

Lennox Lewis Talks Boxing

Written by Robert Ecksel

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Former heavyweight champion Lennox Lewis used to be master of the long silence. More of a chess player than a gangsta rapper, the Lion of Judah – due to his nature, concerned as he is with decorum – kept quiet during his reign and let his fists do most the talking ... after which there was nothing much left to say.

The champ recently sat down with Spiegel magazine's Alexander Osang and Gerhard Pfeil to discuss life after boxing and the state of the heavyweight division.

The interviewers broke the ice by mentioning Saturday's heavyweight title fight in Berlin, and news of the fight was news to the champ. "Who'll be fighting?" Lewis wanted to know. When told that John Ruiz would be defending his title against Nicolay Valuev, Lewis asked, "Who's the second one?"

Lewis, like so many others, had not heard of Valuev. They told Lennox that he's the Russian giant everyone's talking about, the so-called "Beast from the East," 300+ pounds, 2.14 meters, 7 feet tall, a fighter as big as a tree. Valuev doesn't climb through the ropes; he steps over them. He also decisioned Larry Donald in his last fight. Such is the big man's fame.

Yet Lennox never heard of Valuev.

He had, however, heard of John Ruiz. "He's been around for a long time," Lewis observed, "but he doesn't stand out as an exceptional fighter. That also applies to the other world champions, Hasim Rahman and – what's the third guy's name again?"

One of the boys from Spiegel filled in the missing blank. "Lemon Brewster," he said. "From New York."

The champ nodded his head. (And a former fact checker is looking for work.)

"Perhaps Vitali Klitschko would have had the necessary attributes," Lewis continued, casting a learned eye over a bereft division. "At any rate, the current crop of contenders don't have what it takes. Not only are they poor fighters; they've got no personality at all. When I was growing up there were a lot of stars. Marvin Hagler, Sugar Ray Leonard, Roberto Duran, they were great fighters with extraordinary charisma. Guys like that don't exist any more."

What Lewis said is true, more or less, time will tell, don't hold your breath, but it wasn't all that long ago that the heavyweight ranks had some razzle-dazzle, a little pizzazz.

"There was Mike Tyson, the animal," Lewis reminisced. "There was Evander Holyfield, the devout, the priest. And there was me, the thinker, the intellectual boxer. So there was something for every fan, if you like. The public could always identify with one of us."

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Tyson the animal? Holyfield the priest? Lewis the intellectual? Isn't that called checkmate or something?

"Boxing and chess are similar," Lewis pointed out, returning to an earlier theme. "It's about the choice of means. Sometimes I need a pawn, a bishop or a knight to defeat my opponent. It's about finding the best way. A good boxer has to be variable. He doesn't just need to know how to punch. He must also know how to protect himself, how to defend, how to avoid the opponent's punches. Only a complete fighter can become champion.

"A great champion needs a background in amateur boxing, I'm convinced of that. There you learn everything that you'll need later as a pro. Someone who's got more than 400 amateur fights behind him no longer gets nervous before going into the ring and doesn't lose his nerve during a fight. You know all the boxing styles, you're prepared for anything, you've got the pedigree that you need to be a successful pro."

"Tyson fit the American ideal of a boxer. A fighter who jumps out of his corner and hits out fiercely. That's what he'll be remembered for. But good boxing doesn't work like that. Tyson never won on points. It was clear that he'd come a cropper some day."

Tyson became a cropper all right, but Lennox's win over Mike meant a lot at the time.

"I had to shut his mouth," Lewis said. "I could never stand big-mouthed types. I had problems with that at high school. I've still got the scars on my fists from the teeth of the guys I hit so that they'd finally shut up. I came from England to Canada, of course, and was often ridiculed because I had a strange accent. I was expelled from school and it was a long time before I could control myself. But the impulse remained: a punch in the mouth to get some peace and quiet."

Muhammad Ali always figured prominently in Lewis' life, albeit known to Lennox and Lennox alone, and that's not about to change any time soon.

"Recently I donated money to the establishment of the Ali Foundation in Louisville. I regard that as a kind of payback. He smoothed the way for us. He wasn't just a great person who had conviction, but made the sport of boxing great. He was the first superstar, he made our stock rise. Without him we wouldn't have earned so much. Americans from every walk of life have contributed to the foundation: Bill Clinton, Angelina Jolie, Brad Pitt. Unfortunately I was the only American athlete to make a donation. There's not enough respect in our business."

The champ was asked a second time about Vitali Klitschko – onetime heir apparent, recently retired, running for parliament in the Ukraine – and their May 21, 2003 fight, Lennox's final bout, at the Staples Center in LA.

"Klitschko made a respectable showing, no question. I liked the fight," Lennox admitted, "because he really stretched me. The people liked the fight too, because it was bloody and exciting. What most people didn't understand was that Klitschko would have lost badly if the fight had carried on. I made him tired over six rounds. It's like urging an inexperienced swimmer

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to swim further and further from the coast out into the open sea: sooner or later he'll drown.”

Lewis is pretty busy these days, busier in some ways than when he was king of the world.

“I've got a family. My son is one-and-a-half years old and we want to have more children. We're looking for a place to live. We lived in New York for a while, and now we've moved to Miami, where I'm taking acting lessons. In Oceans Eleven I played a boxer, and in an Irish feature film that being released soon I play a DJ. I've developed the concept for a reality show on TV, and I'm working with my sports management company, SEM, to expand its business in America.”

With such a hectic schedule, there's not much time for left for boxing, even if the champ was so inclined.

"Boxing always was corrupt and always will be corrupt," Lewis concluded. "The three world champion's belts really are absurd. One single association, as in football, baseball or basketball, would make this business more reputable. But it's not just the promoters who aren't interested in a solution like that. Just as powerful as the promoters, if not more, is the media. The cable networks control the cash flow. King can stage fights, but it's the cable stations that pay big money to air the fights, essentially paying for the fights. You can't ignore the influence the media and the promoters have on the sport. They have a financial objective – high ratings, selling pay-per-views and selling out arenas. Because of the system, the public may not be seeing the best the sport has to offer, but what sells.”