

Sugar Ray Leonard: Magic in the Boxing Ring

Sugar Ray Leonard is remembered in the sporting world as one of, if not the most; flashy, exciting and elegant fighters the sport of boxing has seen. Born Ray Charles Leonard on May 17, 1956, in Wilmington, North Carolina, named after the singing legend Ray Charles. Leonard adopted the alias 'Sugar' early on in his career upon the approval of Sugar Ray Robinson- with the label being suitable as Leonard, like his namesake, was sweet as sugar inside the boxing ring. Leonard had a fine amateur career, winning three Golden Gloves, two AAU championships, a gold medal at the Pan-American Games in 1975 and culminating in an Olympic gold medal at the 1976 Olympic Games in Montreal, Canada. Leonard finished his amateur career with a record of 145-5, with 75 knock outs. Upon winning the gold medal, Leonard told sports announcer and reporter Howard Cosell he was quitting boxing for good, and was planning to attend college. However, Leonard's father became ill, and with his family in need of money Leonard decided to turn professional. Muhammad Ali's head trainer, Angelo Dundee, was hired to be Leonard's trainer, and Janks Morton and Dave Jacobs as co-trainers, with lawyer Mike Trainer completing the team. Leonard made his professional debut on February 5, 1977, against Luis Vega at the Baltimore Civic Centre. In a fight that was nationally televised- and in which Leonard made \$40,000 from- Vega lost a 6 round unanimous decision. Under the guidance of his shrewd advisors, Leonard decided to remain independent by not signing a long term deal with a promoter, therefore having the flexibility to do business with whom he chose. As a result, Leonard gained popularity by reaching a wide audience demographic, with fights being broadcast on NBC, CBS, HBO and ABC. Leonard won his first 25 fights, and in the process defeated notable names in: Floyd Mayweather, Daniel Aldo Gonzalez, Pete Ranzany and Andy Price. After capturing the NABF welterweight title, Leonard received the opportunity to fight WBC welterweight world champion, Wilfred Benitez. Despite the importance of the bout, Benitez preparation was poor, with his handlers not happy with Benitez volume of training. In a closely fought contest, Leonard stopped Benitez in round 15 via a TKO with only 6 seconds left in the fight. After making a successful first defense against Dave 'Boy' Green, Leonard signed to fight Panamanian tough-man Roberto 'El Cholo' Duran. In what turned out to be back to back fights, Leonard lost the title against Duran, having being drawn into fighting 'El Cholo' predominantly on the inside, to Duran preference, only to reclaim it in the return match after employing a cocktail of skillful outside fighting and gamesmanship. Duran was visibly unhappy with Leonard's tactics in the second bout, and will be remembered for the 'no mas' call to end the fight. Sugar Ray then defended the title against Larry Bonds, after which he claimed the WBA light middleweight title against Ayub Kalule after moving up in weight. Whilst Leonard had moved up, soon to be arch rival Thomas Hearns was tearing apart the welterweight division after claiming the WBA world title by knocking out Pipino Cuevas. A fight was set for both the WBA and WBC welterweight titles between Leonard and Hearns, to be staged at Caesars Palace in Las Vegas, USA. After weighing in at 154lb (welterweight limit 147lb), and throwing fewer right hands in 14 rounds as he usually would in one, Hearns seemed over trained. Hearns controlled the early rounds with his long reaching jab. But in the middle rounds Leonard worked inside Hearns' lead and hurt him with left hooks. The fight was stopped in the 14th round, with Leonard becoming the universally recognised welterweight champion. After making a defense of his welterweight title against Bruce Finch, Leonard was diagnosed with having a detached retina in his left eye, and underwent surgery to repair the problem. In November 1982, after 6 months of deliberation, Leonard announced his retirement. Leonard made a one fight comeback in 1984 against Philadelphia's Kevin Howard, but was put on the canvas for the first time in his career. Leonard went onto win the fight however decided to once again retire. In May 1986, Leonard shocked the sports world once again when it was announced he would fight middleweight champion Marvelous Marvin Hagler. The bout gained a huge amount of interest, and was billed as a 'Super Fight'. Many felt with Leonard's time out of boxing, the injury, jump in weight and the fact that Hagler was an all time great middleweight, that Leonard stood little chance of being victorious. Hagler started the fight heavy favorite. In a bout which saw Sugar Ray fight virtually in entirety on the outside- and clinching when forced inside- Leonard received a controversial split decision. As a result of Leonard's sniping tactics, combined with Hagler's move to fight in an orthodox stance early in the fight, it was a difficult fight to establish a clear winner. Leonard announced his retirement- once again- one month after the bout. On November 7, 1988 Leonard came back and fought Donny Lalonde for both the WBC light heavyweight, and newly created WBC super middleweight titles- a bout which Leonard would win via way of 9th round technical knock out. In 1989, Leonard fought two old rivals: a return match with Hearns, and a completed trilogy with Duran. In the Hearns fight Leonard was knocked down twice, however the final decision was a 12 round draw. Against Duran, Leonard won a sedate 12 round unanimous decision- a fight in which Duran had a very low punch output. Leonard stayed out of the ring during 1990, but came back in February, 1991, to challenge WBC world junior middleweight champion Terry Norris. Past his best, Leonard lost a lopsided unanimous decision. Once again, post bout, Leonard announced his retirement. Leonard went through difficult times during the retirement stints, having divorced wife Juanita, and admitting to a cocaine and alcohol problems which he fought hard to overcome. Leonard remarried Bernadette Robi, daughter of famous composer Paul Robi. In 1997, at age 40, Leonard launched his final boxing comeback against former lightweight world champion Hector Camacho. In the ring, Sugar Ray was a shadow of his former self, and was stopped in 5 rounds. Later that year, Leonard was inducted into the International Boxing Hall of Fame. For a period, Leonard headed a boxing promotional company and he is now the face of the TV reality boxing series, The Contender.

About the Author

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