

Larry Holmes: He Gets His Respect Now

Written by Frank Lotierzo

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During his seven year title tenure Larry Holmes 69-6 (44) repeatedly claimed that he didn't get any respect. Sometimes he had the disposition of the loser during many of his post fight interviews after fights he'd won and looked impressive in. It was as if he was just waiting to jump on whatever statement he perceived to be negative towards his ring showing. For years Holmes was underrated and under-appreciated, something that is now a distant memory.

Larry Holmes supported himself by working in a car wash while learning his craft. He was mocked for having skinny legs and many observers questioned his heart and punch. To top it off he was stopped by Duane Bobick in the finals of 1972 Olympic Trials while Muhammad Ali provided color commentary with Howard Cosell for ABC's Wide World of Sports. Yet when his career was finally over only Joe Louis and Muhammad Ali won more heavyweight title fights than Holmes did. And only Louis made more successful defenses of the title than the 20 Larry Holmes compiled from 1978 through 1985.

The pro-career of Larry Holmes didn't start off with much fanfare. After being stopped by Bobick in the Olympic Trials, Holmes was just about forgotten. On March 21, 1973 without any media attention Larry Holmes turned pro, winning a four round decision over Rodell Dupree in Scranton, Pennsylvania, a fight for which he was paid exactly \$150.00. After beating Dupree, Holmes ran off 26 consecutive victories on his way to becoming the world's top ranked heavyweight under the promotional guidance of Don King. During the five years between fighting Dupree and Norton, Holmes filled out physically and developed one of the best left jabs in heavyweight history. And it's not a reach to suggest that it's at least on par or better than the left jabs of Joe Louis, Sonny Liston and Muhammad Ali.

Before winning the title Holmes was best known for being a sparring partner for former heavyweight champs "Smokin" Joe Frazier and Muhammad Ali. Frazier was the first big time fighter Holmes worked for. Because of Holmes' style being similar to Ali's, Frazier employed him as one of his sparring partners to help him get ready for his upcoming rematch with Ali in 1974. Folk lore has it that after two days of heated sparring, Frazier broke Larry's rib and Holmes was given his walking papers. However, Holmes says he was let go because he was doing too good with Frazier. Having had access to those who witnessed Holmes working with Frazier, it appears Joe's version is a little closer to reality, at least according to the guys who were in the gym and working with both fighters at the time, trainers Eddie Futch, George Benton, Milt Bailey, and Val Colbert.

Later in 1974 Holmes was hired away from Frazier by Muhammad Ali. Ali used Holmes as one of his main sparring partners, along with Roy "Tiger" Williams, to help him prepare for his upcoming title fight with champion George Foreman. It is widely known that Ali was not the greatest gym fighter and had his hands full with the young Holmes. Holmes went on to work for Ali for another year and a half. In fact Holmes stopped Duane Bobick's brother Rodney on the undercard of "The Thrilla in Manila" in the fall of 1975. After leaving Ali, Holmes worked briefly as a sparring partner for the ranked and hard punching Earnie Shavers.

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Ironically, it was Shavers who Holmes would have to beat in an elimination bout in order to get in position to fight Norton for the title. On March 25, 1978, Holmes put on a boxing clinic and beat Shavers 12 out of 12 rounds to set up the title fight versus Norton. In the fight with Shavers, Holmes won no less than 34 minutes out of a 36 minute fight. Against Earnie, Holmes' jab was piston like. Larry totally nullified Shavers' power with his jab and lateral movement and took Shavers to boxing school.

Three months later on June 9, 1978, Holmes would enter the ring as the top ranked heavyweight in the world and challenged Norton who was just appointed champion by the WBC. Most of the press at that time were big fans of Ken Norton, due to the fact that he gave Ali three tough and close fights from 1973 to 1976. Norton was favored by the press, but many boxing insiders knew Holmes was really the goods and that he had an excellent chance to take Norton. A couple days before the fight a report surfaced that Holmes had suffered a torn left tricep muscle. This really sparked the Norton sentiment and by fight night most were leaning towards Norton.

When the fight started, Holmes never looked better. He was just too fast for Kenny. On top of that, Norton couldn't get past the Holmes jab in order to try and work his body, hoping to slow Holmes down and getting him to come down off his toes. For eight rounds it was all Holmes. Norton just couldn't get close enough to Larry in order to do any real damage. Then in the 8th round Norton finally got through and scored heavily to the Holmes head and body.

Arthur Mercante, who was doing the ABC broadcast with Howard Cosell, didn't score a single round for Norton until the 8th round. After 10 rounds Mercante said to Cosell that he had the fight 8-2 Holmes, and the only way Norton could retain the title on his card was if he stopped Holmes. For the next five rounds Holmes and Norton really went at it and had some tremendous exchanges with both fighters getting the upper hand in brief spots. After 14 rounds the fight was very close on the judges' cards, something I disagree with. However, both Holmes and Norton came out and fought the 15th round as if their entire lives depended on it.

Boxing fans were truly the beneficiaries of that mind set because Holmes and Norton fought a round for the ages. At the bell both fighters staggered back to their corners to await the decision. When the decision was announced Holmes won a split decision by the scores of 143-142, 143-142, and 142-143 or 8-7 in rounds. This was the crowning moment of Larry Holmes' career. After years of being called a cheap Muhammad Ali imitation and being told that he wasn't good enough, Larry Holmes showed that he was. The Holmes-Norton title bout ranks up there with some of the greatest heavyweight championship bouts of all time. The 15th round is one of the best rounds in heavyweight history and nobody who saw it disputes that.

During his title reign of seven plus years, Holmes was never really given his just due as champion. It was perceived by many that Holmes won more so because his opponents weren't any good than it was because he was an outstanding/great fighter. Having so many years to look back and reflect on Holmes' career we now know that Holmes was really that good and is without question one of the top five all-time great heavyweight champs.

The only negative aspect of Holmes' career, and it's not his fault, is that he didn't face great

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opposition during his reign as champion. But neither did Jack Johnson, Jack Dempsey, Joe Louis, Rocky Marciano and Sonny Liston. Holmes had the misfortune of meeting one great, Muhammad Ali, when Ali was a shell of the fighter he once was. The other three greats he faced, Michael Spinks, Mike Tyson and Evander Holyfield, came when he was aged 36, 38 and 42 and past his prime. Unlike other greats who came before and after him, Holmes never had another great fighter to measure himself against during his prime. But that shouldn't count against him. All anyone has to do is watch the films of his fights circa 1978-83 to see that Holmes could flat out fight.

Looking back it's easy to see that Holmes had possibly the greatest left jab in heavyweight history, and along with that, he was a great boxer with fast hands and could adapt to the varying styles of the fighters he faced. Holmes had a great chin and an undeniable will to win. Lastly, one cannot write about Holmes without mentioning his huge championship heart. Nobody forgets where they were the night Earnie Shavers dropped him with a right hand that must have been heard around the world during the seventh round of their 1979 title bout. Even Shavers kidded after the fight saying for 8 seconds he was the heavyweight champion of the world.

Larry Holmes is without a doubt the greatest heavyweight champion since the end of the Ali era circa 1978. Holmes ranks above Holyfield, Lewis, Tyson, Bowe and both Wladimir and Vitali Klitschko. Not only does he rank ahead of them but at his best he would've defeated all of them at their best. He had all the tools needed, the size, strength and the heart along with the know how and boxing intuition.

During his title tenure Holmes would often say that he didn't get any respect and suffered because he wasn't Muhammad Ali. Today that's no longer the case. Thirty one plus years after beating Ken Norton for the title, Larry Holmes is regarded as one of the greatest heavyweight champs of all time by an overwhelming majority of boxing observers, fans and historians.

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