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The genetic make-up of a “big fight” now seems entirely in keeping with the synthetic society in which we live, where window-dressing is everything and substance is something of a nuisance. Television broadcasters, in particular, are very clever at blinding us with bubbles. We feel almost grateful that they are thoughtful enough to slot in our favorite programs between the ads.

The “big fight” package of the plastic era is similarly slick and clever, where the “big fight” itself isn’t a fight at all but is skillfully wrapped in forward hype and post-analysis that can run for days. Did Floyd Mayweather cheat when he clocked Victor Ortiz with the only meaningful punch in their quaint little ballet? Did Chad Dawson foul Bernard Hopkins when he chucked the old boy to the floor in Los Angeles? Was Bernard hamming it up? And did anyone bother to measure his hang time before he hit the deck?

I know in my heart that I should take all this more seriously than I do, but please understand that I have been fairly battered senseless with such nonsense for quite a time now. As a 50-something who romped in boxing’s lush green grass before it was baked dry, the need to call upon my golden memories becomes ever greater in order to ward off despair.

So I haven’t spent these last few days wondering whether Bernard Hopkins is badly hurt, mildly hurt or cleverly hurt, because even at his peak he was never more than one of the best of a shockingly mediocre bunch. Tony Zale and Marcel Cerdan would have broken him in half. Joey Giardello would have shown Hopkins tricks that he never knew existed and Carlos Monzon would have regarded B-Hop as a comfortable assignment before moving back to the more challenging likes of Emile Griffith and Rodrigo Valdez. In the unlikely event that Hopkins would have ever graduated to the light heavyweight division in an earlier era, he would have been outclassed by Joey Maxim, Harold Johnson, Willie Pastrano and Mauro Mina, and quite seriously hammered by Bob Foster.

Forty-four years ago, another old man graduated to the light heavyweights and he possessed far greater credentials than Bernard Hopkins. Let us remind ourselves how Dick Tiger did it—without a moan, a groan or a whimper and with all the exciting entertainment you could wish for.

OK Computer

The computer said it and a lot of people believed it. Roger Rouse would beat Dick Tiger and win the light heavyweight championship of the world.

If you think we are all computer-mad now, you should have been around in the late ’60s. Ordinary people didn’t have computers then. The technology was confined to the intelligence community, large corporations and mysterious research firms peopled by folks in white coats and very serious spectacles. They carried clipboards and monitored computers the size of houses.

These machines were the cat’s whiskers and could do anything. Then the eggheads got a little bored with seeing the same old data and decided to pick on boxing. A computerised tournament to determine the greatest heavyweight champion of all time was announced, in which 16 famous titleholders were matched in an elimination contest.

The results began to cough out and those who knew their boxing began to wobble and reach for a reviving shot of Scotch. One could almost see the steam coming out of Ring editor Nat Fleischer’s ears as Max Baer found a way to outpoint the maestro, Jack Johnson. Rocky Marciano emerged the tournament winner, somehow managing to knock Jack Dempsey down six times in the process.

A similar middleweight tournament followed, in which Sugar Ray Robinson outscored Stanley Ketchel in the grand final. Now this one really did rankle with Mr Fleischer. He was moved to write a lengthy article about it.

No great surprise, then, that the computer plumped for Roger Rouse to take Dick Tiger’s crown by way of decision. Such exercises, after all, are only an elaborate form of number crunching, and Dick’s numbers were not greatly impressive. His up-and-down record, hewn from a tough apprenticeship and fighting consistently top-notch opposition, was as deceiving as his everyday radiant smile and graciousness.

What the electronic brain failed to grasp was that Dick Tiger, born Richard Ihetu, was an exceptionally special fighter, one of boxing’s classic late bloomers who had persevered to become a highly accomplished, undisputed world champion in two weight classes.

When he defended his title against Rouse in late 1967, Dick was in the autumn of his career at 38 years of age and had been a professional for more than 20 years.

He had twice held the world middleweight championship and had then astonished the fight fraternity by adding the light heavyweight crown to his list of achievements at the age of 37.

One of the sport’s great gentlemen, Tiger endeared himself to boxing fans all over the world with his sporting conduct and colorful fighting style. Yet he earned his reputation the hard way, through determination, great perseverance and years of hard fighting against the best in the business.

He launched his professional career in his native Nigeria, where he began to learn his trade against fellow Africans with such eye-catching names as Easy Dynamite, Mighty Joe, Koko Kid and Super Human Power.

Dick defeated most of his early opponents, but it was when he came to Britain in 1955 that his career began in earnest. Initially, he found the going tough as he lost his first four fights, but he resumed his winning ways with a first round knockout of Dennis Rowley at Liverpool and thereafter made rapid progress.

In May 1957, Dick was matched with future world middleweight champion Terry Downes in a battle of tough young prospects, a fight in which Dick showed his class by stopping Terry in six rounds.

Within a year of that fine win, Tiger knocked out Pat McAteer in nine rounds to win the Empire middleweight title and was soon fighting world-class opposition. Tiger dropped a decision to the tough Ellsworth (Spider) Webb in London, defeated Yolande Pompey, and then lost and won in successive fights against that classy contender, Randy Sandy.

In June 1959, Dick made his American debut with a 10-round draw against Rory Calhoun. The talented Calhoun beat Tiger in a rematch just a month later, but Dick’s aggressive, fighting style made him an instant hit with the American fans.

Like the great jungle cat whose name he had assumed, Tiger was a dangerous, calculating hunter of the ring, who stalked and attacked his opponent in cold and deliberate fashion. The talent-laden American fight circuit provided Tiger with the opportunity to hone his skills against the very best contenders, and thereafter he campaigned almost exclusively in the United States.

As the years passed, so his legend blossomed and grew, beginning with his first reign as the premier middleweight when he outpointed the rugged Gene Fullmer for the WBA title in October 1962. Dick’s success against Fullmer capped an impressive run in which Tiger was beaten only twice

in 14 fights over a three-year span.

He had lost a 10-round decision to Joey Giardello just two months after outscoring Joey in their first meeting in Chicago, and was deprived of his Empire title on a controversial points verdict to Canadian Wilf Greaves.

During that same period, however, Dick regained his crown by stopping Greaves in the ninth round, avenged the earlier loss to “Spider” Webb by stopping Webb in six rounds in New York, and scored prestigious victories over Gene (Ace) Armstrong, Holly Mims, Hank Casey, Florentino Fernandez and Henry Hank. How’s that for a batch of talent?

When Tiger dethroned Fullmer at San Francisco’s famous old Candlestick Park, Dick was hailed by many as an outstanding champion who would reign for many years to come.

The head-on, bulling, rushing style of Fullmer, which had perplexed and punished so many other opponents, proved costly against Tiger. Dick battered and bruised Gene all night long with sharp and precise punching.

It was a different story in February 1963, when Fullmer changed his style completely and employed jab-and-move tactics to force a draw with the somewhat puzzled Tiger.

But Dick removed any doubts about his supremacy just six months later, when, before his own ecstatic countrymen, he stopped Gene in seven rounds in Ibadan, Nigeria.

Comparisons

The formidable Tiger was now inviting comparisons with such middleweight greats of the past as Stanley Ketchel, Harry Greb and Mickey Walker. This muscled demon, said the boxing analysts, could have rumbled with the best of them. But there was a chink in Dick’s armor, which he could never truly repair. He couldn’t handle the smart cookies who jabbed, moved, slipped and improvised.

The marvelous Joey Giardello, ageing and creaking but still devilishly clever, came back to haunt Tiger in 1963. In December of that year, Dick renewed his rivalry with Joey in a title defense at Atlantic City, and the veteran Giardello finally hit the jackpot to win the crown on a hard-fought decision.

Joey promised Dick a return match, but a lot of water was to flow under the bridge before the twain did meet again. For the next two years, Dick found himself frozen out of the championship picture. Giardello, however, could not get the Tiger off his tail. In his quiet and methodical way, Dick shadowed the champion constantly, posting impressive reminders of his presence with a stoppage of tough Jose Gonzalez and a points victory over Don Fullmer.

Towards the end of 1964, Dick was temporarily sidetracked as he lost a disputed decision to the skillful Joey Archer at Madison Square Garden, but the defeat seemed to fire Tiger’s determination to greater heights. In 1965, he enjoyed arguably his finest year.

He began by stopping the tough, tank-like Rocky Rivero in six rounds, but it was in his next fight that Tiger released his mounting frustration and produced one of the most devastating performances of his career against the dangerous Ruben (Hurricane) Carter.

The hard punching Carter, shaven-skulled and of fearsome countenance, intimidated many an opponent. Not Tiger

The thrashing that Dick administered to Ruben couldn’t have been more single-minded or comprehensive. The breathtaking performance was arguably the masterpiece of Dick’s career, and he wasted little time in establishing his authority. He was the superior man in every department of the game and presented his first chilling evidence in the second round. He was pounding Ruben from a distance and pounding him just as emphatically at close quarters. A left hook suddenly dropped Carter for the mandatory eight-count, and Ruben’s famous snarl was now blending with a wide-eyed look of disbelief. He had lost his share of fights in a tough life but nobody had batted him around like this. Carter wasn’t on his feet for long before another whiplash left hook put him over again just before the bell. Referee Zach Clayton counted to eight before realizing the round had ended, and Ruben headed for the wrong corner before correcting his mistake in that certain unconvincing way that shaken fighters do.

Carter was cautious in the third, employing his jab more and steering clear of Tiger’s left hook. Dick just kept stalking and punching, as if powered by a sure knowledge that he could not be beaten. If Ruben thought he had found sanctuary, his hopes were shattered in the fourth round.

He was jabbing and moving nicely when Tiger found the mark with a left and a right to the head. Another right-left combination spilled Carter onto his back and now it seemed to everyone in the house that Ruben was on the way back to his dressing room.

But the Hurricane wasn’t quite blown out. Bravely, Ruben met Tiger head-on in an exciting fifth round and began to outpunch his opponent for the first time. Carter fired off some tremendous blows to the head and body and Dick seemed hurt and a little confused by the sudden turnaround. But the Nigerian warrior was a tremendously tough and durable man. He had never been knocked off his feet and only the freakish Bob Foster would put him down for the full count in an 81-fight career.

Carter was done. Even before the fifth round was out, Tiger had resumed command, punching and whittling away with his ceaseless aggression. Ruben gave it one last try in the seventh, mastering Dick briefly in a two-fisted exchange, but Tiger launched a punishing body attack that had his foe wilting and on the verge of going down again.

By the 10th and final round, Dick Tiger had people saying that he was the best middleweight on the planet, whatever the claims of Joey Giardello. Tiger closed the show in style against Carter, controlling the last of the exchanges to ease his way over the finishing line. It had been a thrilling and intriguing fight, despite its one-sidedness. Tiger hadn’t pitched a shutout but had done the next best thing on the scorecards of the officials. Referee Zach Clayton saw it 6-2-2 for Dick, while judges Jimmy Riccio and Johnny Dean tabbed the fight 9-1 and 8-1-1 respectively. Joey Giardello could ignore Dick Tiger no more.

October 22, 1965, marked the fourth and final meeting between the two likeable, battle-hardened veterans, and Dick levelled the score in the series by overwhelmingly outpointing Joey at the Garden to reclaim the world championship.

Wrestling with The Tiger

In the run-up to the Giardello fight, one tough man got a priceless valuation of Dick Tiger’s exceptional strength and ability. My good pal and former referee Ron Lipton sparred with the very best middleweights of that golden generation, including Ruben Carter, Emile Griffith, Holly Mims and Jose Gonzalez.

Evergreen Ron, who continues to defy the years by looking like a small chunk of Mount Rushmore, has especially fond memories of his time in the Tiger camp.

“While in the basement of the old Garden before the Giardello fight in ’65, I spent many hours with Dick in and out of the ring. Candy McFarland would box with him before me, and when Tiger was really warmed up, I would use all my skills, conditioning and power to survive him and give him good work.

“At the time I could do over 50 wide grip chin-ups to the upper chest and do 101 dips, sets of 100 push-ups and run hard for four to six miles. I had paid my dues but plenty in the camp of Ruben Carter and Carlos Ortiz. I have the pictures and our conditioning was in the back of beyond.

“Jersey Jones and Jimmy August had brought Tiger through his major successes and in camp his focus was deadly. I knew he would come in on time, ripped, defined and with the bones and couplings of a Terminator.

“He kept me there because I kept turning him, firing on the pivot, and used my skills to avoid his major body attack. At 154 lbs., I could not afford to be pinned in the corner by him and have him rip off body shots. He felt and looked like 172 lbs. with his rubber suit on to lose weight. His thighs and shoulders were like iron.

“His left hook would land on my powerful arms and I would ride out the shots that whistled past my headgear. He jarred me to the roots and now and then I had to take his body shots. Because of my speed of foot, he never landed the really big hook, but he nailed me with right hands that gave me pins and needles in my feet, they were so hard.

“I moved my head well, and unlike a knockdown I suffered once for about a five-count against Ruben Carter; Tiger never floored me. But his left hook felt like it shook loose every organ in my body.

“We were good friends, I got paid and I learned from him. I could make him laugh only after all the work was done, which made me feel great. His focus in training was one of a kind and his eyes in that ring were something to behold. I have never seen such intense focus and a deadpan look except for Joe Louis and Sonny Liston.

“I knew how Dick handled Hank, Fullmer, Carter, Gonzalez, Florentino Fernandez and the rest.

“He was the king of the shootouts if you chose to fight him. There was no one stronger at 160 lbs. than him. I don’t care what anyone says.”

Champion

Middleweight champion for the second time, Tiger looked forward to a title defense against world welterweight champion Emile Griffith, warming up for that task with a third round knockout of Peter Muller in Dortmund.

Dick seemed to do enough to beat Griffith in the eyes of most ringside observers, despite suffering the first knockdown of his career in the ninth round. But it was Griffith who captured the decision, which Ring editor Nat Fleischer condemned as one of the worst ever rendered in New York.

After eight months of inactivity, Dick followed Griffith’s example of moving up a weight class and caused a major upset by outpointing the powerful Jose Torres to win the world light heavyweight championship.

Torres claimed he had been weakened by pancreas trouble, but when the two fighters were rematched in May 1967, even a well conditioned Torres couldn’t contain the sprightly veteran. Tiger fought superbly to win a split decision.

By that time, the amazing Tiger had secured his place among the boxing immortals, yet his ageing body still had much to offer. He was to prove that point emphatically against Roger Rouse.

Rouse was born in Montana’s so-called Smelter City of Anaconda in 1935, one of seven children. In 1953, after finishing high school, he enrolled at Idaho State College on a boxing scholarship, winning an intercollegiate championship en route to compiling a record of 33 wins and two defeats.

After representing the United States at the Melbourne Olympics in 1956, Rouse turned professional in 1958, reeling off 12 wins and a draw in a busy campaign. A stand-up boxer with a solid punch in either hand, he seemed set to make rapid progress.

However, a serious stamina problem meant that Roger was able to compete only twice between March 1959 and March 1963 and he lost both fights. His future in the game didn’t look at all bright, but gradually he regained his strength and began to climb the ladder again, winning the California State light heavyweight championship from Sonny Miles.

After suffering a seventh round technical knockout defeat to Dean Bogany and then losing a close decision to the shrewd Hank Casey, Rouse defeated Miles again, reversed an earlier loss to Sid Carter and then scored a stunning victory over New York’s dangerous Johnny Persol.

However, it was Rouse’s three exciting battles with the brilliantly skillful veteran, Eddie Cotton, which helped to secure the Montana man’s status as the division’s outstanding contender.

His first bout with Cotton in 1965 followed a damaging points loss to the tough Henry Hank, and Roger was eager to make amends. He did so in a marvelous contest that ended in a draw, and the inevitable rematch proved to be no less thrilling as Rouse stopped Eddie on cuts in the seventh round.

After ol’ man Cotton took world champion Jose Torres to a desperately close and hotly disputed decision in their Las Vegas title fight, a third match between Cotton and Rouse became a major attraction in Eddie’s hometown of Seattle.

Rouse confirmed his mastery over the old stager by pounding out a majority decision to press his case for a world title shot. But first Roger had to wait for Jose Torres and Dick Tiger to settle their rivalry.

When Rouse’s chance finally came against Tiger on November 17, 1967, at Las Vegas, there was reason to believe that Roger was poised to enjoy his finest hour. He was in his prime as a fighter at 31 years of age, and even though he was faced with an unenviable assignment, the high technology of the age insisted he would prevail.

War

Concerned and bitter over the war being waged in his native Nigeria at that time, and the resultant loss of much of his hard earned property, Dick Tiger was in a determined and purposeful mood.

Rouse, the taller man, utilized his reach advantage to keep the champion at bay in the first three rounds, but Tiger looked strong and vicious as he punched heavily to the body.

Rouse succeeded in holding his own for the first eight rounds, though his work seemed to lack the vital dash of daring that is expected of a challenger striving to become a champion.

Rouse first came to grief in the ninth round, when Tiger’s punches began to take full effect. Belying his age, the champion stepped up the pace and launched an attack that underlined his reputation as an outstanding exponent of the left hook. Two such blows suddenly had Rouse in dire straits, sending him to the canvas with blood running from a deep cut at the right side of his mouth.

Showing great spirit, Roger clambered to his feet and survived the round, but his defense had been split wide open and the rampaging Tiger was now at his ruthless best. While Rouse displayed immense courage in the face of the onslaught, he couldn’t find a way out of the firing line and was subjected to further heavy punishment in the 10th round.

Tiger’s plan of concentrating his attack to the body was bearing full fruit, and every punch he threw now seemed to carry more steam than its predecessor. Dick cut Rouse down for the second time with a volley of body shots and a follow-up right to the jaw.

Like most hurt fighters whose minds and reflexes have been scrambled, Roger jumped up at “two” instead of gathering himself and taking a longer count.

Game to the last, Rouse continued to fight back as best he could, even though his cause appeared lost. Once again he managed to prolong his stay in the fight in that torrid 10th round, and he was still on his feet at the end of the eleventh, but one sensed that it wouldn’t be much longer before Tiger lowered the boom.

The bell for the 12th round brought the champion bounding from his corner with all the energy and urgency of an enthusiastic rookie. He bore the look of a man who could smell imminent victory. Chasing after Rouse, Tiger landed several punches to the head and body and then brought the curtain down in spectacular fashion.

A superb right hand shot struck Rouse with such force that it spun him round and sent him falling awkwardly on his face and right shoulder.

This time the courageous challenger could not escape the inevitable. Although he somehow managed to beat the count, his glassy eyes and unsteady legs prompted referee Jimmy Olivas to call a halt to the proceedings.

Victory

Dick Tiger thus registered his 58th victory in 76 professional fights against 15 defeats and three draws. Even though he was to lose his championship just six months later to another budding legend in Bob Foster, Dick remained the top light heavyweight contender for some time afterwards, scoring quality wins over Frank De Paula, Nino Benvenuti and Andy Kendall.

Finally, it was an old adversary, Emile Griffith, who ended Tiger’s career with a points decision in New York in July 1970. Dick was 40 by that time and still a magnificent physical specimen.

Nobody could have guessed that just over a year later, only months after announcing his retirement, he would die of cancer.

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