

Falling Hard: A Rookie's Year in Boxing

Chris Jones

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The author was an enterprising journalist for the Canadian National Post when he got his first taste of the sweet science. Once bitten by the boxing bug, he has had a hard time trying to shake it, as much as he claims to try.

The young reporter spent a year on the boxing beat, chronicling such bouts as Otis Grant vs. Roy Jones, Jr.; Francois Botha vs. Mike Tyson; Lennox Lewis vs. Evander Holyfield, (twice); and Prince Naseem Hamed vs. Cesar Soto. The fights range in prestige and perks from small amphitheatres in the (relative) sticks to Madison Square Garden, the Mecca of Boxing.

Jones is the "rookie" of the subtitle (which somewhat is misleading: the reader could naturally assume the reference is to a novice boxer, not the writer himself) and as low man on the sportswriting food chain he must contend with deadlines from his own paper and the disdain of fellow reporters.

His protestations that boxing brings out the best and worst in men are somewhat cliché-ridden. "I question my easy affection for a sport that routinely leaves men shattered," he writes. But it's exactly this affection that dares to portray the pugilists as people, rather than mere athletes who beat up others for a living. Everyone has a story to tell, it seems; unfortunately they are often similar and not very pretty. And while the author obviously shows preferences, his "good guy" doesn't always win.

"Controversy" is the watchword of most of these fights, full of outlandish tactics by the combatants, with various excuses and accusations, and poor judgement on the part of those judging. Following the controversial first match between Lewis and Holyfield, in which Holyfield was deemed champion on the decision of a judge of dubious qualifications, Jones writes, "I know boxing will never change. It's always been rotten. Dirty. Suspect." Yet he keeps coming back, a martyr to the cause. At one point, he relates a fantasy about pounding the bejesus out of an obnoxious passenger on a plane. It seems he's learned his brutal lessons well: "I've become a man more whole thanks to the destruction of others."

He treats the fight game like an inattentive lover. Before the second Lewis-Holyfield fight, he declares how crucial a good fight and fair decision are: "For Lewis. For Holyfield. For me, too. The fight game needs a special night to keep me." His insinuation of himself as a focal point of the book might be a detraction. It would have been better had he stuck to the "up close and personal" accounts of the fighters. Their character analyses makes for the most interesting part of *Falling Hard*.

RON KAPLAN (September / October 2002)

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