

As 2007 began, the ice that Evander Holyfield was skating on seemed dangerously close to cracking.

Evander Holyfield and the Impossible Dream

Boxing isn't like other sports. When aging players in other professional athletic endeavors can't perform anymore, the system forces them out. In boxing, there's always money to be made off an aging fighter; either as an opponent to pad a young prospect's record or as a "name" that sells tickets and engenders pay-per-view buys.

Evander Holyfield is an aging fighter. He's forty-four years old and has amassed a professional record of forty wins against eight losses and two draws over twenty-two years. "I've had a lot of good things happen to me in my career," he says. "Making the United States Olympic team [in 1984] was my greatest moment. Beating Buster Douglas [in 1990] to become undisputed heavyweight champion of the world for the first time was a high point. And knocking out Mike Tyson [in 1996] is up there with those two."

Then Holyfield utters the words that have become the mantra of his fistic faith: "But the best is yet to come. I'm not going to retire until I'm the undisputed heavyweight champion of the world again."

Reality would seem to dictate otherwise. In the past six years, Holyfield has won just three fights. In 2004, he fought a journeyman boxer named Larry Donald at Madison Square Garden and lost eleven of twelve rounds. He was so outclassed that the New York State Athletic Commission put him on indefinite medical suspension for what it called "poor performance" and "diminished skills." Evander subsequently passed a series of medical tests, at which point the commission removed him from its medical suspension list and placed him on administrative suspension. He has fought twice since then, both times in Texas, winning, but looking his age.

Is Holyfield's pursuit of the heavyweight championship a noble quest, or is he the victim of delusional self-indulgence? Is his impossible dream

within reach; or is he like Sisyphus, the Corinthian King of Greek mythology, condemned to roll a large boulder up a hill for eternity?

Given the myriad world-sanctioning organizations and competing promotional interests that rule boxing today, it would be hard for anyone, let alone a forty-four-year-old man, to unify the heavyweight crown. But that doesn't keep Holyfield from saying, "In boxing, it's all or nothing. You're either on top or you're just one of the guys in line trying to get there. I plan on getting to the top again. I'd like my next fight to be a championship fight. But if that's not available to me, I'll take a non-title fight to stay busy and keep my reflexes sharp. If I had a choice, I'd rather that someone else unify the titles and then fight me. One shot, one win, and I could retire as undisputed heavyweight champion of the world. But I'll fight them all one at a time if I have to. The only way they can keep me from achieving my goal is to not let me participate."

What sort of man is driven like this? Emanuel Steward, who trained Holyfield for two fights in 1993 (including his winning effort against Riddick Bowe), offers the first clue: "People who don't know Evander think he's a humble guy," Steward says. "But I've never met anyone with an ego like his. Evander is very nice and very polite, but his ego drives him. He loves being the center of attention as much as anyone I know. It might not seem that way, but he loves the spotlight."

Holyfield also loves a challenge. During his career, he has fought twenty-one fights against fourteen men who have held a version of the heavyweight crown. "I fight people who fight back," he says. "My whole career, I've fought people when they were at their best. You can't prove anything to me by doing it to someone else. You got to do it to me. And I don't look to beat somebody because he makes mistakes. I want to be better."

Holyfield is particularly fond of the challenge inherent in taking on bullies. "Evander was obsessed with beating Mike Tyson," says Steward, "because Tyson was a bully."

"All through high school, I ran from bullies," Holyfield acknowledges. "But if they caught me, I beat them up. I looked at Mike Tyson and I said to myself, 'This man is good. There ain't no sense in wishing him away. You got to fight him to become champion.' But I knew could break him."

In their first encounter, Holyfield knocked Tyson out in the eleventh round. "I'm really not interested in being the baddest man on the planet," Evander said afterward. "My only interest is being the best man in the ring."

The next time they met, Tyson was disqualified in the third stanza when he bit off part of Holyfield's ear. "Today's a great day," Evander said the morning after that fight. "I'm still the heavyweight champion of the world; I just got paid \$33 million; and I only had to fight three rounds. The only bad part is that one ear is a little pointy."

Determination is another facet of Holyfield's character. Lou Duva and George Benton trained Evander from his first pro fight through Holyfield-Bowe I in 1992. "One thing you have to realize," says Duva, "is that there

are better boxers than Evander and bigger punchers than Evander, but no fighter ever has invested more of himself in winning. No fighter that I know has Evander's drive and willpower. No fighter is as competitive. No fighter has his heart."

Evander's determination is coupled with total belief in himself and faith in God. It makes for a compelling package. And many people think there's another motivation for his continuing to fight. Money.

Logic says that Holyfield should be extraordinarily wealthy. Between 1990 and 1995, he had lucrative title fights against James "Buster" Douglas, George Foreman, Bert Cooper, Larry Holmes, Ray Mercer, Michael Moorer (two times), and Riddick Bowe (three times). Then, beginning with the first Tyson-Holyfield fight in 1996, he fought eleven times under the Don King Productions (DKP) banner for gross purses in excess of \$123 million.

But earning the money was only half the battle. The other half was keeping it. Holyfield has eleven children by seven different women (including five out of wedlock). He provides generously for all of them. There have been two costly divorces. It requires more than \$1 million a year to maintain the mansion that he lives in. For a while, there was a serious gambling problem. And his business judgment has not been good.

For many years, Holyfield was represented in boxing matters by an Atlanta attorney named Jim Thomas, who has a well-deserved reputation for integrity and intelligence. Thomas won't discuss the particulars of Evander's finances for reasons of attorney-client confidence, but he does say, "Fighters should have a simple philosophy when it comes to business away from boxing. Each deal should be money in, no money out. You license your name and put in some time in exchange for a percentage of the company and maybe an up-front payment. You do not—I repeat, you do not—put your own money into the ventures."

Holyfield didn't adhere to Thomas's philosophy. He didn't want to retire from boxing with \$20 million in the bank. He wanted to be a billionaire. As a result, he lost millions of dollars in a rhythm-and-blues-gospel record company and tens of millions of dollars in a black family-oriented television channel.

"I'm not fighting for the money," Evander says. "If someone gave me a billion dollars tomorrow, I'd keep fighting. I have a goal, and that goal is to become undisputed heavyweight champion of the world again."

But the fact of the matter is that Holyfield doesn't have significant income apart from boxing. And his most recent fight (against Fres Oquendo in November 2006) engendered fewer than 40,000 pay-per-view buys. Adding insult to injury, while Evander received a \$250,000 advance from promoter Murad Muhammad, the \$1,175,000 check that he was given after the fight bounced. The financial issues surrounding Holyfield-Oquendo are still unresolved.

Holyfield is currently trained by Ronnie Shields, who assisted Lou Duva and George Benton for much of their time with Evander. Shields knows

something about fighters past their prime, having trained Mike Tyson for his 2002 knockout loss at the hands of Lennox Lewis.

"I have no reservations about Evander continuing to fight," Shields says. "He's slower now than he was before. His reflexes aren't what they once were. But he trains hard; he does everything I ask him to do; he knows his way around a boxing ring; his heart hasn't changed. And one thing more," Shields continues. "Evander has faith. God says you can have a goal and, through prayer and working for that goal, you cannot be stopped. Telling Evander he shouldn't fight is like telling Noah, 'You're crazy, don't build an ark.' I honestly believe that Evander can be heavyweight champion of the world again."

But Holyfield's past trainers take a contrary view. Don Turner began working with Evander in 1994. They were together for sixteen fights; a run that ended after Holyfield was knocked out by James Toney in October 2003.

"Evander only hears what he wants to hear," says Turner. "And if you don't tell him what he wants to hear, you're gone. I'm a big fan of reality; and the reality is that Evander isn't what he used to be. I told him so and got fired. But I'd rather lose my job than go to a funeral."

"Evander had a great career," Turner continues. "But the time has come. The second Lennox Lewis fight [which Holyfield lost] was his last good fight, and that was seven years ago. I'm sure Evander believes he can win the championship again. When he was little, his mother told him that he could accomplish anything he wanted if he tried long and hard enough, and he believed her. It's unfortunate sometimes that people have such strong beliefs, but that's the way it is. Evander knows fighting. And the way the heavyweights are these days, in his mind, he thinks he can beat them. But what you think and what you can do are two separate things. A person can believe anything he wants, but nature has a way of telling you the truth. I just don't think he should be fighting anymore, and I hope something happens to get him out of boxing before he gets carried out."

Emanuel Steward is in accord, reminiscing, "The first time I saw Evander, he was a thirteen-year-old kid fighting in tennis shoes. What fuels him now is that he has total belief in himself; more self-belief than I've ever seen in any other fighter including Muhammad Ali. He's courageous, he has good boxing skills, and the fear factor is totally absent so it's hard to discount him completely; especially since, outside of Wladimir Klitschko, the heavyweights today aren't much. But a lot of people who like Evander and care about boxing are unhappy with his continuing to fight. I'm one of them, but there's nothing we can do about it."

"I saw Evander in San Antonio when he fought Fres Oquendo," adds Lou Duva. "It was sad. Evander was doing the best he could but he was fighting from memory; and at the championship level, you don't win fights from memory. Was he a great champion? Yes. Was he a credit to the sport? Yes. But anyone who knows boxing knows that he's not anything close to what he once was. He's fighting bums now, and he can't even look good against them."

If he keeps fighting, it's not going to end well. There's no better representative for boxing in the world today than Evander Holyfield. If he stops fighting now, he could be our greatest ambassador. But when he keeps fighting, it downgrades the sport. And God forbid something really bad should happen to him."

Very few fighters walk away from boxing when there's big money to be made. Lennox Lewis and Rocky Marciano retired while they were on top. Marvin Hagler and Michael Spinks were still marketable when they left the ring after losses in mega-fights. But these men are the exception rather than the rule. Most fighters stay on too long.

A fighter is at risk every time he steps into the ring. Holyfield is now at greater risk than he has ever been before. Outrageous self-belief lifted him to extraordinary heights and fueled his greatness as a fighter. Now that same self-belief threatens to destroy him.

Lennox Lewis is uniquely situated to comment upon Holyfield's continuing quest. Like Evander, he once reigned as undisputed heavyweight champion of the world. They fought each other twice. Their first bout was declared a draw despite the opinion of most onlookers that Lewis had won. In their second encounter, Lennox emerged with a unanimous-decision triumph.

The Lewis-Holyfield relationship was marked by acrimony at the time they faced each other in the ring. Evander called Lennox "arrogant," while Lennox labeled his opponent a "hypocrit." But those days are gone. Lewis now calls Holyfield "the best fighter I ever fought." Evander responds in kind, saying, "Riddick Bowe might have been the best at the time I fought him, but Lennox is the smartest fighter I ever fought. If I was going to war, Lennox is definitely one of the people I'd want fighting beside me."

"You have to know when to call it a day," Lewis says when asked about his own decision to retire. "It was easy for me because I had achieved all my goals. Before Tyson would have been too early. I had to fight Tyson to secure my legacy and be regarded by everyone everywhere as the true undisputed heavyweight champion. But once you've been undisputed champion, there's no higher goal in boxing. And no matter how good you are, you know that someday you'll have to give the championship up. So what you're really doing from that time on is boxing for money."

"After Tyson," Lewis elaborates, "any time was a good time to retire. After the Klitschko fight, I discussed my situation with a lot of people, including my mum. Being my mum, she knew which way I was leaning but she never said she'd like me to retire. She said she was with me either way. There were people who urged me to keep fighting, but there was something in it for them. My mum was only concerned about me."

Then Lewis's thoughts turn to Holyfield. "He has a big ego," Lennox says. "I don't. He misses the glory. I don't. I'm sure he has people around him who are telling him that he can still do it. You can always find yes-men who tell you what you want to hear and fire the ones who don't. They're getting paid, and you're the one who's getting damaged. Evander is an old fighter.

He's past his time. What he's trying to accomplish might not be totally unattainable given the heavyweight division today. But he's at a point now where he's taking serious chances with his health. I don't think he should be in the ring anymore."

"Let's say you have a friend whose girlfriend has broken up with him and married someone else," Lewis continues. "Your friend is devastated, so you say to him, 'Cheer up, there are other possibilities. There's a whole ocean of women out there.' I look at Evander and I say, 'Okay, your girl was boxing. It was great for a while and now she's treating you badly.' But there are other things that Evander can do in life; giving back, creating. There are plenty of fish in the sea. Evander is trying to accomplish at age forty-four what he already accomplished when he was in his twenties. I can't make judgments for other people. But I think it's sad when a person has the same goals at age forty-four that he had when he was in his twenties."

Holyfield knows what the boxing community is saying. "If other people want to put me down, that's their choice," he acknowledges. "But I think it's sad that people are painting a picture of me that I'm not smart enough to know when to quit. I watch tapes of my fights. There are times when I say to myself, 'I know what I should be doing but it's not happening. It's embarrassing to be in the ring with somebody, and you know you're better than he is but he's getting the best of you. I fought a few times when I shouldn't have because of injuries. That's the biggest problem I've had. But life is full of disappointments, and I can handle anything that comes my way. I truly believe that, if I do everything in my power to achieve my goal, God will help me to become undisputed heavyweight champion of the world again.'"

Having shared that thought, Evander turns to evaluating the current heavyweight champions. "The giant [Nikolai Valuev] would be the most difficult for me because of his size. You got to stand tall to get to him and he's in good shape. Klitschko is big and strong. He has a good right hand, good reflexes, and decent skills, so I'd say he's number two. Maskaev is what he is. I don't see him being a problem. Briggs would be the easiest. He has a breathing problem, asthma. Briggs can't go five rounds if someone fights him. But I can beat all of them."

Then Holyfield is asked, "What would it take to get you out of the ring? What would you construe as a sign from God that he wants you to do other things?"

"I already know that God wants me to do other things," Evander answers. "But he wants me to do this first."

"Is there a time when you might say to yourself, 'It doesn't look as though I'm going to be successful in my quest to become undisputed heavyweight champion of the world again. It's time to put boxing behind me.'"

"No. You don't dictate a timetable to God."