

Written by Adam Berlin
Monday, 06 September 2010 19:00

When James Toney waved helplessly under Randy Couture's might, diehard UFC fans saw white. And afterwards, reading numerous articles, and listening to the easy gloating of victors, it seemed as if a white flag had indeed been waved—boxing had surrendered its status as the supreme martial art.

There have been several contests between boxers and MMA fighters, but this one seemed more real, more authentic, and so the consequences held more gravity. James Toney was a champion in four weight classes and while he had ballooned into a super heavyweight, and aged into a man past his prime, he was still considered, and rightly so, a master of his trade. Randy Couture was also a master, a three-time all American wrestler and Olympic alternate, a five-time UFC title holder, but he too was past his prime. At 6'1, his frame seemed more suitable for his weight, 220, than James Toney's 5'10, 237 pounds, but Couture was five years older than Toney and he had lost nineteen fights in his career, six of them inside the distance. Going into the fight, James Toney, better known for wearing opponents down than knocking them cold with a single punch, believed, and made believers out of some boxing fans, that he'd keep the fight from going to the ground and deliver a shot to the point of Couture's chin that would indeed signal lights out. That didn't happen. In less than three and a half minutes, Couture took Toney down and choked him out.

But what does this really mean? James Toney is a boxer, a boxer so skilled he was able to move up the ranks, from middleweight to heavyweight, with real success, never getting stopped, doing his boxing version of the pound and ground, punching and punching until the men in front of him gave up or fell. 83 fights. Only 6 losses. His is an old-school fighter's record that will not be tarnished by his trash talk or his MMA loss. James Toney will go to the boxing hall of fame.

Last Saturday Toney went into another man's sport and he lost, quickly. Boxing and Ultimate Fighting are both martial arts, but one is about standing on two legs and delivering punches to an opponent's head and body. The other, even if it is called a mixed martial art, inevitably moves to the ground, where punches have no leverage and where grappling determines the success or failure of the fighter. While it may start out like a boxing match, it almost always ends as a wrestling match. And this is why the experts picked the wrestler Randy Couture to win by easy decision. Obviously, they were right. Had Couture laced on a pair of boxing gloves and entered a squared circle instead of a caged circle, the fight would have gone to Toney, easily; this would have been the equally obvious and foregone conclusion.

The problem is that this fight has become, for too many, an easy answer about which sport produces the tougher man. Some critics of boxing have gone so far as to say this single match rendered boxing's prowess obsolete. The question about who would win in a street fight, a boxer or a wrestler, a man trained in the sweet science or a man trained to grapple and kick and choke, is a question that many believe determines which sport, which athlete, which fighting technique is more worthy. If an MMA fighter can beat a boxer in a street fight, why watch boxing when ultimate fighting is truly the ultimate? For true boxing fans, the answer is easy: Boxing is

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the ultimate sport because it is about beauty and grace and brutality and facing a fear that MMA fighters rarely face.

Any fan who knows boxing appreciates the sport's beauty. Watch the footwork of a professional boxer, a real professional, and the moves look like a choreographed dance. The simplicity of the one-two, one-two step that is boxing's foundation, the synchronization of feet and hands, the balance required to deliver a perfect punch, the technique required to throw a jab, a hook, or an uppercut, cleanly and crisply, lines of motion cutting through air like the lines a ballet dancer might cut, all of it is beautiful. Even a knockout, clean and complete, a man falling while another man stands, is the stuff of drama, man overcoming obstacle, man asserting self in a brutal world, mortal man seeming immortal, all-powerful, if only for a moment, defying gravity, defying fate, firmly balanced on two legs.

Compare boxing's pure lines and often hypnotic rhythms to the holding and clinching of most UFC fights, legs kicking out, arms flailing about, bodies lurching against a cage, punches thrown with amateur arcs. MMA fighters may be skilled fighters, versed in several martial arts, but their work is neither aesthetically pleasing nor dramatically powerful. Compare Ali moving and jabbing to any wrestler's moves and you'll see the difference between high art and a lower art. Compare either of the Sugar Rays as they dance in the ring to any wrestler's maneuvers on the mat and you'll see the difference between choreography and something less graceful. Compare the wars that are legendary in boxing—Robinson vs. LaMotta, Ali vs. Frazier, Gatti vs. Ward, Pacquiao vs. Marquez—to any MMA fight and you'll see the ebbs and flows of life, the triumph of heart and will over body, the marriage of intellectual and physical, man facing man—literally—vs. a sport that is more obvious, more plodding, where men usually do not look eyes to eyes as their arms and legs struggle, often gracelessly, to achieve dominance on all fours. In MMA the winner is usually on the ground, pulled to earth's gravity, still a plaything for the gods.

And beyond its poetry, the danger that boxers face, the fear they must conquer to walk into the ring, is greater than the fear a fighter faces in MMA. Of course, MMA fighters, like all fighters who sign a dangerous contract with their opponents and themselves and then fulfill that contract by putting their bodies in harm's way, are brave men. But boxing contains its own M—not Mixed or Martial, but Mortal. Boxing tests the best of man, celebrating his strength despite his mortality, raising him, if briefly, to immortal status, but boxing too often reminds man that life is fragile, that the consequences of a fight can be complete and final. In MMA, fighters can tap out—aware that they are in too much danger, the sport provides them with a built-in safety valve. Boxing has no such out. Unless their corner throws in the towel or the referee stops the fight, fighters face being knocked out, rendered unconscious by a concussive blow (not a choke hold that puts fighters to sleep) that can potentially lead to serious damage. Every year too many boxers die in the ring. Not so in MMA. The possibility of death hangs over every boxing venue, sometimes as subtly as yesteryear's evaporated cigar smoke, sometimes palpable, especially when a fighter has recently died in the ring. Boxing too often plays for keeps and so only the bravest men choose to play.

There is only one sweet science. And while boxing has myriad problems and while the business of boxing often stinks, it is still the ultimate sport. MMA organizations may be better

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managed and marketed. MMA events may be drawing the crowds and some fickle viewers away from boxing. But boxing fans, true boxing fans, will never be swayed. Last week, James Toney lost to Randy Couture, but that fight, sloppy, ugly, providing no catharsis of any kind, meant nothing. Judging art may be subjective but sometimes you know, you just know, when a work of art is great. The same is true with sport. Boxing. You know, you just know, the way George Foreman knew, that *boxing is the sport to which all other sports aspire*.

Adam Berlin is the author of the novels Belmondo Style (St. Martin's Press, 2004) and Headlock (Algonquin Books, 2000). He is working on a boxing novel.