Frank Graham, a New York sports columnist back in the days when there were three baseball teams and about 15 newspapers in that city, once wrote of a crotchety old outfielder named Bob Meusel who suddenly became willing to answer writers' questions late in his career after years of discouraging them saying: "He only learned to say hello when it was time to say goodbye.''

The same words can now sadly be used to describe Roy Jones, Jr.

When Jones was at his zenith his physical gifts were breathtaking. Although breaking nearly every rule of sound defensive boxing, Jones was so quick of both hand and foot that few fighters could touch him and when they did they paid a heavy price for trying. Although he would often retreat straight back when pressured while carrying his hands so low they seemed to be in his pockets (if he'd had pockets), his reflexes allowed him to survive such technical deficiencies until the calendar conspired against him, eroding those gifts and leaving him an empty and often defenseless shell who became a target for any opponent with quick hands and the boldness to come forward and throw them.

Even though he was widely considered to be the best fighter in the world for much of a decade, Jones for years refused to travel to Germany to try and unify the light heavyweight title by facing undefeated Dariusz Michalczewski, who at one point held the WBA, IBF and WBO titles simultaneously after defeating Virgil Hill.

Although Michalczewski had a boring style, his record climbed to 48-0 before two late-career losses in title fights sent him into retirement in 2005 at 48-2. For several years before those two losses, much of the boxing world clamored to see Jones square off with the transplanted Pole who fought only in Europe. People believed there was more reason for Michalczewski to fear using his passport than Jones should have had for using his but still people wanted to see the two of them mix to settle the issue.

Roy Jones, Jr. steadfastly refused, instead fighting every form of municipal employee (cop, fireman, postman, teacher, trash man) while insisting he would not go to Germany because of that country's well deserved reputation for stealing decisions from visiting fighters, especially Americans. Few in boxing felt it would ever get to the judges but Jones had never forgotten the shock of having been denied the 1988 Olympic gold medal in Seoul in a tournament in which the organizers were so ashamed of the decision that stole the gold medal from Jones that they named him the tournament's outstanding boxer. How you can be the outstanding boxer in an

Olympic tournament and not come away with gold was beyond everyone but the corrupt officials running the Games.

Jones never forgot a man's pocket can be picked even if he's wearing boxing shorts and has no pockets. Victimized once by corruption and vision-impaired international judges, Jones refused to put himself at risk again in that way. At least he did until he'd reached the point where, frankly, every time he goes into the ring it's a risk.

Now stripped of the high-twitch muscle reactions that once separated him from his peers, Jones can't win any more no matter where he fights if the opponent is capable. Yet he has decided to fight on, it was announced this week, agreeing to travel to Russia to do it. Why only he knows.

Jones has agreed to face cruiserweight contender Denis Lebedev in Moscow on May 22 despite the fact Lebedev is 11 years younger and is coming off the only loss of his career, the kind of split decision defeat in Berlin to German WBO champion Marco Huck that Jones once feared would be his fate if he journeyed overseas. Jones should still fear such an overseas trip but not for the same reasons.

Desperation of one type or another can drive a man to do foolish things and in the past few years it has driven Jones into places he would never go when he was young and had little to fear but bad luck. It took him into an ill-advised but long awaited rematch with the apparently ageless Bernard Hopkins (which he lost). It took him twice into harm's way against Antonio Tarver (who he ducked repeatedly when both were young) and Glen Johnson and each knocked him cold.

It even took him overseas to Australia, where comebacking former light heavyweight champion Danny Green disposed of him in one sad round, Jones going down once in a heap and then sprawling on his face as he rolled over before getting up and taking a beating until the referee mercifully saved him.

That loss was a year and a half ago and was followed by his lopsided losing decision to Hopkins yet here he is again – the Reluctant Dragon reluctant no more even though he's lost two straight, three of his last five and is 6-6 since becoming the first former middleweight champion to win the heavyweight title back in 2003.

Jones was never the same after that night with John Ruiz and is now a ghost of the fighter the world wanted to see face Michalczkewski back when Jones refused to take the kind of risk he now seems to welcome. When he should have used his passport he refused. Now he should only use it to go on vacation.

The old Jones, the one who was young, would recognize that. But that is the odd thing about boxers. Too many of them insult both the sport and its followers when their skills are at their most robust and then, after they become yesterday's news, beg to hang on when, like cranky old Bob Meusel, it is time to say goodbye.

Comment on this article

the Roast says:

Yep. RJJ has become another sad case of the fighter who will not say goodbye. Maybe he needs the money. We all gotta do what we gotta do if that's the deal. Love him or hate him, nobody wants to see Roy get hurt. Roy should have stayed at heavyweight after beating Ruiz. At the time, he could have fought Holyfield and maybe Tyson and made many millions. Good luck Roy but you know what time it is.

Condor says:

If Jones had retired after Ruiz, or even after Tarver 1, he'd be arguably the greatest P4P fighter of all time. All that would have been known was an Olympic robbery and the DQ to Montell Griffin, which he later avenged by 1st round KO. The perception of Jones circa Ruiz was 180 degrees different than it is today. And while many considered him to be a serial ducker, the bottom line is Jones loved titles and the way to fight him was to become his mandatory.

One would think Jones could just kick back, enjoy his HBO gig, and spend his money. But it's his call. Maybe he needs the dough and/or just can't get it out of his blood. I certainly never thought that Jones would take this path, but I had a hell of a lot of fun watching him all those nights on HBO during the 90's.

brownsugar says:

Condor has a point,... Jones may not be as entertaining a George Foreman but he's gifted at giving astute assessments while commentating about other fighters.... often his opinions are contrary to what his fellow announcers are saying,... but 90% of the time his opinion is the correct one... How can Jones see all this,.. and not be able to recognize his own limitations is beyond me... While he's commentating,.. his politcally correct comrads never mention Jones recent crushing defeats,.. they just banter,.. joke,. an commentate like it's 1999 again...Sometimes I have to look at the calender when they tell Jones "he threw that left hook just like you do Roy",... then Roy says "well there's only one Superman,.. but he was close"... It's jarring to me that Jones and his fellow commentators can suspend reality,.. go back in a time bubble and behave as though nothing has changed... It's also a strange contradiction to see Jones commentate so well on other boxers,.. but remain blind to his own circumstances.

Radam G says:

@B-Sug, it is about selling the product. I'm reminded of when I was in elementary school and Ken Norton was the commentating Roy Jones of those days. If I recalled right, Kenny was working NBC -- I mean working for NBC. He had just got destroyed by "Gentleman" Gerry Cooney. But he and Team NBC commentated like, "WHAT THE FUDGE?" DOUBLE d*mn what happen to Kenny a couple of weeks of ago. The show must go on. We got a job to do, and we are not concerned that Superman Roy -- I mean Mandingo jaw-breaking warrior Kenny -- doesn't follow his own advice. The game is all about optical illusions, and is stranger than

fiction. And definitely, "the theatre of the unexpected." And all of us diehard supporters' sanity is suspected. Ain't nuffin' wrong with suspended reality if that is your poison. Holla!

brownsugar says:

I agree with you there Radam,.. only Jones is stuck in permanent "Clark Kent" mode.. while Superman has forever left the building.. LOL

amayseng says:

at this point i dont care if these guys fight till they are 60. who are we to tell a man in america he is not allowed to live out his dream?

its ok for our government to send over boys and girls at the age of 18 to other countries to fight in a war with bullets and missiles dropped on them?

its better to die doing what you love than not to live at all..

Radam G says:

Ditto amayseng! Die we must. So it is better to do, then to just lust. On dat Yankee MOOLA it says, "In God We Trust." So do what you do the way you do it, until dirt nap time and the hollering of "ashes to ashes, dust to dust...." Holla!

amayseng says:

radam, i hate to sound morbid, and unless there are devestating facts that would dismiss a mans ability to fight or live his dream, then im down with it...i love this sport and would hate to see anyone seriously injured. however, how many of us had to give up our own dreams to take care of other responsibilities. how many of us on the outside did not get these opportunities for one reason or another? i say dream, and dream big....you have one life.... why waste it thinking about what you would have liked to attempted...

Matthew says:

@Condor. Roy Jones was certainly a once in a lifetime talent, and was able to do things in the ring that few could do. But even if he had retired after beating Ruiz, or even after the first Tarver fight, no one thinking rationally could possibly believe he was the greatest pound-for-pound fighter of all time. That notion is simply a joke. First of all, while beating a natural heavyweight after turning pro at 160 lbs is impressive, he didn't exactly challenge a world beater for a heavyweight belt, or even the linear champion as Michael Spinks did. Second, aside from beating Hopkins in '93 and Toney in '94, did Jones beat any great fighters at or near their prime? Absolutely not. He preferred to fight the Richard Halls and the David Telescos instead. The crime is that while he was at his peak, he didn't challenge himself. Granted, there weren't a lot of challenges out there for him, but there were some that he could

have taken. Finally, anyone who blatantly ducks Darius Michaelchewski does not have any claim whatsoever to being the greatest fighter of all time. Can't do it. I know that Radam likes to talk about Ray Robinson ducking Charley Burley, but Michaelchewski and Burley don't even belong in the same zip code.