

“I got the I.B.A. title,” says Toney in his usual brash and to-the-point style. “I make the belt (title), the belt don’t make me.”

With Vitali Klitschko’s defense against Britain’s David Haye suddenly gone, and with other heavyweight contenders by-passing Toney for a number of reasons including age, fighting style conflicts and fear of losing their places in line, it’s definitely time for someone to accept Toney’s challenge, including the Klitschko brothers.

“If I’m too old and not good enough then somebody take (knock) me out,” said Toney while at his Reseda boxing gym. “They say I’m out to pasture, then why don’t one of these so-called champions step up and finish me?”

It’s a good question.

Toney, who early in his career trained at Kronk Gym in Detroit, says that his old connection with Emanuel Steward is to blame for both Vitali and Wladimir Klitschko refusing to fight him.

“Because of Emanuel Steward, the Klitschko sisters don’t want to fight me,” says Toney, who has yet to fight since beating Fres Oquendo by close decision last November 2008. “Everybody is scared to fight me.”

The Michigan-born heavyweight now lives and trains in California and works under the guidance of Shadeed Suluki. Toney is still promoted by Goossen-Tutor Promotions, who also have top-ranked heavyweight contenders Chris “The Nightmare” Arreola, ranked number one by WBC, and Fast Eddie Chambers, ranked number one by the WBO. At one point, a fight between Arreola and Toney was discussed but that may wait until after the Riverside heavyweight gets his mandatory fight against WBC titleholder Vitali Klitschko. Or maybe it could be Toney?

Toney doesn’t like to wait and doesn’t care who he fights as long as that heavyweight is known as one of the elite.

Reseda, Calif.

On the day we visited Toney, he was in the middle of his second session. Each day he arrives early in the morning for a boxing workout. Then he returns home for rest and lunch. Around 2 p.m. Toney returns to the gym for more physical training, including strength work.

“He’s here every day,” says John “Pops” Arthur, who advises Toney on almost everything. “Sometimes he’s here at 6:30 in the morning.”

Most experts, with few exceptions, say Toney is one of the most skilled prizefighters in the last 40 years. How else could someone who stands only 5 feet, 10-inches tall withstand all comers and be able to boast that no one has ever knocked him out.

“They said Evander Holyfield was going to knock me out and look what happened,” Toney says.

Perhaps the best example of Toney’s ability was demonstrated in his rematch with Hasim Rahman at Pechanga Casino a year ago. In that fight, Toney immediately proved to fans and experts that when prepared, he’s a force. Counter right hands, left hooks, combinations were rained on Rahman for three rounds. But an accidental clash of heads forced the fight to be stopped.

Toney’s performance was lauded by the press, yet it was Rahman who benefited as he was awarded a fight with Wladimir Klitschko for the WBO and IBF titles last December and was stopped in seven rounds.

What would Toney have done?

It’s a question that many have asked.

“Why are they afraid?”

Not since the great Sam Langford has a prizefighter risen from a lower weight class to contend regularly with the monster heavyweights.

“I came all the way up from 157,” says Toney. “Why are they afraid?”

Dan Goossen, president of Goossen-Tutor Promotions, said it’s been laborious looking for a leading heavyweight to step forward against Toney.

“The simple fact is they’re scared of James Toney,” said Goossen of other top ranked heavyweights, including David Haye and Nicolai Valuev, who both turned down challenges to fight Toney.

Talks have begun to contract a fight between Arreola and former champion Oleg Maskaev. But with Haye dropping out of the proposed fight with the elder Klitschko, that could leave the door open for Arreola.

Toney says if the Klitschkos don’t want to fight him, then he hopes Arreola takes care of one of them. Afterward, he would love to be Arreola’s first title defense should the Riverside heavyweight emerge victorious.

It could happen.

“I like Chris Arreola but he ain’t ready for James Toney. He may be ready for Klitschko but he’s not ready for James Toney,” said Toney, who previously sparred with Arreola years ago. “He’s a strong fighter, he punches good, a little wide, but it’s the situation.”

Toney says both Klitschkos are accustomed to a slow and conservative style where they can dictate a fight.

“They’re very flawed. They got nothing to offer. If you throw too many punches they get nervous,” said Toney about the two Ukrainian brothers.

Trainer Suluki, who also trains Lamon Brewster and Laila Ali among others, said that Toney is one of the few professional boxers that need little guidance in a fight.

“He’s a real professional,” Suluki says.

Homage

Before Toney became a middleweight world champion, he first needed to prove himself in the rugged and notorious boxing gyms in Michigan. While in his home state the fighter now known as “Lights Out” first met the man who taught him boxing.

“It was my old trainer Bill Miller who taught me the game,” says Toney. “Emanuel Steward has known me since I was in Detroit. I destroyed everybody in his gym. I destroyed all his middleweights.”

Back in those days Miller would sit the rambunctious Toney in a room in front of a screen and show him tapes of all the former boxing greats.

“I’d sit down and watch tapes of Archie Moore, Ezzard Charles and Jersey Joe Walcott and I’d be saying what’s this,” said Toney who was excited watching the old masters. “I picked their styles apart and Bill Miller showed me how to do things.”

Its this boxing style that has allowed Toney to win the middleweight, super middleweight, cruiserweight and heavyweight world titles.

“I forgot more things than most trainers know,” he said.

Unification

Though Toney holds the IBA heavyweight world title, he wants to eventually take all of the heavyweight belts. That’s his goal.

The Ukrainian heavyweights are his number one target.

“He called out everybody than he going to fight David Haye? These guys haven’t done anything. Call out the real fighters. If they really want to prove themselves call out James Toney,” said Toney inside his boxing gym. “If they fight me they’re going to be a statistic. I don’t like them. I don’t like Emanuel. He shouldn’t be allowed back in Detroit. He knows I’m going to kill his boys. I’m a kill all his chicks.”

Title fight anyone?