



There's a growing belief among those who seriously study boxing that Sugar Ray Leonard is the best fighter of the past fifty years. Leonard really would fight anyone. His inquisitors were men like Marvin Hagler, Roberto Duran, Wilfred Benitez, and Thomas Hearns. Take away the four ill-considered fights at the end of his career, and his ring record would have been 35-and-1 with

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Written by Thomas Hauser
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25 knockouts. As it was, he lost three times and still “agonizes” over each defeat.

Leonard is in the news these days because of his recently-published autobiography, *The Big Fight* authored with Michael Arkush. The book’s headline-grabbing revelation is Ray’s account of being sexually abused in the early-1970s by an unnamed “prominent Olympic boxing coach.”

Two themes run throughout *The Big Fight*. The first centers on Leonard’s illustrious ring exploits. The second details a life spiraling out of control in a haze of fame, alcohol, and drugs.

Let’s start with the boxing.

One of the notable things about Leonard’s ring career is that he accomplished so much so young. At age twenty, he won a gold medal and was the darling of the 1976 United States Olympic boxing team in Montreal. He turned pro and, at age twenty-three, defeated Wilfredo Benitez to claim the WBC welterweight crown.

“I loved to hit other men,” Leonard writes in *The Big Fight*. “I loved to see them crumble. I was not one to hold back when my opponent was in trouble, no matter what chance there was of inflicting permanent damage. Fights can turn in a matter of seconds. The next thing you know, you’re the one getting beaten up and the guy doing it will not show you any mercy.”

The counterpoint to that thought is a scene in which Leonard recounts visiting Benitez in an assisted living facility in Puerto Rico two decades after their ring encounter. “I was devastated,” Ray writes of the hellish dementia that confronted him. He then describes his former foe: “His face and stomach bloated, his eyes staring blankly into space, his mind essentially gone.”

After dethroning Benitez, Leonard knocked out Dave Green. Then, still only twenty-four, he returned to Montreal for the first of two bouts against Roberto Duran.

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Duran had won 71 of 72 previous fights. He was a master craftsman inside the ring and a master of psychology outside it. In the months leading up to his battle against Leonard, he got inside Ray's head.

"I fought Duran toe-to-toe instead of exploiting my superior boxing skills," Leonard admits. "Why was I so stupid? Because I wanted to hurt Duran the way he hurt me with his constant insults. My desire was there. Unfortunately, my power was not. Roberto Duran, at least on that night, was the better man. He cut off the ring and used his expertise to outmuscle and outwit me. His heart was every bit as impressive as his hands. When the bell [ending the fight] rang, I walked toward him to touch gloves. He would have no part of it. Instead, he shouted at me in one final act of defiance, 'Fuck you! I show you.'"

The fight had been close. Duran won a 146-144, 145-144, 144-144 majority decision.

"The first few days after losing to Duran were perhaps the worst days of my life," Leonard writes. "I felt a deep sense of loss, as if a part of me had been taken away for good. I was certain I would defeat every opponent until there was none left and then retire on top like Marciano, invincible forever. I was not invincible. Equally disappointing was finding out that, contrary to the image I constantly tried to convey, I was not a model of composure who saved his best for the sport's grandest stages."

Five months later, Leonard and Duran fought again. "I was desperate for a real victory; not a moral one," Ray recalls. Employing speed and guile, he won four of the first seven rounds on each of the judges' scorecards. In round eight, a frustrated Duran said "no mas."

The victory was bittersweet.

"From that moment on," Leonard recounts, "the evening ceased to be about me and regaining my title. I took on a supporting role in a more complicated drama in which an icon to an entire continent became, in one sudden unfortunate act, an object of derision for the rest of his life. I was given more credit for losing courageously in Montreal than for winning cleverly in New Orleans."

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By the time Leonard beat Duran, the balance of power in sports journalism had irrevocably shifted from the printed word to television. That was a plus for Ray in that he was remarkably telegenic. The downside, he says, was that many boxing writers resented the fact that the launching pad for his success had been television rather than their reporting. They were slow to give him full credit for his accomplishments.

“A number of veteran boxing writers,” he says, “still saw me as a fighter created by television who had yet to defeat a star opponent. In their view, Benitez was not in that class. Duran was, but they argued that the outcome in New Orleans was more about him surrendering than my causing him to surrender.”

That changed on September 16, 1981, at Caesars Palace in Las Vegas, when Leonard fought back from the brink of defeat to knock out Thomas Hearns in the fourteenth round. Their encounter is widely regarded as one of the greatest fights of all time.

“The fight with Tommy was my greatest achievement in the ring,” Ray writes. “Thirty years later, it remains my defining moment as a fighter.”

When Leonard vanquished Hearns, he was twenty-five years old. “I was at the peak of my abilities,” he says. “And so was Tommy. I was nowhere near my best ever again.”

That assessment is correct.

The rest of Leonard’s ring career consisted of eight fights contested over the course of sixteen years. All told, he retired from boxing five times, coming back on four occasions. The one glorious moment during that stretch was a split-decision victory over Marvin Hagler on April 6, 1987.

Hagler had twelve successful middleweight championship defenses to his credit and hadn’t lost in eleven years. When he and Leonard met in the ring, Ray, despite being thirty years old, had fought only once in the preceding five years.

Leonard and Arkush nicely reconstruct the action in Ray's biggest fights. They also offer an inside look at the endless infighting between Dave Jacobs, Janks Morton, Pepe Correa and Angelo Dundee.

"Angelo was my official trainer," Leonard writes. "But he didn't train me the way people thought. I'd been trained already by Pepe Correa, Dave Jacobs, and Janks Morton. I used to laugh at stories in the paper that gave the credit to Angelo for swooping in a week or two before every fight with the magical formula to get me ready. No disrespect to him; but if I did not have a strategy by that point, I wasn't going to find one in a few days. His true value was in the corner during the battle and as a matchmaker. In those roles, there was no one else who could have served me better."

Dundee was also at odds from time to time with Mike Trainer (Leonard's attorney). According to Ray, the lawyer initially thought that Angelo would fulfill many of the traditional managerial duties in addition to his trainer's role for a 15-percent fee. But Dundee, Ray says, didn't live up to his end of the bargain. Thus, his contract was rewritten to cap the 15-percent fee at \$75,000 for non-title fights and \$150,000 for championship outings.

"The new arrangement would wind up costing Angelo millions," Leonard notes. "In the Hearn fight, for instance, he would have received \$1,800,000 of my \$12,000,000 take instead of \$150,000."

Then Ray acknowledges that residual hard feelings exist, saying, "Angelo complained in his book several years ago that he wished I had stood up for him in the contract dispute with Mike. With all due respect, he is totally off base. Working for me from my debut in 1977 through the Hagler fight ten years later afforded Angelo the chance to stay in the spotlight long after his first meal ticket [Muhammad Ali] retired and make a ton of money. The truth is, he has no one to blame but himself. He failed to do what he was hired to do."

"In this corrupt business," Leonard adds, "I had to pick one person to trust. That was Mike Trainer. He never let me down."

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Leonard's ring accomplishments are a matter of record. Over the years, much of his personal life has been shrouded in secrecy and rumor. That leads to the second theme in *The Big Fight*; Ray's tumultuous personal life.

Leonard grew up in a violent home. His parent drank and often quarreled about Cicero Leonard's profligate womanizing. Once, when Ray was six or seven years old, Gerta Leonard stuck a knife in her husband's back. "Forty years later," Leonard writes, "I still can't cope with any yelling and screaming, though I was unable to avoid it during my own doomed marriage."

Ray met Juanita Wilkinson when he was sixteen. It took a while for them to start dating. Then – "In no time, Juanita and I were having sex on a regular basis. We never used a rubber or any other method of birth control. We did it everywhere. In the car. In my house. In the woods lying down on my jacket. Everywhere. The inevitable came next. Juanita was pregnant."

On November 22, 1973, Ray Jr was born.

Over the next six years, Leonard admits, "I was neither a boyfriend to Juanita nor a father to Ray Jr. I made what I would describe as cameo appearances, showing up in their lives for brief stretches before disappearing again for days or weeks at a time. Either I hung out in the gym in pursuit of my next victory or I hung out with friends in pursuit of my next piece of ass. No matter what financial responsibilities I assumed for Juanita and little Ray, I saw myself as a free man in every sense of the word. After the three of us started to live together in the summer of 1977, I rented a separate apartment that I kept secret from Juanita. Little Ray didn't complain, though no amount of bribery could make up for my failings as a father. The gift he wanted most, my time, was the one gift I didn't give him. I rarely attended any of his sporting events. If he needed something, I handed a few bucks to my personal assistant to pick it up."

Years later, in 1984, a second son, Jarrel, was born. Meanwhile, Ray and Juanita were married on January 19, 1980 (her twenty-third birthday).

"We should never have been married," Leonard says. "That was entirely because of me, not her. I wasn't ready to commit. I chose to spend my last evening as a single man with another woman at a bachelor party. I didn't know the girl and I never saw her again. Marriage was not about to change my life. I promised myself I would still go to the coolest clubs and sleep with the

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hottest girls. I was Sugar Ray Leonard.”

During the course of his career, Leonard earned six purses in excess of \$10,000,000. Ten million dollars in 1980 adjusted for inflation would be the equivalent of \$27,300,000 today. For one fight. Ray fought Roberto Duran twice in 1980.

Then, in 1981, he beat Thomas Hearns.

“I thought I knew what fame was before the fight with Tommy,” Leonard writes. “It was nothing compared to how I was treated after the fight. I used to walk into Odell’s, a black nightclub in downtown Baltimore, and the girls would scream as if I were a rock star. I’d take the hottest ones I could find to the local Holiday Inn, sharing them with the rest of the boys. Once I beat Tommy, the amount of women we met and the caliber of those women rose to a whole new level. They were faster, looser, better dressed. I didn’t know their names. I didn’t care. We weren’t there to make friends. The first choice was mine. ‘The one in the red dress,’ I’d say. And presto; the woman and I would retreat to my bedroom, leaving the boys to fight over the rest. It wasn’t a matter of money; these women weren’t getting paid. They just wanted to be with the champ.”

Leonard was flying out of control.

“Wherever I went, whether in public appearances or intimate gatherings, Sugar Ray was the main event,” he says. “I wanted to hear how special I was all the time, and I surrounded myself with people I knew would tell me just that.”

Then alcohol and cocaine took over his life.

Leonard began using cocaine in the summer of 1982 after eye surgery for a detached retina.

“If I could handle Benitez, Duran, and Hearns,” he recalls, “I could certainly handle a little white

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powder. Besides, during my trips to California, the people I did coke with lived in mansions with swimming pools. They were some of the most high-profile stars in music and movies, people of stature. If they thought cocaine was cool, who was I to argue. The high I got from cocaine was incredible. Coke made me feel like I did in the ring, in complete control. I became funny, engaging, articulate. Coke made the anxieties go away. I was Sugar Ray again. Except [the anxieties] kept coming back. Which meant I needed more coke. Lots more. The high rollers I hung with were thrilled to share with the champ, coke being another symbol of their vast wealth and power. As time went on and my appetite grew, I couldn't wait for the next party in Bel Air or the next visit to a swanky club in West Hollywood. I paid for the stuff myself, doling out one thousand dollars here, two thousand dollars there. Those dollars began adding up in a hurry. One friend I used as a supplier estimates that I spent a quarter of a million dollars per year on coke."

Leonard recalls that, once during his tenure as an expert analyst for HBO, Ross Greenburg (then HBO's executive producer) was conducting a production meeting. Ray reached for a vial of cocaine and took a hit in full view of everyone. Greenburg, Leonard recalls, "kept talking as if nothing happened."

The 1980s, Ray says, were characterized by "one sad shameful incident leading to another." One time, he woke up in his room at a Las Vegas hotel-casino after spending the night with a woman he'd met in a club and discovered that his cash and \$35,000 worth of jewelry were missing.

The lesson he learned?

"From then on, whenever I had a girl, I stashed valuables in the hotel safe or under the mattress."

In late-1987, Juanita decided that enough was enough.

"The night that ended our marriage fit the pattern perfectly," Leonard remembers. "Me wasted, her ranting. I demanded she hand over her wedding ring, which I then placed on my finger. As the argument got more heated, I gave her a shove, accidentally scraping Juanita on the forehead with the ring's large diamond. Blood trickled down the bridge of her nose. I was horrified."

Juanita left that night with Ray Jr and Jarrel.

"I hate you," three-year-old Jarrel shouted at his father.

The divorce became final in 1990.

"Looking back," Ray says, "I can offer no defense for my conduct. Juanita gave me more chances than I deserved. I was wrong, and I have to live with these sins every single day. They cost me my first marriage and deeply harmed the relationship with my two older sons."

Leonard says that he's in a better place today. He has since remarried. He and Bernadette Robi have a son and daughter (Daniel and Camille).

More importantly, in 2006, Ray confronted his substance abuse problems and began attending meetings at Alcoholics Anonymous. Recalling the pivotal first meeting, he writes, "I stayed in the back row, my hat and shades on, head down, trying not to be noticed. Suddenly, it was my turn to introduce myself. 'I'm Ray Leonard,' I said. 'Your first name is enough,' I was told. I started over. 'I'm Ray.' Everyone laughed."

Leonard says that he has been clean for the past five years. One hopes that it continues; for his sake and the sake of his family.

In assessing the merits of *The Big Fight*, the first things to note are that the story flows nicely and Arkush captures Leonard's voice. At times, the treatment of issues is a bit superficial. There are a few more layers of varnish over Ray's feelings that he might strip away. But he's honest about his shortcomings as a father and husband in his first marriage.

He also deserves credit for acknowledging that Thomas Hearn should have been declared the

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winner of their second fight, contested long after both men had passed their prime.

“When the fight was over,” Leonard admits, “the only uncertainty left was the margin of defeat. I braced myself for the announcement. The judges must have been watching a different fight. It was ruled a draw.”

The most troubling issue surrounding *The Big Fight* concerns the aforementioned revelation that Ray was sexually abused in the early-1970s by an unnamed “prominent Olympic boxing coach.”

Three men were involved in coaching the 1976 United States Olympic boxing team. Speculation has centered on them, and one of them in particular. All three are deceased.

I don't condone sexual harassment in any form, and the crime is worse when the victim is underage. But Leonard had the platform to address this issue long before it became a factor in the sale of his book. To raise it now in a manner that casts suspicion on at least two coaches (and possibly others) who by definition are innocent seems unfair.

That said; *The Big Fight* is an interesting passageway into the mind of a great fighter, who describes boxing as an escape from places in his psyche that he otherwise dared not enter.

Before one of Leonard's fights, a camp assistant asked, ‘Boss, where are you?’ Ray answered, ‘Somewhere you'll never go. Somewhere you don't want to go.’

Writing of the seconds before the bell rang for round one of his fight against Wilfred Benitez, Leonard recalls, “I never felt more alive and more authentic. It was as if I entered a room where no one else was permitted to go, where there was no confusion and no fear, where I felt happy and at peace despite taking part in a sport that required merciless brutality.”

And speaking of the ritual ending to a long hard-fought battle, Leonard explains, “Some might

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wonder how two men who for forty-five minutes tried to destroy each other can embrace so soon after their battle is over. But as most of us who fight for a living come to recognize, the opponent is a partner on the same journey.”

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the Roast says:

I love Sugar Ray. I've said it before. The Showdown was THE fight that got me hooked on boxing. The matchup, the buildup, everything was great. I was fourteen in '81. I told everyone at school that Sugar Ray was gonna win. He was my guy. Then I sat there, with my Dad at his buddy's, watching Ray fall behind only to roar back and stop the valiant Thomas Hearn. I was out of my seat jumping around the room when the Ref waved the fight over. Hooked for life. Thanks Ray.

Radam G says:

Ditto, the Roast! Nuffin' but much luv and respect to da 1980s' Sugarman. He was thrillin,' and could be quite killin.' Holla!

brownsugar says:

too much info Sugar.. let the pedestrians divulge personal ,... we want to hear about your sparring session with Flo Low.

brownsugar says:

besides... you played your role in "The Fighter" to a TEE... that one scene told us all we needed to know about your tendancies to carouse about town...