Written by Bernard Fernandez
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At the June 10 Hall of Fame induction ceremony, Thomas Hearns shows us those hands, which Ray Leonard said were the hardest he ever had to contend with. (photo by Teddy Blackburn)

CANASTOTA, N.Y. -- Philadelphia-based promoter J Russell Peltz, a 2007 inductee into the International Boxing Hall of Fame, once described the IBHOF, as well as its placement in this pastoral village, as “boxing heaven.”

References to the celestial afterlife were plentiful throughout the four-day annual celebration of fights and fighters. The 23rd annual Induction Weekend ceremonies – a bit of misnomer when you consider the festivities always begin on a Thursday – were, as usual, a festive time for honorees and fans alike, with devotees of the pugilistic arts traveling from as far away as Australia to soak in the upstate New York hospitality and the chance to mingle with ring greats. The primary draw in the 13-member Class of 2012, including six living inductees, was the legendary Thomas “The Hit Man” Hearns, whose big day drew two of his most celebrated opponents and fellow Hall of Famers, Sugar Ray Leonard and Marvelous Marvin Hagler. The five-division former world champion from Detroit was joined on the dais here Sunday afternoon by former flyweight and super flyweight champion Mark “Too Sharp” Johnson, trainer Freddie Roach, broadcaster Al Bernstein, ring announcer Michael Buffer and journalist Michael Katz.

“This is beautiful,” a beaming Hearns said as he surveyed the throng that had come to pay him tribute.

But the good times that are always had by all seemed just a bit muted by the absence of six Hall of Famers who have died since the 2011 enshrinement activities, which drew a record crowd thanks to the superstar presences of Mike Tyson, Julio Cesar Chavez and actor Sylvester Stallone, the movies’ Rocky Balboa.

Among those who were given the ceremonial 10-count were trainer Angelo Dundee (Class of 1992) and author/editor/raconteur Bert Randolph Sugar (Class of 2005), who returned to Canastota on almost an annual basis to greet fans, perch on the back seats of convertibles for the feel-good parade down Canastota’s short, picturesque main drag, and to oblige virtually everyone seeking an autograph or a photo op. As the beloved Dundee always said, it doesn’t cost anything more to be nice. Angelo and Sugar leave behind thousands of close friends, many of whom they might have only met for a minute or two.

“My father and Bert had a gift for making everyone they met feel special,” said Jim Dundee, Angelo’s son, who as best he could filled in for his dad, who not only was the chief second in the corners of Muhammad Ali and Leonard, but was maybe the friendliest, most accommodating individual ever to walk the earth.

As much as every inductee into the IBHOF, or any Hall of Fame (the baseball one is in Cooperstown, N.Y., a little more than an hour away by car), would like to believe that their selection ensures a degree of immortality, even the best of the best must accept the inevitability of death and taxes. Hall of Famers die off as fast, or faster, as new ones are minted, an annual revision of the roster of the living and the dearly departed is as expected as the changing of the seasons. When another visitor whose appearances here have come with clockwork regularity, 85-year-old Carmen Basilio, arrived late in the program, there were murmurs in the crowd that the health concerns of the one Hall of Famer with the deepest ties to Canastota – the “Onion Farmer” was born and raised here – somehow might have worsened.

Of course, boxing being what it is, there is a third inevitability—the dubious decision -- that was revisited on Saturday night, and one that cast a pall over Sunday’s sun-splashed glory just off Exit 34 of the New York Thruway. The split verdict that went against Manny Pacquiao and in

favor of Timothy Bradley Jr., who took possession of Pacquiao's WBO welterweight championship in faraway Las Vegas, was widely assailed as another stain on a frequently soiled sport, and a reminder that even the best of the best fighters, including future Hall of Famers, are occasionally subject to malfeasance by pencil. If nothing else, Pacquiao's upset defeat probably fired a couple of torpedoes into the already listing vessel holding hopes of someday pairing the Filipino icon with Floyd Mayweather Jr.

"It'll probably happen again and again and again," the always acerbic Katz, noting that the vast majority of media and fans attending the Pacquiao-Bradley scrap had "Pac Man" winning easily, said of the high incidence of odious scoring during his acceptance remarks. Katz described the points nod for Bradley as the "worst decision since Dred Scott."

As if to balance the scales for Roach's hello/goodbye comments, which seemingly were compressed within the same breath, Buffer – the "Let's get ready to rumble" man – waxed lyrical for 29 minutes, which easily surpassed what many considered to be the longest acceptance speech in IBHOF history. WBC president-for-life Jose Sulaiman officially droned on for 20 minutes in 2007, but it seemed like forever. To his credit, Buffer's stories were much more interesting, and his voice decidedly more melodious.

"In the sport of boxing, I'm the only person in history to have ever been in the ring with Marvelous Marvin Hagler, Sugar Ray Leonard, Thomas `The Hit Man' Hearns, Evander Holyfield and Mike Tyson – and none of them were ever able to land a hand on me," said Buffer, who also noted that he tried out such catchphrases as "Man your battle stations," "Fasten your seat belts" and "Gentlemen, start your engines" before deciding that none worked as well as that rumbling tag.

Bernstein, a straightforward type whose delivery contains no catchphrases, said his approach to his craft is rooted in the simple belief that "being fair is more important than being clever." He also stated, correctly, that the Hall of Fame was founded primarily to honor top-tier fighters.

"This is their house," said Bernstein, who four days earlier accepted the BWAA's Marvin Kohn Good Guy Award in New York City. "However, they are very generous in sharing this stage with others in a different category."

Johnson, one of the youngest inductees ever into the IBHOF at 40, choked up a bit toward the end of his remarks, closing with, “This is truly, truly, truly a dream come true for me,” before lifting his eyes skyward and raising his arms above his head.

But the person most of those assembled came to hear on this day was Hearns, whose entertainment quotient was always high, be it in victory or defeat. With Hearns, fans knew they were in for something special, and he rarely disappointed.

“I prayed that I’d be able to go out and give you guys what you paid to see, each and every time I’d fight,” said Hearns, resplendent in a tan suit, light blue dress shirt and blue-and-gold tie.

Turning toward Leonard, who was seating just behind him, Hearns said, “Ray, together we made a lot of folks happy. And we made a lot of people sad, too.” That was clearly a reference to their 1981 superfight, in which Hearns was leading on points on all three judges’ scorecards through 13 rounds until a furious 14th-round assault by Leonard catapulted him to a win by stoppage, thus disappointing Hearns loyalists.

During a Saturday ringside lecture, Leonard had praised Hearns as the hardest puncher he ever faced, by far. That statement was relayed to Hearns, who clearly appreciated the compliment.

“It was something I didn’t enjoy,” Leonard said of being on the receiving end of Hearns’ harder shots.

Comment on this article

Radam G says:

Nice! Enough key-board touched. Holla!

ultimoshogun says:

[video=youtube;rYeolMCI1-k]http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rYeolMCI1-k&feature=youtube_gdata_player[/video] Amidst all the controversy last week I forgot to give a big shout out to fellow Michigan native, Thomas Hearns. I missed my chance to meet the Hitman in person

years ago at The Palace for the Tyson/Golotta fight. As we were walking into the arena one of my buddies spotted him in the parking lot bout 20 feet away. He already had a group of people around him so we decided not to approach like girls with Bieber fever....wish I had now when I think back on it, oh well. I shared a badass vid of his war with Hagler...I can only imagine what it musta been like to watch that fight live...musta been pure electricty! Big congrats Hitman!!

ultimoshogun says:

[video=youtube;rYeolMCl1-k]http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rYeolMCl1-k&feature=youtube_gdata_player[/video]

ultimoshogun says:

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[QUOTE=ultimoshogun;17318][URL="http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rYeolMCl1-k&feature=youtube_gdata_player">http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rYeolMCl1-k&feature=youtube_gdata_player[/URL][/QUOTE]

Thank you Ultimo. Enjoyed watching this. A lot of talent in the ring that evening, and the call on this fight was as good as any fight you'll ever watch. Half of that broadcast team was inducted with Tommy, as well. (...Al Bernstein. Congratulations Al!)

Congratulations to the rest of the men on a tremendous honor. Went back after watching this to the Marvelous One's record. Hagler only had two more fights after Hearns. His opponents record coming into their bout vs. Marvin was a combined 544-31 with nine draws. Amazing.

ultimoshogun says:

Wow! Thats a pretty impressive combined opponent record...I guess The Marvelous One really did get there "the hard way" as he states in the video.

the Roast says:

Excellent video Ultimo, Hagler would not be denied that night. I think at that moment in time Hagler could have beaten any middleweight ever. That was the peak of a great career. Too bad Hearns broke his hand in the 1st round. Hard to hold off a monster with one good hand. Two of my favorite fighters of all time.

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