

Is Byrd the 'Real Deal'?

Written by Steve Kim

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Chris Byrd is usually a David who takes on heavyweight Goliaths. This weekend he takes on another David in Evander Holyfield who's consistently battled the game's best big men since moving up from the cruiserweight division in 1989. Holyfield has never ducked a challenge in his storied career. Three bouts with Riddick Bowe, two with Lennox Lewis, a pair with Mike Tyson, a double-dip with Michael Moorer and fights against Ray Mercer, Buster Douglas and Hasim Rahman. And he's won more than his share of fights despite being the smaller man in most of his fights. He defines the words courage and heart. He'll take on anybody at anytime with no hesitation. Well, there is one notable exception.

That would be the crafty southpaw, Bryd, who Holyfield has openly admitted in the past he would rather not fight. Well, guess what, they're fighting this weekend. And you have to wonder if Byrd, who's always yearned to face the blue-chip heavyweights, is looking forward to this fight more than Holyfield.

" Hmmm....I don't think so," contemplated the affable Byrd, when asked that question." I mean, I know he wants to win his fifth world title. I know he's looking forward to it more than anything, probably even more because he really didn't want to fight me at first knowing that I'm a pretty difficult style to fight. Now he's got it in his head,' Hey, I just have to do it', so he's going to train hard and be pumped for the fight. So we both want it real bad."

Holyfield has been written off more times than chalk, but he looked a bit rejuvenated when he beat Rahman this past June after he struggled in his three fights set with John Ruiz. A trio of fights that Byrd throws out in assessing Holyfield.

" Yeah, you never base it off fighting the same guy over and over with a difficult style," says Byrd." I always go into the fight thinking, ' I don't worry about what Evanders gonna do. I worry

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about what I'm gonna do' If
I do things well in the ring and he beats me by doing the
things I do, well, something's wrong. So if I get
off the way I should, I shouldn't have a problem."

One advantage that Byrd may have is that Holyfield is a heavyweight
cut from the same cloth as he is.

While Byrd ended his amateur career as a super
middleweight (winning a silver medal in the 1992 Olympic Games),
Holyfield was a light heavyweight as an
amateur who started off his career as a cruiserweight.

After facing behemoths like the Klitschko
brothers and Ike Ibeabuchi, fighting Holyfield for Byrd is like
fighting someone his own size for the first time in his career.

" Yeah, I would say that now, plus, he's 40-years old too," he
points out." But he's a true warrior and
he's got a lot of experience so I can't really say that. I just take
them as they come, if they're big, you
fight'em, if they're small, you fight'em. It would still be a difficult
fight and he's been around a long time with
his experience. He can give me problems
more than a Klitschko because they don't have the experience,
so you really can't tell 'till you get in the ring."

Byrd and Holyfield are fighting for the vacated IBF belt that was
dumped by Lewis, who vacated the title rather than face
Byrd who had become his mandatory after defeating
Maurice Harris and David Tua in the IBF box-off of 2001.
His mandatory was due last year but
the IBF decided to let him take on Mike Tyson instead (so
they could collect their sanctioning fee for
that high-priced mis-match) and Byrd was left out in the cold
despite earning his spot as the mandatory challenger
and being promised a shot at the IBF belt by this
April.

" At first I was pretty mad," admitted Byrd, at the IBF's shenanigans."
but I can't just dog them out like that because
y'know they gave me an opportunity to be in this position when
nobody else did. So I forgive them and
just move on. I'm still very grateful that they
gave me the opportunity to be in the tournament to get to this
position."

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But the reality is, even if the IBF would have stuck to it's own edict, it's doubtful that Lewis would have ever given Byrd a shot to beat him. His trainer Emanuel Steward is dead set against such a fight for his man.

" Oh, heck no," agreed Byrd." We knew that going in. I don't care what the public thinks, the media thinks about how big Lennox is. Emanuel knows, when you break it down to him, you can ask Emanuel or Harold Knight, they'll tell you- they won't tell you in public- personally, they'll tell you what's really up. Right now, I'm feeling at the top of my game as a heavyweight, I'm performing well and I'm very confident in my abilities and going in fighting Lennox, I was very confident that I could beat him.

" Not just hang with him," he continued." but he's just too big and slow. He would have to knock me out completely to beat me. So over 12 rounds, he's 37 years old, I feel (and Emanuel knew), that it was just too difficult a style to fight."

The Byrd-Holyfield fight is part of a proposed heavyweight tournament that will match the winner against the March 1st victor of John Ruiz-Roy Jones. Jones is being lauded for taking the extraordinary step of moving up from light heavyweight to heavyweight.

But it has to be pointed out that Byrd has been there and been doing that for the past decade. And unlike Jones, he isn't just handpicking the most mediocre guy he can find. Byrd has been in there with the likes of the Klitschko's, Ike Ibeabuchi and David Tua. Byrd says that Jones is in for a rude awakening.

" It's going to be a tough fight," Byrd says." He picked a guy with a very awkward style. He's a big heavyweight too. And it's not just an easy fight for Roy to take, especially at this point with Roy putting on weight that will hinder his style. I would remain around 180 and just fight him."

And Byrd says that acclimating himself to a new division just doesn't happen overnight. "I'm just getting used out, after a decade in to fighting heavyweight," he points

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the division." The punches are totally
different. I'm always amazed, I'm like, 'Man, these guys
can punch' and I'm used to fighting heavyweights; he's not
and when you feel that power from a big heavyweight like Ruiz, you're
like 'Man, I don't know why I did this'."

But still, most are tabbing Jones to overcome the odds and down
'the Quiet Man'; but many insiders doubt
that he'll go through with the second half of this tourney if he has
to face Byrd.
After all, the advantages in boxing savvy, quickness and ring
generalship that he would have over most heavyweights doesn't
exist with Byrd.

" Yeah," agreed Byrd on that premise." I mean, I like Roy, for me
pound-for-pound he's the best.
But when you come to the heavyweight division I feel I
can match speed with Roy, movement, everything. So it'll be a difficult
fight for him to take. But it would be a great
fight if people want to see it."

But first he has some business to take care of this Saturday night
against Holyfield. It's about time he started picking on
guys his own size.

REAL OLD?

I know some will discount a win over Holyfield because of his
advanced age but look beyond that and you'll see that he's still a
tough out.

Think about it, after getting a gift draw against Lennox Lewis in
their first bout, he would fight on even
terms with Lewis the second time out. Then you can say that in his
36 rounds with Ruiz, that he won more rounds
than he lost and most thought he deserved the verdict
(which was a draw) in their third bout.
In his last bout he out-fought Hasim Rahman;
that was one fight removed from being the undisputed heavyweight
champion of the world.

He may be old, but don't bury the guy yet. People have been doing
that since 1992 and all he does is find a way, time
and time again.

TOP RANK SOLUTION

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With dates harder and harder to get and the shrinking boxing budgets at both HBO and Showtime, Bob Arum is taking a proactive approach to keeping his fighters busy by promoting smaller pay-per-view shows on his own dime.

" We've always prided ourselves on being innovative," explained Arum, the CEO of Top Rank Boxing." I mean, it's one thing to take money from HBO and then call yourself a promoter when you're really just like a booker. It's another thing to put up your own money, and go out and promote like we did in Morales and Ayala and like we're going to do on February 1st with Medina and Marquez, Cotto and Bazan. It's the only solution. How do you tell these kids,' I'm sorry, you gotta sit on your ass for a year, year-and-a-half, there's no dates' They don't want to hear that."

Arum's November 16th show featuring a featherweight title between Erik Morales and Paulie Ayala did around 125,000 pay-per-view buys which is good considering that the break-even mark was around 60,000. Arum points out that his February 1st show featuring Juan Manuel Marquez and Manny Medina for the vacant IBF featherweight title has even less of a break even mark.