

Memories of Tyson-McNeeley Still Amaze

Written by Bernard Fernandez
Thursday, 14 August 2014 17:35



You had to have seen it to believe it. Maybe, if you were part of the insanely large, morbidly curious audience that bought into the unprecedented hype of the most fraudulent boxing match of all time, you actually did see it – and still can't believe it.

By comparison, the recent mismatch that paired the vastly superior Danny Garcia against Rod Salka was almost a re-creation of Ali-Frazier I or III.

Aug. 19 marks the 19th anniversary of the circus-like atmosphere that hung thick in the desert air in the summer of 1995 when Mike Tyson, fighting for the first time in 50 months following his three-year conviction for rape, squared off against a totally fabricated "contender" named Peter McNeeley at the MGM Grand in Las Vegas. It was the ultimate verification of the old P.T. Barnum dictum that there's a sucker born every minute, that there really is a bull market for gullible sorts willing, even eager, to part with sizable sums of their money in exchange for bogus deeds to the Brooklyn Bridge or worthless swamp land in Florida.

Chew on these numbers for a while and you can't help but shake your head in amazement:

*Because the most optimistic of Showtime Pay-Per-View projections were met, Tyson, who was guaranteed a minimum of \$25 million, came away with a then-record \$36 million for his night's work, which lasted all of 89 seconds. That breaks down to a payout of \$404,494.38 *per second*.

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*McNeeley, on the other hand, received \$540,000 for the privilege of offering himself up as a human sacrifice. Going into the Tyson bout, the 25-year-old known as the “Irish Hurricane” sported a spiffy 36-1 record with 30 wins inside the distance, which gained him a sheen of legitimacy in the form of a No. 7 ranking from the shameless WBA. But McNeeley’s opponents up to that point had lost a staggering 449 fights, and his previous ring appearance, on April 22, 1995, had resulted in a one-round stoppage of Frankie Hines in Hot Springs, Ark. McNeeley reportedly was paid \$190 (no, that is not a misprint) for that fight, which came against a career fall-down guy who had lost 10 straight and 39 of 40 before taking on Tyson’s comeback partner, on the way to a final career mark of 17-120-5 with 78 defeats inside the distance.

*Only three of the 37 fighters McNeeley had mixed it up with on the road to Tyson – the immortal trio of Ron Drinkwater, Stanley Wright and J.B. Williamson -- had so much as a winning record at the time they threw down with the Medford, Mass., resident.

*The \$1,500 ringside seats were filled (among the celebrity attendees: Arnold Schwarzenegger, Eddie Murphy, Bruce Willis, Demi Moore, Michael Jackson, Kevin Costner, Jim Carrey, Luke Perry, Axl Rose, Denzel Washington, Tim Allen, Shaquille O’Neal, Don Johnson and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar) as part of a sellout crowd of 16,736, which did not include some 1,500 credentialed media members from around the world.

*The fight was televised to 90 countries on six continents. Somehow, Antarctica missed out on the big show.

*Following his final bout, a first-round TKO loss to Mike Bernardo on June 8, 2001, in Cape Town, South Africa, McNeeley retired with a still-impressive 47-7 record that included 36 wins by KO. But one of those defeats, on June 26, 1999, was a first-round blowout by boxing’s favorite fatty, 311-pound Eric “Butterbean” Esch (who would later fight as high as 426½), at Las Vegas’ Mandalay Bay, on the undercard of a show headlined by Paulie Ayala’s unanimous-decision dethronement of WBA bantamweight champion Johnny Tapia. It is a testament to how far McNeeley had fallen from semi-legitimacy that he went off as an 8-1 underdog to The Bean after having been just a 13-1 longshot against Tyson.

*So much of a running national joke had McNeeley become after the Tyson debacle that, shortly after Peter the Not So Great’s one-round disqualification (brought about when his Damon Runyonesque manager-trainer, Vinny Vecchione, entered the ring and wrapped his arms around his clearly buzzed and twice-floored fighter), he appeared in a commercial for Pizza Hut

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in which he again was sent crashing to the canvas – by a slice of pizza. As McNeeley lay on his back, his vision fuzzy in accordance with the script, Vecchione stands over him waving some of that stuffed-crust cheese and pepperoni pie in his face and asking, “Hey, McNeeley, how many slices am I holding?”

As long as there is a profit to be made from continued humiliation, why not offer up another piece of your dignity on the altar of financial expediency?

“My first reaction was, uh, kind of negative,” McNeeley at the time said of the endorsement deal that he at first was hesitant to accept. “You wonder how the public is going to perceive you. But then I thought about it a while and decided, what the heck. There’s no such thing as bad publicity, right?”

Actually, there is. The biggest headlines McNeeley, now 45, has generated in recent years stem from his occasional brushes with the law. His Tyson windfall vanished and by now a victim of the sort of alcohol-related problems that had taken a toll on his father, former heavyweight title challenger Tom McNeeley, Peter in November 1995 was charged with assault with a dangerous weapon (his fists) following an altercation with a Boston bar patron and, in June 2006, with serving as the driver of the getaway car in a drug-store stickup that gained his armed passenger, Robert Perry, \$180 in cash and a shoplifted fanny pack.

All of which leads to a still-perplexing question. If McNeeley was indeed the hapless oaf that he was depicted as then and now, how could his matchup with Tyson possibly have commanded such widespread interest? In a sport where false prophets appear with some regularity, particularly in the heavyweight division – think Primo Carnera, Duane Bobick, Michael Grant and, for now at least, we’re keeping an eye on you, Deontay Wilder – McNeeley stands alone as the falsest of the false.

The answer, of course, is that McNeeley was merely there to be used and promptly disposed of, a prop necessary to again fan the flames of fixation attendant to Tyson’s return to the ring after an extended period. A presumably rusted Iron Mike needed *somebody* to beat up, and his handlers were justifiably hesitant to put him in with a truly dangerous rival. Thus was the door opened for McNeeley, with his artificially inflated record against crushed tomato cans and the good fortune of being the offspring of his kind-of-prominent dad, who was 23-0 when he squared off against heavyweight champ Floyd Patterson on Dec. 4, 1961, in Toronto. That the elder McNeeley, who was 74 when he passed away in 2011, had officially gone down 11 times

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in a four-round TKO loss only added to whatever mystique his son brought to the equation. Could Peter last longer against Tyson than Tom had against Patterson?

“The stories about the fight said I went down nine or 10 times,” Tom McNeeley said long after his courageous but hopeless bid to unseat Patterson. “The writers were being nice to me. I have the film. It was more like 12 or 13.”

Few writers were willing to give Peter McNeeley anywhere near as much benefit of the doubt as their predecessors had accorded his pop. This was to be a ritualistic execution inside the ropes. How could it be anything else? Everyone had to know how it would end, probably including Vecchione, who had turned down decent-paying bouts for McNeeley with, among others, Tommy Morrison, Andrew Golota, Joe Hipp and King Ipitan in the hope that a really big bonanza might be had by waiting. Then along came Don King, Tyson’s hyperbolic promoter, extending that golden lottery ticket.

The only one apparently not in on the scheme was McNeeley himself, who figured all those knockouts, even if they had come against nobodies, had to mean he had at least a chance to shock the world.

“I have good stats,” McNeeley reasoned when an army of media critics rose up to denounce him as unworthy. “I deserve this shot.”

His second-generation family status notwithstanding, McNeeley benefited greatly from the legerdemain of Vecchione, a cigar-chomping, old-school type who had packaged his fighter as better – very much better-- than his actual accomplishments might have suggested. After the Tyson fight was scheduled, Vecchione regaled listeners with tales of McNeeley’s bottomless well of untapped potential.

“It took about 25 seconds for me to know that he had tremendous punching power and a killer instinct,” Vecchione said, rhapsodizing about his first glimpse at the then-20-year-old McNeeley. “This was a mean, vicious kid in the ring. He was the best heavyweight prospect I’d ever seen. Literally nobody believed me, but I knew from all the knowledge I had from Sam Silverman (who had been Vecchione’s boxing guru) I could do something with this kid.”

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Whether Vecchione was spinning a tall tale or actually believed what he was dishing out, the media, many of whom have a fondness for cartoonish characters, ate it up. And when you added Vecchione to a promotional venture that also included that master of malaprops, King, there at least was a likelihood that the press conferences would be more entertaining than the fight.

In the frenzied lead-up to Tyson-McNeeley, King, Vecchione and the “Irish Hurricane” played their parts to perfection. Tyson said less than the other principals, in no small part because he wasn’t around much until fight night. But he did offer these chilling words to a small group of writers a few days before the opening bell, saying, with no hint of bemusement, that “I’m going to kill Peter McNeeley, God willing.”

King, at the final press conference two days before the bout, launched into another stream-of-consciousness delivery that touched on, among others, General George Armstrong Custer, John Quincy Adams and Robin Hood. Boxing’s Theater of the Absurd never seemed quite so ridiculous.

“A lot of people have fought opponents with lesser records, but few have fought lesser opponents with greater skill,” King harrumphed in referring to the D-list of pugs McNeeley had vanquished.

Of what paying customers could expect, King noted that “This is no longer a fight, it’s a happening. It’s so big, even I don’t know how big it is. But it’s huge. There hasn’t been anything like it in the history of mankind. You got 1.3 billion people in China who are going to be watching this fight. You got 900 million in India, and I don’t know how many in Russia. Everybody wants to see the great Mike Tyson back in action. They want to see if he’s as good as he ever was, or better.”

Vecchione chimed in with his opinion that “(McNeeley) has a hell of a chance against Tyson. Think about it: Within 30 seconds, *somebody’s* probably going to be down. If I were Mike Tyson, I wouldn’t have taken this fight the first time out – and who knows more about picking opponents than I do?”

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Clearly enjoying his 15 minutes of fame, McNeeley uttered the words that would prove to be the most memorable of his career: “ I’m Peter McNeeley, from Medford, Mass, and I’m here to kick Mike Tyson’s ass.”

At least McNeeley wasn’t the only one who thought that he would do just that. A Las Vegas woman, a medium or spiritualist or some such delver into the occult, said she did not know anything about boxing, but the stars or the tea leaves had informed her that Tyson would go down in four rounds. The media dutifully took note, for amusement purposes only.

But hardly anyone else was buying into the premise that McNeeley would or could hang with a 29-year-old Tyson even if his skills had atrophied during his incarceration. Among the most vocal of skeptics was Rock Newman, manager of Riddick Bowe, who told the press corps he once had considered inviting McNeeley to serve as a sparring partner for his fighter after he had finished getting tuned up by Tyson.

“I was kicking around the idea a little bit,” Newman recalled. “I thought it might be kind of a fun thing, that it might create a stir. But I’m not even going to extend an invitation. McNeeley is so incredibly horrible. I mean, just awful. This guy is so bad, he even makes Frans Botha look good by comparison. There is no way he could give Bowe any kind of decent work in the gym.”

All that remains was for the inevitable ending to be recorded for historical purposes. To his credit, McNeeley did exactly what Vecchione had said he would do. He went right at Tyson, and somebody did go down within the first 30 seconds. It was, of course, McNeeley, who was decked by an overhand right after just seven elapsed seconds. But McNeeley beat the count, and momentarily succeeded in bull-rushing Tyson to the ropes, throwing wide, loaded-up haymakers in the hope of getting lucky.

Didn’t happen. A second knockdown quickly followed as Tyson connected with a pair of left hooks, neither of which landed flush, and a ripping overhand right, which did. Again, McNeeley arose, on spaghetti legs, causing referee Mills Lane to lean forward, ready to stop it as soon as Tyson nailed him again. But Vecchione removed that decision from Lane, entering the ring and offering himself as a human towel-toss. The joke of a fight went into the books as a disqualification, and thus was provided its expected punch line.

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“It’s not an outrage,” King said of the unsatisfying conclusion. “The people might be disappointed that the manager jumped into the ring, but they can’t say they didn’t get their money’s worth. We had quite a spectacle this evening. No one can say Peter McNeeley didn’t come to fight. We saw a terrific altercation for the time that it lasted.”

In explaining his intervention, Vecchione said that “I remember Jimmy Garcia and Gerald McClellan,” a reference to one fighter who died as a result of injuries sustained in a bout (Garcia) and another who was rendered blind and brain-damaged (McClellan) in another scrap that went horribly wrong. “The important thing is that this kid’s 26 years old. He’s going to continue to fight. He gave you 100 percent effort. If I made a judgment and have to live with that judgment, so be it. As far as I’m concerned, I did the right thing by my fighter.”

McNeeley did continue to fight, against more of the soft touches he had gone against earlier. Only now, those touches weren’t quite so plump and cushiony. In his first post-Tyson bout, on Oct. 27, 1995, McNeeley took on Mike Sam for something called the U.S. Boxing Federation title, in Boston’s FleetCenter. And although he knocked out Sam in two rounds, he did so against a 37-year-old guy who had fought just once in the previous 10 years, that outing resulting in a second-round TKO loss. The beatdowns by that slice of pizza and Butterbean were to follow.

Vecchione fared better, at least temporarily, as he was voted Manager of the Year for 1995 by the Boxing Writers Association of America for his improbable feat of taking the limited likes of Peter McNeeley to a 36-1 record and a mid-six-figure jackpot against Tyson. But there would be no more pieces of pugilistic coal like McNeeley for Vecchione to transform into cubic zirconia; he was 64 when he died of a heart attack on July 2, 2009. Like McNeeley, “Double-V” would prove to be something of a one-hit wonder.

Yet the true takeaway of Tyson-McNeely has little or nothing to do with McNeely and Vecchione. They were bit players on a stage dedicated to a larger purpose. In retrospect, the quickie destruction of McNeeley marked the beginning of the end of the Mike Tyson that fight fans once regarded with a sense of wonderment. Some will insist the swinging of the pendulum in the opposite direction actually began on Feb. 11, 1990, with his stunning, 10th-round knockout loss to Buster Douglas in Tokyo, and there is some validity to that. But the Douglas who fought Tyson, even if it was a diminished Tyson, would have beaten a lot of good heavyweights that day. Before or after, Buster was never nearly as sharp or well-conditioned as he was in turning in his career-best performance.

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What the fight with McNeeley demonstrated was that the public still had an insatiable curiosity about Tyson, who might have been described as an odd mixture of O.J. Simpson, Nelson Mandela, Elvis Presley and Muhammad Ali. Depending on one's viewpoint, he was a high-profile criminal defendant, a political prisoner, a subject of outlandish tabloid rumors or the world's most recognizable boxer returning after a long and enforced exile. Love him or hate him, it was still impossible to ignore him. And yet ...

The fact that Tyson's handlers felt obliged to put him in with a gimme opponent like McNeeley in his much-anticipated comeback bout now stands as evidence that there were hints, which would become increasingly obvious, that the former "baddest man on the planet" was a fast-emptying vessel. What started with McNeeley would morph into defeats at the hands of Evander Holyfield (twice) and Lennox Lewis, which weren't upsets, and then into shocking losses to Danny Williams and, finally, Kevin McBride, who at best rate as small sniffs ahead of McNeeley on the smell-o-meter.

Then-WBO heavyweight champion Vitali Klitschko, doing commentary for German television for Tyson-Julius Francis on Jan. 29, 2005, saw enough in those 89 seconds five-plus years earlier to convince him that the beast that Michael Gerard Tyson had been was no more and probably never could be again.

"He still has a lot of power," Klitschko said in assessing what remained of Tyson. "But I saw a lot of his earlier fights, and he's not at all as sharp as he once was. It's pretty obvious Tyson is looking for easy money against easy opponents."

For both Tyson and McNeeley, the old saying did indeed hold true: Be careful what you wish for, because you just might get it.

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Radam G says:

OMG! I hoped that this old-arse thrashing would be brought up before the Massacre In Macau.

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All types of promotion was done to make McNeeley's fans, fanfaronades, fanboys, groupies and Iron-Mike haters think that the 15-to-1 underdog had a chance. Nyet! Holla!

the Roast says:

Don King knew how to put on a show. The Tyson-McNeeley mismatch was well hyped with a pretty decent undercard to go with it.

Quincy Taylor upset Julian Jackson by 6th rnd tko for the WBC middleweight belt.

Terry Norris avenges those two dq fights by stopping Luis Santana in the second winning the WBC superwelterweight title.

WBC lightweight champion Miguel Angel Gonzalez wins by MD over Lamar Murphy.

Bruce Seldon batters Joe Hipp for a 10th rnd tko for the WBA heavyweight championship.

All in all a good show. August 19th is also my birthday so I remember going out to dinner with friends before returning home to watch the fights for free on my pirate cable box. That was a good night.

New York Tony says:

A well-written and well-researched article, and certainly timely and relevant. But it should be made clearer than it has by Bernard Fernandez that Tom McNeeley was of a much higher caliber, both as a man and a boxer, than his son. More importantly, while Primo Carnera was not a great boxer or champ, he deserves more respect than to be compared to the likes of Duane Bobick. Such a comparison is not only unfair, it's historically inaccurate and indefensible.

oubobcat says:

[QUOTE=the Roast;61372]Don King knew how to put on a show. The Tyson-McNeeley mismatch was well hyped with a pretty decent undercard to go with it.

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The good old days when Don King promoted massive PPV events. Something I remember about the day and that event was the third Norris-Santana fight. That fight took place on ABC in the afternoon and King used that programming slot as more or less nice advertising for the PPV later that night. I read later that he actually let people in free to the MGM for that fight to fill the arena and then had the arena cleared when the fight ended and before the rest of the card started. If you watch the broadcast of that fight, look at how filled up the arena is for an afternoon fight well before the main event was set to begin.

The Commish says:

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Tremendous story and a fun memory. I watched this one in a packed sports bar on Long Island. Packed. SRO. Fifteen bucks gained you entry and one free drink. The owner told me he made more money on the night than in any three of his best nights combined.

That's why Tyson's return to the ring meant.

That, and the salesmanship of Don King.

-Randy G/

MCM says:

That was fun to read. I remember that fight well.

And it goes to show the kind of love-hate relationship we have with some of the more farcical aspects of boxing. Is it with fondness we remember this PT Barnum sucker-show? Maybe. And the way King & Vecchione were able to pull it off makes us almost laugh to remember.

An "adventurer" named Walter Scott took another man's mansion in the desert, convinced people he had built it with money made in "secret mines" and sold shares in his non-existent mines for thousands. Today, "Scotty's Castle" is memorialized in Death Valley National Park and his story is told by Park Rangers with humor and a certain amount of respect.

Americans have always had a soft spot for good con men, and boxing provides some of the best.

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Americans have always had a soft spot for good con men, and boxing provides some of the best.[/QUOTE]

Very good post, MGM. Welcome to the site. Hope you'll be as addicted to it as a lot of us have become.

-Randy G.

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the Roast says:

[QUOTE=oubobcat;61407]The good old days when Don King promoted massive PPV events. Something I remember about the day and that event was the third Norris-Santana fight. That fight took place on ABC in the afternoon and King used that programming slot as more or less nice advertising for the PPV later that night. I read later that he actually let people in free to the MGM for that fight to fill the arena and then had the arena cleared when the fight ended and before the rest of the card started. If you watch the broadcast of that fight, look at how filled up the arena is for an afternoon fight well before the main event was set to begin.[/QUOTE]

Good memory Bobcat. I forgot about that fight being on in the afternoon. Probably Alex Wallau and Dan Dierdorff on the call. Those two always make me think of one of my all time favorite KOs, Julian Jackson vs Terry Norris. Dierdorff was talking and then it was BOOM! "OOOOOHHHH!!!" Terry was down and not getting up.

Froggy says:

Who was the best fighter Tyson ever beat ? Trevor Berbick was strong like bull and smart like tractor, Larry Holmes was past his prime, Michael Spinks was an oversized lightheavyweight ! I say the best fighter he ever beat was Razor Ruddick, twice and both times controversial !

deepwater2 says:

Razor was tip top, I say Mitch Green was one of Tyson's toughest opponents. Tubbs was good too

Radam G says:

I'll holla Tommy Tubbs, Tony Tucker, Pinklon Thomas, James "Bone crusher" Smith, Alex Stewart, Mitch "Blood" Green, Frank Bruno, Fran's Botha, Bruce Seldon, and Andrew Golota.

Iron Mike straight-up whopped many solid contenders and some-beat-your-arse titlebelt holders. Mike was legit. And when with trainer Kevin Rooney was not full of syet. Holla!

Froggy says:

Very respectable group, I hope you think Razor at least belongs in the group !

Radam G says:

[QUOTE=Froggy;61528]Very respectable group, I hope you think Razor at least belongs in the group ![/QUOTE]

He rides with da group, and gives "Iron" Mike da pug cred that the Iron One deserves for being no joke, and one of the greatest of all times and fighting every other legit alphabet-sanctioning organization -- WBA, WBC, IBF, WBO, WBF and IBO -- heavyweight champion of his era. Holla!

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Iron Mike is a member of the IBHOF because he deserves to be !