



The review copy of *The Bite Fight: Tyson, Holyfield and the Night That Changed Boxing Forever* arrived in the mail a couple of weeks ago. The promotional flyer that accompanied the 222-page book called it “An unparalleled account of the infamous bite felt ’round the world.”

The Bite Fight....And The King of Cowboys

Written by Bernard Fernandez
Thursday, 30 May 2013 18:43

Written by George Willis, the excellent New York Post sports columnist, this behind-the-scenes account of one of the most bizarre nights in boxing history delivers on that heady promise. Everything you know, or think you know, about the fateful night of June 28, 1997, is in there, as well as some stuff you might not have heard at all.

But even George, gifted wordsmith and hard-digging reporter that he is, doesn't know every tiny detail of what went on after Tyson's teeth sank into Holyfield's ears as if they were a medium-rare filet mignon at Ruth's Chris. I have my own particular recollections of the aftermath of the "Bite Fight," and they can't be found in any book, magazine, newspaper or web site.

Until now.

TSS readers, you are about to learn of the (mostly) secret connection between Holyfield-Tyson II (Holyfield won their first matchup, and Tyson's WBA heavyweight championship, on an 11th-round TKO on Nov. 9, 1996) and the "King of the Cowboys," Roy Rogers.

Well, at least there is a connection as far as my wife Anne, our youngest daughter Amy, our foreign-exchange student, Izumi Tirado, and I are concerned. When Tyson got the munchies and the spit hit the fan, he altered what I somewhat foolishly had presumed would be a working vacation, with three days scheduled to be spent with my female entourage in and around the Los Angeles area following the big bout. I had arranged for lodging at a nice hotel in Marina del Rey, Calif., where the plan was for our group to do Disneyland, Universal Studios and, you know, the whole tourist bit in the brief time allotted. I'd been to L.A. before, of course, but this was to be the first such experience for the missus, Amy and Izumi.

But then Tyson chewed off a one-inch chunk of Holyfield's right ear in the third round, prompting no-nonsense referee Mills Lane to disqualify him prior to the start of Round 4, and ... hey, you know what they say about the best-laid plans of mice and men.

June 29 was not spent by our group in southern California; I was obliged to remain in Las Vegas, as was the army of media types who changed their travel plans to accommodate the post-bite set of circumstances. Anne, Amy and Izumi hung around the MGM Grand while I tried

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to find out what the very perturbed members of the Nevada State Athletic Commission planned to do in terms of disciplinary action for Tyson. On July 9, the NSAC socked him with a “lifetime suspension” subject to annual review (his boxing license was reinstated on Oct. 18, 1998) and a record \$3 million fine, the maximum allowable under Nevada law.

So we got a late start for SoCal, on June 30, traveling by rental car across the desert. I can't recall whether I possessed a cell phone in that technologically unadvanced age – if I did, the reception in the desert must have been pretty bad – so I stopped en route to call my editors at the Philadelphia Daily News and find out if there was anything new and interesting about the ongoing story on which I might need to be brought up to speed. It was like asking if the sun is hot and it gets dark at night. Of course there were fresh developments; I was told to check into the nearest hotel so I could make a few calls, gather any pertinent information and crank out another story or two or three.

On the way to that hotel, in Barstow, Calif., we passed a sign advising us that just ahead was the Roy Rogers Museum, where it was said that Roy himself and wife Dale Evans (birth name: Lucille Wood Smith), the “Queen of the West,” were on-site nearly every day, regaling visitors with tales of their many screen adventures amidst a treasure trove of memorabilia, including Roy's stuffed palomino, Trigger.

“Oh, we have to stop there!” exclaimed Anne, who, like me, was an unabashed fan of Roy – born Leonard Slye on Nov. 5, 1911, in that noted Wild West outpost of Cincinnati, Ohio -- through our constant Saturday-morning exposure to his movies and TV shows when we were children.

“Sorry,” I had to tell her. “I have to get to work on this Tyson stuff as quickly as I can. We can catch Roy the next time we're out this way.”

You can probably guess the rest. Our three days in Los Angeles had been reduced to part of a single day, which meant the only place I got to take Anne and the girls was nearby Universal Studios. Amy seemed to particularly enjoy that experience, probably because she spotted comedian/actor Pauly Shore on the grounds, which probably seemed like a big deal to your average 15-year-old. Pauly Shore? All I could think was, he's no Bob Hope. Or Roy Rogers, for that matter.

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We flew back to Philadelphia from LAX, which meant no return trip across the desert to Vegas and no stopping off at the Roy Rogers Museum. Then, on July 6, 1998, it was reported that Roy Rogers was dead at the age of 86. He was physically beyond our reach, at least in this dimension.

To this very day, I don't think Anne has forgiven Mike Tyson for the missed opportunity he caused her.

The Roy Rogers Museum in Victorville, Calif., closed a few years later and in 2003 its contents were moved to Branson, Mo., where another museum was operated by Roy and Dale's son, Roy "Dusty" Rogers Jr. But Roy Sr. had left instructions to Dusty to shut everything down once the museum started to operate at a loss, which it did, and it shut its doors permanently on Dec. 12, 2009. A public auction of Roy's most treasured keepsakes was held in New York City on July 15, 2010, with sales totaling \$2.98 million. Among the items which sold at much higher prices than the auctioneers had expected was Roy's 1964 Bonneville, which went for \$254,500; an even more cherished ride, stuffed Trigger, was purchased by a Nebraska cable TV network for \$266,500. Trigger's fancy saddle and bridle fetched a whopping \$386,500, one of Roy's shirts sold for \$16,250 and one of the beloved hero's favorite cowboy hats – white, of course – for \$17,500.

Which got me to thinking: What would the most distinctive memento from the front end of our Bite Fight adventure, the chewed-off piece of Holyfield's ear, be priced at if it still existed and were somehow made available to a collector looking for that extra-special piece of boxing history?

I went back through my own voluminous files – sorry, George, you weren't the only reporter to assiduously chronicle the event – and rediscovered that that the missing part of Holyfield's ear was, in fact, really missing. To the best of anyone's knowledge, it still is.

Mitch Libonati, a member of the MGM Grand's Convention Services staff, took possession of the severed piece of flesh, at least temporarily. "A buddy of mine said Evander had been bitten," Libonati said. "I didn't see it, but I did see that Tyson had spit something out. There was a melee in the ring after the fight and when it cleared up, I found it. I picked it up, put it in a latex glove and ran back to the locker room.

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“I told some of Evander’s people, ‘I have a piece of Evander’s ear. I’m sure he wants it.’” According to Libonati, heavyweight Michael Grant, a member of the Holyfield camp, took the piece of ear and placed it in an ice bucket that included several other latex gloves.

“But the piece didn’t get (to Valley Hospital),” Tim Hallmark, Holyfield’s conditioning specialist, said on June 29. “Somewhere in the locker room to the ambulance to the hospital, it never turned up. The plastic surgeon (Julio Garcia) and I were rooting around in three or four gloves in the ice pack, but we never found it.

“I’m not a doctor, but I imagine if somebody found it at this point, it wouldn’t be in very good shape.”

I’ll leave it to George to provide additional details, which he does in Chapter 12 of his book, cleverly entitled Ear Piece.

Garcia, who was born in Cuba and came to this country with his father, an orthopedic surgeon, 37 years prior to the Bite Fight, was watching the pay-per-view telecast at a pool party in Southwest Las Vegas when Holyfield and the upper portion of his right ear became separated.

“Some poor guy is going to get called in to sew him up,” Garcia, in Willis’ book, recalled thinking. Five minutes later, Garcia’s beeper began to buzz. He was being immediately summoned to the emergency room at Valley Hospital.

“Traditionally, human bites are the most prone to infection,” Garcia said of the task he was being asked to perform. “They’re worse than a dog bite. We have more bacteria in our mouth than a dog has.”

But Garcia had an even more daunting task. The latex glove containing the piece of Holyfield’s ear had been placed in a red biohazard bag, but when Garcia examined the bag’s contents, he found only a piece of skin, not the cartilage. And matters got worse from there; after Garcia left to change into operating garb and to scrub, he returned to find the red biohazard bag missing. He suspects it might have accidentally been thrown away, but who knows for sure? Perhaps a

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souvenir-seeking hospital employee or bystander had grabbed it.

“It’s not a locked facility,” said Garcia, who nonetheless performed a 45-minute procedure to repair, as best he could, Holyfield’s raggedy ear. “Any person could have come into that area and taken it.”

One story that has made the rounds is that someone from Holyfield’s camp wound up with the cartilage and sold it in New York where it was purchased for \$25,000 by a stockbroker. Another has it that the cartilage lies in a trophy case displayed in the memorabilia section of a restaurant in Cincinnati (Roy Rogers’ hometown!) although the granddaughter of the founder of the restaurant says the gristly thing on display there is actually from a chicken and was placed in a glass case as “a joke.”

Perhaps you have heard of the “Six Degrees of Separation” theory involving Kevin Bacon, in which virtually every other actor you can think of can be linked to fellow actor Bacon or one of Bacon’s movies within six easy-to-connect dots. For our family, that premise more or less holds true with Mike Tyson.

But first let it be noted that where we missed out on seeing the “King of the Cowboys,” we did not miss out on seeing the “King of Rock ‘n’ Roll,” Elvis Presley, in an eerily similar situation. Anne and I, natives of New Orleans, were living down South in the 1970s when an entertainment reporter friend advised me he could procure tickets for us, if we wanted them, to the May 5, 1975, Elvis concert at the Mississippi Coliseum in Jackson. Elvis diehards were pitching tents days in advance of those ducats going on sale, and Anne was, at best, lukewarm about attending in any case. We liked Presley’s music for the most part, but it wasn’t as if we thought he walked on water or anything.

“But the guy is not in real good shape,” I said of the fat Elvis, whose health was obviously deteriorating. “We better see him now, because we might never get another chance.”

It didn’t happen quite as quickly as it did with Roy Rogers, but Elvis passed away on Aug. 16 (Anne’s birthday), 1977, at the too-young age of 42. Which brings us to ...

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The night of June 8, 2002, in Elvis' longtime home of Memphis, Tenn. WBC/IBF heavyweight champion Lennox Lewis – who had had a piece of his left leg chomped by Tyson during a scuffle at a New York press conference to officially announce the much-anticipated matchup – savagely kayoed the erstwhile “baddest man on the planet” in eight rounds. A pundit might say that Lewis had sunk his own teeth into Tyson and chewed off a chunk, without so much as opening his mouth in the ring. Lewis' fists had served as his incisors.

I thought of all this when I made the obligatory pilgrimage to Graceland, Elvis' mansion-turned-museum, a few days before Lewis-Tyson, and every time I grabbed a, um, quick bite at a Roy Rogers Restaurant, a chain of fast-food joints in the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic states that, as of August 2012, have been reduced in number to 49 from its previous high of 650. There probably are more people around today who think of roast beef sandwiches, cheeseburgers and fried chicken rather than blazing six-guns and a galloping Trigger when they think of Roy Rogers, if they think of him at all.

Hard times, it would seem, can descend even on the most heroic of figures, as well as the most villainous. Tyson and Holyfield are bereft of all or most of their nine-figure fortunes, the aura of their fame dimming along with the boxing skills that made them icons. Tyson, now a reasonably placid stay-at-home husband and father, tours the country as the star of a one-man stage show in which he essentially beats himself up for the snarling pit-bull image he so relishly created when his bite was even more dangerous than his bark. Most of whatever income he brings in these days goes to the Internal Revenue Service and a long line of creditors.

On Nov. 14, I will be one of 14 inductees into the New Jersey Boxing Hall of Fame's Class of 2013, along with – you guessed it – Mike Tyson. I figure the ghosts of Elvis and Roy will be floating somewhere around the room, so connected are they in their own way to Mike and me.

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the Roast says:

This fight pissed me off beyond belief. Holyfield is my all time favorite fighter, coming off his biggest win ever, I got a house full of people ready to see if the first fight was a fluke or not and Tyson bites his ear. What? He bit his ear? We are all looking at each other like WTF? The fight continues. I'm thinking, OK that was really weird, but its back on and he bites his ear again? Fights over, DQ, no one can believe it. I'm standing in the middle of the room with my hands clasped behind my head like when you get arrested. Everyone is looking at me like now what do we do? Luckily I have a vast collection of VHS tapes. "Have you ever seen Foreman vs Ron

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Lyle? No? You're gonna like this."

tlig says:

I haven't read the whole article (but will at some point as I'm a little pressed for time), but just want to comment on the general consensus that Tyson bit Holy as a way to get out of another beating. I think people give him too much credit when they do that; I feel he just got frustrated and real angry and lost control of himself.

Did butting and holding have to do with it? Possibly. But I think it was just a simple issue of extreme frustration at not being able (allowed?) to do what he wanted in there. Either way that was a terrible thing he did, real ugly, and as fan I couldn't even try to defend his actions. I would have preferred him to lose legitimately than for it to end that way and 'til this day I find that bout very difficult to watch.

Carmine Cas says:

It's the one retaliating who always gets caught