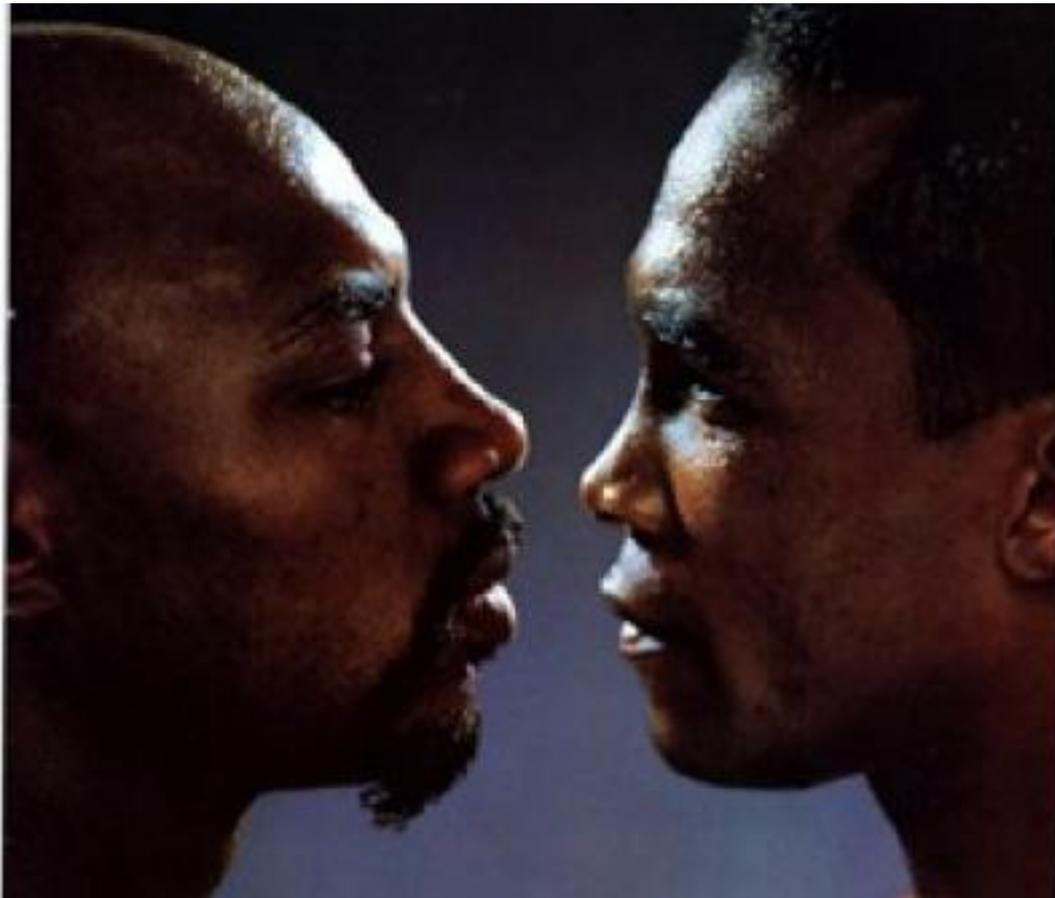


25 Years On--Leonard Beat Hagler in Clear But Close Decision

Written by Frank Lotierzo
Friday, 06 April 2012 12:17



For some in the boxing community it was the most anticipated fight since the "Fight Of The Century" between heavyweight Champ "Smokin" Joe Frazier and challenger Muhammad Ali 16 years earlier. And if you think about it, reigning middleweight champ Marvin Hagler and former welterweight/junior middleweight champ Sugar Ray Leonard were on a collision course longer than Ali and Frazier were.

One could argue that ever since Hagler and Leonard challenged for their first world titles on November 30th 1979, they were often mentioned as future opponents. And even then Hagler played second fiddle to Leonard being that his title bout with defending middleweight champion Vito Antuofermo was the semi-wind up bout prior to Leonard challenging WBC welterweight champ Wilfred Benitez. The heavily favored Hagler was held to a disputed draw against Antuofermo an hour before Leonard stopped Benitez with six seconds remaining in the 15th and final round.

Well, it's been 25 years--April 6th 1987--since Leonard came out of a three year retirement having only fought once in five years to challenge the slightly eroding undisputed middleweight champ, Hagler, who was fighting just once a year by April of 1987. Most forget that it was

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Leonard who challenged Hagler after retiring on November 9th 1982 with Hagler sitting there watching Ray announce that a fight between the two greats would never happen. As we found out later Leonard wanted to continue fighting and wanted to meet Hagler eventually, but succumbed to family pressure and retired after having his detached retina repaired. For the next five years Leonard did commentary for Hagler's title defenses on HBO while taking notes on him subconsciously the whole time.

When Leonard finally initiated the challenge to Hagler, that should've raised a red flag in Marvin's head. Mainly because for the previous five years it appeared that Leonard was less interested in the fight than Hagler was. Then after a grueling fight with the undefeated John "The Beast" Mugabi, six months later Leonard is all in to meet Hagler? What changed? Perhaps Marvin looking a little less hungry and ferocious and him starting to mention that Mugabi may have been his last fight?

Here's what many weren't sophisticated enough to know or didn't understand about the at the time 30 year old Leonard and 32 year old Hagler.....

1) Leonard never stopped training or running during his retirement. He knew boxing was still in his blood and that he might fight again.

2) When he came back to fight Kevin Howard in 1984 and suffered the first official knockdown of his career, he wasn't focused and was still dealing with personal turmoil.

3) Leonard realized beyond all doubt after Hagler had trouble with Roberto Duran's wait and react counter-punching that he matched up great with Hagler stylistically.

4) Ray knew that as dangerous as Hagler was, he was dramatically less effective fighting as the attacker and that Marvin was no Frazier when it came to cutting off the ring and forcing the fight. He was fully aware that he'd force Marvin to pursue him if they ever fought.

5) Hagler's money punch was his right hand, which fighting as a southpaw he obviously led with. Ray was confident he wasn't going to be iced by any fighter's lead punch. Furthermore,

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Leonard had no fear or concern over Hagler's left cross, uppercut or hook and viewed them as nothing more than set-up punches with their intent to make you forget about the right.

6) Leonard also grasped that Hagler was an overrated puncher coming off his three round war with Thomas Hearn. Unlike the public perception of Hagler, Leonard didn't view Marvin as a "catch-n-kill" style attacker. He said repeatedly if Hagler was such a killer, why'd he have to hit Hearn so many times with his Sunday shots before finally stopping him?

7) Leonard knew that Hagler wouldn't feel complete until they fought and knew Marvin would fight him under almost any circumstances.

8) Leonard knew that Marvin thought he was a pretty boy and didn't view him as a tough guy with a much better chin than he ever got credit for. And that it was conceivable that Hagler would take him lightly regardless of what he said.

9) Hagler was an incredible cheapskate and thought about money constantly. Leonard knew that money would make Marvin do foolish things, like consent to 10 ounce gloves when middleweights fought with eight ounce gloves at that time.

Lets also clear some other things up.

Hagler's previous two title defenses (Hearn & Mugabi) were scheduled for 12 rounds and fought in 20 foot rings, which were the conditions in which the fight with Leonard was conducted. So saying Leonard made Hagler consent to unfavorable conditions (12 rounds instead of 15) really doesn't apply. Prior to their fight Leonard did everything but send Hagler a hand written letter saying that he was gonna move and box while looking to flurry at the end of the rounds to impress the judges. Was there the slightest doubt that Leonard had no intention of obliging Hagler in a knock down drag out war?

For some reason as great as Hagler was, surely one of the top five or six greatest middleweight champions in boxing history, he was a little awed by legends his equal like Roberto Duran and Ray Leonard. He was psyched out by Duran's ring antics during a good portion of their bout and

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abandoned his southpaw style in the early going of his bout against Leonard.

I could go on and bore you with the cookbook reasons as to why Leonard out boxed Hagler, but I'm assuming those reading this have a high enough boxing aptitude that doesn't require me drum-beating the nuanced trinkets you already know. The bottom line is Marvin Hagler was at his best when his opponents took the fight to him. The fallacy at the time was because of Vito Antuofermo's draw with Hagler in their first fight the way to beat him was to make him go back.

Ironically, Marvin never lost in his career to a fighter who tried to make him go back. The worst Hagler ever looked were in his first fights with Bobby "Boogaloo" Watts and Willie "The Worm" Monroe in Philadelphia. Watts and Monroe handed Hagler his first two defeats (although the Watts bout is considered a home town decision). The point being both Bobby and Willie used their feet and brought Marvin to them en-route to out-boxing him. And like Duran and Leonard after them, they didn't try to take his head off or knock him out.

Ray Leonard knew that Hagler wasn't really that fast of hand or foot and followed movers like Mike "The Roadrunner" Colbert (who wasn't stopped until the 12th round) instead of cutting them off and forcing them into the ropes or a corner. In order for Hagler to beat Leonard in 1987, he was gonna have to freeze him with one shot to where he was defenseless, then go in and finish him. Only Leonard knew Hagler wouldn't get that many Sunday shots on him and the odds of freezing him with one shot weren't that great due to his chin and movement.

What Leonard showed the boxing world in his fight with Hagler was, Marvin wasn't that great at cutting off the ring. He tended to follow more than stepping in front of Leonard to block his escape route. The only time Hagler was able to corner or pin Leonard against the ropes was when he tired and started slowing down. By Leonard moving and using the ring, Hagler wasn't able to take advantage of his most significant advantage, his physical strength. Because Hagler had to constantly keep his feet moving in order to track Leonard down, he was never able to mount a sustained offense or get set, especially in the early rounds. Leonard continually beat Hagler to the punch and was just about always a step ahead of him, thus forcing Hagler to reach and sometimes miss wildly.

Some have implied that Leonard's punches were nothing but pitty-pat punches that lacked power. What amazes me about that is, Hagler had one of the best chins in history. If Leonard's punches had nothing on them, why didn't Hagler just walk through them and force Leonard to fight instead of box? Actually, Leonard won many of the exchanges and fought Hagler straight

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up when he was too tired to move.

Another ridiculous statement made over the years is that Leonard should've fought Hagler like a man. In other words, Leonard should've nullified his own strengths and made it easy for Hagler. Suggesting that Leonard should've fought Hagler like a man is one of the most ignorant statements I've ever heard about a fight or fighter. I guess Muhammad Ali should've fought Joe Frazier and George Foreman toe-to-toe like a real man.

The style in which Leonard fought Hagler wasn't a surprise to any knowledgeable fight observer. It was the only style he could employ against him to win. On top of that, it was the style Leonard fought in every fight of his career with the exception of his first bout with Duran. If Hagler was shocked by Leonard trying to keep the fight from becoming a slugfest, shame on him.

The bottom line is Sugar Ray Leonard out-fought and thought Marvin Hagler. He set the pace early by moving and boxing, using his greater hand and foot speed to its fullest advantage. In those first three or four rounds, Hagler couldn't get near Leonard. Starting around the fifth round Hagler began to get closer and scored as Leonard started to slow.

There is absolutely no doubt that Leonard was up 3-0 after three rounds. At best Hagler won 5 of the last 9 rounds. That makes it 7-5 Leonard or 115-113. On top of that, there was not a 2-point round in the fight. Although Hagler was the aggressor he wasn't the effective aggressor. An effective aggressor is Frazier versus Ali in their first fight or Duran versus Leonard in their first fight. Not Hagler versus Leonard.

Lastly, some have said that a reigning champ shouldn't lose his title on such a close decision. The problem was, despite not having the title, Leonard was the star and bigger personality which neutralized Hagler being the champ. However, that had no bearing on the fight. Sugar Ray Leonard was just a little sharper and more effective than Marvin Hagler the night they fought and earned a clear cut close decision victory.

Recently a friend of mine said, "I think one of the reasons Hagler didn't press hard for a rematch was because he was afraid his legacy would suffer even more from a second loss to Leonard. In Hagler's mind it was better to go out disputing a 'controversial' loss rather than a more

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decisive one."

Looking back 25 years, I think you nailed it, Bill. And based on Seth Abraham's quote in Sports Illustrated years after the the fight, he may have been right.

Seth Abraham: There was talk of a rematch, but it never went anywhere. Marvin made it very clear — he thought he was jobbed and he was never going to fight again. And he never did. There were conversations, but they were never at the level of negotiations. If people say Marvin wanted the fight and Ray didn't, that's revisionist history.

[Comment on this article](#)

tlig says:

Strangely enough I was watching this earlier on YouTube and it dawned on me it was on the 25th Anniversary of the fight. I agree with much of what the writer says but I always thought Hagler actively pursued a rematch which Leonard refused to give to him? I do recall him saying he hung around for a year in hopes Leonard would grant him the fight and only retired once it became clear Ray (who loved to play with people's heads) wouldn't take the fight.

Radam G says:

@Tlig, that is the name of the game. Maybe Money May has learned from Sugar Ray "to play with [some] people's heads." Da game is prize fighting -- not pride fighting. There was no reason for SRL to reward Marvelous Marvin for rewarding him. If the powers that be, back in da day, would have offer the Sugarman a purse of 40mil, there would have been a rematch, maybe.

Sugar Ray Leonard was the ultimate prize fighter -- not a Money May - or Marvelous Marvin Hagler-style pride fighter. Money May wants to stay pridefully undefeat. Marvelous Marvin want to pridefully whoop a\$\$es. You cannot have the cake and eat it too. It is either prize or pride. Holla!

Coxs Corner says:

Great article and I agree 100%. Leonard won that fight and Hagler fought like his feet were stuck in the mud. He followed Ray and didn't cut him off and Ray simply outscored him and at times outfought him. I just can't believe its been 25 years

deepwater says:

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great all time fight. very close fight. seems like hagler picked the wrong tactics but it was very close. Hagler said he tried to get the rematch but ray jerked him along. either way good fight

Grimm says:

The sport was really huge in those days. I remember walking the streets in Sweden the morning after the fight - which, due to time-difference, in reality was just hours afterwards - and reading the frontpages of all major newspapers: LEONARD WON. These guys were sport royalty, and justfully so.

Rooting for Hagler, when I eventually saw the fight, I had to give it to Leonard. He was always so much more than a flamboyant technical wonder. The man was a warrior. Recently looked back on the first Duran-Leonard fight, and even though SRL fought Durans fight, he made the panamanian dug deep to carve out the win.

DaveB says:

I thought that Leonard won that fight too. I know that Leonard waited for the opportunity to see Hagler slow down and he saw it when Hagler fought Duran. During that fight he said to the other broadcasters - I can beat this sucker. Nothing wrong with that as Leonard was the smaller man and needed an edge in his favor. I never viewed Hagler as a great puncher. He was a very good puncher but a fighter who wore his opponent down over the course of the fight. I think that the biggest factor, at least to me, is that Leonard went out of his way to befriend Hagler and that is what won him the fight. The Leonard's hung out with the Hagler's. They went out to clubs with them. In short he did everything that he could to weaken that man's resolve. Hearns and Mugabi made the mistake of challenging Hagler by saying and trying to knock Hagler out and they made it into a war even before the fight started. I'm convinced if Leonard had of bad mouthed Hagler and said he was going to knock him out Hagler would have shown his more vicious side. Even Leonard said when asked how would he have fought if Hagler came after him like he did Hearns, and Leonard said I would have fought him the same way because I wouldn't have had any other choice. I remember my wife at the time saying she could never watch that fight again because she thought it was underhanded what Leonard did to Hagler. But it was fair to use a psychological advantage. It was really Hagler's weakness not Leonard's if Hagler couldn't go full force. I'm sure Hagler would be a great friend because he would have a loyalty not many people have but in this arena that trust will let a man down. It is the same when fighters today have an unspoken agreement that if you don't push the fight and try to hurt me, I won't try to hurt you. I always thought that it was Hagler who wanted the rematch. Leonard was like De La Hoya. He was one and done unless you beat him, at least in his prime.

brownsugar says:

a lot of good comments here, got me feeling just a little bit nostalgic.

Leonard was one of my favorites without question... but the guy had such a perfect public persona, and my life was so crappy at the time,..all I wanted was to see him get demolished in the ring.

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Specially after he got my boy Hearn's out of there.

thus it's no surprise that I related easily to the blue collar-like Hagler,.. a meat and potatoes man who came into the ring with his hard hat on,.....and a lunch pail filled with pain and punishment

sentiments that Hagler freely enjoyed sharing with his opponents....

Leonard was the epitome of intelligence inside and outside the ring(at least publically),.....Like DaveB said,..... Leonard's guile was something Hagler never experienced in his career . Hagler was so vexed by Leonard he wanted to beat him at his own game....boxing.

I had conveniently forgotten how Duran had befuddled Hagler, had the man groping for any kind of meaningful attack for 36 primetime minutes..

No.... I thought "destruct and destroy" the Hagler that crushed Hearn's inside 3 acton packed rounds would show up and put Leonard thru the meat grinder in 8 rounds or less.

amazingly.... I learned that I could be wrong sometimes.

for over 10 years I stubbornly believed Hagler had won the fight and would debate it to the fullest(even to the point of wanting to put on a catchup-stained wifebeater and settle the argument with my fists),..

but thru the wonders of technology (youtube) and viewing the fight over and over ...I surrendered to the only consensus that can be made ,..... which is,..... Leonard truly took Hagler to school that day,.... made him doubt himself, made him too tentative. maybe Ray didn't school him enough to present Hagler with a doctorates degree that day.... but he at least taught him enough to earn a 2 year associates .

Next thing I knew Hagler had turned his back on boxing completely and was doing Spagetti Westerns in Italy.

never saw that coming.

the Roast says:

Great posts Grimm, DaveB, B-Sug, funny how time flies.

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Matthew says:

This article covers it beautifully. Leonard had the right combination of skill, will, and smarts to beat one of the greatest middleweights of all time. Much has been made about Leonard waiting for the right time to fight Hagler after he got some mileage on his odometer, and there's no question that he did. I think, stylistically, Hagler would have had a hard time beating Leonard even if they had fought five years earlier. You can bet that Leonard would not have tired in '82 or '83 (when he would have been a more active fighter) like he did coming off a 3 year layoff for the fight in '87. Those that think Hagler won that fight are certainly entitled to their opinion, but I think this article might open their eyes. The bottom line is that Hagler should have been able to do more against a man that had fought only once in five years and had never before fought as a middleweight. The other unmentioned reason why a rematch never took place had to do with Hagler's attitude after the fight. He complained bitterly about being robbed and said that the Vegas judges stole it from him. Did he forget about getting a very close decision against Duran in Vegas 3 1/2 years earlier? Ray Leonard lost a very close decision against Duran (I actually scored it a draw, but had no problem with Duran getting the nod) and he never cried robbery. If Hagler really wanted a rematch and had been a better sport, I bet he would have gotten it. Leonard would have beaten him easier the second time around. The fact that Hagler preferred to complain about the decision leads me to believe he never really wanted a rematch. I recommend a great book written by Steve Marantz about this fight called "Sorcery at Caesars."

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amayseng says:

this is a very difficult fight for me to watch to this day, im rewatching it as i type this...

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i would not say leonard schooled hagler, staying away and running and holding nonstop following spurts is not schooling your opponent...

im not saying hagler won, it was difficult to score, and in fact i do remember telling myself a few years ago watching it that leonard squeaked it out, but i dont see a schooling...

damn, was this not such a great era of boxing, im 33, i tell my dad all the time he got the best eras of boxing, he is 61. he barely watches the sport today.....barely....

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mortcola says:

Yes, a case can be made that Leonard just outsmarted Hagler on several levels. But that was a badly aged, terribly slow Hagler who brought none of the virtues that allowed him to be the mostly devastating champ we remember. I don't see Leonard surviving a prime match-up. Just dreaming.

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the Roast says:

The last thing I remember from this fight was the very end. Hagler bitterly disappointed is trying to leave the ring with Robbie Simms. I don't recall word for word what they said but I think it went like this, Ray says, "Marvin..Marvin.." Hagler turns back, "It wasn't fair man." Ray says, "It was a good fight." Hagler says, "You gave me a good fight." They shake hands. I wore out that VHS tape.

Radam G says:

NO! NO! The Roast, the Sugarman Leonard would have only given the Marvelous One a rematch for triple the amount of about 15 mil that they got. Don't let SRL pull the wool over your eyes. He was 75 percent about the moola -- prizefighting and maybe 25 percent about the pride, pridfighting. Let's not musta' fo'got too soon.

SRL was sucked into the pros for the big purses to help out with his pops's medical bills back in da day. When Ray saw how easy he could make the BIG BUCKS, he told the University of Maryland to keep that scholarship and shove it where the sun doesn't shine.

After winning the "Olympic Gold Medal in Montreal, SRL's intentions was straight-up college time of smoking pots, crashing courses, banging you know what and, of course _____ ! Hehehehehe!

Big Money changed the soul of a poor kid, who was born in North Carolina, and never had much moola or prize-making opportunites. Holla!

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10-8 says:

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If Hagler maintains nowadays that he tried to get a rematch that's NOT what he was saying at the time. It's revisionist history. Hagler basically went into seclusion after losing to Leonard, was drinking heavily, rumored to be using cocaine and his marriage fell apart. He resurfaced later in the year with this SI article. Give it a read through and you will see that Hagler was not interested in fighting again much less fighting Leonard.

[url]<http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/vault/article/magazine/MAG1066497/index.htm>

10-8 says:

[QUOTE=deepwater;15209]Hagler said he tried to get the rematch but ray jerked him along. either way good fight[/QUOTE]That may be Hagler's revisionist view but that's not what happened at the time. Hagler basically went into seclusion after the fight, began drinking heavily, allegedly doing cocaine and went through marital problems which led to his wife Bertha filing divorce papers. Hagler re-surfaced late in the year featured in a Sports Illustrated article and it's very clear reading it now that Hagler had no interest in fighting again, much less a rematch with Leonard. He never mentioned it at the time.

[url]<http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/vault/article/magazine/MAG1066497/index.htm>