

Riddick Bowe's Plight

Written by Thomas Hauser
Monday, 17 June 2013 08:25



Hall-of-fame trainer George Benton once said, "I've never seen an old fighter come back without it being for money."

More recently, writer Bart Barry observed, "Prizefighting finds its participants in unfortunate situations, elevates them too high, and then drops them back on their original paths – with brain damage."

Sadly, those two thoughts seem to describe the plight of 45-year-old Riddick Bowe.

Twenty years ago, Bowe was the undisputed heavyweight champion of the world.

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Last Friday night (June 14th), Bowe, weighing 300 pounds, was knocked down five times in less than two rounds of a Muay Thai (kickboxing) bout in Thailand. As reported by Jocelyn Gecker of the Associated Press, "The fight was one of a dozen at the venue, which had the atmosphere of a village fairground with loud music and amusement park rides nearby. Promoters had said they hoped to draw about 20,000 people, but a crowd closer to 1,000 turned up even though admission was free. On a sweltering night, Bowe sat and sweated for hours as he waited his turn to fight. The venue had no changing rooms, so Bowe and other fighters stripped down and changed in open air tents beside the stage."

Bowe took a beating. He did not land a single punch or kick during the bout. Discretion being the better part of valor, he stayed on the canvas after the fifth knockdown.

In his prime, Bowe was a supremely gifted boxer. He won the heavyweight crown in 1992 with a unanimous-decision triumph over Evander Holyfield. Successful defenses against Michael Dokes and Jesse Ferguson followed. He lost his championship by majority-decision in a 1993 rematch against Holyfield. But he rebounded to beat Larry Donald, Herbie Hide and Jorge Luis Gonzalez before knocking Evander out in the eighth round of their 1995 rubber match.

What Bowe didn't do was train properly. He got lazy and squandered his immense talent. The last two bouts of his legitimate ring career were against Andrew Golota in 1996. On each occasion, Golota was disqualified for low blows. But both times, Riddick took a beating. After the second Golota fight, he was slurring his words badly.

In January 1997, Bowe announced that he was retiring from boxing to join the United States Marines. It was, he said, the fulfillment of a lifelong dream. His record at the time was 40-and-1 with 32 knockouts.

Eleven days after Bowe enlisted, he was granted a discharge from the Marines. Everyone involved (including the Marines) understood that it wasn't going to work out.

A downward spiral followed. Bowe hit rock bottom on February 25, 1998, when he kidnapped his estranged wife (Judy) and their five children in a frightening and irrational attempt to reunite his family.

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Scott Shaffer later reported, "According to court records, Bowe borrowed a Lincoln Navigator and placed a bag in the vehicle that contained a flashlight, duct tape, pepper spray, and handcuffs. He was also armed with a buck knife. He then drove with his brother [to Judy's home in North Carolina]. After the Bowe's three oldest children left the home, he ordered the children to get into the Lincoln Navigator. When children complied, he drove the vehicle onto Mrs. Bowe's driveway. While his brother remained in the vehicle with the children, Bowe ran to the front door and forced it open. He pushed Lynette Shaw, Mrs. Bowe's cousin, back inside the house and motioned her to be quiet. He asked Ms. Shaw to tell him where Mrs. Bowe was located. With hand gestures, he indicated that he would hit Ms. Shaw if she did not disclose Mrs. Bowe's whereabouts. Ms. Shaw led Bowe to Mrs. Bowe's bedroom. He shoved the door open, removed the bed covers, and ordered Mrs. Bowe to get up. He gestured that he would hit her if she did not comply. He demanded that she prepare herself and the two youngest children to leave immediately for [the former marital residence in] Maryland. En route, Bowe displayed the flashlight, duct tape, pepper spray, and handcuffs to Mrs. Bowe and told her, 'I came prepared.' He also informed her that, if he had found her with another man, he would have killed both of them. At one point, he stabbed Mrs. Bowe on her left breast through a heavy jacket that she was wearing. Although Mrs. Bowe said she was not seriously injured, she did bleed from the resultant wound. He also slapped her. In addition, Bowe ordered his wife to call her attorney and instruct him to suspend their divorce proceedings. Mrs. Bowe dialed her attorney and her brother on a cellular phone. Her attorney's secretary informed her that her attorney was not available. Her call to her brother was unanswered. When the vehicle stopped at a restaurant in Virginia, Mrs. Bowe went to the ladies restroom. Bowe stood guard outside the door. While in the restroom, Mrs. Bowe called Ms. Shaw in North Carolina to notify her of the location of the restaurant. Mrs. Bowe also asked two elderly women who were in the restroom to contact the police to inform them that she was being kidnapped. Shortly after they left the restaurant, local police officers stopped the Lincoln Navigator and arrested Bowe."

After lengthy pre-trial maneuvering, Bowe pled guilty to criminal charges and was imprisoned for seventeen months. Upon his release from prison, he announced his intention to resume his ring career.

But there was a roadblock. In conjunction with Bowe's plea bargain and sentencing, his attorneys had submitted evidence to the court stating that Riddick's conduct had resulted from brain damage sustained as a consequence of boxing.

More specifically, Dr. Neil Blumberg interviewed Bowe at length, studied the results of an MRI and various cognitive tests, and stated the belief that Bowe suffered from a brain impairment known as frontal lobe syndrome.

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Blumberg's report declared in part, "As a result of my forensic psychiatric evaluation, it is my opinion to a reasonable degree of medical certainty that, at the time of the [kidnapping] offense and at the present time, Riddick Bowe was and is suffering from personality change due to frontal lobe brain syndrome. Common manifestations of personality change include affective instability, poor impulse control, outbursts of aggression or rage grossly out of proportion to any precipitating psychosocial stressor, marked apathy, and suspiciousness or paranoid ideation. As an example, injury to the frontal lobes may yield such symptoms as lack of judgment or foresight, disinhibition and euphoria. This type of impairment is not uncommon, especially in individuals who spent the majority of their lives in the boxing profession. Despite the defendant's success as an amateur and professional boxer, he sustained enough significant blows to the head to create this brain damage which has led to a gradual but progressive worsening in his impulsivity, judgment, and behavioral controls. Although Mr. Bowe's personality change due to frontal lobe brain syndrome is not curable, it is treatable [with] outpatient cognitive remediation, which should be continued on a long-term basis. Treatment with antidepressant, anticonvulsant and/or mood stabilizing agents may also be useful and effective in dealing with the specific behavioral and emotional difficulties that can occur with this disorder."

The court accepted Dr. Blumberg's finding, in part because of the bizarre nature of Bowe's experience with the Marines.

When Bowe announced his intention to return to boxing, he told British writer Anthony Evans, "I missed it all so much. I never wanted to retire, but my manager at the time convinced me to. I knew all I needed was a rest, but I got talked into a retirement situation. Once I retired, I became so frustrated and my life kept going downhill. I'd be sitting alone at home, watching fights on TV, and I'd miss it so bad I'd just burst out crying. A lot of people are telling me I shouldn't fight, but you should be able to do what you want to do. Let me do what makes me happy. If it wasn't for boxing, what else would I do?"

As for the court's acceptance of the finding that he had brain damage, Bowe told Evans, "Let me tell you something, When I went to court, they tried to make it into a big deal, and it wasn't. It was just a lawyer's idea, a trick, that is now backfiring on me."

Dr. Margaret Goodman (chief ringside physician and chairperson of the Nevada State Athletic Commission's medical advisory board) took a contrary view. Goodman, who had followed the Bowe proceedings from afar, declared, "If a fighter has been documented to have brain damage, game over. Brain damage doesn't disappear. Some of the clinical manifestations such

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as slurred speech can improve, but there are many other symptoms and signs. Refraining from getting hit in the head will improve someone clinically, but it doesn't cure the problem. You can't rest or train away brain damage. You can improve the symptoms from lack of exposure. So any jurisdiction allowing him to continue is drastically increasing the fighter's risks. I heard Mr. Bowe went for extensive speech therapy. That's great. He should do that. But getting hit in the head will wipe out any improvements he has made."

On September 25, 2004, Bowe returned to the ring in Shawnee, Oklahoma, with a second-round knockout of Marcus Rhode (who was on a seven-fight losing streak during which he was knocked out six times).

Then, in March 2005, Bowe signed a promotional contract with Goossen Tutor Promotions.

Asked if he had detected any slurring of words in Riddick's voice, Dan Goossen distinguished himself by saying, "I'm not training him to do *Othello*. I just want him to beat people up."

On April 7, 2005, Bowe eked out a ten-round split-decision over stepping-stone-for-heavyweight-prospects Billy Zumbun. Next, on December 13, 2008, he traveled to Germany where he scored an eight-round decision over Gene Pukall.

How formidable was Pukall? Just prior to fighting Bowe, he was chosen as the pro-debut opponent for Robert Helenius and was knocked out in less than a round.

Boxing fans talk about how sad it is that Joe Louis was reduced to participating in staged professional wrestling matches after his boxing career was over. At least Joe Louis wasn't getting beaten up.

Also, while this column is largely about Riddick Bowe, one might express similar concern for the damage inflicted on Marcus Rhode, Billy Zumbun, and Gene Pukall. Rhode last fought in the great state of Missouri on April 20 of this year and was knocked out in the second round. He has now lost fourteen of his last fifteen fights, with twelve of those defeats coming by way of knockout. All told, Rhode has been knocked out forty times.

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Thomas Hauser can be reached by email at thausen@rcn.com. His most recent book (*Thomas Hauser on Sports: Remembering the Journey*) has just been published by the University of Arkansas Press.

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Matthew says:

This is a sad story, but unfortunately it isn't one we haven't seen before. You could see a marked slurring in Bowe's speech around the time of the Golota bouts, and we know that the beatings he took in those fights did him no favors. The reason he took those beatings was because his skills rapidly declined and his reflexes eroded, due to his rapid fluctuation of weight in between fights. When a guy like Eddie Futch says that Bowe had the tools to be the best heavyweight he ever worked with, you know that Bowe could have been something special. Unfortunately he didn't have the will to prepare like Futch's other heavyweights did, and that's why he had a brief championship reign. A colossal waste of talent.

Radam G says:

Actually "Big Daddy" Bo and his lawyer at that time -- the late Johnny Cockran -- did run a con of brain damage on the court, and it did come back to bit Bowe. Dude was never brain damaged. His @\$\$ was loved damaged. He couldn't let it go, and it became a Love T-K-O! His ex-wife was Robin Given lite.

Anyway! Enough of that. Big Daddy is just coming to the P-Islands and get laid. Now that he got his arse whupped in Muay Tai, and Lights out Toney bytch tapped out in dat weak MMA/UFC, the dudes need to fight one another in an Olongapo City bout promoted by me. I will call it the \$hitty Pity in Olongapo City. Hehehe! Holla!

stormcentre says:

Yes RG thats both funny and right. Let Bowe & Toney thrash each other with slurred speech slanging matches in the lead up to a stoush of former old-skool greats.

Both could care less about what cells they have left and damage.

In fact, I honestly believe that Toney (if not Bowe) likes being hit, in the sense it warms him up and makes him feel alive and "performing".