

Thirty Years Ago: Larry Holmes Proved His Worthiness As Champ

Written by Frank Lotierzo

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At the time he was still considered a poor Muhammad Ali imitation. The critics belittled him for having no charisma and just fifteen months earlier he had his hands full in a title winning effort against Ken Norton. In his first three title defenses Larry Holmes blew out Alfredo Evangelista, Ossie Ocasio, and struggled getting the inconsistent Mike Weaver over twelve rounds.

It was the night of September 28, 1979 and Holmes was defending his WBC heavyweight title against top contender and dynamite punching Earnie Shavers at Caesars Palace in Las Vegas. Holmes and Shavers were no strangers to each other. Early in his career Holmes worked as a sparring partner for Shavers after stints working with former champs "Smokin" Joe Frazier and Muhammad Ali circa 1973-75. In fact Larry and Earnie knew each other through more than just having worked together in the ring when both were on the way up. Eighteen months prior to their title bout Holmes and Shavers met in a WBC title elimination bout to decide who newly appointed champ Ken Norton would make his first defense against.

When Holmes met Shavers the first time Larry was undefeated but in his only noteworthy win in 26 fights he scored a unanimous decision over fringe contender Roy "Tiger" Williams. Shavers, having turned pro three and a half years before Holmes, had already shared a ring with Jimmy Young, Jimmy Ellis, Jerry Quarry, Ron Lyle, Henry Clark and Roy "Tiger" Williams. In his last fight six months earlier Shavers lost a 15-round unanimous decision to undisputed heavyweight champion Muhammad Ali. Due to all the top heavyweights Shavers had fought, boxing fans were well aware of his power and lack of stamina. Therefore all the questions surrounding the fight were about Larry Holmes.

Everybody knew about Holmes' terrific left jab and boxing ability before the fight. However, his stamina, punch, chin and heart were still in question after 26 pro bouts. That changed after Holmes put on a boxing clinic for twelve rounds winning 34 out of 36 minutes of the fight. During his first fight with Shavers, Holmes answered some of the questions about him as a fighter, but there were some still not answered. Holmes proved that he definitely punched hard enough to win at the highest level and he had plenty of stamina. In fact Holmes dominated Shavers so thoroughly that his chin and heart were never questioned because Shavers couldn't get near him and was never really in the fight.

Leading up to their title bout Shavers said he took Holmes lightly the first time and that Larry would be the ex-champ on the morning after the fight. Holmes countered by saying Shavers didn't hit all that hard and after the fight there'd be no question as to who was the best heavyweight in the world. And to that Holmes may have never been truer to his word.

The second Holmes-Shavers bout started much like their first fight. Holmes was up on his toes circling to his left while zinging Shavers with his left jab as Earnie tried to get close and nail Holmes with his big right hand. By the fourth round Holmes was down off his toes and was just stepping to the left while jamming his left jab into Shavers' face, while occasionally shooting his right hand or uppercut behind it. The only hope Shavers had was to get lucky and land a lottery

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right hand over Holmes' jab that he sometimes recoiled low.

As the seventh round began Shavers was bleeding from a deep cut over his right eye and Holmes was pitching a shutout. Shavers, sensing that the fight was probably going to be stopped within the next couple rounds started throwing big overhand rights against the more stationary Holmes. A little over a minute into the round Shavers grazed Holmes with an overhand right that shook him good and forced Larry to retreat as Shavers became the predator and Holmes the prey. While Holmes was briefly hurt he tried to fight Shavers off and stabilize the fight. Just as Holmes seemed to be recuperating from the earlier right hand and was back up on his toes and moving, Shavers dropped Holmes with an over hand right that must've been heard around the world. Larry crashed to the canvas and was badly hurt. After being down for a few seconds Holmes started to get up but stumbled once he was upright and looked to be in jeopardy of losing the fight.

When the fight resumed a tired Shavers began unloading with big right hands trying to finish Holmes. Holmes despite being on unsteady legs was able to make Shavers miss with every hay-maker he threw. As the round ended Shavers had Holmes pinned in a corner and crashed a couple of thudding right hands to Larry's body but was never able to connect with another clean shot to Holmes' chin.

Holmes came out for round eight and looked completely refreshed from the minute rest in between the seventh and eighth rounds. Holmes moved and boxed beautifully while hitting Shavers almost at will while avoiding whatever bombs Earnie launched at him trying to end the fight. Midway through the eleventh round referee Davey Pearl stopped the fight due to Shavers bleeding from both eyes and not returning anything back at Holmes.

Prior to the fight many questioned Holmes's heart and chin. When the fight was over never again was Larry's durability and toughness questioned. Just as no one ever questioned Muhammad Ali's heart and toughness again after he got up from his grave after being floored by a massive left hook from Joe Frazier in the 15th round of their first fight.

Granted, nobody began making a case for Larry Holmes as being one of the greatest of the greats, (although he is) but after he got up from one of the biggest punches delivered by one of the biggest punchers in boxing history - his worthiness as champion was never challenged again, even in jest.

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