



*“ You start a fighter in kindergarten, and hope that one day, if they’ve got the ability, heart and desire, they’ll graduate with a master’s degree—a championship.”*

*--Manager and trainer, Angelo Dundee*

On an autumn evening more than 30 years ago, Sugar Ray Leonard won the World Boxing Council world welterweight championship by lifting the crown from defending champion Wilfred Benitez with a technical knockout at 2:54 of the fifteenth and final round before a capacity crowd of 4,589 and a national television audience at Caesars Palace Sports Pavilion in Las Vegas, Nevada.

With the champion trapped along the ropes after suffering his second knockdown of the fight, and Leonard on the attack with both fists, referee, Carlos Padilla Jr., called a halt to the hostilities with six seconds remaining in the bout to spare Benitez further punishment and awarded the undefeated challenger his 26th consecutive victory and 17th by knockout.

At the time of the stoppage, Leonard wheeled around, sprinted across the ring, and vaulted upon the second tier of ropes in a neutral corner—arms raised high above his head in victory. The elated new champion then jumped to the floor and sprang into the arms of his co-trainer and advisor, Janks Morton.

“And there is a new world welterweight champion!” long-time boxing commentator, the late Howard Cosell, declared with gusto to a television audience estimated at some 55 million viewers tuned into the fight live on the ABC television network.

Written by David Linden, Special For TSS  
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“First of all, I made a million dollars (and) I was in a different tax bracket,” said Leonard in recalling his triumphant leap onto the ropes.

“I mean, the fight was huge. It was Las Vegas. It was at Caesars Palace—it was like, ‘Wow!’

“I think I just out-hustled (Benitez), I out-fought him. My hand speed—I think I was a little faster than he was, but he was just so slick. It took every ounce of me to beat him. He had the experience, but I had the heart and determination, and I think that’s why I prevailed.”

For Leonard, the title-winning effort capped a busy 1979 in which the Palmer Park, Maryland welterweight fought and won nine times while registering eight knockouts in being honored as “Fighter of the Year” by The Ring magazine.

Change in plans:

Ironically, after punctuating an outstanding amateur career with a gold medal in the 139-pound light-welterweight division at the XXI Olympiad at Montreal, Canada, in 1976, the then-20-year-old future world champion never intended on a professional boxing career. After winning the Olympic title, Leonard believed that a college degree from the University of Maryland was in his future until family health issues forced a change in plans.

“Being in the Olympics in ’76 was truly an incredible accomplishment, and going for the gold medal was awesome, it was incredible,” said Leonard. “To have made it that far and then be just one fight from bringing home a gold medal was just unbelievable.”

After recording decisions over Ulf Carlson of Sweden, Valery Limasov of the Soviet Union, Clinton McKenzie of Great Britain, Ulrich Beyer of East Germany, and Kazimier Szczerba of Poland, Leonard was matched against the heavy-punching Andres Aldama of Cuba for the gold medal on July 31, 1976.

The American pounded out a unanimous 5-0 verdict to become an Olympic champion and closed out his amateur career with a record of 145-5.

“I was somewhat the underdog because Andres Aldama had just annihilated everybody,” Leonard remembered. “He was so dominant. He wouldn’t just knock guys out; he would knock guys senseless. He put guys on their back; he was such a powerful puncher—a tall, southpaw.

“Even one of my local papers at home in D.C. predicted that I would lose, that I had no chance of winning. But I beat the guy; I beat the guy with hand speed and with foot movement. It was a big win.

“My mom and dad were there, my family was there. My dad was sick at the time and to have him sitting ringside was just so inspirational.”

With his father suffering from spinal meningitis and tuberculosis, the Olympic titlist felt obligated to put plans for higher education aside and explore the monetary potential of the professional

ring.

“I had no intention of turning professional,” Leonard explained. “I had received a scholarship to the University of Maryland, so I was going to college. The only reason I turned pro was because of my dad’s illness. He went into a coma once we got home (from Canada). I just felt I was the only one in the family that could bring in some quick money to pay off the hospital bills and I did just that—that was my intention. So I turned pro, and made a couple dollars, paid off the bills, my dad regained his health, and I said, ‘You know what? This is not a bad job,’ and I continued.”

Managed by Angelo Dundee, and trained by Dave Jacobs, Morton and Jose ‘Pepe’ Correa, the former Olympic gold medallist received a then-record \$ 42,500 debut purse for his CBS-televised professional baptism on February 5, 1977 –a unanimous six-round decision against 8-11-2 Luis ‘The Bull’ Vega in Baltimore, Maryland.

During his first 33 months as a professional leading to the title bout with Benitez, Leonard fought on the major television networks of ABC, CBS and NBC as well as cable television’s HBO to help the boxer record, according to one estimate, approximately three million dollars in professional ring earnings prior to challenging for the world title.

Different level:

When asked if there was a bout in which he realized that he could be champion, Leonard pointed to his second professional fight held in Baltimore on May 14, 1977—a unanimous six-round decision against the 10-1 Willie ‘Fireball’ Rodriguez.

“I think that one fight that really taught me that (professional boxing) is a whole different level than amateur boxing was my second professional fight. (Rodriguez) not only introduced me to the fact that if you get a tooth knocked out, you can get cosmetic surgery to have it fixed, he nearly knocked me out.”

“It was an uppercut,” Leonard said in recalling the punch that Rodriguez delivered to put him in serious trouble. “A big, vicious uppercut and I remember that like it was yesterday.

“He had the experience, but I had the hand speed, I had the determination and I think that was what pulled me through.”

The bout with Rodriguez also showed Leonard that he would be better suited to the heavier 147-pound welterweight division rather than the lighter 140-pound junior welterweight classification.

“I think that fight also indicated that fighting at 140 was just a bit too much because I was getting bigger and trying to make 140 was senseless because it was taking away the fun of training and the joy and the pleasures of getting in shape because I was so concerned about making the 140 weight limit.”

### Championship dreams:

In the fall of 1979, Leonard, rated as the world's number-one welterweight contender by The Ring magazine, boasted a record of 25-0 with 16 knockouts, and was ready to challenge for the WBC world championship.

The 15-round Benitez-Leonard title bout marked the first time in boxing history that fighters outside of the heavyweight division would earn purses of seven figures.

Leonard's payday for challenging the 21-year-old, undefeated champion was a reported one million dollars.

For his first professional fight as a 15-year-old in 1973, WBC welterweight champion Wilfred Benitez received a purse of \$50 dollars for his one-round knockout of Hiram Santiago in San Juan, Puerto Rico.

On March 6, 1976, Benitez became the youngest champion in professional boxing history when, as a 17 year-old teenager, he took a 25-0 record into the ring in San Juan and captured a 15-round split-decision and the World Boxing Association junior welterweight title from the highly respected, 30-year-old defending champion, Antonio 'Kid Pambele' Cervantes, a fighter who held a record of 73-9-3 and was making his 11th title defense.

After successfully defending the WBA 140-pound crown three times, Benitez moved up in weight and added a second world championship to his resume when he won the WBC welterweight championship from titlist, Carlos Palomino, on a 15-round split verdict in San Juan on January 14, 1979.

The Bronx, New York-born title-holder, sporting a record of 38-0-1 with 25 knockouts and fighting out of San Just, Puerto Rico, earned a reported \$140,000 for his first successful defense of the WBC crown, a 15-round unanimous decision over Harold Weston on March 25, 1979, and would now receive \$ 1.2 million in compensation for risking the title against the 23-year old Leonard.

"I'm not scared of nobody," the champ was quoted as saying before the bout by the Associated Press. "I'm the champion. That's why I fight the greatest. I beat Pambele and Palomino and when I beat Leonard I'll fight (former world lightweight king and welterweight contender) Roberto Duran," said Benitez who would be elected to the International Boxing Hall of Fame in 1996.

"Benitez was one of those rare fighters that's so gifted, it's sickening," Leonard said. "So elusive, great hand-eye coordination. He'd slip a punch just by a millimeter. A pretty solid puncher. Not really a knockout puncher, but he still could hurt you. Just a smart, technical fighter. Benitez had no weak points, he had no weak areas. As much as we watched tapes, there were no weak points. You had to catch him (and) you had to make that happen."

### Preparation:

“I trained very, very hard for the fight,” said Leonard who had never fought past ten rounds prior to the title match.

“When I trained, I (sparring) five-minute rounds sometimes with 30-seconds of rest. Going down the stretch, (of a fight) I had the ability to become rejuvenated. I had great recuperative powers, and I could bounce back—and going down the stretch, really engage in some (effective punching) combinations.”

The challenger, a 3 ½ -1 betting favorite to take Benitez’ crown, felt no need to increase his regular daily roadwork mileage for the demanding 15-round championship distance.

“I always felt, ‘What’s the difference between running ten miles or running five miles?’ You won’t go any more rounds than I. If I run five miles a day and you run 15 miles a day, does that mean you can go 20 rounds? No. It’s just a way of training.

“I would run like I’m fighting. Every now and then I’d sprint, jog a little bit, slow down, run backwards, run sideways—and I got that from Muhammad Ali, he gave me that advice. ‘Run like you fight,’” said Leonard in crediting the former three-time world heavyweight champion.

Fight night:

For his second title defense, the 5’10” Benitez weighed in at 144 ½ pounds while the 5’10” challenger came in at an even 146.

After entering the 19’6” x 19’6” ring, both welterweights participated in psychological warfare as they engaged in a face-to-face stare-down prior to the opening bell.

“I think there was such a mental intensity in that fight when we stared each other down. I was pissed, (Benitez) had fun,” said Leonard in recalling the moment. “I learned so much from that fight—that you’ve got to be calm. Always be calm. My first big championship fight, I’m almost gnawing through my mouthpiece, but (Benitez) was so ‘Cool-hand-Luke’ and that’s what made him such a great fighter—his breathing patterns, his poise, his coolness.”

The first big moment of the evening came late in the third round, when a left jab from the challenger deposited the champion on the seat of his trunks.

“It was more of a flash-flood knockdown,” Leonard said. “He wasn’t really hurt; I think I just caught him at the perfect time with the perfect punch. It wasn’t a big punch per se, but it was a punch that just caught him right on the button and put him down.”

In Round 6, an accidental collision of heads resulted in a welt on Leonard’s forehead and left Benitez with a gash that oozed blood down the champion’s forehead and face.

“It happened so quickly,” Leonard said. “It startled me because when you collide with your head, that’s pretty traumatizing. I was shaken up a little bit. Thank God I wasn’t cut, but I looked at him and he had like a little gash in the middle of his forehead. He smiled it off.”

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Leonard praised the effectiveness of the champion's defensive skills.

"When I was fighting him, it was like a mirror. I've never missed that many punches. So that told me that he had that elusiveness. It's like a mirage—one time he's there, the next time he's not. So slick, so talented. It was just so difficult to land combinations with him. But the good thing about it, when I threw combinations, I may miss two, three punches, but the fourth punch would come in and catch him."

Round 11 saw a left hook, followed by a right hand that knocked Benitez' mouthpiece out as Leonard had the champion in trouble along the ropes.

"I think my hand speed and the number of punches we threw; I think I just wore him down. Because it's 15 rounds of just punches and punches. I tried left hook, uppercut, I tried everything in the book. Whatever landed, I tried."

With one round remaining, the challenger enjoyed a clear lead on all three official ringside scorecards. Judge Harry Gibbs scored the contest 136-134; judge Ray Solis saw the fight 137-133, and judge Art Lurie's card read 137-130, meaning that Benitez would have to knock Leonard out in order to retain the title.

"I was totally exhausted, just spent," Leonard remembered about heading into the final stanza. "Just so physically tired. I knew it was the last round and I was giving it all I had. (Benitez) was giving it all he had. I ended up catching him with some combinations and the referee jumped in."

With approximately 30 seconds left in the bout, both fighters exchanged uppercuts on the inside. Leonard missed with a chopping right but followed with a left hook that caught Benitez high on the head and dropped the champion to one knee.

With crimson leaking from his forehead, Benitez rose and walked to a neutral corner while taking an eight-count. When the fight resumed, the challenger pounced on his foe and forced Padilla to intervene.

"I stayed on top of him, in the corner," Leonard remembered. "And the referee was seeing that he wasn't really punching back, and jumped in."

In the aftermath of the stoppage, Benitez walked over to Leonard and embraced his conqueror in the crowded ring.

"(Leonard) won good," Benitez told the press following the fight. "I don't have any question. No excuse. This tremendous champion—he won the fight."

"I've always respected him, he always respected me. There was mutual respect," Leonard said. "He was a true, true champion."

Recovery:

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“After the fight I got back to my room (at Caesars). I was just so exhausted. It took that much out of me to beat Benitez. I went to my room and unfortunately they put me in a tub of hot water and I dehydrated and I had to be rushed to the hospital.

“You don’t put a man who went 15 rounds in a tub of hot water. Your body is already overheated. So (if) you put yourself in hot water, you are going to start to draw out the little bit of fluids in your body.”

The new champion received intravenous fluid treatment during his hospital stay.

“It was just to hydrate myself. I was there in the hospital for like an hour or two. No big deal.”

With a portion of the purse from his first title fight, Leonard purchased some new transportation and had a gift for his parents.

“I think I bought a Mercedes, (and) I bought my mom and dad a new house too. That was my treat (to myself).”

Leonard, who finished his professional career with a mark of 36-3-1, would be elected to the International Boxing Hall of Fame in 1997, having won professional world championships in the welterweight, junior middleweight, middleweight, super-middleweight and light-heavyweight divisions.

When asked where his title-winning effort against Wilfred Benitez ranks among his boxing accomplishments, the champion said: “That’s up there. That (victory) started me, with my confidence and with the experience I got from fighting Benitez, to capture many more titles. So that (bout) ranks very high up there.”

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**Radam G says:**

Nice long copy. Enough said! Holla!

**Matthew says:**

Great piece. That fight was just an unbelievable chess match between two great young fighters. It wasn't the greatest fight in terms of all-out action, but purists had to admire the skills that these two young men displayed. They traded feints, for crying out loud. It's too bad that Benitez never really had the discipline to dedicate himself to train hard for every fight. That's why he fizzled out, in my opinion, after his loss to Hearns in late 1982 (even though he was still very young). It could have been the Five Kings instead of the Four Kings (RIP George Kimball).