterested, underprepared Tyson could be taken down, and the rest of heavyweight boxing began to become emboldened, especially after Iron Mike came back rusty after three-plus years in stir following his rape conviction.

Maybe it all did begin to slip away, at first imperceptively, with that thrashing of Spinks. Lott

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thinks so, saying, “June 27, 1988, was when Mike’s emotional strength started to wane and probably his physical ability, too.”

Oh, but what a night that was! It was the summit of the highest mountain, with a panoramic view no heavyweight since has had the privilege of glimpsing. Holyfield never was as absolutely dominant as the 1988 vintage Tyson, nor was Riddick Bowe or Lennox Lewis. Who could have known that Tyson, who wouldn’t even turn 22 until four days after his 91-second rout of Spinks, was ready to begin a slow descent to a very different night, when he would quit on his stool after six rounds against McBride on June 11, 2005?

“I can’t really say there was another night like it,” Lott said of a moment in time when the world was transfixed by Mike Tyson’s impending throwdown with the highly regarded Spinks. “Mike knew the whole town would be a zoo, which it was. He knew the hotels and the casinos would be packed, which they were. He knew 22,000 people would be in Boardwalk Hall, which they were.

“He also knew he would give those people a spectacular performance, which he did.”

Like the late Michael Jackson, another supernova who blazed across the sky for a giddy period until he flamed out and became an object of peculiar fascination, Tyson might have had it all too soon, before he knew the full ramifications of wealth and fame, and how to deal with those alluring potential pitfalls.

Et tu, Mike. Jacko and Julius await on the other side, and no doubt the three of you will have much to talk about when and if you ever discuss the complexities of empire-maintenance as opposed to empire-building.