I conducted exactly one phone interview with Mark “Too Sharp” Johnson when he was in his fighting prime. It was January 2000. I was writing the monthly “Looking Ahead” column for the back page of The Ring magazine and wanted to ask Johnson about his future following a four-round no-contest against journeyman Raul Juarez in defense of his 115-pound belt. Too Sharp told me he was ready to hunt bigger game, talking about moving up to bantamweight to fight Paulie Ayala or junior feather to face the winner of the upcoming first fight between Marco Antonio Barrera and Erik Morales.

The content of the interview provided nothing out of the ordinary, just the usual ambitious talk from a great fighter struggling to find a great opponent. I wrote a few hundred words, and we went to press. Ho-hum. Nothing particularly memorable about any of it.

Except Johnson was speaking with me from behind bars. And I had no idea. He was talking about all the guys he wanted to fight in 2000, even though he wouldn’t actually end up fighting again until June 2001. It wasn’t until after the issue printed that I found out my interview subject had been (and still was) incarcerated. Suddenly it made sense why, when I called Too Sharp’s father/trainer, Ham, to set up an interview with his son, he wouldn’t give me a phone number to call and instead insisted that Mark would call me.

I’d been expertly outslicked by Mark Johnson. Just add my name to the list, because there are quite a few 112-to-118-pound fighters from the last 20 years who can say the same thing.

Speaking of adding names to a list, last week Johnson’s name landed on the International Boxing Hall of Fame ballot for the first time. And I’m hoping that in about three months, when the Hall announces its induction class of 2012, Johnson’s name lands on that list as well.

Johnson is one of those fighters whose line-by-line record doesn't do his greatness justice. He "only" won titles in two divisions, never unified belts or claimed a lineal title, and didn't defeat any legendary opponents. The only man he beat who has any chance at the Hall of Fame is Fernando Montiel, and Montiel is an extreme long shot in that regard. If you weren't watching boxing when Too Sharp was in his prime, and you just scrolled through his resume on BoxRec now, you'd probably think he wasn't quite Canastota material.

But I watched him in his prime. I know how great he was and that the main reason he didn't notch wins over any fellow future Hall of Famers was because nobody fitting that description was willing to fight him. So this is a direct message for anyone who joined the boxing beat after the '90s concluded, has a Hall of Fame vote, and isn't quite sure if Mark Johnson is a Hall of Famer: Vote for him. He is worthy of first-ballot induction.

From 1997, after he'd held a flyweight belt for a year or so and made a couple of defenses, through 2000, when he went to prison, Johnson was on everybody's pound-for-pound list. He climbed as high as number five on mine, behind only the likes of Roy Jones, Oscar De La Hoya, Felix Trinidad, and Ricardo Lopez, all of whom are unquestioned Hall of Famers.

If you want to see Johnson at the peak of his powers, check out his destruction of the highly respected Arthur Johnson, available on YouTube in two parts (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i5quri0qFRk , http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1g0hDDRuiq0&NR=1). Too Sharp had ludicrous hand speed, great skill, and, at least at flyweight, exceptional power.

The win over Arthur Johnson not only epitomized what made Too Sharp great, but it also provided a classic example of why he couldn't get the big names to fight him. From Lopez to Michael Carbajal to Danny Romero to Johnny Tapia, there were several fighters within one weight division of Johnson who brought money and marquee value to the table. But you know that oft-repeated quote that Joe Frazier supposedly uttered to Marvin Hagler about how "The Marvelous One's" problems stemmed from being black, a southpaw, and a good fighter? Too Sharp was a direct descendent in that three-strikes lineage. When Mark Johnson eviscerated Arthur Johnson in 71 seconds, he reminded all of the other top tiny fighters why they were ducking, and would be wise to continue to duck, Too Sharp.

To be fair, "ducking" is probably a bit too strong a word, especially for the smaller guys like Lopez and Carbajal who can be easily excused for passing on a fight with Johnson. But Tapia, a man I respect tremendously as a fighter, was blatant in his avoidance of Johnson. Too Sharp chased him up to 115 pounds, and Tapia conveniently moved up to 118. Johnson announced he would be moving up again, and Tapia did likewise. Fighting Johnson was all risk, no reward, for someone like Tapia.

When assessing Johnson's Hall of Fame credentials, you obviously can't give him credit for wins over guys he didn't fight. But you should at least appreciate that his failure to fight those guys in no way detracts from the argument on his behalf.

After Johnson was released from prison and returned in 2001 as a bantamweight, he wasn't

quite the same fighter he'd been before. His punching power had already diminished when he went from 112 pounds to 115, and it slipped another notch at 118. Age was also an issue. He'd celebrated his 30th birthday by the time he lost in October '01 in a major upset to a then-lightly regarded Rafael Marquez. (Interestingly, Johnson's one early-career loss came when he was 18, which means during his 20s he was undefeated, posting a record of 32-0 with 21 KOs and 1 no-contest.)

More on that first Marquez defeat: It came via split decision, thanks to two questionable point deductions for holding, against a fighter who, as it turned out, was Hall of Fame material himself. So it's hardly a stain on Johnson's legacy. The rematch was much more definitive; Johnson got knocked out (by the man who it turned was the best bantam in the world at the time), and it seemed he was pretty much done at that point. But he rebounded in '03 to score a major upset over the unbeaten Montiel on HBO. To my eyes, Too Sharp was already a Hall of Famer. But that stirring win over the decade-younger Montiel should have clinched it for everybody else.

On this year's IBHOF ballot, there's one slam dunk: Tommy Hearns. Two additional fighters will be voted in from the "Modern" category. Johnson isn't the only one for whom you can make a case. Myung-Woo Yuh has been overlooked for several years, while Donald Curry and Naseem Hamed are well-known names and compelling candidates to debate. There are other assorted names left over from the '50s, '60s, '70s, and '80s who annually attract pockets of support from various corners of the boxing-historian community. Will Johnson get in on his first try? He was a flyweight who never had a "superfight" and didn't enjoy great longevity. It's hard to feel overly confident.

What I can say with confidence is that when I watched Johnson perform in his prime I knew I was watching a Hall of Famer. I hope that my fellow voters saw and felt the same thing, and that those who missed out on Too Sharp's pound-for-pound years will look beyond the basic information that BoxRec provides.

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Comment on this article

Radam G says:

Right ON! Too Sharp Johnson was all that and a big of chips and giant of lemonade. Dude was one of the greatest flyweights of all times and a pound-for-pound great hands down IMHO! Holla!

ali says:

[QUOTE=Radam G;9964]Right ON! Too Sharp Johnson was all that and a big bag of chips and a couple of glasses of giant lemonade. Dude was one of the greatest flyweights of all times and a pound-for-pound great hands down IMH
I'm with u 110% on mark he was a beast.

the Roast says:

Too Sharp was legit.