

From THE ULTIMATE BOOK OF BOXING LISTS by Bert Sugar and Teddy Atlas, Running Press, 2011

Saddest Finales

Unfortunately, boxers rarely know when to quit, staying on long after the footlights have dimmed and the curtains of their primes have come down. And as once-greats who are now once-wases, they become cannon fodder for young turks who have entered, stage left, to take their turn in the spotlight. For evidence of this unfortunate tendency, look to the fact that only six of the first 27 heavyweight champions exited their careers, stage right, with a “W.” Here are ten of the saddest final fights of some of the all-time greats.

10. Jersey Joe Walcott (1930-53). After losing his title to Rocky Marciano in 1952 in what had been one of the most exciting heavyweight title fights of all time, Jersey Joe met Marciano in a return bout on May 15, 1953 in an attempt to regain his crown. But the highly anticipated rematch turned out to be, in the words of the poet laureate of sportswriters, Red Smith, “one of the most sordid of all time.” After Marciano threw the fight’s first notable punch—a right “to the expression,” according to Smith—Walcott took a seat on the floor and sat there while referee Frank Sikora tolled ten to end the fight. And Walcott’s career.

9. Jimmy Wilde (1910-23). Acknowledged by all as the greatest flyweight of all-time, “The Mighty Atom” Jimmy Wilde ended his career at New York’s Polo Grounds on June 18, 1923 by losing his title to the hard-punching Pancho Villa. The Filipino battered and bloodied Wilde for seven rounds until the referee had seen enough—even if Wilde hadn’t—and stepped in mercifully to stop the slaughter.

8. Tony Canzoneri (1925-39). A popular champion in three weight classes (featherweight, lightweight, and junior welterweight), Canzoneri ended his career on November 1, 1939 by serving as a punching bag for hard-hitting left-hook artist Al “Bummy” Davis, with the 19-year-old Davis handing the once-great Canzoneri his only KO loss in 176 career fights.

7. Mike Tyson (1985-2005). Once, by his own declaration, “The Baddest Man on the Planet,” Tyson was by 2004 anything but. After taking a beating from the unheralded Danny Williams in four rounds in July of 2004, Tyson came back in June 2005 to fight an even lesser opponent, Kevin McBride, who dominated a sluggish Tyson, making the former champion quit before the seventh round.

6. Willie Pep (1940-66). One of the greatest fighters of the 20th century, the man known as “The Will o’ the Wisp” was still knocking out opponents into his 44th year. Pep thought his last fight—in Richmond, Virginia on March 16, 1966 against someone named Calvin Woodland—was supposed to be just an exhibition. Instead, it was ruled an official bout and a unanimous decision win for Woodland.

5. Jim Jeffries (1896-1910). After having retired as undefeated heavyweight champion in 1905, Jeffries was called back into the ring five years later by public outcry and the white establishment, which viewed African-American Jack Johnson's 1908 defeat of Tommy Burns for the heavyweight title an insult and worse—novelist Jack London exhorting him to “remove that golden smile from Johnson's face... Jeff, the White Man must be saved!” Famous author Jack London wrote, “Jeffries must emerge from his alfalfa farm and remove that smile from Johnson's face. Jeff it's up to you!” Succumbing to the pleas, Jeffries entered the ring on July 4, 1910 to take back their title from Johnson. But in front of a hopeful crowd of 15,760 packed into the Reno outdoor arena, Johnson played with the supposedly invincible Jeffries for 14 rounds, then, in the 15th, as the crowd shouted, “Stop it! Don't let him get knocked out!” Johnson knocked down the exhausted and beaten-down Jeffries twice to end the crusade and Jeffries' career.

4. Benny Leonard (1911-24; 1931-32). The all-time great lightweight champion retired in 1925 after ruling the lightweight roost for almost eight years, but was forced to make a comeback after being wiped out by the stock market crash of 1929. After 19 comeback fights without a defeat against, at best, mediocre competition, Leonard was matched with the hard-hitting Jimmy McLarnin on October 7, 1932. The result was sadly predictable as McLarnin raked the balding, slow-moving Leonard, alternately hitting the once-great Leonard and pleading with the referee to stop the slaughter. Finally, with McLarnin pulling his punches to save Leonard from any more punishment, the referee took pity on Leonard in the sixth round and put an end to his ill-fated comeback.

3. Sugar Ray Leonard (1977-97). The most unretiring boxer in history, Leonard came out of a two-year retirement to face Terry Norris in 1991 and lost, going back into retirement for another six years, until he decided he “missed the roar of the crowd.” So much so that Leonard again came out of retirement again on March 1, 1997 to fight Hector Camacho. Unfortunately, there was to be no roaring from the crowd as the once ever-so-graceful Leonard was reduced to hobbling around the ring when his 40-year-old legs failed in their obligation to uphold him. The fight was called to a halt in the fifth round, marking the only time in his 40-fight career that Sugar Ray Leonard was stopped.

2. Muhammad Ali (1960-81). Coming back from a two-year retirement in 1980, Ali took what he called, “a one-sided ass whuppin” from his former sparring partner and then-heavyweight champion, Larry Holmes. But Ali came back again the following year on December 11, 1981 in the Bahamas against Trevor Berbick. With a cowbell serving as the ring bell, Ali lost a 10-round decision, his storied career ending not with a bang, but with a cowbell's tinkle.

1. Joe Louis (1934-51). As glorious as his 13-year reign as heavyweight champion had been, his after-the-ring life and return to boxing bordered on the tragic. Retiring as undefeated champion in 1949 after 25 successful title defenses, Louis soon found himself hounded by the IRS for unpaid taxes and was forced to return to the ring the following year to face his successor, Ezzard Charles. Rusty and looking every bit his 36 years of age, Louis lost a unanimous decision. He continued his comeback in 1951, winning eight fights, three by knockout. But in his next fight, he entered the ring at Madison Square Garden on October 26, 1951 to face the young, up-and-coming Rocky Marciano. A shell of his former self, that old fire

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Written by The Sweet Science
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that had flamed at his every command in his younger days now but a flicker, Louis was knocked out in the eighth round by a devastating right hand that sent the former champ through the ropes, his head cradled by those in the press area in one of the saddest sights and nights the Garden had ever witnessed.

EDITOR NOTE: This is a great read. Ordering info here: <http://amzn.to/fF6Sak>

*thanks Seta Zink

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Robert Curtis says:

Ali should be number one in any list because he was the greatest. Nothing was sadder than Ali's demise fighting prime and hungry champion Larry Holmes. Also, Tyson's saddest and best moment was going up against Lennox Lewis. Tyson was a shell and Lewis has always been overrated. I have sympathy for Joe Louis because I know he was old and burnt out from hard living, drug use and was just fighting for the money when he went up against prime Marciano.

Isaiah says:

Muhammed Ali was NOT the greatest. He was an all time great far up on the list, but the editor has it right. As far as heavyweights alone go, Joe Louis is the greatest hands down. (:Note to editor. Joe Louis's championship reign fell just short of 12 years. It wasn't 13 years.: About 12 years and 25 title defenses do NOT lie! Don't give me the "bum of the month club" crap! Those weren't official title defenses. Joe Louis, like Ali, cleaned out the heavyweight division, but unlike Ali, Joe was INTERUPPTED in his reign. During Joe's reign, through all 25 defenses, (which by the way, is the greatest and longest reign in ANY weight class in HISTORY!) Joe got through more than 10 or so title defenses without suffering a loss (unlike Ali ala unable to get the title from Frazier in the first fight, suffering the Norton loss coming back and losing to nobody Spinks.) and Joe was NOT stripped of his title for 3 and a half years having to earn it back due to political and military conditons, like Ali. In fact, the 4 years Louis was in the Army, they still let him keep the title while Louis put on exhibitons for the other soldiers. Sorry Ali fans, but Joe Louis's career overall is just a little better and I personally feel that both in their prime, the size difference wasn't large enough for Louis not to kick Ali's butt. It's the truth. Louis stayed around 200 to 205 pounds and Ali stayed around 217 pounds. This and Ali's style wouldn't have been enough to save him from the Brown Bomber. Truth hurts. No, I didn't need to look ANY of this stuff up. I just naturally know it from being a student of the game all my life. Boxing for life! Oh, I also despise the government for what they took from BOTH of these men. It makes me sick how the IRS finacially raped Louis and what was allowed on Ali as well.

Isaiah says:

My mistake on the typo of the word INTERUPPTED. I meant to say UNinterupted if I'm spelling

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it right even then. Also possible I spelt the word exhibition wrong, but so be it. Why is there a smily face icon on what I type up in these articles? I did NOT put that there.

FighterforJC says:

To me, Ali was "The Greatest" because not only did he have the skills and physical tools, he captured the public's imagination. Part of being great is not just "cleaning out" the division, but proving critics wrong and providing memorable bouts. Also, it was the "interruption" in Ali's career proved Ali's greatness. Clearly not the same fighter athletically speaking, Ali part 2 was as much guts and glory as Frazier or Rocky Balboa. He stood toe to toe with the likes of Frazier, Norton and Shavers.