

Roy Jones-Bobby Gunn Another Reminder of How the Mighty Have Fallen

Written by Bernard Fernandez
Monday, 04 November 2013 11:31



Some will come because they are curious, perhaps even morbidly so. Others will come because they remember how truly great one of the participants was, even if that greatness has dimmed into a mere shadow of its former brilliance.

Mostly, though, fight fans with more important ways to dispose of their disposable income will choose to sit this one out, even if the legendary but now-44-year-old Roy Jones Jr. somehow manages to reach far enough back in time to remind spectators, at least a little, of what once made him so very special.

They held a press conference in Philadelphia last Wednesday to formally announce the Dec. 4 matchup of Jones (56-8, 40 KOs) and Bobby “The Celtic Warrior” Gunn (21-5-1, 18 KOs) for the vacant WBU cruiserweight championship, a mostly meaningless trinket. The scheduled 12-rounder, if indeed it is staged, will take place at the cozy National Guard Armory in Northeast Philly, which figuratively is much further from Madison Square Garden, site of several of Jones’ marquee fights, than the 115 or so miles actual driving distance.

It is an indication of the current reality that the Jones-Gunn press conference was attended by only one reporter from a local newspaper and a handful of boxing web-site writers, but not by camera crews from any of the Philadelphia television stations or by the town’s more influential columnists. That was because another famous and aging athlete whose best days are well behind him, onetime 76ers superstar Allen Iverson, 38, was choking back tears at a similar media gathering and announcing that he had hoisted up his last jump shot.

Virginia native Iverson, of course, spent all or part of 12 of his 14 NBA seasons with the Sixers, firmly establishing himself as a hometown icon. But Jones, who hails from Pensacola, Fla., has never fought in Philadelphia, a place where he is known mostly for being a thorn in the side of

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Bernard Hopkins, the ageless Philly standout with whom Jones split a pair of decisions spaced over nearly 17 years, from May 22, 1993, to April 10, 2010.

Not that Jones (*seen in above Hogan photo, getting ready to fight Bernard Hopkins in 2010*) hasn't considered fighting in Philadelphia in the past. Like the late standup comedian Henny Youngman, RJJ might have told the sparse turnout at Wednesday's press conference that he was "glad to be here ... but then, at my age, I'm glad to be anywhere."

"I love the City of Brotherly Love," Jones said with a touch less pomposity than most followers of his career are used to. "When (Gunn) said he wanted to fight Roy Jones Jr. and that it was going to be his last fight, that's big to me. And I know that him being a gypsy, being a bare-knuckle champ, he has heart like no other. These are the type of fights that make legendary nights. They are dangerous the whole night long.

"I know this guy is game, and that from Round 1 to Round 12 he's going to think he can win, and will be trying to land that one punch to take you out. That's what I live for. That's what I love. My job is trying to see how many hits I can put on him before he even tries to land that punch. As a 44-year-old, ain't nobody can do that like I do."

Matchmaker Don Elbaum (who can't be the promoter of record, as he does not hold a promotional license with the Pennsylvania State Athletic Commission) beamed as Jones spoke. Elbaum has been down this path before, having staged Sugar Ray Robinson's final bout – ironically, when Robinson was 44 – in which the greatest boxer of all time dropped a 10-round unanimous decision to Joey Archer on Nov. 10, 1965, in Pittsburgh.

Elbaum knows that name recognition sells, and Jones certainly has retained some of that. "The Bum," as he is sometimes affectionately known, also knows the value of any interesting "hook" to lure paying customers, and he believes he has found one for Gunn, who, at least until now, probably was best known for his losing challenge of then-IBF cruiserweight champ Tomasz Adamek on July 11, 2009. But Gunn – who turns 40 on Christmas Day – became the first boxer to win a sanctioned bare-knuckle fight since 1989 when he defeated Richard Stewart on Aug. 5, 2011, thus winning the "vacant heavyweight title."

"He's the first bare-knuckle champion since John L. Sullivan!" Elbaum said of Gunn, who

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intends to retire after the bout with Jones, regardless of the outcome.

Gunn, to his credit, doesn't pretend that he ever was the equal of the Jones that was voted Fighter of the Decade for the 1990s by the Boxing Writers Association of America. But that was then and this is now, and Gunn thinks that the considerable gap between himself and Jones not only has narrowed, but been successfully bridged.

"I came close to fighting Jones twice before," Gunn recalled. "In 2006, when I had the IBA cruiserweight title, I was going to fight him, but that fell through. Two years ago, I again was supposed to fight him, but once more it didn't happen. And that's OK, because I believe now is the right time for me.

"I could not carry Roy Jones' jockstrap five or 10 years ago. I admit it. But his time has passed, and it's my time now. I'm a full-fledged cruiserweight and a puncher, and a puncher always has a puncher's chance."

Gunn said he is training as if the Roy Jones Jr. of many people's memories, the one who held legitimate world titles at middleweight, super middleweight, light heavyweight and heavyweight, makes a surprise re-appearance.

"He might not be all that he was, but on any given night a great champion like Roy ones might show up and look as good as he ever did," Gunn continued. "You never know. But I'm not coming just to say that I was there. I've paid my dues. I've had a long, crazy career, been involved in my share of controversial fights. But this one ... it just feels right to me. And I don't doubt for a minute that I am going to come out on top."

The mere thought of a fringe guy like Gunn defeating a prime Roy Jones Jr. is incomprehensible, but that Jones left the building years ago and really hasn't been glimpsed since. That Jones dropped his hands and leaned straight back from punches, which are violations of the most basic tenets of boxing, but he was able to get away with it because of his extraordinary reflexes. Like the young, lithe Cassius Clay/Muhammad Ali, Jones, technically speaking, did everything wrong but found a way to make it turn out right.

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Jones' slide was shockingly sudden and seemingly irreversible. He lost three consecutive bouts from June 2004 to October 2005, a pair of the defeats (one on a second-round stoppage) against Antonio Tarver sandwiched around a brutal, nine-round beatdown by Glen Johnson.

When it was suggested to Jones that his unorthodox style had betrayed him as his reflexes slowed, he said the losing streak owed more to his getting away from the distinctive traits that had set him apart.

"With my hands up, I am no good," he said before a victory over Jeff Lacy on Aug. 15, 2009. "That is not what I was put here to do. I had to go back, re-drop my hands, get 'em back down to my side. Get my mouthpiece back out so I can stick my tongue at people and piss 'em off before I knocked 'em out. That's what I used to do and that's what I'm best at."

Jones more or less reiterated those comments prior to a scheduled fight against journeyman Manny Siaca, for the NABO cruiser title, which was to have been held on Dec. 9, 2009, at the Liacouras Center on the Temple University campus in Philadelphia. But that fight never happened, delaying for nearly four years Jones' pledge to strut his stuff before Philly fight fans in a city that, he said, "if it's not the best place for boxing, it's one of the best. It's home of so many legends."

Curiously, again using the tactics he claims to have gotten away from, Jones endured another three-bout losing streak from December 2009 to May 2011 – knockout losses to Danny Green and Denis Ledbedev plus a unanimous-decision loss in the long-delayed rematch with Hopkins. He has since cobbled together back-to-back wins, over Max Alexander and Pawel Glazewski, but he is 7-7 dating back to the knockout by Tarver, four of those defeats coming inside the distance.

What Jones apparently wants is to build some momentum leading up to an oft-proposed pairing with mixed martial arts great Anderson "Spider" Silva of Brazil, whom many believe is the foremost MMA fighter of all time. That bout would not be in the Octagon, but in the ring, which presumably would enhance Jones' chances, considering the stumbles Ray Mercer and James Toney had when attempting to cross over into a different type of fighting. Silva – who is skilled in Jiu-Jitsu, Tae Kwon Do, Muay Thai, Judo and Capoeira – has said he is amenable to squaring off with Jones in a boxing match.

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But what if Jones loses to Gunn? To Silva, who is 1-1 as a boxer? Is RJJ's legacy and place in boxing history so secure that they can't be tarnished by his continuing to fight at a noticeably diminished level?

Seth Abraham, the former head of HBO Sports, weighed in on that issue in April 2006. "His drive was to do things that were of interest to him," Abraham said, "but not necessarily to fight the very best middleweights, super middleweights and light heavyweights who were out there. I think Roy's legacy in the sport absolutely will suffer because he chose not to do everything he could to make himself as great as he might have been."

Then again, Jones can hardly be faulted for chasing past glories. It is a tale that is repeated over and over, like a spinning cat trying to capture its own tail.

"You always think of yourself as the best you ever were," Hall of Famer Sugar Ray Leonard said of his own many comebacks from retirements that didn't stick. "That's human nature. And that's not just how highly successful people think. Everybody thinks that way.

"Most guys come back for money. They need another payday and there are people around them feeding their egos, telling them how good they still are. Maybe they come back because they don't know anything but boxing, and they're apprehensive about entering the next phase of their lives that doesn't include it.

"But even if money is not an issue, and you have other options, you never lose that belief in yourself as a fighter, particularly if you've been to the very top of the mountain. (Being retired) eats at you. It's hard to find anything else that can give you that high."

Even if achieved high is actually sort of low, and it comes in a cramped National Guard Armory in Philly instead of in glitzy venues in Las Vegas and New York.

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Radam G says:

The once Superman of boxing -- Roy Jones Jr -- is not putting himself in much danger. He's fighting a 40-year-old double bum.

The now earthbound Superman Jones of boxing doesn't have to worry about any kyptonite attacks from Bobby Gunn, because Gunn doesn't have any.

At best, BG will has buckets-of-water-like attacks. And since Superman Jones has not gotten the job of the new Wicked Witch of the West in some enchanted alternate world and he won't melt from Gunn throwing splashing, slapping punches.

Duperman -- I mean Superman -- Jones is going to KAYO BG whenever he wants to. Holla!

stormcentre says:

Double-Bum. That's awesome RG.

Really nice compliment!!!

Radam G says:

Storm, I must admit that I was being a bit kind. I didn't holla dat da dude is a triple chump, who's easy to bump-rush bump. Hehehe! Holla!