It was Chris Byrd at his best (or worst, depending on your perspective) when he pecked and pawed his way to winning the IBF heavyweight title by out-boxing and out-foxing Evander Holyfield.

It wasn't exciting but it was effective.

For 12 rounds, Byrd would evade and frustrate Holyfield to a point where the 'Real Deal' was so exasperated that when he began to complain about his left shoulder and shake his head in disgust in between one of the middle rounds, you almost- only for a split second though- believed he had thoughts of quitting. Very few men have been able to successfully overpower Holyfield physically and spiritually but Byrd frustrated him to a point of mental fatigue.

Give Holyfield credit, he came back relatively strong the last three rounds to provide some excitement, but it was clear that Byrd was the winner on this night. But don't think for one moment that Holyfield will ride off into the sunset. Never mind that he's in his 40's now, that he's 2-3-2 in his last seven bouts or that his last strong performance came in November of 1997 when he blasted out Michael Moorer in their rematch. Holyfield is as pure a fighter as there ever was and he'll do what fighters do: keep fighting, on and on. From Joe Louis, to Muhammad Ali and Larry Holmes as they all did, outside of one Rocky Marciano. And who knows what 'the Rock' would have done if he didn't die tragically in a plane crash? Mike Tyson, who was vanquished twice by Holyfied, is next line to fight well beyond his prime. Some say he's been doing that for well over a decade now anyway.

I get the sneaking suspicion that Holyfield will be used as a 'name' opponent for Wladimir Klitschko in the near future. Klitschko is the consensus choice to the heavyweight heir apparent once Lennox Lewis gives up the crown. He's big (6' 7 and 245 pounds of chiseled muscle), he's got the look, the American media seems to have embraced him and he can fight a bit.

Holyfield would be looked on as the perfect foil to boost the credibility and marketability of the big Ukranian, who was recently signed to a multi-fight deal with HBO. Holyfield has always done great ratings for HBO. Holyfield is a big name and he's an American. I brought up this idea to ESPN2's boxing analyst, Max Kellerman, and he agreed with my notion and added," That would be Apollo Creed against Ivan Drago."

And you know what happened to Creed in Rocky IV- he didn't make it out of there alive. Now, I'm not saying that would happen should they meet, but the fact of the matter is that the longer Holyfield steps in the ring against the other world class heavyweights, he is furthering his risk of permanent damage. But in reality, all fighters (of all shapes, sizes, and skill level) damage themselves once they begin boxing. But at what point do you say 'enough'?

But the quandary with Holyfield is that he's been dead and buried several times only to be reborn like Lazarus. I mean, Lou Duva wanted him to retire after his first loss to Riddick Bowe-

that was a decade ago. He would go on to down 'Big Daddy' in a rematch a year later. He was thought to be such a health risk coming into his first bout with Tyson in 1996, that he was made to take a battery of physical tests to ensure his safety. All this because he looked like a dead man walking in struggling against Bobby Czyz and the supposed 'non-compliant left ventricle' in his heart that he had a few years earlier when losing his title to Moorer in 94.

He was so dead that he ended up whipping Tyson and then getting his ear bitten by 'Iron Mike' in the rematch. Fast-forward a few years later, he would receive a gift draw against Lennox Lewis in March of 1999. For sure, at this time, he was now officially ready to be put out to pasture. Well, just six months later in the rematch, he would fight well enough against Lewis to have more than a few folks thinking he did enough to win that fight.

Then there were his infamous three bouts with John Ruiz, which needed as many sequels as the 'Police Academy' series - which is to say none. And while the fights were mediocre at best, the first bout was close. In the second bout he wins on a knockout if Joe Cortez correctly rules that Holyfield's body shot was legal instead of a low blow which had Ruiz writhing in pain for at least a couple of minutes. Most everyone felt he did more than enough to win the rubber match. Then he would defeat Hasim Rahman with his hands and head this past June. Yeah, it's only Rahman, a basic journeyman/contender-type, but just a fight before he walked into the ring against Lewis as the recognized heavyweight champion of the world, having upset Lewis in South Africa.

Which brings us to his loss to Byrd. And you can hear it now from Holyfield: "I hurt my left rotator cuff and I basically had one arm. Also his style beat me, I still have a lot left in me. He never hurt me at all; I made the fight the whole night. My goal is still to retire the undisputed heavyweight champion of the world." We've heard this before after Holyfield losses, the alibi's followed by a declaration that he would continue to fight on.

Which he'll do. Holyfield has made his career off of proving people wrong time and time again. The fear is that if he doesn't get out soon, he may prove everyone tragically correct.

NBC

There is talk in the boxing circles that NBC and Main Events are trying to get together to bring boxing back to 'the Peacock' after last televising boxing in 1992.

Sources tell me that Miller Lite will basically subsidize the series and that they were going to feature the return of Fernando Vargas before his suspension for his positive steroid test after his knockout loss to Oscar De La Hoya in September.

NBC's sports department has been gutted the past few years with the defections of the NFL and NBA. Right now, all they seem to have is Notre Dame football, golf and the Olympics. Thank heavens for Ty Willingham, huh? From what I've been told, these fights will basically be 'time share buys' in which the sponsor buys the time and puts the fights on the air.

The plan would be for the boxing series to be paired with horse racing. Some would say that

appropriate, two dying sports being paired together.

KING VS. MERCHANT

Did anyone see the exchange between Larry Merchant and Don King after Byrd and Holyfield had finished fighting on HBO?
The bottom line is that King was romancing Lewis all night with the idea of facing one of his heavyweights instead of Wladimir Klitschko. Merchant was absolutely correct in pointing out to the viewing audience that all King was trying to do was to get Lewis to bypass Klitschko for one of his two fighters.

King has been after Lewis for years, going as far as to wine and dine his mother prior to the rematch with Rahman. My sources told me he went along with that because he wanted to make sure he didn't get the shaft in that rematch just in case it went the distance. Also, the vacant IBF title that Byrd and Holyfield fought for was made available to King when Lewis sold (and dropped) that title to King for a million bucks and a luxury vehicle. It was a great deal for Lewis since he was never going to face Byrd anyway.

Now, you get the feeling that King is telling Lewis that no matter what he is offered to face either Klitschko, it would pale in comparison to what he could offer. I've been told to expect a tug-of-war over Lewis' plans between King and HBO.