

Who Should Rank Higher: Holyfield Or Lewis ?

Written by Frank Lotierzo
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Regardless of what happens during the remainder of their careers, both Evander Holyfield and Lennox Lewis have made their mark in heavyweight history. Holyfield and Lewis are without a doubt the two best and most accomplished heavyweight champions since the end of the Larry Holmes era in September of 1985. Some may say Riddick Bowe should be included, but his body of work doesn't compare to either fighter.

Mike Tyson also doesn't match up with either Holyfield or Lewis. Based on career achievements and head to head confrontations, both surpass Tyson. They are more complete fighters than Tyson and have faced and defeated better fighters than he has. Holyfield and Lewis have also handled adversity better than Tyson and have never ducked any fighter who was a perceived threat to them. There's no doubt that the battle for who is the best heavyweight champ since Larry Holmes is between Evander Holyfield and Lennox Lewis.

When it comes to evaluating who should be ranked above who, it comes down to personal preference, since a substantial case can be made for either fighter. Both fighters have fought the best fighters of their era, have stood the test of time and demonstrated longevity. Also, both Holyfield and Lewis have fought their way back to the top after suffering major setbacks. The most compelling argument as to the greatness of these two is that neither was accepted by the mainstream media and public early in their championship reign. However, considering the passage of time, one would now be hard pressed to make a compelling argument debating the greatness of either fighter.

Who Fought The Better Opposition?

I have spent much time going over their records in trying to make a case for one over the other regarding who fought the better opposition. Holyfield and Lewis have fought everybody. It's actually easier listing the fighters they didn't fight and working from that vantage point than going over all the fighters they did fight.

Concerning Holyfield, the only fighters he didn't fight from his era were Ruddock, Morrison and Golota. As for Lewis, he didn't fight Bowe (although it wasn't because of Lewis; it was Bowe who avoided the fight), Foreman and Moorner. The fact that Holyfield fought and beat Foreman should not be scoffed at. When Holyfield and Foreman fought in April of 1991, Foreman was the most formidable contender at the time. Lewis was only a two-year pro and was nowhere near the threat of Foreman of 1991. Tyson's confidence was shattered and he wanted no part of Foreman, especially after being knocked out by Buster Douglas (that is a fact). Bowe was just a couple years into his pro career and Ruddock was just starting to make his mark in the heavyweight landscape. Foreman also went on to capture the lineal title three years after losing to Holyfield, further justifying his ranking.

When comparing the fighting ledgers of Holyfield and Lewis, a case can be made for both fighters as to who faced better opposition. The case for Holyfield is that the Bowe of 1992-93 is

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better than any fighter Lewis has ever shared a ring with. A good case can also be made that the Foreman of 1991 is better than any opponent Lewis has faced in a title fight. Holyfield also had Mercer down and beat him much easier than Lewis did, and Holyfield beat a better Tyson.

The case for Lewis is that he held the title longer without losing it and winning it back. After Lewis regained the title from McCall in their rematch, he made nine successful title defenses before losing it to Rahman. Lewis also faced more of the supposed up and coming young heavyweights (Briggs, Morrison, Grant, and Tua to name a few). Lewis also defeated Tyson more soundly than Holyfield did (although he faced a more eroded version).

The fairest conclusion I can make as to who fought the better fighters is Holyfield fought more established fighters who were considered threats. Lewis fought more up and coming fighters who were considered as viable threats. The conclusion is that it's a wash; no fighter has a distinct advantage. They both fought the best available during their era.

Who Had The Better Career?

This is another category in which Holyfield and Lewis are pretty close. Holyfield is a four-time heavyweight champ and is 10-5-2 in heavyweight title fights, (6-0 in Cruiserweight title fights). Lewis is a two-time heavyweight champ and is 15-2-1 in heavyweight title fights. Lewis has been the more consistent champ. Holyfield has won the title more times, but he had to because he lost it more.

Lewis ranks fourth in heavyweight title fight wins, something for which he never receives enough credit. Only Joe Louis, Muhammad Ali and Larry Holmes have won more. He has definitely been the more dominant champ compared to Holyfield. However, the fact that he's been counted out twice in heavyweight title fights during his prime hurts his legacy somewhat. Some try to gloss over it, but it can't be ignored, although it may not be fair, it just can't be omitted. Even though Lewis has avenged both defeats, his title tenure is never mentioned without the inclusion of these two devastating defeats.

The two times Lewis lost the title were the result of one-punch knockouts. Lewis is the only heavyweight champion in boxing history about which that can be said. His two conquerors in those fights, Oliver McCall and Hasim Rahman, are not known for their punch. Some have tried to justify them as big hitters, but the fact of the matter is that they definitely are not (who have either McCall or Rahman KO'd that resemble anything close to a special fighter besides Lewis?). As humbling as these two defeats have been, they should never diminish Lewis' 15 heavyweight championship victories.

Although Holyfield was not as dominant as Lewis, he was never blown out in a title fight. He also faced better punchers in title fights in Foreman, Bowe and the Tyson of 1996-97 than Lewis has (compared to a one dimensional Tua, an eroded Tyson of 2002 and Vitali Klitschko). His record in title fights is not as good as Lewis', but it's a little misleading. In my opinion, he was shafted in the first Moorer fight and the third Ruiz fight. However, he was the benefactor in one of the worst decisions in heavyweight history in his first fight with Lewis, a fight he definitely lost. In my view, Holyfield's title fight record should be 12-5, and Lewis' should be 16-2. In trying to

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justify who had the better career, you must split hairs. I say career accomplishment is a tossup; a compelling case can be made for both fighters.

Head-to-Head

Unlike hypothetical fights, Holyfield and Lewis have fought. Let's be honest, Lewis won the first fight (I scored it 9-3 Lewis), but was shafted out of the decision, and Lewis won the second fight by a unanimous decision (I scored it 7-5 Lewis). Although Holyfield and Lewis have fought, are their two fights a true indicator as to how the fights would have turned out if they both were at their peak? I don't think so. Lewis was definitely at his peak when he fought Holyfield. I believe Lewis' peak was 1997 thru 2002, and Holyfield's peak was 1990 thru 1993. The Holyfield who fought Bowe in '92 and '93 was superior to the Holyfield who faced Lewis in '99. The last time Holyfield was anything close to being a great fighter was 1997. Holyfield has been outweighed in all but four of his fights as a heavyweight. Being the smaller fighter in all those heavyweight wars definitely took their toll on him. There can be no mistaking that Holyfield was on the wrong side of the hill by 1999.

By the time Holyfield faced Lewis, he was only capable of fighting in spurts and not able to fight an entire round. This made it virtually impossible for him to win a decision. Going into the first fight with Lewis, Holyfield questioned Lewis' heart and character. Although it was a mistake, he still had disdain for Lewis and didn't approach the fight with the fear and urgency that he normally did against other top fighters. Remember, Holyfield predicted that he would knock Lewis out in the third round. Something he never did before any fight in his career.

Holyfield was clearly beaten by Lewis in their first fight. However, he was basically outworked and couldn't sustain any offense. Yes, Lewis had a lot to do with that, but Holyfield was in awful condition and barely put forth any real effort. As bad as Holyfield was, he was never hurt once during the fight, even in the controversial fifth round (the round judge Eugina Williams scored for Holyfield) although it was Lewis' best round.

In the rematch, Holyfield showed up in the best possible condition he was capable of being in at the time. Although I scored the fight 7-5 Lewis, there are more than a few knowledgeable boxing writers and fans who scored the fight for Holyfield. The problem I have in the rematch is that Lewis was so tentative against a focused Holyfield. With all the physical advantages that Lewis holds, Holyfield pushed him all over the ring and was never close to being shaken or hurt. It was obvious that when Holyfield was able of sustaining any offense, Lewis was either out-fought or tied him up. The problem was that Holyfield of 1999 was not capable of sustaining an all out offensive assault.

If I had to enter the best Holyfield or the best Lewis in a heavyweight tournament versus the greatest heavyweight champions in boxing history, I would pick Holyfield. I must admit that I am swayed by his mental toughness and better chin, and I'm not convinced Lewis is stronger physically (a harder puncher, yes, but not stronger). If you want to say Lewis' chin only failed him when he was not in top shape, it's true. However, he has been wobbled and shook more than Holyfield, even when Lewis was in top shape. Lewis' chin has betrayed him enough that it scares me off from picking him against the greatest of the greats. His chin has proven to me

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that he's capable of being stopped by any top fighter on any given night. In my opinion, the best Holyfield would decision the best Lewis. Holyfield at his peak would've been capable of throwing punches the entire round as long as the fight lasted. That would have been enough to keep Lewis on the defensive, enabling Holyfield to outwork Lewis and win the decision.

Who Should Be Ranked Higher?

This is such a tough call. I respect and admire both Holyfield and Lewis. As to who should rank higher between the two, I think it's a toss up. A good case can be made for either fighter. This is so close that I don't think there is a right or wrong answer. In this writer's opinion, I give Holyfield the nod, based on the fact I think he would win in an actual confrontation if both were at their best. I would also give him a slight edge in head to head match ups versus other all time greats, mainly because of his chin and warrior mentality. That being said, I have not a single issue with anyone who thinks Lewis should be ranked above Holyfield. As I said, I don't think it's clear-cut either way. Two things are certain; there can be no question that Holyfield and Lewis are the two best and most accomplished heavyweights since Larry Holmes, and they're both all-time greats.