Written by Frank Lotierzo
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Last week it was announced without much fanfare that 1990's heavyweight contender David Tua, 39, was retiring from professional boxing, for a multitude of personal reasons. In Tua's last bout he lost a unanimous decision to perennial fringe contender Monte Barrett 35-9-2 (20). Actually, the fight with Barrett was a rematch of their July 2010 first meeting in which Tua suffered the first official knockdown of his career en route to the fight being scored a majority draw.

Set aside whatever his personal reasons are for retiring - the fact that he couldn't beat Barrett once in two fights is sufficient evidence that Tua, who finishes with a stellar career record of 54-3-2 (43) having never been stopped, will never fulfill his dream of becoming the world heavyweight boxing champion.

The first words that come to mind when thinking of or describing the career of David Tua are "unfulfilled potential." Wouldn't it have been something to see how things would've unfolded in the heavyweight division had Tua's career had not gone off the tracks after his great fight with Ike Ibeabuchi, a decision loss on his record. That was a fight that he looked sensational in and would've gone through any other heavyweight in the world that night with the exception of Ibeabuchi. For the record I had Tua beating Ike by a point.

Tua won a bronze medal at the 1992 Olympics as a 19 year old and turned pro after wards. He fought the only way he could being he was just 5'10" -- as a swarmer. Fighting as a swarmer is the hardest route to travel as a professional boxer and requires a fighter to be in the greatest condition possible and he also must be very disciplined. That's why there's only been four great swarmers in heavyweight history, Jack Dempsey, Rocky Marciano, Joe Frazier and Mike Tyson.

Tua was blessed at birth with two things that a swarmer must posses that can't be learned or taught, a cast iron chin and one punch fight altering power. And David Tua was a genuine life-taker. Nobody lived with him when he was at or near his best by trading with him. I believe, along with Freddie Roach who was once in line to train Tua, that he would've knocked Mike Tyson out had they fought. No, he wasn't better nor did he achieve as much as Tyson, but in a head to head confrontation he would've beat Mike in what would've been a great two round fight.

Some have stated that Tua should've emulated Tyson stylistically, but they couldn't be more wrong. Joe Frazier, who was a much better swarmer than Tyson, is the fighter Tua should've done everything in his power to emulate. Joe cut off the ring better, was harder to hit, and applied more bell-to-bell pressure than Tyson did at his best. Mike attacked more so in spurts. Also, Tyson couldn't fight on the inside and was easy to tie up. On the other hand, Frazier was murder inside and even "The Greatest" Muhammad Ali took a beating trying to tie Joe up. Another thing David and Joe shared that Mike didn't was, they didn't get discouraged or lose focus when they got hit. Perhaps Tua did once against Lennox Lewis, but Joe never did.

Tua, like Frazier, carried his power. Whereas Tyson was a three or four round fighter and became less effective the longer the fight went. Mike also didn't score many late round stoppages against quality opposition. Had Tua been able to slip the jab and bob and weave while pressing the fight like Frazier, he would've been murder and a handful for either Klitschko on their best nights.

When one thinks about how Tua destroyed Oleg Maskaev, John Ruiz, Hasim Rahman and Michael Moorer, who all won a piece of the heavyweight title, yet he never did, it's almost mind boggling. But in his defense, he did meet Lennox Lewis who was at the top of his game in his only title shot. Maybe that's the most mind boggling, the fact that Tua only got one title shot during an era where at least four titles existed that he could've challenged for.

For his entire career fans waited for a fully flowered and not overweight Tua to show up. However, no one ever saw that version. For years we've heard David say how much he loved the sport of boxing and how it was his life. The only thing that blurred his words was the loudness in which his actions spoke as Tua usually came to the ring too heavy and was huffing and puffing after a few spirited rounds. Not the way for a swarmer to approach combat when he's looking to be crowned heavyweight champion.

Tua talked a great fight and actually convinced me that he was gonna throw 120 punches a round at Lennox Lewis when they fought and eventually knock him out. But David came in way too heavy at 245 and once he got hit and realized how much work and risk were involved in

getting near Lennox, he went through the motions and lost by a landslide. Nothing was more frustrating than watching fighters like Rahman and Chris Byrd touch him with a few inconsequential jabs and then take a step or two to the left and force him to reset. Had Tua fought with the same zeal and tenacity when it came to forcing an opponent to have to fight and trade with him the way Frazier did, Tua may have only been an underdog to George Foreman circa 1973-74.

Imagine finding a heavyweight who you could hit across the chin with a baseball bat and it wouldn't faze him. In addition to that he had dynamite in both hands and was a rarity in that he carried his power from rounds one through 12. The thought would have to be that with a few refinements along with the fighter’s desire and willingness to learn how to fight as the attacker and not follow opponents around the ring, he'd have to at some point win a piece of the title. Not to mention that Muhammad Ali, George Foreman and Larry Holmes, who would've been a nightmare for Tua stylistically, were long gone by the time he arrived.

What would Tua have done to the heavyweights who won a piece of the title circa 1997 to 2005 had he been a 20 pound bigger version of Frazier? Yeah, it would've been something to see, but cookbook analogies don't apply in the ring on fight night. It's doubtful even Joe himself could've molded Tua into the fighter he would've needed to become in order for him to dominate the heavyweight division.

I was told by some in the Tua camp that in the gym during training there were times when the "Tuaman" looked like "Smokin" Joe slipping the jab while cutting off the ring as he was closing the distance and working his way inside during sparring. But on fight night he'd end up stranding a little more erect and just followed his opponent around the ring. And as it's been said in this space many times over, sparring in the gym and correcting mistakes and refining fight plans are a world apart. And that's what separates good and great fighters. Like Tyson, but not to nearly the same degree, Tua lost focus when he got hit fighting the best of the best, something that never happened to Joe, even against the most destructive wrecking machine in history, George Foreman.

My guess is that deep down David Tua wasn't defined by fighting or becoming the heavyweight champion of the world. He fought because he was good at it, it paid well, and he achieved some notoriety along the way. And that's what separates the greats and the near greats. And that's why Tua never reached his potential and his name cannot be added to the list of all-time great attackers and swarmers the likes of Dempsey, Marciano, Frazier and Tyson.

If one wants to think about how much Tua was blessed with at birth as a fighter, think of a football team taking possession of the ball on the other team’s 10 yard line every time they get it. In order to score they only have to move it 10 yards as opposed to the other team who has to go the length of the field after returning the punt or kick. Yet the team starting at the 10 yard line never gets in the end zone.

Well, that's the story of David Tua's career that fell about 10 yards short of what it should've been. He had what most fighters would give up 10 years of their life to possess, a concrete chin and one punch knockout power in both hands. What a monumental advantage he started with

but unfortunately he never learned the teachable things that would've rounded him into an almost unbeatable professional fighter.

Comment on this article

tlig says:

Tyson couldn't fight on the inside?
Tyson was easier to hit than Joe Frazier?
Tua would have stopped Mike Tyson in 2 rounds?

Is this a serious article?

ali says:

Im with u Tlig Tua would have gotten KO by Iron Mike period point blank

mortcola says:

I like F-Lo's enthusiasm and appreciation here. But, I have to agree, some of the analysis is whacky. First, the only fighters who accomplished anything against Tyson were slick, durable, mover-jabbers. Tyson was very hard to hit cleanly, especially with the sorts of circular punches Tua through, and which he through more slowly than Tyson moved. And, for a fighter like Tua who could take a punch, but always be taken out of his game by a punch, there is simply little chance a fight-altering hook would ever be timed to come near Tyson's chin. Tua is indeed all about unfulfilled potential. So, it is only in an imaginary night of fulfilled potential that Tua could accomplish the feats F-Lo envisions. Good guy, exciting at times, but, just as you say, unfulfilled.

Radam G says:

WoW! I'm not finding my way into this one, because Tua was one of my Asian boys. Just let him be the greatest heavyweight pugilist outta Asia. Enough said! That is until another great comes. Then all you guys and your girls will know what imaginary -- I mean real -- time it is. Holla!

teaser says:

I think what Frank is trying to say is IF Tua had took the fight game more seriously and IF he could be trained to have fought like Smokin Joe ....a 20 pound naturally bigger Joe at that....he would have been a formidable foe for any heavyweight ...Tyson included

the Roast says:

Whatever Tua did or did not do, that KO of Ruiz is one of my all time favorites. I wish all Ruiz

fights ended that way. THanks Dave!

mortcola says:

[I]I think what Frank is trying to say is IF Tua had took the fight game more seriously and IF he could be trained to have fought like Smokin Joe ....a 20 pound naturally bigger Joe at that....he would have been a formidable foe for any heavyweight ...Tyson included[/I]

Yep. I'm in an anti-what-if phase of life, because I was saying it too much in the mirror. But I agree in this case.

brownsugar says:

For some reason I had no appreciation for Lewis before his bout with Tua,... Maybe it was because I perceived him as running/ducking Tyson and Holyfield during their best years... (Yes I know there's a novel sized chronology about those events,.. one for the pro's and one for the con's)
I had hoped Tua would bury the brittish born hype once and for all and restore the current balance/imbalance of the heavyweight division

Tua did nothing but follow Lewis around for twelve rounds while eating a full buffet of knuckle sandwiches of every variety.

I think We even held a prayer and worship service in the living room requesting a divine intervention, in the hopes that Tua would strike Lewis to the canvas with one mighty haymaker.

but it never happened, and I don't think I ever watched Tua again... but I never missed a Lewis fight after that.

Chris's greatest moment was against Ike Ibeabuchi, one of the classic heavyweight moments... but still... as good as Tua looked in losing that fight. Even that would not have been good enough against Tyson.

Coxs Corner says:

1. This is a very good article about the gifts Tua had and an unfufilled destiny.
2. Some people seem to be focusing on Frank's comments on Tyson. FLo said that Tyson was a better swarmer than Tua and one of the 4 great swarmers of history. He was not dispararging Tyson.
3. He was correct saying Mike was not as good an inside fighter as Joe Frazier. Mike was willing to grapple and let himself be held inside, whereas Joe would get his hands free, bury his head in your chest and work the body with both hands. Mike would grapple for position and try to get a big shot off, either the right to the side or a big uppercut or hook. Frazier put on more consistent pressure inside, whereas Mike would fight in spurts. I did a slip and duck rate study some years ago and found that Frazier had a little higher slip and duck rate than Tyson, not hugely different but a few extra slips a round adds up. So those facts are correct. You can see

the study in my archives.
4. Had Tua fought like Frazier, slipping to get inside, forcing his opponent to fight and gaving them no room to breathe he would have been an all time great fighter. That is Franks point and he is right. Tua had the natural things that couldnt be taught - the big punch ansd powerful chin, but either lacked the motivation or desire to learn them or simply was unable to apply it in the ring like the 4 ATG swarmers mentioned.

tlig says:

The thing with Tua that most people seem to gloss over was his caution despite his very solid chin. Then again, the chin may not have been as solid as his record would indicate if you consider he generally stayed out of harm's way. Even against guys not known for their punching power he rarely threw caution to the wind (despite often being behind on the scorecards).

I do think he had natural power though- the punches he hurt and dropped guys with sometimes appeared not to have that much in them (unlike Tyson's) yet they hurt guys badly.

All in all, the dude never came across as someone who really cared about his trade. Apparently he was forced into boxing by his dad so that would part-explain it. I also disagree with the writer's view about the potential of Tua being a more effective Joe Frazier because he was 20lbs heavier. The weight never really helped him. He should have stuck to the low 220s. He was more effective that way.

But of course this article isn't really about David. It's merely a vehicle with which to bash Mike Tyson. Nice cover though...