Written by Ron Borges
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Whether they like it or not (and who would?) greatness for a prize fighter comes only with the display of a high pain threshold. It is a sad requirement of the sport, a demand put on boxers to define themselves not simply by their most triumphant moments but by overcoming their most difficult ones.

Would the story be the same for Ali if there had never been a Joe Frazier to knock him to the floor and challenge him at every turn? Would Sugar Ray Robinson be so sweet without Jake LaMotta, Carmen Basilio, Max Schmeling and even Randy Turpin tormenting him?

Leonard and Hagler needed Thomas Hearns as much to test their mettle as to prove their greatness. It is a truism of boxing going back that goes back to the days of bare knuckle brawling. Even though these days one can gain world rankings and even world titles without facing so much as one true challenge, the price of boxing immortality is higher for it demands a hard night or two when all seems lost and still you triumph.

That is what is missing from Roy Jones' resume (judging by the poor performance of his chin when finally tested one can understand why he avoided such challenges for so long) and from Mike Tyson's. Neither got off the floor to win, at least not when deposited there in the kind of crushing way that leaves the sound of wind chimes in their head long after they are again upright.

Floyd Mayweather, Jr. seems to have no interest in facing such a moment and one can understand why yet he needs such a night to validate not his boxing talent, which is obvious, but to test him in the hot cauldron of adversity.

Mayweather may finally face such a test Saturday night at the MGM Grand Garden Arena when he steps into the ring against four-time world champion Shane Mosley but he wants no part of such a test. In fact, he mocks the very idea of it and why wouldn't he?

As Mayweather's trainer and uncle, the former champion Roger Mayweather, said recently when asked about his nephew's apparent distaste for being hit, "I don't know anybody that likes to get hit.''

It's a good point but the difficult fact when it comes to assessing Mayweather is that we have yet to see him face the kind of adversity Leonard did in his first bout with Hearns or the type of hellish, soul-searching moments Ali encountered when in the ring with Joe Frazier.

In boxing, fair or unfair, that is when we decide who and what a fighter really is. This is not to promise Mosley will be able to take Mayweather to such a dark and difficult place but it is where he needs to go to win over the remaining doubters and skeptics who insist he is still untested even after winning 40 straight fights and world titles from 130 pounds to 154 pounds.

Yet in Mayweather's opinion that whole concept is borderline insanity. Why must a fighter struggle to prove his greatness? Why isn't dominance enough?

"I take less punishment, I land the highest percentage and I work the hardest,'' he said of himself recently not long before insisting he not only compared favorably to Ali and Ray Robinson but was better than both, a position that has been hotly debated ever since.

"My father taught me defense and no one can break through it. I just know if a punch is coming. I can feel it. I know what my opponent is going to do.''

Perhaps he does for those are the instincts that separate good boxers from great ones. But what happens to him on the night he doesn't know? What happens on the night he takes more punishment, not less?

Can he still find a way to win then, when he is wounded and vulnerable in the way Leonard appeared to be in his first fight with Hearns or the way Ali was against Frazier? Frankly, Floyd Mayweather, Jr. would rather not find out.

"Shane is a solid welterweight with great accomplishments but I have been fighting these kinds of fighters my whole career without much appreciation,'' Mayweather said. "Shane has talent. I have a God-given gift. No one gives me credit for who I've fought during my career because I can make anybody look like a nobody.

"Shane's done some things in this sport but I've done a lot of things in this sport. I've done a lot of things that a lot of fighters weren't able to do and didn't do.

"I don't rate myself. I'm a harsh critic of myself so no matter how I go I always say to myself I could have done better. When I fought (Diego) Corrales I said I could have done better. When I fought (Arturo) Gatti I said I could have done better. My main thing is I don't worry about it.''

He doesn't worry about the need for a bloody night of triumph either. If Mayweather leaves the MGM early Sunday morning looking like he's been there for a night of blackjack rather than as if he'd been hit by a blackjack it's no bother to him because, the way he sees it, bruises are not the definition of greatness in boxing.

"I don't get paid to get hit,'' Mayweather insisted. "I wasn't taught to get hit. I was taught how to hit and not get hit. That's what I'm about. I don't need my nose all over my face to prove I'm a great fighter. When I get in the ring I'm trying to get that boy off my ass.

"I love the fans but I fight for me first because the truth is you're just an object. Once they're done with you, it's over so it doesn't matter to me what other people say.

"There's nothing cool about taking punishment. What's cool is dishing it out so when your career is over you still have all your senses. When my career is over fans will appreciate my skills and my boxing ability. I know who Floyd Mayweather is. I'm a great fighter…a great fighter.''

Maybe so great that he won’tever need to overcome great difficulties and difficult nights to prove it but, boxing being boxing, I wouldn’t bet on it.