

On the Shoulders of Many: The Boxing Champion as a Symbol

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For me, it was Jim Lampley's late-round call—in the form of a question—during the Nov. 10, 2007 Miguel Cotto-Shane Mosley that summarized the public fascination with boxing champions and with the sport at its purest.

Following a truly ferocious exchange—Cotto's left hook slamming into Mosley's head and Sugar Shane's quick right hands ripping up the scar tissue around Cotto's eyes— and with the Madison Square Garden crowd roaring, Lampley posed a question which weighs on all our minds when two people exhort millions of fans across the world into frenzy with their indomitable will: "How do men do this?"

But in defining a champion and what solidifies his ability to elevate a raucous stadium crowd in the electricity of the moment, there may be no simple answer, only a brave demonstration of what it is to be champion. The 18,000-odd fans in the Garden that night knew instinctually and without apprehension that the two champions and their pursuit of victory was something to be revered.

Tracing the concept back to its Greco-Roman roots, a champion is not a person, but a mythic figure: flesh and blood, yes, but endowed with the imagination of an audience. When journalists, fans, and promoters refer to boxers as gladiators, it's the result of more than paging through the thesaurus. This speech is influenced by a history of warriors being idolized and spurred on by communities of fans.

To consider Julio Caesar Chavez or Felix Trinidad is to ruminate on fighters who have been lifted to cult or heroic status by adoring Mexican and Puerto Rican fans, respectively. And why? Because a Chavez or a Trinidad synthesizes an ideal image of what these communities are and what they aspire to. Hailing from Culiacan, Mexico, Chavez fought in the late 1980s and early 1990s as a man exhibiting the best of what a dirt poor son of one of Mexico's roughest neighborhoods could become on the back of sheer will. To be a nationalist champion is to walk the line between utter transcendence and community grounding. After any Trinidad victory, in the streets of San Juan, Tito's fans showered him with accolades. Trinidad was heralded as the best of Puerto Rico, but most importantly of Puerto Rico, embracing and embodying the values of the community as a whole. In Trinidad's case, we see a refusal to publicly appear speaking English and his use of the stage of his 1999 mega-fight with Oscar De La Hoya to a support wholly Puerto Rican causes: protesting for an end to US military testing on the island of Yucas. It's a given in most cases that boxing champions will hold some kind of celebrity, but the most celebrated use that celebrity to emphasize the interests of the national, geographic, or ethnic group that made them famous.

This heroic space is one where a champion faces the embrace, pressure, and forgiveness of his community all at once. When a fighter transcends his own skin to become a representational figure, the risk of failure and the fallout of that failure are multiplied. It's part and parcel to what it means to be champion. A primed and undefeated Thomas Hearns rode into his 1981 superfight with Sugar Ray Leonard on a wave of support from his Detroit fans. But after falling short, he faced the malice of the hometowners when the Vegas sportsbooks cleaned

them out. And yet just as the champion persevered, public support of Hearn as he entered a decade of stardom (with stunning knockouts over Roberto Duran and Juan Roldan and equally brutal losses to Hagler and Iran Barkley) never wavered. For Detroit, to believe in “The Hitman” was to believe in an idea, to believe in hope for a struggling industrial city.

There’s a magic to the boxing champion. When we talk about fighters who capture the public imagination, we’re appealing to the idea that one man’s struggle in a boxing ring for 36 minutes is a community’s struggle for recognition: to push out of society’s margins, to push out of poverty, to push out of discrimination. Whether the champion should elect it or not, when the gloves are laced up, he is a symbol.

There is no more enduring example of the champion as a symbol than Muhammad Ali: a figure so dynamic, but adaptable even today that his symbology seems impossibly fluid. How did a brash, handsome 22-year-old who represented no one except himself become an icon of resistance to mainstream America and negative racial views to finally become the Muhammad Ali cherished globally today? And what greater proof than Ali is there that a champion extends beyond his physical body? At a time when Parkinson’s has ravaged the most iconic athlete of the 20th century (according to Sports Illustrated), he is more than ever a holistic figure of the American ideals of triumph, grit, and transgressiveness.

The love of a champion is something as visceral and magnetic as the appeal of boxing in the first place. The sport’s central philosophies make it possible: the promise of triumph, anger, surrender, fear, and bravery. Where there are forces that would seek to damage or exploit boxing, no one person or institution can rewrite the mythology and all that is fundamentally epic and inspiring about a boxing champion. That’s at the whim of his community, his disciples. And they, like a champion under the hot lights in the 12th round of a toss-up fight, know only what they feel.