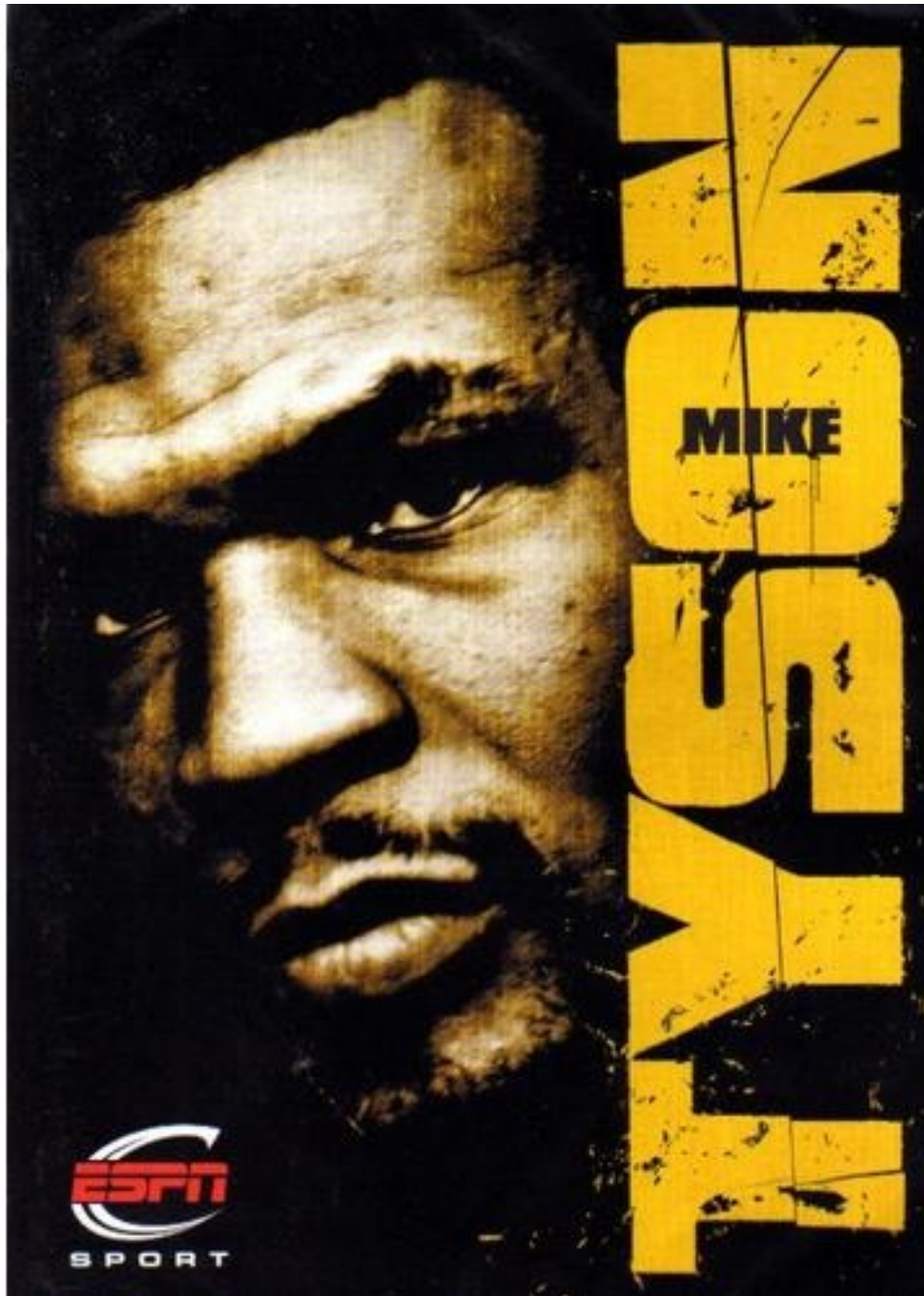


Mike Tyson Gets An 'A' For His Hall of Fame Speech, And For His Rebirth...WOODS

Written by Michael Woods
Monday, 13 June 2011 15:14



It is a wonder what the passage of time, a vegan diet and a fab iPhone app can do to the image of a man once dismissed as the Willie Horton of boxing, Mike Tyson.

The fighter who started out as Kid Dynamite, morphed into Iron Mike, and devolved into "Behind Iron Bars" Mike was inducted into the International Boxing Hall of Fame on Sunday in Canastota, NY, and as he was called to the lectern, the cheers coming from those in attendance were beyond robust. Richard Nixon was likely looking up, shaking his head and wondering who Tyson's image reclamation consultants were.

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Flippancy aside, it was something of a marvel to see Tyson, now aged 44, get the Hall Call, because, and he'd be the first to tell you, his career and life didn't have "happy ending" stamped on them back in the late 1980s-early 1990s. He had "early grave" written on his forehead, way before he had that Maori tat inked on.

Looking to be in better shape--compliments of that vegan diet he assumed over a year ago--than many of the "contenders" who get heavyweight title shots these days, the Brownsville, Brooklyn native thanked the crowd, and then God, before pointing out welterweight great Gaspar Ortega in the crowd, and thanking him for being there.

Humble, is how he came off, and how about that. "Humble" wouldn't have been in the top tier of adjectives you'd assign to Tyson while his arc played out in a slo-mo train wreck, as he combusted in the way only the youth, money, a violent streak and in-the-gutter level self esteem can force.

"All this started...I got to be goofy about this so I won't get emotional up here," said Tyson, as he gesticulated nervously. "All this stuff started when I met Cus and he..Bobby Stewart from (inaudible) because I'm always robbing people as a kid..or something." Someone yelled out that he was innocent, and Tyson got a roar when he admitted, "No, I did it."

What he did do was keep the game in the public eye, on ESPN, on the sports pages as the sport moved away from the heavyweights and then middleweights' supremacy, with a signature style of violence. Sure, there was science behind it, he didn't just go at people like a wrecking ball, but the thing that made Tyson a mainstream public figure was the single-mindedness in which he went about his task. The task, by the way, wasn't merely to win. No, it was to obliterate, and there was something comforting, believe it or not, in his manner. Tyson didn't prattle on excessively about the sweetly scientific ways and means to get the W; he told you he was coming in to remove your head from your neck, and then basically tried to keep his promise. Pretty simple stuff, for the viewer. Easy to understand, quick to digest. His early run had some of what makes MMA popular today among the under 35 set; fast, furious action. Tyson fights were perfect fodder for the short attention span generation.

But Tyson out of the ring, you had to pay attention to him. He never bored you. He was a different animal, a guy who was living an examined life when it would have made more sense for him not to be doing so. Speaking of animals, I always enjoyed his candor; he comprehended and admitted that humans are animals, prone to brutishness like a wild animal, but with a capacity to mask the untoward urges. He didn't put our species on a pedestal, or talk about the exceptionalism of us humans, or our nation, for that matter. "I love the freedom of speech and opportunity here...but sometimes, I'm embarrassed by America," he told Sports Illustrated's Gary Smith in 1988. "We should be a great enough country to take care of the weak. If there wasn't poor, there couldn't be rich."

That "keeping it real" way meant that many folks secretly enjoyed his rants, but had to feign horror, because he went too far, into revolutionary territory. "Real freedom is having nothing," he said to Smith in 1988. "I was freer when I didn't have a cent. Do you know what I do sometimes? Put on a ski mask and dress in old clothes, go out on the streets and beg

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quarters."He wore his woes on his sleeve, paraded his anger and negativity, and he had an above average ability to communicate travails of existing which make the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation. Not "just" for an athlete, or a boxer, no, he put into words what many with an excess of testosterone and a tendency to ponder can't or don't. Like when he told Smith, "I did evil things. But my heart was always pure." That sentence has to resonate with any being who had indulged in a few of the seven deadlies and a bunch of the lesser sins, but still hesitates before smushing a spider who blundered his way into his house.

I confess, the cynic in me wonders how long Tyson can pull this off. How long he can stay right-minded, stay grounded, stay out of a cell. But I veer away from cynicism when I hear him say things like he said Sunday, like when he saluted Carmen Basilio, the former welterweight champion, saying, "I know him as a guy that will fight you to the death with every blood in his body."

That's humility. Or it's one of the slickest long cons I've ever come across. T

Tyson could've spent ten minutes recounting his accomplishments, and then another five settling old scores, like Michael Jordan did at his induction. But instead, he mentioned Gaspar Ortega, and Gene Tunney and Carmen Basilio. He made it about other guys. He spread the wealth. Classy. The work of a role model.

Wow.

This from the man who in 1998 told Mark Kram in a Playboy interview, "I have so many enemies. They control all that stuff. You know people don't give a damn about that stuff. They try to discredit me as much as possible. **** 'em. I know I ***** up my chance to be in the Hall of Fame, to be the kind of guy I always dreamed of being, but **** 'em, **** 'em, **** 'em. The critics may use the Holyfield fights to deny me. But Ali lost fights. I don't give a ****. My life is doomed the way it is. I have no future. I just live my life." That guy was headed for an early grave, a Listonian end, wasn't he?

But the Tyson who got the Hall Call, the one of today exists as a monument to the possibility of change, and of resilience. He scratched his way out of the ghetto, almost self immolated in a blaze of broads and a quagmire of cash, went to prison for rape, tried to silence the inner dialogue with drugs and booze, lived through the unmeasurable pain of a four year old daughter dying in a freak accident...and yet he carries on, with grace and dignity.

"When I met Cus we talked a little bit about money...but we wanted to be great fighters and that's..." he paused, teared up, hoped to gather his thoughts to wrap up his speech neatly. "Hey guys, um, I can't even finish this stuff. Thank you."

The old Mike Tyson, you could point at him and counsel the kids, "Don't do as he does." This Tyson, you can point to him and counsel the kids, "If you mess up, do as this guy did. Learn from your mistake, and be a better man for it."

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