

Coach Merk Says He Isn't Just Roy Jones' Sidekick

Written by Bernard Fernandez
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Awards tend to come in clusters. Take almost any Oscars ceremony, for instance. The Best Picture winner often yields golden statuettes for its lead and supporting actors, as well as for the director, screenwriter, composer of the musical score and any number of technical personnel involved in the project.

OK, so maybe it's an anomaly that Roy Jones Jr. never was voted Fighter of the Year by the Boxing Writers Association of America. Maybe one day he'll receive the BWAA's Irving J. Thalberg Award equivalent for career achievement, a consolation prize created for frequent nominees of the silver screen who never took top honors for their performance in a particular film. But Jones was named the Fighter of the Decade of the 1990s by the BWAA, which perhaps supersedes top billing for any given year. And riding on Jones' coattails were brothers Fred and Stanley Levin, who shared BWAA Manager of the Year honors for 1995 in large part because of their astute handling of the Pensacola, Fla., native's career.

But while Freddie Roach, Manny Pacquiao's chief second, is set to collect his unprecedented fourth Trainer of the Year trophy on June 4 at the BWAA's 85th annual Awards Dinner in New York, Jones' longtime trainer, Alton Merkerson, remains the most conspicuous member of Team Jones never to have stepped up to the podium to give an acceptance speech. Most years, the former Army sergeant hasn't even made the final ballot.

In some respects, having worked the corner of the fighter who for so long was regarded as the most gifted of his era is like being the manager of the New York Yankees. The skipper-of-the-moment of the Bronx Bombers seldom is recognized for his work, even when the team emerges victorious in the World Series, because, hey, isn't a collection of all-stars with a \$200 million payroll supposed to win? Couldn't some Joe Schmoe sitting in the upper deck of the new Yankee Stadium guide his favorite team's real-life players to the pennant as easily as he might his entry in a beer league's fantasy format?

It's a good thing for Merkerson that he doesn't have an ego that needs to be constantly massaged, like Jones', but that's not to say that some of the slights, spoken or not, don't sting. It can be a bit deflating to constantly hear that your role in the corner is mostly ornamental, that the Jones who so thoroughly dominated opponents for so long did it solely on natural talent and without much assistance from his trainer.

Now that the 41-year-old Jones (54-6, 40 KOs), who takes on 45-year-old Bernard Hopkins (50-5-1, 32 KOs) Saturday night at Las Vegas' Mandalay Bay in a matchup of golden oldies, the likelihood is that Merkerson never will be acknowledged for his role in RJJ's rise to the summit of the pugilistic mountain.

"I remember seeing a Ring magazine cover years ago," Merkerson said. "The headline read, 'Is Roy Jones Jr. too good for his own good?' The gist was that Roy was so dominant, he made most of his opponents look bad. But isn't that the idea? Aren't you supposed to win as easily as

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you can?

“Now that Roy is in competitive fights, and losing some of them, people act like he's a bum. They say he shouldn't be fighting any more because he's not doing what he used to do.

“Aging is inevitable. There are certain things you can do when you're young you can't do, or do as well, when you get older. That's just a fact of life. So you try to compensate. But let me tell you, Roy has something left. Don't be surprised when he beats Hopkins again, like he did in 1993.”

But even if Jones, a 4-1 underdog coming off a first-round stoppage by Danny Green on Dec. 2 in Australia, reaches back in time to summon some of his old magic, it likely won't nudge Merkerson into the favorite's spot for Trainer of the Year for 2010. Oh, sure, he'd almost certainly be nominated and might even make the final ballot, but the Eddie Futch Award surely would go to the trainer of whoever wins the delayed matchup of Pacquiao and Floyd Mayweather Jr., should that megafight take place before 2010 gives way to 2011. Which means a possible fifth coronation for Roach.

“How can you have two individuals who are friends of mine, Stanley and Fred Levin, be named co-Managers of the Year for their work with Roy, but I've never been recognized?” Merkerson wonders. “I don't understand that. But I know what I've done. My boxers appreciate me and appreciate what I do for them, so I really don't give a damn if nobody else does.

“I've never gotten my just due, but I don't need an award. Roy Jones Jr. was a world champion for many years. He's one of the best boxers ever to enter the ring. I'm no chest-thumper. I know I was part of that, and it's enough.”

Well, maybe it is and maybe it isn't. It's not just the tidal wave of adulation for Roach that is a bit nettlesome to Merkerson. He's aware that Hopkins' former trainer, Bouie Fisher, was cited by the BWAA as Trainer of the Year for 2001, the year the Philadelphian unified the middleweight championship. Fisher's steady hand was more evident in the progression of an ex-convict who morphed from rough-hewn brawler to disciplined technician, the byproduct of which was an unprecedented 10-year, division-record 20-defense reign in the 160-pound weight class. And when Fisher left Hopkins in a bitter monetary dispute, assistant trainer Naazim Richardson took over and became a regular Trainer of the Year contender. It was Richardson who detected something untoward in Felix Trinidad's hand wraps before Hopkins' 2001 showdown with the Puerto Rican slugger, and it was Richardson, by then working with Shane Mosley, who exposed Antonio Margarito for attempting to use loaded wraps before their January 2009 fight.

Trainers who transform fighters with more or less standard equipment – Hopkins has remained at or near the top as long as he has because of a maniacal dedication to physical fitness and an ability to execute or deviate from fight plans, as need dictates – are almost always credited more than those who are presented with an athlete of otherworldly ability and just manage to not screw them up.

Merkerson, who became involved with Jones when he was an assistant coach of the 1988 USA

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Olympic boxing team that competed at the Seoul Olympics, acknowledges that Jones came to him as an extraordinarily talented individual. But Merkerson stresses that Jones has not been his only fighter, and that others he has worked with achieved success at their own level.

“If it’s not a good relationship, I really don’t want to be in it,” he said of the close bond he hopes to form with all of his fighters. “Every fighter I’ve trained basically has stayed with me for the duration of his career, with few exceptions.

“Alfred Cole (the former IBF cruiserweight titlist) was one who was with me for a long time. I started working with him with a lot of one-on-one training when he was with Triple Threat (whose other members were Ray Mercer and Charles Murray). We had a great association; he became a world champion. We stayed together for a long time. I’m proud to say the guys I’ve worked with through the years get along with the other fighters I train.”

Jones, however, is not Al Cole. He was created by his father, Roy Jones Sr., to be a one-of-a-kind fighter, and Big Roy did a commendable job before he and his son had a falling-out and Merkerson entered the picture.

Of his 22-year relationship with Jones, Merkerson said, “It’s very unusual that something like that occurs, but then Roy and I are compatible in a lot of ways. We made agreements when I first started training him, and we’re both men of our word.

“I told him I’d be there with him until he finishes. We’re together because of something more than words on a piece of paper. You can’t write trust into a contract. It’s been a very interesting road, a very successful road and a very long road.”

To his credit, at least for the most part, the unorthodox approach Jones takes to his craft – hands down at his side, pulling straight back from punches – is something from which “Coach Merk” never attempted to dissuade his then-19-year-old pupil.

“Roy’s style was something instilled in him when he was very young,” Merkerson said. “Most great boxers do things that are out of the norm, and they benefit from that. People expect boxers to hold their hands a certain way, to move a certain way. I’ll never forget a statement Roy made when he turned pro. Somebody said, ‘You’re going to be the next Sugar Ray Leonard.’ Roy said, ‘No, I’m going to be the first Roy Jones Jr.’ And that’s who he’s been.

“Great boxers might do some things that remind you of somebody else, but what makes them great is what they do like nobody else. Roy had the timing, reflexes and speed to be his own unique person in the ring. He could do things other people couldn’t. He knew it. His opponents knew it. Pretty soon, everybody knew it.

“He kept everyone guessing about what he was going to do next. It worked to his advantage. It still works to his advantage at 41.”

Or maybe not. There is a saying in boxing, “He does everything wrong, but it turns out right,” which applies to the luminescent young talents who dance to the beat of their own drummer, but

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find themselves out of rhythm when their reaction time begins to slow, if even imperceptibly. For a couple of years now, the things Jones did that were wrong but turned out right have been turning out wrong. The punches that he once slipped so casually are finding the mark.

But maybe the true legacy of a fighter is the impact he has on those who follow. Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, or so the saying goes, and there have been any number of Roy Jones Jr. wannabes who have tried to copy some of his moves which were beyond duplication. It was the same with Sugar Ray Robinson and Muhammad Ali, other originals who created masterpieces on swatches of roped-off canvas while the imitators never got beyond the finger-painting stage.

“Some fighters try to mimic Roy, but it’s asinine,” Merkerson said. “Mimicking somebody’s style doesn’t make you like that person. It can’t change genetics. It can’t make a regular athlete into a superior one.”

So is now Jones mimicking himself? Is he making the same mistake that all fighters do – indeed, most human beings – in considering himself to still be the best he ever was? Margaret Goodman and Flip Homansky, former chief physicians with the Nevada State Athletic Commission, have offered the opinion that a mostly used-up Jones is entering the danger zone after having absorbed more punishment in the last few years than he did in all the time that preceded his rapid, perhaps inexorable fall from grace.

“He shouldn’t be competing right now, and maybe never again,” Dr. Goodman said of Jones. “Obviously, he has amazing credentials, an amazing history. But his last several performances have been terrible for someone with those credentials and that history. I don’t know how you can turn a blind eye to that.”

Merkerson hears the concern of others and, he says, he shares it. Roy Jones Jr. is not just his fighter, “he’s like a son to me,” he stressed.

“I take my hat off to them for being concerned,” he said of those who would prefer that Jones enter retirement whole and healthy. “It’s definitely a concern for me, too.”

“But the Nevada commission has rules and regulations. If a man meets the standards for being licensed, you can’t hold him to a double standard because of what he once was. Roy has undergone and passed all the tests that were required. Saying, ‘Well, I don’t think he should fight any more’ is not a reason for shutting him down. That’s only somebody’s opinion.”

“Are you telling me that Roy should be prevented from fighting when they let Arturo Gatti take all those beatings? Even when Gatti won, he took a lot of punishment yet they kept bringing him back. Roy has not taken anywhere near the toll on his body that Gatti did.”

But a revenge-minded Hopkins could nudge Jones closer to the point of no return. Would one more opened can of losing whup-ass convince Jones to walk away? Would it be enough for Merkerson to counsel his longtime friend and protégé to do so?

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“There’ll come a time when Roy looks in the mirror, like we all do, and see a different person than the one he’s used to seeing,” Merkerson said. “He knows he can’t fight forever. But when he stops, it’ll be his decision, not someone else’s.

“I can tell you that whenever he does walk away, he’ll have a good life. There is more to Roy Jones than boxing.”