

Pros, cons of Hagler-Hearns

BOXING | STEVE MARANTZ

Those who think forecasting the Marvellous Marvin Hagler-Thomas Hearns fight is anything but a wish and a hope should note that tomorrow is the 30th anniversary of one of boxing's biggest upsets, as well as one of the most memorable moments in local pugilism. On April 1, 1955, Tony DeMarco of the North End stopped Johnny Saxton in the 14th round at Boston Garden and laid claim to the welterweight title.

DeMarco, born Leonard Liotta, was a 10-3 underdog against the dazzling Saxton, who had lifted the title from the legendary Kid Gavilan, and who was ostensibly tuning up for a defense against Carmen Basilio. Those who saw the fight say that DeMarco took the fight out of Saxton with a numbing body shot midway through the bout. They also say the night was a special transcendent moment that retains a stop-action vividness in their memories.

What separates winners from losers? Styles? Preparation? Biorhythms? Willpower? Luck? There is no way to know how fighters will mix, like two unstable chemicals joined in a test tube. In some of the biggest fights, the least likely patterns emerge. Ray Leonard, in his first fight with Roberto Duran, stood his ground and slugged, the very thing he and Angelo Dundee had trained to avoid. "I had to prove something to myself," Leonard said, puffy and bruised, after losing. Hagler laid back against Duran, waiting for the pressure that never came, and only snapped out of his daze in the last three rounds, just before Duran stole the decision. Thomas Hearns, the catalytic puncher, circled Leonard and jabbed like a dilettante until Leonard, the consummate boxer, assumed the role of the brute and knocked him out.

Understanding that nothing is understood, the analysis is an exercise of instinct mostly, guided by form.

In the case of Hagler-Hearns, the case for both fighters is compelling.

On Hagler's side:

● Hagler is at his normal weight. Hearns is moving up. Hearns has been unable to overpower large opponents such as Ernie Singletary, Murray Sutherland and Luigi Minichillo.

● Hagler has a better chin. He has never truly been knocked down - although the

slip against Juan Roldan was ruled a knockdown - and almost nobody can remember him being rocked by a punch, even though, as Hagler recalls, he was tagged by the likes of Tony Sibson, Roldan and Fulgencio Obelmejias. Hearns, on the other hand, was punched into a daze by Leonard and hurt by Harold Weston. "Both these guys are good punchers - they're going to land and land heavily," said Pat Petronelli, Hagler's co-manager. "We think Marv has the edge because he's got a better chin than Tommy Hearns."

● Hagler will psychologically dominate Hearns - he is mentally tougher. This derives from Hagler's belief that Hearns "chickened out" of their first fight in 1982, even though Hearns claimed he had an injured finger. This is also based on the slump Hearns endured after his 1981 loss to Leonard, when for a year it appeared his desire and ferocity had waned.

● Hagler will punish Hearns to the body. The genesis of this is Hearns' loss to Leonard. "Thomas is a frontrunner - he's an offensive fighter," said Hagler. "The only way he's good defensively is if he's moving away running like a rabbit. He uses his jab and reach effectively - no doubt about it - but you get inside his long arms and choke up his right hand and left hook and he is an ordinary fighter."

● Hagler is lefthanded. Hearns has almost no experience against southpaws.

● Hagler is more highly motivated. He needs a win over a great fighter to be recognized as a true great - the Duran victory raised more questions than it answered. Hearns has beaten Pipino Cuevas and Wilfred Benitez when they were at their peaks. Besides, if Hearns loses, he retains his 154-pound title.

On Hearns' side:

● Hearns is 26, Hagler 32. Hearns, with 41 fights, is at his peak; Hagler, with 64, may be past his. "In two of Hagler's last three fights - Duran and Roldan - he was a little off," said Emanuel Steward, Hearns' trainer. "That's a sign of age. When a fighter starts to age he is never sure when he'll be just a little off. A fighter can become old overnight. I saw it with Sonny Liston."

● Hearns is a bigger man. Look at the pictures. Check out the arm lengths. Forget

past weights - Hearns has grown to full maturity in just the last year.

● Hearns is adaptable. Hagler rigid in strategy. Hearns takes what is given - he boxed Leonard and outslugged a vicious puncher like Cuevas. Hagler, meanwhile, was slow to change tactics against Duran and failed to in his first fight against Vito Antuofermo. "If Marvin's fights don't go according to plan, he gets frustrated and he won't do anything until things are just right," said Steward.

● Hearns has been in three fights in the last four years in which he was given a chance to lose. Hagler has not been in a single such match since Bennie Briscoe in 1978. "People are going to ask him some questions he's going to get really bitter at," said Steward. "Can you take his punch? What if he hurts you? He hasn't had to deal with that for a long time. And it's going to affect him."

● Hearns has better hand speed and perhaps the best left jab in boxing. Hagler has never faced an opponent with Hearns' speed. Those who had decent speed and could box - Bobby Watts and Willie Monroe - gave him fits. "Maybe he can create a problem there," Hagler concedes. "But what is speed without power, or power without speed? Thomas has to give up something with him moving up. Duran lacked punching power when he moved up. The same thing can happen here."

● Hearns benefits from the scheduled 12-round distance - which is why it was the last negotiating point when the bout was made. The shorter distance prevents Hagler from exploiting his advantage in endurance. Hearns wilted after the 12th against Leonard.

● Hearns is the "hotter" fighter. His sudden KO's of Duran and Fred Hutchings in 1984 have put him on a roll. Hagler's KO of Mustafa Hamsho was impressive, but his previous outings against Roldan and Duran were not.

● Hearns' reach could force Hagler to do something he rarely does - pressure inside. Think back over the years - Hagler pressured Obelmejias in their first fight in an undersized ring, but otherwise he has dueled from a distance. Hagler will have to fight an unfamiliar fight.

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