

Lennox Lewis: He Got Out At The Perfect With A Lifetime To Relish It

Written by Frank Lotierzo

Monday, 28 March 2011 10:47



It doesn't matter how great you were or what weight you fought at. Nor does it make a difference as to how much wealth you acquired. Even if you made the most consecutive title defenses in boxing history, or you're considered the greatest fighter of all-time or thought by many to be the most recognized person on the planet, you most likely didn't leave professional boxing on your own terms or the way you had always hoped to when you were on top.

Joe Louis stayed too long and was tormented by the IRS for a majority of his life after he lost his final bout to future hall of famer and all-time great Rocky Marciano. Sugar Ray Robinson, the greatest pound-for-pound fighter in boxing history (and you're wrong if you think he's not) lost to Ferd Hernandez, Stan Harrington and Joey Archer during the last half of 1965, the final year of

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his stellar career before retiring for good. Muhammad Ali lost the last two bouts of his career versus reigning champ and all-time great Larry Holmes, and future WBC title holder Trevor Berbick, before finally retiring for good in 1981.

It's doubtful that the most respected boxing historian's alive today would argue that Louis, Robinson and Ali are the three most celebrated and accomplished fighters in boxing history. Yet, both Louis and Robinson fought too long after their prime while in declining health because they needed money. As for Ali, he may not have been hurting financially, but he couldn't turn down the eight million dollars he was guaranteed for coming out of retirement and fighting Larry Holmes for the title. And it very well may be that his fight with Holmes contributed to Ali's decline physically, more so than the 59 combined bouts he participated in prior to him challenging Holmes.

It's almost unheard of for great fighters to retire as champ and never attempt to return to the ring, especially after they've defeated the fighter who was perceived to be their biggest threat in the final bout of their career. Only five all-time greats retired from boxing at the exact right time and never attempted a comeback: Gene Tunney, Rocky Marciano, Carlos Monzon, Ricardo Lopez and Lennox Lewis. And Marciano, Monzon and Lewis beat the man who was thought to be their eventual successor in Archie Moore, Rodrigo Valdez and Vitali Klitschko.

Lewis retired in 2004 after his sixth-round stoppage of Vitali Klitschko in June of 2003. Despite trailing by two points on all three judges' scorecards, Lewis was declared the winner when the ring doctor stopped the fight due to a terrible gash over Klitschko's eye after the sixth round. And let's be clear about one thing, Lewis' victory over Klitschko was no fluke. It was a well placed punch landed by Lennox that opened the cut over Vitali's eye. And in the eyes of many observers, Lewis looked like he had figured Klitschko out by the end of the sixth round and possibly was on his way to a more clear-cut stoppage victory.

Klitschko pleaded for a rematch in the months after the fight, but Lewis, sensing his time had come and gone, smartly declined to fight Vitali again. And if you were Lewis, you couldn't have left boxing at a better time. Being that he was never heavier or less prepared for any bout of his career, and still managed to come out on top on the night Vitali probably fought the best fight of his life. Add to that Vitali stopped Kirk Johnson, Corrie Sanders and Danny Williams after losing to Lewis and then retired for almost four years. Then he came back and stopped the once beaten Samuel Peter in his first fight to win the WBC heavyweight title. And since his return Klitschko has won seven consecutive title fights, six by stoppage, and has barely lost a round.

What's admirable about Lennox Lewis and the way he retired from boxing is, he realized that after he beat Mike Tyson in June of 2002, he retired mentally as a fighter. He said after defeating Tyson, nothing much motivated him after that. Tyson, he said, was his "nemesis," and throughout his career, no matter what he had done, he was always compared to and asked about Tyson.

Lewis had clamored to fight Tyson for at least five years before they finally met. "That was the fight, really, that I was going to be remembered by," Lewis said. "I'd win all these fights and feel like I was beating everyone who was out there, and all the time they'd say, 'Yeah, but what

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about Tyson?' And I was like, 'What about him? I want to fight him. I'm ready at any time. It's him.' "

After beating Tyson conclusively, Lennox underestimated Vitali in what would turn out to be his last career bout and was fortunate to come out on top when they fought. So why chance it again? He understood the fighter who'd beaten Tyson a year earlier was never coming back and there was nothing left for him to prove. It was the ideal time for Lewis to bow out gracefully with his health, wealth and respect. Since then Lewis' legacy and career perception has continued to escalate. And a good bit of that is due to Vitali Klitschko's dominance of the heavyweight division since Lennox retired. The more Vitali continues to win, the better Lennox's victory over him on the worst night of his career looks.

Prior to Vitali's last bout against Odlanier Solis, Lennox spoke to the press regarding his bout with Klitschko almost eight years ago. And he was very gracious and said repeatedly how Vitali gave him one of the toughest fights of his entire career. Lewis also reiterated how difficult Vitali is to match up with and said he was troubled by Klitschko's 6'7" height. And based on what Lewis has been saying over the last few years, he has a ton of respect for Vitali Klitschko and clearly sees him as the top heavyweight in boxing today. In the years that have passed since he fought Vitali, Lennox has accepted that it was more than just him not being in top shape for his sub-par showing during their fight. If you read between the lines he's so much as said that Klitschko had a lot to do with it as well.

When Lewis was asked about the state of the heavyweight division, he said, "there aren't a lot of heavyweights out there right now. My era, you had myself, Evander Holyfield, of course Mike Tyson, Riddick Bowe. There were a lot of good guys. Muhammad Ali's era, there were a lot of great heavyweights. There were a ton of great guys then, but the era before Muhammad Ali's, or Larry Holmes' era, it was lacking. There weren't many. It has really dwindled down now and I say we're in a rebuilding stage. We're waiting for some new bright star to fight his way into the spotlight."

When the subject of a possible return to the ring by Lewis was mentioned, he made it emphatically clear that we'll never see him in the ring again other than as a commentator. Obviously, Lennox Lewis is at peace with himself and doesn't harbor a single regret over his career. Sadly, Lennox is on a short list of great fighters who got out of boxing at the perfect time. He'd no doubt earn a King's ransom if he announced he was going to come out of retirement and challenge Vitali for the WBC title. However, there's no need for him to do it. He doesn't need the money and the record books already have documented that he stopped Klitschko when they fought.

Lennox Lewis ended his career at the perfect time with no regrets. And with that he has the rest of his life to sit back and relish it. What a feeling that must be.

Frank Lotierzo can be contacted at GlovedFist@Gmail.com

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Radam G says:

Nice copy! I can dig it. Lennox Lewis is no doubt one of the best heavyweights ever. My ranking of heavy ATG champions are: [1] GOAT Muhammad Ali [2] Jack Johnson [3] Joe Louis [4] Rocky Marciano [5] (Rev.) George Foreman [6] Larry Holmes [7] Lennox Lewis [8] Gene Tunney [9] Jack Demsey [10] Mike Tyson.

I'm wrong! But I've been that way for so long! Danggit! I guess that I was born too early, or maybe the films that I've seem are all wrong. And maybe the people -- whom I have been schooled by -- of Sugar Ray Robinson's boxing days are just prejudice and crazy for so long. Life is a b*tch! Then you die! But living forever you still try. Against the Sugarman, busters and faders tell me that I'm always ready to lash. But about that I say BALDERDASH! I'm just going by what I have heard, and by the films that I see. It is like "Floating like a butterfly and stinging like a BEE!" I don't apologize, I just have to be me. Holla!

Radam G says:

List of the greatest ATG B -- bum -- heavyweight champions: [1] Ernie Terrell [2] Max Baer [3] Primo Carnera [4] Jess Willard [5] Tommy Burns [6] [7] Jack Sharkey [8] Leon Spinks [9] Dr. Vitali Klitschko [10] Dr. Wlad Klitschko. Holla!

Matthew says:

I agree completely. While I was never a fan of Lennox Lewis (his chess-like, dispassionate style bored me), I have to give him his due. He is, in my opinion, a top ten heavyweight who fought and beat all of the top heavyweights of his era (except for Riddick Bowe, who gave up the WBC belt rather than fight him) and beat every single one of them. He got out at EXACTLY the right time. Sadly, in that respect he'll continue to be an exception rather than a rule.

Bobby C says:

The big upset here is that Larry even made Radam's list. Effective use of the word balderdash!

Radam G says:

Come on Bobby C! Don't make me into a Larry Holmes hater. I haven't ever said that he was not great. I said that he is self overhyped. Dude is aight! I was just outta my toddler's years and Larry, Larry, so contrary put da beatdown on da GOAT Ali. I was so angry, but had stopped gettin' on my peepee on champs' laps by then, or I woulda, coulda, shoulda aimed and shot straight for da Easton Assassin's lap. SLISS! SLISS! P*ssed time on da champ lika mutha-RAGAMUFFIN!

Nevermind all of that, but then when my boy Slim -- Michael Spink -- got the decision over LH, LH acted so entitled and insulted the late, great Rocky Marciano in front of the Rock's brothers

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and other family members, who were giving LH nothing but luv leading up to the fight. I'm all about the kind. Not bouncing on the words of LH saying, "Kiss me where the sun don't [sic] shine, and dat is on my [little yellowish brown] behind!" ehehehe! Holla!

brownsugar says:

a very well balanced and unbiased piece... not what I was expecting. Heavyweight articles can get very skewed sometimes... but this isn't one of them... I look at the heavyweights as goinig through a cleansing process. And we know who boxings' equivalent of the "Tidy Bowl Men" are.. but just like geese on a winter migration... the competition and challenge will be back. and so will the fun of completitive, dramatic fights. Whether this will involve the KBrothers or not I don't know,.. but there are some signs of new life,.. new heavyweight blood is finally on the horizon.