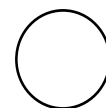


# The Art

# of the



# Draw

boxing

by don cogswell

**Lewis-Tyson I (!)** has now taken its place among boxing's great promotional achievements, special-special division, (it never hurts to utilize Orwell in these double-strange times), the one at the very top of boxing's promotional hocus-pocus emporium, at ease and comfort with the likes of Dempsey-Carpentier, although in this more recent "contest" the beast was slain and not the hero.

The opportunity, in the words of Arnold Glasgow, to see "the past returning through another gate" proved both pugilistically impossible, and promotionally irresistible, to those streaming into this fandango's ppv Big Top. While setting new monetary returns, and plumbing familiar fiduciary lows, this plodding denouement set to the tune of a golden oldie (with a Zolof remix) broke no new ground in the fields of promotional sleight-of-hand.

For practitioners of nostalgia as balm in recasting the world's wrongs, two partners of not-so-long-ago piloted a short (in number of bouts, near its end it seemed interminable), crownless career into pride of place among the carnies, barkers and pitchmen, in the Art of the Draw.

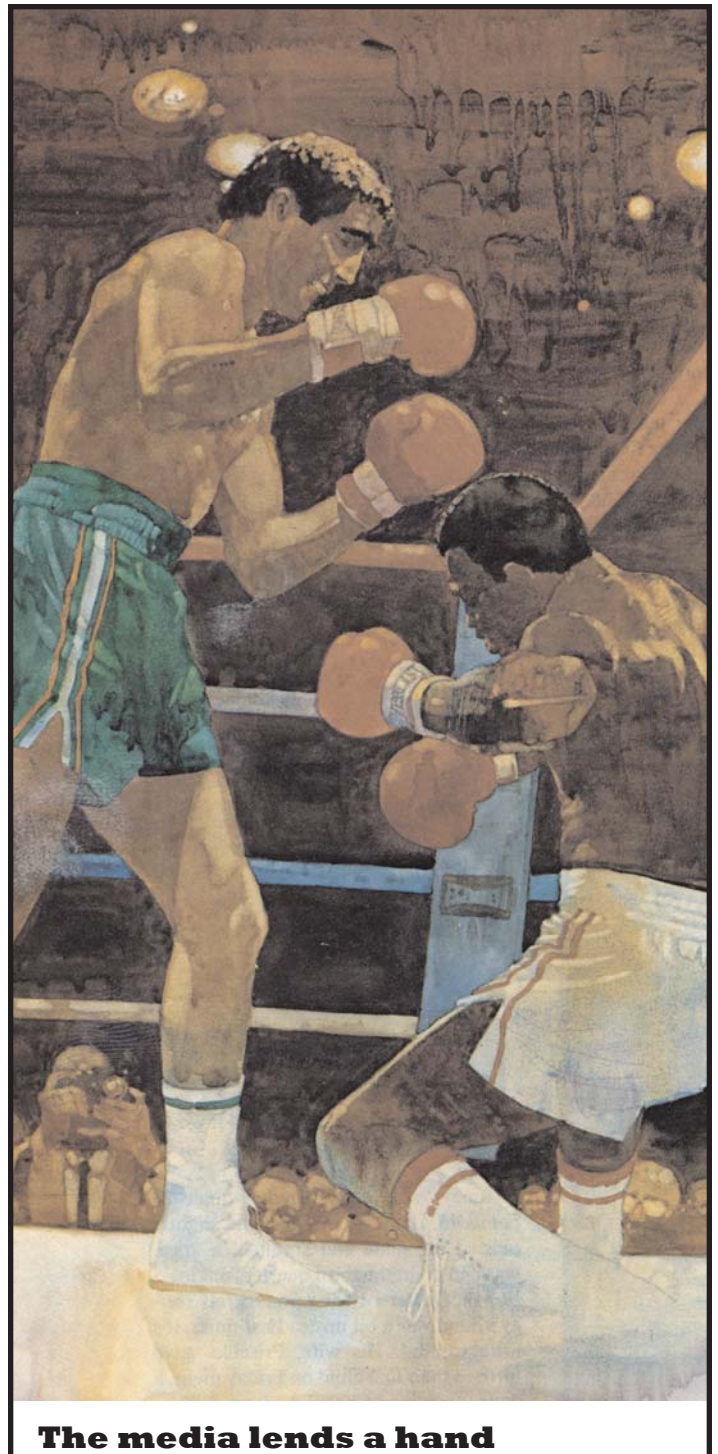
**Gerry Cooney's** career was piloted by **Mike Jones** and **Dennis Rappaport**. Dubbed the Wacko Twins, Mike and Dennis comported themselves like Hollywood Kamikaze pilot parodies but their effectiveness was more akin to those of the sons of the Rising Sun at Pearl. They scored a number of direct hits among the prevailing powers of boxiana.

Cooney's career began conventionally enough, a busy schedule against prospects, suspects and known non-violent offenders. He fought seven times in 1977, eight in 1978, and seven again in 1979. His trial horse opponents, both in 1979, were **Eddie "Animal" Lopez** and **John "Dino" Dennis**. The former was a rugged, lower case **Bert Cooper**, going the distance of eight rounds. The latter, a stand-up, hittable, short-lived rival of Gerry's, went in three. Through this apprenticeship, Cooney's profile as a fighter began to emerge. Tall at 6'7", he fought "big" if his opponent was willing. Advancing behind an educated, if not particularly powerful, left jab, Gerry's moves were designed to set up his legitimate power shot, a left hook to either the head, or more likely, legs slightly bent, a debilitating blow to the body. He clubbed with the right.

At this juncture the promotional spells were cast. After a six-month layoff, Gerry fought former number one contender **Jimmy Young** (TKO4 due to cut). Five months later, former top ten resident, **Ron Lyle**, fell in the first to debilitating body shots. Six months following, former "Champion" **Ken Norton** was brutally KO'd in one. Every one of these once remarkable fighters was near the end of his career. Lyle and Norton both immediately retired. Young campaigned on in a damaging twilight that stretched out to 1988. (During which he was 9-9 with one No Contest. Jimmy went the distance in all but the last, a TKO10 win over Frank Lux, who was 1-4 at the time.)

Cooney looked spectacular against the now immobile, once big name opponents, Ken Norton and Ron Lyle. The caving in of Lyle, the nearly ending of more than Norton's career with wicked, clean shots to the head while Ken sat, unconscious, on the corner turnbuckle, were memorable victories. They translated into marketing mother lodes. The image of once dangerous Black fighters pummeled into submission by a soft-spoken White giant from Long Island's suburbs captured the attention of boxing's casual white fan. In just three fights, spaced over a year and a half, the Wacko Twins had built the hottest commodity in the hurting business. *Sports Illustrated* put Gerry on its cover, which screamed, "The Contender". Gold Dust, or Star Dust, twins was more appropriate for this duo.

Boxing's cognoscenti argued that although these were spent fighters of high renown, Cooney had done exactly what was required of him, dispatching them quickly and ruthlessly ( timing being everything.)



**The media lends a hand**

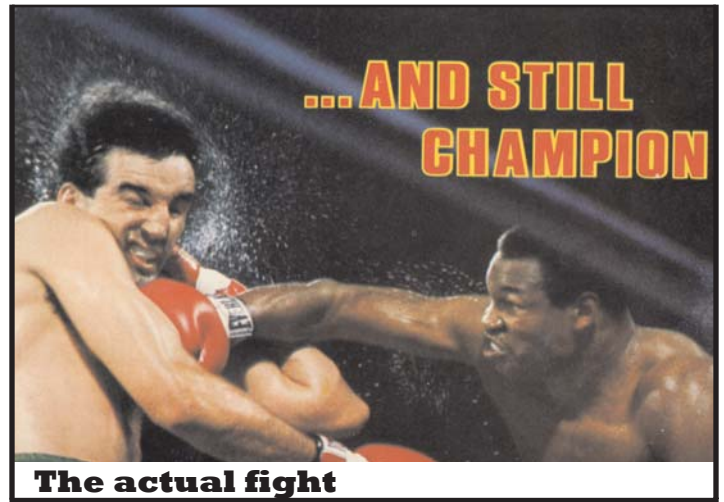
Heavyweight Champion **Larry Holmes** was in the heart of his lengthy reign at the time of Mike Jones and Dennis Rappaport's legerdemain. Holmes first became a titlist with his spirited split decision win over anointed WBC Champ Ken Norton in June 1978 and had successfully defended it eleven times against a string of modest-money contenders. They included **Alfredo Evangelista**, **Oswaldo Ocasio**, **Mike Weaver**, **Lorenzo Zenon**, **Leroy Jones**, **Scott LeDoux** and **Trevor Berbick**, more like promotional cannon fodder than large gate appeal. The unsavory

defense against a helpless **Muhammad Ali** presented money to the Champ he couldn't refuse. Cooney's people, despite fighting *none* of Holmes' contenders, insisted on *splitting the purse*. Leveraging alternate champion Mike Weaver, team Cooney successfully negotiated a per fighter take of 35% of the net, a potentially enormous return. It took a year to bring it to a ring walk.

The fight was guaranteed to be an interesting affair, every development magnified by the promotional buildup crafted by Jones and Rappaport. Holmes' self-promotional skills were as poor as his left jab was magnificent. It was of little help to Larry that his style so resembled that of his legendary predecessor, Muhammad Ali. (If Tyson, with his highly contrasting style, had succeeded Ali as champion, speculation would have been heated and rampant between the cognoscenti and the masses over a dream match up between Kid Dynamite and The Greatest.) Holmes as champion never drew that type of partisan passion, his sour persona often displayed in ill-considered ventings of his not inconsiderable spleen.

The Champion's anger was real. He seldom held much in reserve. Years of toiling as a sparing partner for both Ali and Frazier, difficulties in getting an established trainer, Holmes had gone on to win the grand prize only to find the cupboard bare. No love, and worse yet, he would be the first to grumble, no money. The final injustice of a press and people's contender in the guise of a dangerous white puncher cemented his resolve like nothing else conceivably could. Holmes was incredulous that members of the boxing fraternity thought Cooney had a chance. Past his prime, Larry Holmes would be as ready as hard work and motivation could deliver and this was understood. The hot, acerbic certainty of Larry Holmes played off against Cooney's soft-spoken, favorite nephew (one fully capable of mayhem, just the kid to call in the dead of night, when a suspected intruder's footfalls awakened one in the inner sanctum of the master bedroom suite). This was a compelling event for both urbanites and suburban folk.

**Victor Valle** worked the challenger's corner, **Rich Giachetti** the Champs; **Mills Lane** was the referee. The fight itself was tactical. Unlike his first round power displays against stationary opponents, Cooney fought cautiously with Holmes moving on the outside and both fighters trading jabs. Cooney found out quickly Holmes was not vulnerable to his left, the right hand being the chink in the Champ's armor. (The few times Gerry would stun Holmes would be with unexpected short stiff rights.) In the second round, Holmes decked Cooney, his first career trip to the canvas, with his own straight right. Gerry weathered the storm but these early factors



in the fight's equation would be played out, in retrospect, to an inevitable conclusion.

Cooney, now leery of Holmes' right, and unable to deliver his hook, stayed at range jabbing the more proficient boxer. The play was all Holmes who pursued his tried and true recipe of wearing down an opponent before risking too much too soon for a stoppage. "Getting an opponent drunk" was Larry's way of characterizing his approach and Gerry loosened up over time. Testing the waters for a conclusion in the tenth, Holmes found Cooney a bit too cognizant of his surroundings in what became the fight's best frame. By the thirteenth, fatigue, cuts, swelling and general punishment dropped Gerry for the second time and prompted Valle's interdiction.

The way the fight had played itself out slowly drained the promotion of much of its drama but follow up coverage was lavish, holding promise for great things to come. It didn't work out that way. Holmes went on to nine more defenses, nearly breaking **Louis'** consecutive title defense and **Marciano's** undefeated records, holy grails in the sweet science, only to suffer a galling loss to the first light-heavyweight champion to win the big one, **Michael Spinks**. (Larry, effectively at the end of his career, couldn't pull the trigger against the herky-jerky Spinks. No mystery as to why Holmes was testy.)

Cooney fought three insignificant fights over five years totaling less than seven rounds. Past his prime, he opportunistically challenged Spinks for the title, in June 1987, for a not inconsiderable purse, losing on a fifth round TKO. (These "campaigns", shadows of the Holmes quest, saw Cooney again unretiring to fight **George Foreman** in January 1990. Big (Old) George stopped him in two, ending Gerry's slide into career



caricature.)

## Today's Promotional Landscape

Or has unsafe at any speed ever kept a dealership from closing.

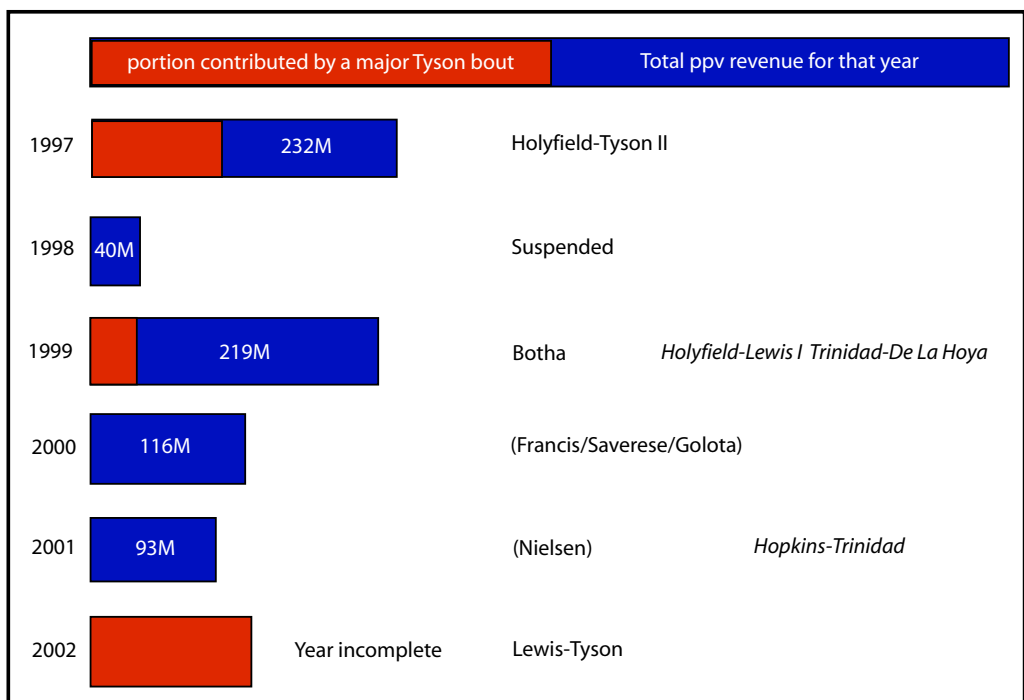
With Lewis-Tyson in the till, Rusted Pitted Broken Mike has invoked his rematch clause. Shelly Finkel, his promoter, is by all accounts a compassionate man. He has publicly expressed his concern for his charge's post-fighting days.

The pay-per-view buys for Lewis-Tyson approach 2 million, at \$54.95 a pop, setting an all-time fight revenue (well over \$100 M). The gate is more problematic, technically a record at \$17.5 million but undercut by reported undisclosed sanctioning fee underwriting, ticket scams gone south, deficit scalping, deep discounts on late ticket sales, etc.

Lewis' initial bargaining position for a rematch is \$30M or he retires.

*How important has Mike Tyson been for pay-per-view?*

(Parenthesized are "free" telecasts, italicized major non-Tyson ppv contests.)



Is Lewis-Tyson II inevitable? Can it be made compelling enough to pay? There are several story lines at work here.

Tyson has a Jack Dempsey opportunity to regain the general public goodwill if he wants it. Jack was the original heavy-weight intimidator whose persona was soiled, his public confused, and both exploited to handsome advantage, in his perceived armed services shirking shenanigans. The VFW's poster boy, (an organization that seized on Dempsey's miscue to legitimize its existence as the Palmer raids in perpetuity), Jack had taken the still-longest voluntary sabbatical of a sitting heavyweight champ, three years, spent primarily cavorting among silent screen hopefuls. The two **Tunney** ass-whippings, and at 31-32 years respectively, this aging slugger was dominated by Gene despite the "long count", transformed Jack in defeat into a potential American icon. Dempsey fulfilled this second chance go-round. So could a Humble Mike.

Dempsey couldn't fight Tunney again if the public perceived nothing more than a replay was at hand. Eight months (time dimming the communal memory) following his first defeat, Jack KO'd **Sharkey** on essentially a foul blow, emerging pugilistically reborn. Is a similar scenario possible with Shot Mike, who remains boxing's "compelling personality" of record? Can some of the people be fooled some of the time?

Broke Mike needs the dough really bad. Jack was having a swell time in lotus land but duty called. The Tunney money kept him in the black until The Crash in 1929 (this is where the Tyson parallel gets really scary).

Unlike Tex Rickard's entrepreneurial wizardry, Lewis-Tyson I was a corporate event. So will Lewis-Tyson II. The largess, even at nickels, dimes and quarters on the dollar, are too great. Only a corporate sponsor could have shepherded Mad-Cow Mike over such a long road to market. Expect Spent Mike's posse one last attempt at driving home the tainted beef.