

Roy Jones' Aging Captain Hook Returns To Neverland

Written by Bernard Fernandez
Wednesday, 15 July 2009 19:00

Some years back, when Roy Jones Jr. was still Roy Jones Jr. – which is to say so supremely talented that he scarcely had been touched by opponents' fists – I posed to him a hypothetical question about how he might react when all those punches that had previously missed the mark started to connect. How would an older, slower RJ respond if he ever found himself cut up, lumped up, climbing off the deck and trailing on the scorecards? Would he reach deep inside himself and find that extra spark to rally to an improbable victory? Or would he fold like a tent when confronted with the realization that he, too, is a fallible human being as capable of being thrashed as any fighter on a given night?

Jones considered the matter as quizzically as he might the possibility of Martians landing in Pensacola, Fla., and transporting him to the red planet for scientific experimentation. Sure, such a thing was possible. It just was highly unlikely.

"I don't know how I'd react," Jones finally said, the sort of statement that never could emanate from the puffy lips of a Matthew Saad Muhammad or the late Arturo Gatti. "I haven't been in that position. I hope I never am, and I don't think I ever will be."

At that particular moment in time, the still-at-the-top-of-his-game Roy Jones Jr.'s view of his future in boxing was as bright and confident as had been his past: he would continue to dazzle any designated victim unfortunate enough to be paired with him. He had the machine gun, the no-hopers drawing the short straw in the other corner had cap pistols. Thus had it ever been and always would be. No doubt the young Sugar Ray Robinson and the young Cassius Clay/Muhammad Ali felt the same way when they were at the zenith of their powers.

But fighters are not like Benjamin Button. Even the best of the best don't become more youthful, virile and imposing as the pages of the calendar inexorably turn. The natural laws of diminishing returns mandate that reflexes slow, legs become heavy and the toll of the most brutal of athletic professions eventually begins to be revealed.

Roy Jones Jr., now 40, has more than a little practical experience when it comes to having his ass kicked. Oh, sure, he had been saddled with his first loss way back on March 21, 1997, but that came on a ninth-round disqualification in a bout he was winning, against Montell Griffin, when he whacked Griffin after he already had knocked him down. But Jones followed that error in judgment with a first-round blowout of Griffin a little less than five months later, reassuring fight fans that the most physically gifted fighter of the past quarter-century was still invincible, or nearly so.

Flash forward seven years from the Griffin rematch and the Jones who called to mind the glorious primes of Robinson and Ali was absent during a three-bout losing streak in 2004-05 in which he lost on a one-punch, second-round knockout to Antonio Tarver, was drubbed unconscious in nine rounds by Glen Johnson, and easily outpointed over 12 rounds by Tarver. Now Jones knew what it felt like to be lumped up and knocked down. The cutting lesson was administered on Nov. 8 of last year, when Joe Calzaghe so bloodied the previously ungnashed

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Jones in Madison Square Garden that you'd have thought someone had opened spigots in his facial veins.

So what did Jones learn from all of this?

If his public pronouncements are to be believed, the Jones (53-5, 39 KOs) who takes on Jeff "Left Hook" Lacy (25-2, 17 KOs) in a scheduled 12-rounder Aug. 15 at the Mississippi Gulf Coast Coliseum, has retained most if not all of his colossal ego, and, finally answering in the affirmative to the question I posed to him so long ago, he now believes he has that Saad Muhammad, Gatti-like quality that will enable him to elevate his performance when the action gets really hot and heavy.

In keeping with the matchup's theme, Jones, ever the showman, arrived at a press conference earlier this week with a plumed hat, flowing wig, ornate breastcoat and curved, plastic hook on his left hand. It was a sight gag straight out of Peter Pan, but it served the purpose of illustrating Jones' contention that, despite Lacy's nickname, it was he who packed the better, more damaging left hook.

"I am a hooker," Jones preened. "I got the best left hook in the business. I dressed up as Captain Hook, so you know I ain't playing about my hook."

Hey, we get it. Anybody who saw Jones drill Vinny Pazienza with eight consecutive hooks, all delivered within a time frame of about two eye-blinks, knows that punch is his weapon of choice.

If only Jones had left it at that. But in explaining why he had selected Lacy, a former IBF super middleweight champion, as the next opponent on his comeback trail, the reason cited rang as hollow as an empty oil drum.

"I ain't never fought a Smokin' Joe Frazier," Jones went on. "That's why this is the most intriguing thing to me in the world.

"You know, I felt Muhammad Ali was the greatest who ever did it. I still do think that. He's my favorite of all time.

"I thought his best and favorite opponent was Joe Frazier. I never had a Joe Frazier prototype in my face. Now I got one. I can't wait to get out there and have the time of my life."

Apart from the fact that anyone comparing Jeff Lacy to Joe Frazier should have his mouth washed out with soap, Jones' prattling to the media was so full of contradictions that you had to wonder: had those Martians made off with the real Roy Jones Jr. and left some cyborg in his place? For one thing, if you ask Ali how much fun he had in his three wars of attrition with Frazier, he'd probably tell you that it was as enjoyable as nonstop waterboarding at Guantanamo, flaming bamboo shoot under the fingernails and an interminable stay in a medieval torture dungeon. Whether Lacy can put Jones to that sort of acid test remains to be seen, but the guess here is that he can't and he won't. In this dimming phase of Jones' career, he selects opponents with care, the only requirements being that they have name-recognition value, a decent record and minimal chance to do unto him what Tarver, Johnson and Calzaghe

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did.

That Lacy also was beaten lopsided by Calzaghe probably was more of a determining factor in his selection by Jones than was Lacy's calling-out of Jones on March 21, when Jones stopped Omar Sheika in five rounds before the obligatory adoring home crowd at the Pensacola Civic Center.

"All it takes in boxing is if you got a decent name," Jones said of Lacy's relatively thin credentials for participating in a pay-per-view fight with a suggested retail price of \$34.95. "Jeff ain't got but two losses. If you got a decent name, then it's legitimate and it's something that people want to see.

"All it takes is to say the word. That's how I been my whole career. Just say when. You know that. Everybody knows that about me. It don't matter what weight you are, if you want to fight me, just say when and where and I will be there. I'm the easiest person in the world to make a fight with."

Bernard Hopkins and Dariusz Michalczewski are just two of the fighters who have been saying when and where for years, but those bouts never got made. In Hopkins' case, though, it must be said that there is no mathematical formula for paying both B-Hop and RJ the 66 2/3 percent of the available revenues they'd demand and getting a deal done. When gargantuan egos collide, the result generally is a lot of talk and no action.

Lacy is getting his shot at Jones because he's perceived as a non-threat and because he's willing to take short money. Also presumably fitting that description is 36-year-old Australian Danny Green (26-3, 23 KOs), who fights Argentina's Julio Cesar Dominguez (20-4-1, 14 KOs) on the Jones-Lacy undercard. Green has expressed interest in taking on Jones Down Under, should both get past their Aug. 15 low hurdles.

"Danny Green is about to fight for the vacant IBO cruiserweight title and I don't have a cruiserweight title," Jones said when asked if Green is apt to be next on his dance card. "By him doing that, it definitely sounds very intriguing to me to go to Australia and try to lift that off his hands, if he gets it."

Should that happen, it would mark the first time Jones – who expressed zero interest in taking on Michalczewski in Europe, where the live gate undoubtedly would have been larger – has fought as a professional outside the United States.

"It took a long time for me to get over '88," Jones said of his disappointment at having to settle for the silver medal at the Seoul Olympics, where he punched South Korea's Park Si-Hun lopsided, only to be shafted by the judges. "Now a guy from Kazakhstan (Beibut Shumenov) wants to fight me. He ain't nothing but 8-0, and he wants to pay me money to go over there and fight him. Do y'all really know what he's asking for? Do you really want war way over there in Kazakhstan?"

"But, man, I don't know. My business might be out of the country right now."

Especially if that business is against a fighter with limited experience who is willing to pony up

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big bucks, or whatever the currency equivalent is in Kazakhstan, to share a ring with even the shadow of the magnificent fighter Roy Jones Jr. once was.

Realities change, and so do the questions of media inquisitors. Has Jones, like the young Ali an athletic freak of nature who went against all the established fundamentals of boxing, such as dropping your hands to your sides and leaning straight back, made adjustments to compensate for his advanced years and slower reaction time?

“Yeah, I had to make a big adjustment,” Jones said. “My big adjustment was I had to throw that safe sh*t out the window. I had started to fight with my hands up and stuff, and that started getting me knocked out. So you know what? That’s wrong for me. That does not work for me. I am not an orthodox type of a fighter.

“With my hands up, I am no good. That is not what I was put here to do. I had to go back, re-drop my hands, get ’em back down to my side, get my mouthpiece back out so I can stick my tongue at people and piss ’em off before I knock ’em out. That’s what I used to do and that’s what I was best at.”

Taking another tack, I asked Jones if he had contemplated what it must be like for older athletes like Ken Griffey Jr. and Brett Favre, who once had been the very best in their respective sports, to acknowledge that they no longer are what they had been. Has Jones also had to make that sort of mental adjustment, to face the remainder of his life and career with the realization that even the greatest athletes eventually must settle for being something less?

“When you start thinking like that, you start making yourself less,” Jones said with typical bravado. “Maybe I am still the guy I used to be. I just thought I wasn’t because people said I wasn’t. Maybe I believed them for a little while and that’s where I made my mistake.

“Brett Favre still got to be Brett Favre. If he ain’t Brett Favre, it ain’t doing him no good to go out there. He needs to go home if he can’t be Brett Favre.

“What it was, I started thinking I was getting to be too old to be Roy Jones. I thought I didn’t have the energy. But if I don’t think I can be Roy Jones, I shouldn’t be in boxing. I know right now I still got everything it takes to be Roy Jones.”

It is that Peter Pan philosophy – a wish to forever remain in Neverland – that eventually takes down every athlete who looks in the mirror and can’t see the wrinkles and laugh lines, but just the unmarked face of a glorious prime. Jones’ Captain Hook should remember that the fictional version created by Sir J.M. Barrie was forever trailed by the crocodile with the ticking clock in its belly, the same croc that chomped off the hand that wears the hook. That voracious reptile so liked the taste of Captain Hook’s flesh, it was willing to bide its time until the next feeding.

Here’s hoping that Roy Jones Jr., whose not-so-secret fear was that he might one day wind up like his friend, the blind, brain-damaged Gerald McClellan, never finds himself locked in mortal combat with an actual Joe Frazier equivalent.