

Carl "The Truth" Williams Was A Study in Contradictions

Written by Bernard Fernandez
Tuesday, 09 April 2013 18:18



So little actual time elapsed. So many memorable quotes uttered.

Boxing can be funny that way. Sometimes, so many say so much about so little. Gary Cooper “strong, silent types” are a rare commodity in a sport where bragging about what you expect to do (beforehand) or what you might have done (after you fail to do it) is common. Now or then, everyone has a detailed explanation – or an excuse – for what we all saw with our own eyes. Some of what is said is even a little bit believable, if not the absolute truth.

The announcement of former heavyweight contender Carl “The Truth” Williams’ death at 53 on April 7, after a prolonged battle with esophageal cancer, reminded me of the taunt-filled prelude to, and defiant aftermath, of Williams’ first-round technical knockout by undisputed champion Mike Tyson on July 21, 1989, in Atlantic City’s Boardwalk Hall. It also is a reminder that what seemingly is apparent to all can really be nothing more than an illusion.

Controversy? Yeah, well, maybe some, particularly if you were of the opinion that the 6-foot-4 Williams, with an imposing 14-inch reach advantage, might have survived Iron Mike’s furious early onslaught, found his rhythm and employed that telephone-pole of a jab to overcome the

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12-1 odds against him and pull off a monumental upset.

Williams, in fact, had already landed several stiff jabs before he threw one that missed. Tyson ducked underneath it and surged upward with a left hook that caught the challenger flush on the jaw. Williams went down in a heap, the back of his head bouncing off the bottom strand of the ropes.

Three hundred and ninety days earlier, in the very same arena, Michael Spinks had gone down with a thud after being tagged with another Tyson first-round missile. Some observers thought Spinks might have beaten the count that night, but elected not to try. After being run over by a truck, you don't whistle for the driver to back up and do it again.

To his credit, Williams struggled to his feet at the count of seven. But referee Randy Neumann, not liking what he saw in Williams' seemingly unfocused eyes, waved the fight off only 93 seconds after the opening bell.

Williams, whose previous claim to fame had come in giving then-champion Larry Holmes all he could handle in losing a close, 15-round unanimous decision on May 20, 1985, in Reno, Nev., claimed in the postfight press conference that he had been the victim of a premature stoppage.

"I've been down before, got up and rose to the occasion," Williams said, noting that he had been floored a total of seven times in bouts with James "Quick" Tillis, Jesse Ferguson and Mike Weaver, but had managed to come away with victories over Tillis and Ferguson. "(Neumann) said to put up my hands. I put up my hands. He asked me if I was all right. I said, 'Sure.' What was there, a one-knockdown rule? This is a heavyweight championship fight. I should get the benefit of the doubt."

Neumann, who had been a promising heavyweight prospect in his own right in the early 1970s, having mixed it up with Jerry Quarry, Jimmy Young, Duane Bobick and Chuck Wepner (three times), had a different take.

"I asked him, 'Are you all right?'" Neumann said of his attempt to ascertain Williams' fitness to

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continue. "The first time I asked him there was no response and his eyes looked rather blank. I asked him a second time. Again, no response. I stopped the fight. The man clearly was concussed. He couldn't answer a very simple question verbally, and his eyes told me a story that he was not in good shape."

Williams' veteran trainer, Carmen Graziano, opined that Neumann had pulled the plug on his guy too quickly because the snarling guy standing in the neutral corner, ready to charge out and fire more haymakers, was a monster puncher everyone then considered to be what he claimed to be, namely the baddest man on the planet.

"When Mike Tyson knocks somebody down," Graziano conceded, "some referees are more inclined to stop a fight just because he's Mike Tyson."

Whether or not Williams could have weathered that early storm seemed a moot point to the 11,112 spectators and a phalanx of media members who were totally buying into the notion that the 23-year-old Tyson was as close to unbeatable as it ever gets in boxing. And, I have to admit, I also was a passenger on that crowded bandwagon. My report in the *Philadelphia Daily News* suggested that what had happened to Spinks and Williams was going to happen over and over, possibly for a good many more years.

Considering that Tyson ... continues to cut down contenders like a scythe in tall grass, his reign might last into the 21st century. Although there is no shortage of heavyweights who would volunteer – for a substantial fee, of course – to be beaten up by Tyson, the man who is capable of ending his reign might not even be a man yet. He might be in grade school somewhere, taking his classmates' lunch money.

Williams' complaints, as might be expected, merely served as backdrop to Tyson's chest-thumping, which, in retrospect, would seem to have been eerily prophetic. Noting that Evander Holyfield had knocked out a world-rated Brazilian heavyweight, Adilson Rodrigues, in the second round just six days earlier in Lake Tahoe, Nev., Tyson dismissed Holyfield as another prospective victim whose fate would be no different than the one just suffered by Williams.

"Yeah, he can come get some," Tyson said of Holyfield. "I'm sure he would find it very

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stimulating. I would love to fight Holyfield. Right now. Today. Tonight. In the ring, out of the ring.

“Let’s get it on. If he thinks he can beat me, we can go down in the cellar. The one who comes back with the key is the champion.”

The prevailing sentiment was that, in the ring or down in the cellar, Tyson held the key and wasn’t going to hand it over to anyone until he was damn good and ready. But Tyson also said something during his time at the podium that was even more telling.

“No man is invincible,” he said, in what many of us thought was a half-hearted and unconvincing attempt at humility. “One day I won’t be champion. One day somebody will beat me, or else I’ll retire. Then you guys (reporters) will have a lot to write. But you’re going to have to live with the way I am until that day happens.”

That day, as it turned out, was a lot closer than anyone could have anticipated. In Tyson’s very next bout, 311 days after he disassembled Williams, he himself was taken apart by an apparent no-chance challenger whose attributes were not unlike those of “The Truth.” And when a 42-1 longshot named Buster Douglas shocked the world on Feb. 11, 1990, in Tokyo, knocking out Tyson in 10 rounds, what had transpired in the Tyson-Williams fight took on a completely different perspective.

Had so many of us been wrong in our assessment of the Tyson that had been on display until his denouement in Japan? When Tyson finally did go down into that cellar with Holyfield, admittedly eight years after it probably should have happened, it was Holyfield who twice came up with the key.

Maybe the young Tyson was never as indestructible as his legion of backers had convinced themselves he was. Maybe he would have been all that and more, had not his consumptive lifestyle robbed him of much of what had made him so very special. And maybe, had Douglas fought him in Atlantic City on July 21, 1989, and Williams had been his opponent on Feb. 11, 1990, in Tokyo, Douglas would now be a footnote to history and Williams would be the celebrated first conqueror of Godzilla.

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Randy Gordon, the former editor of *The Ring* and former chairman of the New York State Athletic Commission, fondly remembered Williams when asked to comment on his passing by boxing writer Lyle Fitzsimmons.

"To me he was a fighter who came along at the wrong time – right between Larry Holmes and Mike Tyson," Gordon said. "I have no doubt that if Williams were fighting today he'd be the one guy capable of upsetting the Klitschko brothers and certainly capable of teaching the rest of the division how a heavyweight should use the jab."

There probably is at least a scintilla of justification for Gordon's praise of "The Truth," who retired in October 1997 with a 30-10 record that included 21 wins inside the distance. It's conceivable everything all have turned out differently for him in a different time or under different circumstances. But the record is what the record is, and speculation and conjecture can't change it.

Williams does take to the grave those 15 heroic rounds against Holmes, and a minute or so against Tyson when he at least attempted to give as good as he got.

"I have great admiration for him," Tyson said after his TKO victory. "That's how you should fight when you fight for the heavyweight championship of the world. You should try to *take* it. Don't run around the ring and pitty-pat for it."

[Comment on this article](#)

ali says:

Rest in peace champ..

Radam G says:

My greatest condolences. I'll holla at cha at da crossroad, "The Truth." May your love ones be strong in this time of mourning. Much luv! Holla!

the Roast says:

Sad to read this news. Very talented fighter. Sometimes talent just isn't enough. I watched that

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Holmes fight in '85. I think I watched it on a secondary TV maybe in my parents room. I was a Holmes fan but ended up rooting for the Truth just because he was shocking the world. I thought he had a good chance to hang with Tyson in '89. I did think the fight was stopped too soon but that's boxing. You can't fault the ref, he is looking right at the fighter and he has to make a split second call. Rest in Peace Truth.

gibola says:

RIP Carl.

Amir Khan reminds me of Carl Williams in many ways. The speed, the skills, the jab - he can outbox anybody but if he gets hit flush, he's out. Carl's finest hour for me was the Holmes fight. Williams was a big, mobile heavyweight with good power who actually outboxed Holmes for much of the fight. He had other excellent nights against Bert Cooper (when he was a big underdog and Cooper was being lined up as a Tyson foe) and despite the knockdowns he showed he could respond to adversity against Ferguson and Tillis.

I remember at one time Butch Lewis ridiculing the idea of Michael Spinks defending against Williams, he was ridiculing the paltry purse it would bring Spinks, I remember thinking that the idea of Spinks beating Williams was far more ridiculous. What Spinks did to an ageing Holmes wouldn't have worked with 'The Truth'. Spinks would have been outboxed and without the power to hurt Williams it would have been a one-sided fight and a new champ.

When people talk about 80s heavyweights who could have competed with the K Bros I always go to Witherspoon and Williams. Carl could have outboxed either brother until he got hit. If he didn't get hurt - he'd win.

If younger fans want to understand what Carl was as a fighter, his strengths and flaws, UTube the Mike Weaver fight from 1986. Speed, jab, confidence, aggression for one and half rounds, a mismatch. Then Weaver lands a massive left hook off the ropes and it's over.

I hated watching Williams against Morrison and Bruno later in his career, guys he could have beaten at his peak, but that's boxing. I remember reading that Carl was a security guard and had a few problems after boxing. I now know he was suffering with his health.

I will remember Carl Williams as the bright, fresh, exciting young heavyweight he was in the mid-80s when he could have conceivably have beaten or lost to any of the top guys - but it would have been entertaining either way. He was also for years an x-factor in the division outside of the Page-Spoon-Tubbs-Thomas brigade. You had to tune in when Carl was on the TV, that Khan-like vulnerability made him great fun to watch.

Larry Holmes always said that Williams was the most impressive young fighter he came up against and he should have become a champ. He was right.

RIP Carl - thanks for the memories - you were a hell of a fighter.

mortcola says:

Truth was talented and a gentleman. Great tools. No one who knows a damn thing about boxing should ever mock a bad chin, because it is the one thing no amount of training or willpower can do anything about. You can get up concussed and show the world you're not quitting, but you're not going to be able to stop the eyes from crossing and rolling, nor the legs from wobbling. A guy who knows in his heart that he can't take the bombs is braver than the iron-chin wonders, because he knows he is a punch away from oblivion. Hearn, Truth, Roger

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Mayweather, even Khan who did everythign he could to stay in the fight after his legs were gone - all fought brave and skilled in spite of the sudden-death quality of their fights due to chin issues. As far as outboxing the K-bros - no one has ever outboxed a Klitschko for more than a few seconds, if that. He would have come closer than today's mediocrities, we can surmise - but rather than exalt him in the eulogy, lets give him his realistic due and say that he was a seriously talented, ballsy fighter who was held back, as are so many fighters of varying levels of talent, by a relative weakness he could do nothing about.

brownsugar says:

[QUOTE=mortcola;28656]Truth was talented and a gentleman. Great tools. No one who knows a damn thing about boxing should ever mock a bad chin, because it is the one thing no amount of training or willpower can do anything about. You can get up concussed and show the world you're not quitting, but you're not going to be able to stop the eyes from crossing and rolling, nor the legs from wobbling. A guy who knows in his heart that he can't take the bombs is braver than the iron-chin wonders, because he knows he is a punch away from oblivion. Hearn, Truth, Roger Mayweather, even Khan who did everythign he could to stay in the fight after his legs were gone - all fought brave and skilled in spite of the sudden-death quality of their fights due to chin issues. As far as outboxing the K-bros - no one has ever outboxed a Klitschko for more than a few seconds, if that. He would have come closer than today's mediocrities, we can surmise - but rather than exalt him in the eulogy, lets give him his realistic due and say that he was a seriously talented, ballsy fighter who was held back, as are so many fighters of varying levels of talent, by a relative weakness he could do nothing about.[/QUOTE]

Classic Mortcola folks.

mortcola says:

Its my birthday, B-Sug. One day a year I let myself talk now.

brownsugar says:

And we are the fortunate ones who receive the gift of your insight .. How ironic

Have a good BDay Celebration !!!

Radam G says:

Wow! WTF! Doc Mortcola and my son has the same B-Day. Too much in common that doc and I have. Hehehe! Holla!

mortcola says:

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Have a good BDay Celebration !!![/QUOTE]

Thank you, my friend!

mortcola says:

[QUOTE=Radam G;28679]Wow! WTF! Doc Mortcola and my son has the same B-Day. Too much in common that doc and I have. Hehehe! Holla![/QUOTE]

Would be an honor to have more in common with you, Rad!

tlig says:

Just found out about this sad news. RIP.

I also have to say I found the article a little less than respectful as it seemed to focus more on Mike Tyson than on the departed fighter. I have no issue with him being mentioned as that was one fight that many people remember Carl for but all the other talk about Tyson, Spinks, Holy etc was really unnecessary. Anyway, I seem to recall an interview with Randy Neumann (published here on TSS a few years ago) and his reason for stopping the bout differs from what is reported here. He claimed -granted this was several years after the fight- he stopped it because when he let go of Carl's hands after wiping the gloves they dropped like they had no life in them (or something along those lines)....