

Rahman vs. Lewis: "I'm Going to Mecca"

Written by Aaron Tallent

Tuesday, 06 December 2005 19:00

A fighter should never be more focused than when challenging for the heavyweight title. The champion be damned, the contender's years of hard work are culminating with that title shot. When Hasim "The Rock" Rahman signed to challenge Lennox Lewis in Johannesburg, South Africa, on April 22, 2001, he showed up in peak form. The champion? Not so much. To paraphrase George Foreman's commentary for HBO that night, Lewis learned if you come to Africa to fight, you better mean business.

Lewis had recovered greatly from his only loss, a wild punch by Oliver McCall that put him on the canvas in September of 1994. After that knockout, he hired trainer Emanuel Steward, who turned him into one of the finest specimens the heavyweight division has ever seen.

Early in his career, Lewis's style relied too heavily on his right hand, arguably the best in history, and a straight-up, open stance. Under Steward's training, he developed a fearsome jab, along with greater footwork. The only feature Steward could not hone was Lewis's chin.

A suspect chin hardly mattered as Lewis unleashed a refined two-fisted attack when he returned to the ring in May of 1995 and knocked out Lionel Butler in five and a string of opponents thereafter. In their rematch for the vacant WBC title in 1998, Lewis dominated McCall from the outset, before his nemesis suffered what appeared to stunned ringsiders and an international television audience, as an emotional breakdown, in Round 5.

The onslaught would continue. By 2001, he had unified the heavyweight title with a win over Evander Holyfield, avenged his only loss and defeated a who's who of former champions and contenders.

At the personal invitation of Nelson Mandela, Lewis chose to journey to South Africa to face the lightly regarded Rahman. The Rock had taken the path of many solid contenders. He started his career with 29 straight wins and was cruising to number 30 when David Tua stopped him in Round 10 of an IBF world title eliminator in 1998. The following year, Rahman showed up out of shape to fight journeyman Oleg Maskaev. Ahead on all three scorecards – as he was against Tua – Rahman was stopped again, this time in Round 8.

After that humiliating loss, the Rock once again found focus ... and the gym. He then scored three consecutive wins to earn his title shot with Lewis. Noting that Johannesburg is 6,000 feet above sea level, Rahman opened camp in the Catskill Mountains and arrived in the South African capital a month early to acclimate himself to the high altitude.

By the time of the Rahman fight, Lewis, like many champions before him, found himself pulled in different directions by outside interests, the gym not being one of them. He interrupted his abhorrent training for the bout to appear in the remake of *Ocean's Eleven*. He finally arrived in Johannesburg 11 days before the fight weighing a career-high 253 pounds.

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Both fighters made their way to the ring a little before 5:30 a.m. South African time to accommodate television viewers in the United States. When the opening bell sounded, Rahman attacked and Lewis sluggishly defended. By the end of the second, the sparse South African air had the champion breathing heavily.

But Lennox Lewis was still Lennox Lewis. Although fatigued, he managed to win three of the first four rounds and open a cut under Rahman's left eye. The Rock started Round 5 battling off the ropes. He hurt Lewis with an overhand right midway through the round and then chased the champion into the ropes with a string of jabs.

Lewis bounced off the ropes and smiled cockily, trying to conceal his pain and fear. The Englishman would have done better to just cover his face, as Rahman landed one of the greatest right hands in history beneath his forced grin.

Lewis was immediately dropped, his head hitting the canvas. As referee Daniel Van de Wiele counted, Lewis slowly pushed himself upward. He was on his feet by the count of 10, but was by no means able to continue. Van de Wiele stopped the fight at 2:32 in the fifth. Rahman celebrated. Lewis sat in his corner as he had following his equally shocking loss to McCall, confused and bewildered.

When asked the inevitable question if he was going to Disney World, Rahman, a devout Muslim, replied, "No. I'm going to Mecca."

Shortly after leaving Johannesburg, he did just that.

Lewis would later say, "The punch was a great punch, but I never put my hand in position to block it. My defense wasn't like it should have been. I may have taken him a bit lightly."

Fortunately for Lewis, there was a rematch clause in the contract to The Ring's 2001 Upset of the Year. Although Rahman went to court to avoid fighting Lewis (he stood to make more money fighting Mike Tyson), the court upheld the contract and the rematch was held in Las Vegas on November 17, 2001. For this bout, a more focused Lewis arrived weighing 246 pounds. In the fourth round, he regained his title with a perfectly thrown right cross.

Lewis held the title for two more years, successfully defending it against Tyson and Vitali Klitschko, before retiring in early 2004. Rahman went through a series of lackluster defeats before once again regaining his focus. He reeled off six straight wins, the most recent one (W 12) coming against Monte Barrett in August, for the WBC Interim championship (due to Klitschko's injury-induced inactivity). Rahman was scheduled to fight Klitschko November 12, before nagging injuries led Klitschko to retire. As a result, the WBC crowned Rahman as its champion.