



Bob Verdi In the wake of the news

A raspy vote for 'the Rock'

If the story of 1985 shall read like a broken record, so be it. But when the fighters step into the ring for Saturday night's main event in Las Vegas, Ben Bentley will insist on the last word.

"No contest!" he says. "The other guy doesn't have a chance."

The referencé is to Michael Spinks, an unbeaten light heavyweight who figures to serve as the latest punching bag for Larry Holmes, the oft-unretiring heavyweight champion. Should the form chart prevail, Holmes will achieve more than another notch in his International Boxing Federation title, whatever that is.

Holmes, with one more victory, will extend his record to 49-0—theatrically enough, exactly 30 years after Rocky Marciano completed his career with such a mark, whipping up on Archie Moore in New York. However, comma, whether Holmes will be applauded as roundly as was Pete Rose



'Marciano was relentless. The only fighter I ever saw who never took a step backwards. Never.'

—Ben Bentley

Rocky Marciano

when he broke into Ty Cobb's trophy case . . . well, there'll be a joust over that issue.

"No contest!" assures Bentley. "The other guy wouldn't have a chance."

Bentley means Holmes, and Bentley means business. He is a Chicago heirloom, this chap with gravel in his throat and a cigar in his mouth. Bentley's current address is director of public information for the Park District. He moonlights as referee-in-chief for WGN radio's popular "Sports-writers" program. More often than not, though, Bentley will rewind his watch to those days of yore, when he toiled for the International Boxing Club, when he and "the Rock" were *compadres*.

"I may be partial," Bentley admits, "but I think Marciano would have handled Holmes. Holmes is a good fighter, don't get me wrong. But Marciano, with that unorthodox style, would have come out of that crouch, that low stance, from the ground, with his tongue sticking out, and boom! No contest!"

Bentley was chairman in charge of publicity for several of Marciano's bouts, and talk about a labor of love. Bentley was forever at the Rock's side, whether it be at training sessions or press conferences or marathon meals.

"Fridays," Bentley recalls. "Marciano would always take Fridays off when he was training. And he'd always wink and say, 'Keep Friday night open.' That meant a big, homecooked dinner. And I mean big. Marciano loved to eat. Tremendous amounts of food. Of course, if you went to a restaurant, he'd eat a lot, too. But be prepared to pay. Rocky would always carry three or four single dollar bills in his shirt pocket. When it came time for the check, he'd say, 'Geez, I left my money back in the room.'

"He watched his dough, yes. And he was careful about who was around. He didn't have any entourage, any of the parasites you see a lot of in boxing now. No valets or hairdressers or court jesters. He was all business. Marciano was one of the only fighters I ever remember who enjoyed going to the gym, enjoyed working out. He'd say, 'I'm going to my office now.' I never forgot that. Loved to train. A unique fighter, a

Continued on page 9

Verdi

Continued from page 1

decent human being."

Holmes, an engaging sort himself when so moved, has chosen to belittle Marciano's resumé, knocking the Rock for feasting on lesser foes, including his own brothers. Well, rare is the champion who hasn't fattened up on a tomato can or three. But facts are facts. One of Marciano's brothers, Peter, was too young to serve as a foil. Louis Marciano did fight Rocky, but only in an exhibition for charity in Portland, Me. Rocky's list of conquests does not include any in that state.

"Holmes' remarks about that are not prudent, not appropriate and not accurate," Bentley steams. "Look at the men Marciano fought. Jersey Joe Walcott, Archie Moore, Jersey Joe Walcott. He broke Ezzard Charles' nose. He fought a pretty good fighter in Roland LaStarza, and LaStarza wound up with broken blood vessels in his arm. I mean, Marciano was relentless. Even when he went down, he'd come right back at you. The only fighter I ever saw who never took a step backwards. Never. He was old school. Take one shot to give two.

"Away from the ring, though, Marciano was different. He was an avid newspaper reader. I remember one night we're flying on this little plane, a four-seater maybe, and we're hitting all sorts of bumps. Rocky never knew what was going on. The rest of us are turning pale white, he's reading the New York Post. Fearless, he was. He didn't mind being alone, but did mind being woken up.

"He'd get up early, do his roadwork, have a cup of tea, a rubdown, and then go to sleep for a while. And nobody interfered with his sleep. He was almost a gentle guy, until he came into that



Muhammad Ali



Larry Holmes

ring with that Boston Red Sox cap on. He was from Brockton, Mass., he was a good friend of Ted Williams and he wore a Red Sox cap. Rocky was like a kid when Williams would talk to him about hitting."

Bentley concedes that Holmes has exhibited admirable endurance, along with a powerful left, but Bentley assures that Holmes would have been a better sparring partner for Marciano than a viable challenger. Marciano would have swarmed Holmes, who would have been unable to jab with any success, or so Bentley surmises. He wouldn't have held out much hope for Muhammad Ali, either.

"Ali might have dazzled Marciano early, but then Marciano would have come on and worn him out," Bentley says. "Sooner or later, Ali, like Holmes, would have wound up on the Boulevard of Broken Dreams. Marciano could have kept on going after his last fight. But he wanted to be remembered as the undefeated heavyweight champion, with 49 victories and 43 knockouts. He'll always be that.

"He left us too soon. Died in a plane crash in 1969. I haven't seen them all, but he was the best I've seen. I'll be watching Saturday night, and I realize that records are made to be broken. But Marciano will still go down as one of the greatest fighters of all time. Remember, he never took a step backwards. And could he ever eat!"