

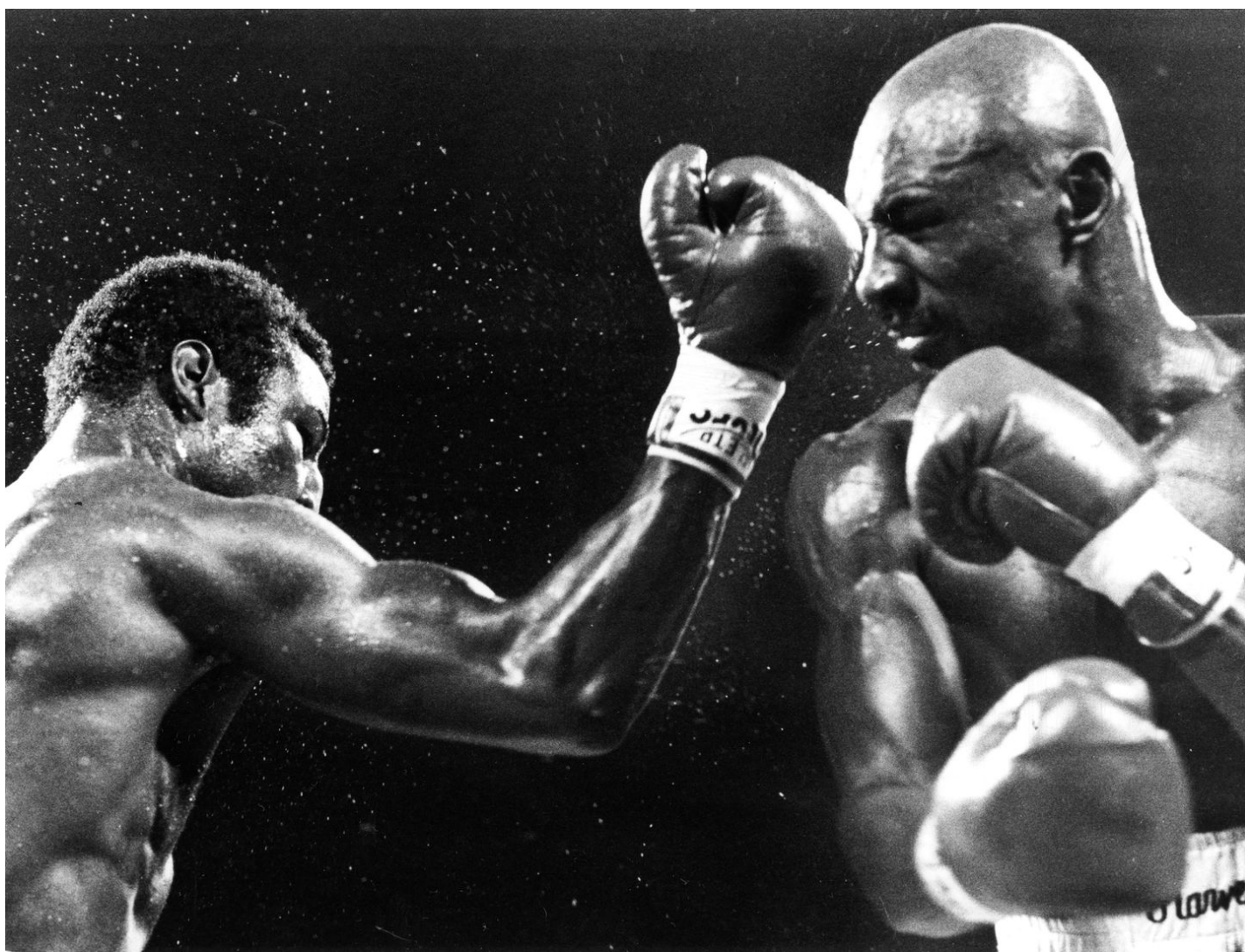
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Marvin Hagler's legendary career was truly marvelous, indeed

By **Steve Marantz** Globe Correspondent, Updated March 14, 2021, 12:19 p.m.



Marvelous Marvin Hagler, right, battled Wilford Scypion in a 1983 fight at the Providence Civic Center. JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF

In a pro boxing career spanning 14 years and 67 fights, Marvelous Marvin Hagler never was knocked down. His slip after a glancing blow from Juan Roldan in 1984 was ruled a

knockdown, but he never went down from a punch. That may be why [his death Saturday](#), at 66, seems so implausible, so unreal.

Wasn't Hagler immortal? If you doubt it, go watch the seven-plus minutes of his 1985 bout with Thomas Hearns, arguably the fiercest match in boxing history. The first round is legendary; action so immediate and reckless that spectators were left breathless. So were the reporters at ringside. I was there for the Globe, and I remember the veteran scribes who sat paralyzed after the bell, unable to type or scratch notes, me included.

Hagler and Hearns fought as if possessed in the parking lot behind Caesars Palace. A deep gash opened above Hagler's right eye, and Hearns's right hand fractured. In the third round, with blood running down Hagler's nose, the referee stopped the bout and asked Hagler if he could continue. Hagler snapped: "I'm not missing him, am I?" When the bout resumed Hagler attacked quickly, bounced three long rights off of Hearns's head, and watched him twist downward to the canvas.

And here's another thing about Hagler: the chip on his shoulder was so big he had to be immortal. There were too many grievances, slights, and injustices to rectify in one lifetime. Seconds after he stopped Hearns, HBO's Larry Merchant crowded him with a microphone. "I told you a long time ago I was a great fighter and you said 'you still have to prove yourself,' " Hagler crowed. "Well, did I do that tonight?" Minutes later, before the assembled media, Hagler said, "Maybe now I'll get some commercials."

Hagler's greatness was fueled by a lifetime of resentment, much of it carefully nurtured and cultivated to "destruct and destroy" his opponents. Nobody pricked his sense of grievance more than the one fighter with whom his career is inextricably bound, Sugar Ray Leonard.

In April 1987 Hagler and Leonard fought 12 strategic rounds at Caesars Palace. Not a brawl, as Hagler-Hearns was, but an energetic tactical chess match that favored Leonard, at least in the eyes of two judges, who awarded him a split decision that tore Hagler

apart. Broke his heart, actually.

The bout culminated a rivalry that reached back to the mid-1970s, when Leonard soared to fame and fortune as an Olympic gold medalist while Hagler hacked his way through the fight game's dense politics and modest paydays. Hagler couldn't help but envy Leonard, who had the "million dollar smile", smooth patter, and ring theatricality that translated to box-office gold.

Leonard arrived at his first title fight a little more than 2½ years and 26 bouts into his pro career. Hagler arrived after 6½ years and 49 bouts. They were on the same Las Vegas card, in 1979, when Leonard took the welterweight title from Wilfredo Benitez and Hagler fought to a draw with middleweight champion Vito Antuofermo. Not only was Hagler frustrated for not stopping Antuofermo and allowing the judges to have their say, he was miffed that Leonard pocketed \$1 million and he was paid \$40,000.

Hagler took the middleweight title from Alan Minter in 1980 and began a seven-year reign, which included Big Fights and rich paydays against Roberto Duran (1983) and Hearns. All the while he and Leonard circled and baited one another. But not until Leonard sensed that Hagler had wearied of boxing's harsh demands, and was past his prime, did he push for a match.

Leonard was past his prime, too, in April 1987. Hagler was a 3-1 favorite. Yet, Leonard won a split decision, because, as I wrote, he "had sold himself to two judges, not literally, but as a salesman sells a product, a con man sells a lie, or a magician sells an illusion. More importantly, he had sold himself to Hagler, who gave him just enough respect, and room, to close the deal."

Nearly 34 years later the bout lives on YouTube, as controversial now as then, still debated by mature (ahem) aficionados, and watched by young fans curious about a bygone era when boxing was a major sport.

The "stolen" decision was to Hagler no different than a hijacked presidential election.

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Though he banked \$18.5 million, he never accepted the loss, and turned down a \$20-million-to-\$25-million offer for a rematch. A guy whose single mother worked as a caterer and housekeeper and occasionally got a welfare check, and whose first pro fight paid him \$50, walked away from at least \$20 million. He went into retirement, rode into the sunset, on principle.



Hagler and Sugar Ray Leonard posed for a promo photo in 1986. DON EMMERT/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

Hagler's immortality is more than the sum of his grievance and resentment. He bonded with Brockton, his adopted hometown, a blue-collar city proud to elevate him alongside its first boxing icon, Rocky Marciano. His trainer and manager, the late Goody and Pat Petronelli, were Brockton guys who grew up with Marciano. When Hagler came to Brockton from Newark in 1970, as a teenager, the Petronellis gave him work on their construction crews, and invited him into their boxing gym. The three of them, an African-American boxer and two Italian-American handlers, formed a "triangle" that was a model of respect and trust.

Their relationship was such that by the time Hagler fought Leonard, and the Petronellis asked for a contract to formalize their share (which worked out to \$6 million), Hagler was offended. “Marv looked at us and said ‘After all these years you want me to sign another contract? Don’t you trust me?’ ” Pat Petronelli recalled. “So we didn’t. And he paid us.”

Saturday evening, after I heard of Hagler’s death, I called Pat Petronelli’s widow, Betty Whitney. She reminisced about the closeness of the three, and especially that of Hagler and Pat, which carried outside the gym, while Hagler and Goody were more ring-focused.

“Marvin was totally loyal,” Whitney said. “Which was very remarkable in that sport at that time — no one could penetrate that threesome.”

She paused and her voice quavered.

“Now they’re all gone. And, I guess, together.”

Steve Marantz is a former Globe staff writer who covered boxing.

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