It started out as a comeback, or better yet, an escape from journeyman status. Five non-losing efforts later, Glengoffe Johnson is now in a position where one more win would put him atop the light heavyweight heap. And more importantly, one step ahead of the man he has seemingly followed for the past two years.

When “Gentleman Glen” squares off against consensus light heavyweight champion Antonio “Magic Man” Tarver this Saturday night (HBO World Championship Boxing, 9PM ET/6PM PT live from the Staples Center in Los Angeles, CA), more will be at stake than the IBO light heavyweight championship. Even more than The Ring championship, for that matter. While the winner will undoubtedly be hailed as the best light heavyweight on the planet, many boxing scribes are also looking at this fight to anoint the winner as Fighter of the Year for 2004.

Neither is a scenario Johnson had envisioned becoming a reality even after upsetting Roy Jones in what has been the biggest win of his career, to date.

“Like I pretty much said at the end of the fight in the post-fight interview, I don’t need to be the best, I just want to fight the best,” Johnson told TheSweetScience.com while preparing for the Tarver showdown this weekend. “Fighting Roy was a dream come true for me, but certainly not the end of my dream. I always said that when I retire, I wanted to go out knowing that I faced everyone and tried my hardest. I didn’t think I would beat them all, but I surely wanted to meet them all.”

Certainly a refreshing change from your average fighter, champion or otherwise, who normally sits on the side and waits for one big fight to come along rather than working one’s way toward the top. In fact, Tarver fits the very same mold. It was his decision to rematch Eric Harding that earned him the respect of the boxing community. Here was a fighter who was Roy Jones’ #1 contender in the WBC, and soon to be mandatory challenger in the IBF and WBA as well. Rather than sit on his lead – as Roy had been accused of doing for much of his light heavyweight run to that point – Tarver opted for a rematch with the one man that defeated him in the ring.

The gamble paid off big time, though it required Antonio to rally from behind in order to catch Harding with a perfect shot that would permanently turn the tide in his favor before stopping him in five. Just like that, Tarver went from wasted talent to perennial contender. Never before had a win over a top contender look so good.

That is, until Johnson turned the trick less than a year later. This would be the first of three occasions where Johnson would pull the in-the-ring version of “anything you can do, I can do better.”

After recovering from the Tarver debacle, Harding was looking for a comeback fight, and Johnson was looking for a win. He had been blatantly robbed in his first two bouts of 2003 – a

hotly contested split decision loss to Julio Gonzalez on Telefutura, and a draw to undefeated Daniel Judah just six weeks prior to the Harding fight. The Judah fight was so bad that Daniel himself thought that Johnson won. Unfortunately, his opinion didn't change the fact that Johnson hadn't won a fight on American soil since the Clinton administration.

Fast forward to fight night in the Bronx, where Johnson and Harding squared off on FoxSports. In typical Johnson form, he sprinted out to an early lead. Only this time, he didn't ease off the gas, as he arguable won seven of the first nine rounds against a surprisingly lethargic Harding. Eric was able to pick up the pace down the final three rounds, but had fallen too far behind early to catch up, thus dropping a unanimous decision to Johnson. Just ten months after Tarver had dropped and subsequently stopped Harding, Johnson beat the former world title challenger in his very next fight.

"The win was big for me, because it said that I can beat the top fighters. I can beat the same guys that others fight and beat in trying to claim that they are the best. This let me know that I was ready to fight for a world title."

The world title he had hoped to fight for were the two that Tarver had picked up in scoring a unanimous decision over Montell Griffin just a month prior. In an unprecedented move, the bout was for the vacant WBC AND IBF titles, as they were

the top two contenders for both alphabet organizations. After winning the titles, Tarver remained determined to score a showdown with longtime nemesis Roy Jones. While Tarver sought Roy, Johnson searched for opportunity to build on his newfound momentum.

The IBF would come through, as they announced an elimination bout, where the winner of the proposed November 2003 fight between Johnson and Clinton Woods would square off against the winner of Jones-Tarver I. It wasn't a title shot, but Glen was happy enough to be in the position where he only needed one more win to get there.

He would be even happier with last minute news that the fight would be upgraded to world title fight, as Tarver elected to vacate his title the week of the fight. Johnson was elated, though somehow sensed that the timing wasn't right.

"I guess I still wasn't used to the judges allowing me to win a fight" Johnson now jokes. "But something told me that I wasn't leaving Sheffield (Woods' hometown, where the fight was staged) with a world title, no matter how bad I beat that boy."

He was right, as many in attendance – again, this is Woods' hometown – felt that Johnson had done more than enough to pick up the vacant strap. For the third time in four fights in that calendar year, the judges disagreed with the masses, as they declared the bout a draw. In a year where Johnson arguably could have went 4-0 and would have been a strong contender for Fighter of the Year, he instead walked away 1-1-2 – and beltless.

Three months later, Johnson returned to the scene of the crime, determined to prove that he could somehow win a decision in Sheffield. "The decision was simple," Johnson recalls. "That's

where the most money was at the time, so why not go back. I beat him once, I knew I could beat him again."

Glen was right, and this time, so were the judges. After twelve dominant rounds, Johnson left England a champion. Once again, ten months after Tarver scored the biggest win of his career, Johnson comes along and follows suit. Only now, Johnson had a world title, while Tarver was coming off of a disputed majority decision loss to Jones and bracing for the rematch.

In May, Tarver landed the left hand heard 'round the world, knocking Roy Jones out with a single shot to regain his WBC world title, and re-claim his spot atop the light heavyweight division. Even though Johnson at the time was training for a return trip to England with a Joe Calzaghe fight and career payday waiting in the wings, you could almost sense that Glencoffe would come along and find a way to match and possibly top the feat.

Two postponements and a permanent cancellation later, Johnson received the opportunity of a lifetime – only a few states away from home.

"Man, Calzaghe drove me crazy, pulling out of the original date, pushing it back, coming up with another excuse to postpone… I just said forget it. It's not worth going to England with him and (promoter Frank) Warren playing games. So, when Roy's people called me up, I told him it was on."

With Roy looking both to rebound and regain some leverage for a possible rubber match with Tarver, he turned to Johnson in hopes of picking up the IBF title and securing his 50th win. Only Roy "must've forgot" that Johnson's days of divisional steppingstone were long over.

"We knew going in that it was to be just another fight we were supposed to lose. But I trained hard for that fight. I knew that if Tarver could find a way, so could I."

Nine rounds later, Johnson did just that. Jumping on a seemingly shell-shocked Roy from the opening bell, Johnson fought no worse than on even terms through the first four rounds before taking over for good in the fifth. By the ninth round, everyone was simultaneously stunned and bracing for the inevitable – the permanent demise of Roy. When Johnson landed that final overhand right that put Roy on the canvas for nearly five minutes afterward, Tarver sat in attendance and watched a potential career high payday go flying out the window. He also watched Johnson once again duplicate his best fight just one fight later.

Enough was enough, Tarver decided. So determined to get Johnson in the ring, that he was willing to pass on a $2 million payday that would have came with facing mandatory challenger Paul Briggs, and instead set his sights on the man that managed to match all that Tarver had achieved in the past twenty-four months. He even dumped his WBC belt in the nearest receptacle. And once again, Johnson matched the feat, vacating his IBF title and passing on a mandatory defense against Rico Hoye in a fight that would have paid low six figures, in favor of a seven-figure payday and the final main event on HBO's 2004 boxing calendar.

"I wish that it could have worked out another way. I was disappointed that the IBF did what they

did in taking my title. But in the end, I did what is best for my family. Now, I have to do what's best for boxing – beat Antonio Tarver. I beat Harding right after he did. I won a world title right after he did. I beat Roy right after he did. I proved that I can do everything he can do. Now, I plan to become the best light heavyweight in the world, one fight after he did."

The only question remains – if he beats Tarver, would he be willing to fight himself next? That's the only way he could possibly follow suit. Right?

"I beat myself enough in my career. Some decisions shouldn't have gone that way, others I simply do what I needed to do to win. So, this would have to be one time where I can't outdo what Tarver did the fight before. Because I no longer have it in me to lose."