

Back to the glory days

by MIKE BAKER

Be honest, who else threw down 80 bucks over the weekend to watch the much-hyped rematch between Tyson Fury and Deontay Wilder?

Granted, I've always been a sucker for big time sporting events. Okay, you got me. I've always been a sucker for sporting events in general, no matter how big or small. But, this fight, a contest that pitted two undefeated heavyweights against each other with both the WBC world championship and The Ring title on the line, felt like something special.

As I sat in front of my TV at home, it dawned on me that this spectacle could conceivably be the spark that reignites, or rather reinvigorates, the sport of boxing.

Once upon a time, way before I was even thought of, boxing was considered the number one sport in the world. The world heavyweight champion, whether it be Joe Louis, Rocky Marciano or Muhammad Ali, was the top dog on the global sports scene. Nobody, not Joe Namath, Babe Ruth, Gordie Howe, or even Pele, came close to being as big a star as the aforementioned heavyweight boxers.

As we moved into the mid 80s, there was perhaps no bigger celebrity in the world than Mike Tyson. Earning the moniker of 'Baddest Man on the Planet', Iron Mike was a destructive force in the heavyweight division from his debut in 1985, all the way through to 1996/97, when his back-to-back fights with Evander Holyfield captured the attention of the entire world.

In truth, that period in the mid to late 90s, when the sport had three genuine behemoths atop the heavyweight division in Tyson, Holyfield and Lennox Lewis, was the last truly great period in heavyweight boxing. While the 2000s has undoubtedly brought about some of the very best lower weight fighters to ever grace the sport - think Floyd Mayweather, Manny Pacquiao, Oscar De La Hoya and Canelo Alvarez, the heavyweight division has suffocated thanks in large part to the dominance of the Klitschko brothers.

From 2004 to 2015, the pair basically owned the heavyweight division, holding the WBA, IBF, WBO, IBO and WBC titles hostage. While they each defeated numerous contenders, it was always in more of a methodic, strategic way rather than the blood and thunder, heavy hitting style most casual viewers demand. While I, for one, can appreciate paying to witness a boxing clinic, a lot of fans do not. The Klitschkos turned a lot of people off of heavyweight boxing.

This past Saturday, Tyson Fury, and to some degree Deontay Wilder, lifted a long forgotten about sport back into the spotlight. In what many decreed to be a surprise, Fury, long considered a student of the game and a boxer in the same ilk of the Klitschkos, adopted a new offensive style, taking the fight to one of the very best KO artists in heavyweight boxing history. Tyson Fury scored a TKO victory over Wilder, a man who previously had a 42-0-1 record, with 41 knockout victories.

It was one hell of a victory. In the aftermath, Fury, during his post-match interview, serenaded the crowd inside the MGM Grand Garden Arena with his own rendition of Don McLean's 'American Pie'. Fury is an odd character with an infectious personality. On top of that, he has an incredible story behind him. In 2015, Fury defeated Wladimir Klitschko to claim the WBA, IBF, WBO, IBO, The Ring and lineal heavyweight titles. He was considered, by many, to be the new face of the sport. Sadly, that wasn't to be.

Depression is a vicious thing. Shortly after defeating Klitschko, Fury fell into a dark abyss, abusing drugs, binge drinking and binge eating on a regular basis. He relinquished his world titles a little more than a year after winning them. At this time he had ballooned to more than 400 pounds. Tyson Fury, it appeared, was done.

That was until 2018, when, after seeking help and coming out the other side, Fury announced his return to heavyweight boxing. He scored comfortable victories in his first two fights back. Then he challenged Wilder. On Dec. 1, 2018, in what was the pair's first

encounter, Fury and Wilder battled to a 12-round draw, although the general perception, mine included, was that Fury won the fight. Following the draw, he picked up two more victories before facing off with Wilder once again.

A third match between the pair is, reportedly, already in the works, with a date in July already in mind. The winner of that fight must surely have their sights set on Anthony Joshua, another highly skilled fighter who currently holds four world titles. A first heavyweight unification fight in almost two decades would be a huge, huge draw.

In Fury, Wilder and Joshua, boxing may have found its new holy trinity. One that can bring the sport back to its former glory days.