

Toney's X-Mas Wish: Less Jelly On The Belly, Pounding Peter

Written by Michael Woods

Tuesday, 05 December 2006 19:00

James Toney strode to the podium at the Rainbow Room in New York City, and if there's anyone in boxing who can follow Don King, and not suffer in oratorical comparison to the loquacious promoter, it's Toney.

If you were in attendance on Tuesday, you could guarantee a master class in trash talk would follow. There would be some expletives, some inventive disparagements thrown at his opponent, maybe the threat of a bludgeoning towards his opponents' management if they got out of line.

I readied my pen, and was poised to transcribe another Toney trash-talk special.

Instead, the former middleweight, super middleweight, light heavyweight, cruiserweight and heavyweight champion did something that he never does: he kept it short, sweet and totally absent of profanities. Toney thanked everyone for coming, and said he was ready to rock, and that was it. He went back to his seat, and uttered barely a peep, except an occasional aside to his pal and advisor, John Arthur, seated next to him on the dais.

So what can we make of this behavior?

The unspoken message is clear: this time, Toney will let his actions do the talking.

Prior to the first Toney/Peter match—and did you notice that this one is billed Peter/Toney?—in September, Toney was in typical vocal form.

The Michigan-born boxer berated Peter on conference calls, playing the race card, dismissing him as a savage with minimal skills.

He blasted Peter's manager, Ivaylo Gotzev, and his promoter, Dino Duva, and it seemed imminent that Toney and Duva would square off themselves if the bad blood continued to boil.

Not so this time.

Gotzev didn't engage in any incendiary talk, Duva was in a kindly mood (perhaps still in a cocoon of fulfillment after King purchased half his promotional outfit), and Toney and Peter seemed to be looking at each other with the respect that comes with fighting 12 hard rounds with a foe, who shows you more than you thought he had. Oh, and the money being made here isn't too shabby, and that quite likely is keeping people at a baseline level of comportment.

So, will this version of Toney (69-5-3), absence the motormouth, be better able to work his technical edge on the 26-year-old Peter (27-1), the cruder, but sturdy, Nigerian?

Toney turned 38 in August, and has been engaged in a battle with a most plebian foe, his

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waistline, for some years now. He debuted as a pro at 160 pounds in 1988. Heavyweight is the last weight class for him to participate in. He's 5-10, maybe a shade less, so when he weighs in the 230s, as he has in his last four fights, and isn't on a supplement cycle that strips his body fat content, he is no body beautiful.

That doesn't much matter to me; after all, who am I to talk? And Toney has forgotten more about the sweet science than 98% of active fighters know. He knows and uses the intricate, subtle techniques that are taught by fewer and fewer trainers, as the elders take the little moves to the grave. Even with a jelly belly, Toney has enough stamina to fight 12, at a pace that may not be blazing, but isn't too shabby.

So, I'm wondering, how much jelly will be on the belly come Jan. 6, when Showtime delivers this highly-regarded rematch, and continues their hot streak of viewer (and wallet) friendly fare?

At the Rainbow Room, Toney was wearing a suit, so I couldn't see if his workouts with Tae Bo inventor, karate kid Billy Blanks, have had an impact on his frame. His face certainly didn't look hollowed out. But his promoter, Dan Goossen, says that Toney has barred himself from his favorite deli for months now. He's been working out with Blanks since October, and Goossen says, his cardio will be at another level when he faces off with Peter at the America Airlines Arena in Miami in the New Year. Before, Goossen says, Toney was in boxing shape, but now he will be The Kardio Kid.

No, Goossen told me, there isn't a target weight. Blanks isn't aiming to get Toney into the 220s. Rather, the deli ban, and ban on cigars, and carbonated drinks and amber colored liquids, will result in a fitter, finer Toney.

The judges, who I theorize deduct a point from Toney when they read about his expletive-laden pre-fight rants, and take another point away when he shows up, takes off his robe, and reveals his Everyman physique. Well, I tell them, get over it. Go judge a Miss USA contest if you want to factor body shape into your scoring.

No, none of us should expect Toney to morph into a LeBron James type frame. So, let's get that out on the table right now. Judges, whoever's working the rematch, please note this for the record.

Toney contemplated hiring Mackie Shillstone, who got Bernard Hopkins into form to fight Antonio Tarver in June, but chose to work with Blanks instead. Blanks has even been cooking some of Toney's meals, and has him forcing down oatmeal in the AM. He also concocts a green, mystery drink, and Goossen assured me that the beverage is comprised of wholly legal, if foul tasting, materials.

Were I Sam Peter, I'd be a little bit more worried than I was before the first fight. This Toney, with Blanks acting as watchdog and motivator, may be in a position to let his actions in the ring on January 6 speak louder than his words ever could.