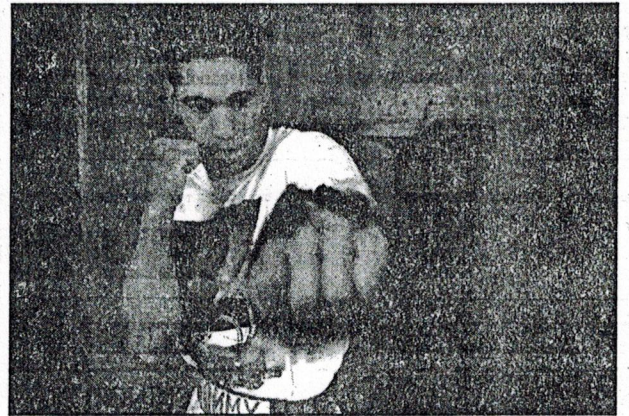


RELIGION



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For Pro Boxers, It's a Struggle of Right and Might



BY CARL BOWER—RELIGION NEWS SERVICE

Tommy Rodriguez, a Catholic, says he will back off a vanquished opponent. "Some guys will keep hitting. But God is watching," he says. "God sees all that." Rodriguez, 25, works out at Gleason's Gym in Brooklyn. At left, former heavyweight champion Mike Tyson is a recent Muslim convert.

Some Reconcile Paradox of Their Profession; Others Separate the Ring From Religion

By Julia Lieblich
Religion News Service

NEW YORK—Catholic boxer Tommy Rodriguez prays to God to protect him and his opponent before a fight. Still, the boyish, 132-pound former Golden Gloves champion said he can get "really motivated" when the crowd yells for him to "take a guy out." During his last fight, he threw a punch so hard he broke his hand against his opponent's head.

"I prayed to God he wouldn't get up so I wouldn't have to hit him again," Rodriguez, 25, said during a recent workout at Gleason's Gym in Brooklyn. "If I ever really hurt someone, I couldn't live with that."

Muslim Muhammad Ali voiced similar concerns midway through his career, but Evander Holyfield, reigning world heavyweight champion and evangelical Christian, said restraint has no place in the ring.

"A guy shouldn't be a boxer if he's worried about hurting someone," said Holyfield, who on June 28 will defend his title against Mike Tyson in Las Vegas. "Do you think people are going to pay to see . . . a boxer hold back?" If an opponent gets up, he said, "you knock him out."

Holyfield, Christian minister George Foreman and recent Muslim convert Mike Tyson join Ali as the most famous fighters in recent years to embrace religion. Like scores of lesser-known boxers, mostly Christian and Muslim, they have tried to reconcile the violence of their sport with the teachings of their faiths.

For fighters such as Holyfield, the boundaries between life in and out of the ring are clear: Street fighting is a sin; boxing is a sport. And it's the boxer's job to knock out his opponent.

For other boxers, the lines are fuzzier. For them, the question of how hard to hit a man already dazed becomes a moral question. And still others wonder whether the teachings of their religion can ever be reconciled with the sport they love.

"Boxing is not godly," said Domenico Monaco, the former Italian national lightweight champion who left the Jehovah's Witnesses to return to the ring. "It's a basic principle to love your neighbor, and you cannot hit someone you love."

"You got to take the guy out before he takes you out. You can't pray in the ring."

— Joseph Kiwanuka,
North American super
middleweight champion

"Do you think people are going to pay to see . . . a boxer hold back? . . . I pray to win."

— Evander Holyfield,
world heavyweight champion

"I got to look good to God . . . How am I going to sleep at night if I killed a man in front of his wife and son?"

— Muhammad Ali,
former heavyweight champion

Go to any ring before a fight, said Gleason's owner Bruce Silverglade, and 'you'll see fellows in the corner crossing themselves and genuflecting."

But Rodriguez suspects "some guys are not really religious; they're superstitious."

Still, even devout boxers say they pray harder before a fight.

"I say, 'Allah help me, please,'" said super middleweight Kabary Salem, a Muslim from Egypt.

"I pray to win," said Holyfield, who knocked out Tyson in November against 25 to 1 odds.

If the skill matches the fervor, said Thomas Hauser, author of "Muhammad Ali: His Life and Times," prayer can give boxers a strong psychological edge. "So much of fighting is a test of will. . . . If you believe you are fighting for God and God is on your side, that's a pretty big boost."

Christian welterweight Keith Lee Jr. doesn't think God takes sides.

"Both guys are praying to win," he said,

"and only one can win." But he and his trainer father pray for protection.

"You're this far from death every time you step into the ring," said Keith Lee Sr. "You're leaving walking or dead, and if you die, you want to be in one of those mansions. Football is a team sport. In boxing, your only help is faith in God."

That's why fighters, he said, "are so religious."

The Rev. Anthony Loreto, a Catholic priest who exercises at Gleason's, smiles when he sees a boxer praying in the ring. On the one hand, he said, he likes to see a young man pray. "On the other, he's going to knock the other guy's block off." The goal of debilitating an opponent cannot be morally justified, he said, "nor the blood lust" of the people watching.

Yet many priests, he said, have had an ambivalent relationship with the sport that's produced great Irish, Italian and Hispanic Catholic boxers and provided a vehicle for poor inner-city youths to get ahead, even if few earned much money from the sport.

The late Nation of Islam leader Elijah Muhammad, Ali's early spiritual mentor, also considered boxing immoral, a display of brutality that pits one black man against another to amuse a white audience, according to Hauser. Some interpreters of orthodox Islam, which Ali later embraced, also reject boxing as acceptable entertainment.

Most boxers, however, see the ring as a separate arena, where traditional moral codes don't apply.

"If I hit you to deliberately hurt you, it's a sin," said Keith Lee Sr. "If we go into the ring and agree to a contest of skill, it's a game."

Although many fighters say they pray for their opponents before competing, once in the ring they do not ask themselves ethical questions about inflicting immediate harm or long-term damage.

"That's the referee's job," Holyfield said. For the boxer to worry about harming his opponent "is a conflict of interest."

"You got to take the guy out before he takes you out," agreed North American Boxing Association super middleweight champion Joseph Kiwanuka, a devout Roman Catholic from Uganda. "You can't pray in the ring."

Some boxers, however, say that even in the heat of the fight, they are morally responsible for caring about their opponent.

Before his religious awakening in 1977, former heavyweight champion George Foreman writes in his autobiography, "boxing had been a funnel for my hatred." He thought nothing of hitting a man as he fell to the ground.

After he returned to fighting at age 37 to raise money for his Houston-based youth center, he was determined that he would "have to win my matches with an absence of rage and a minimum of violence. . . . There was no way I could go wild on a human being again; no way could I unleash a torrent of punches until the man crumbled to the mat."

Ali, Hauser noted, also became increasingly concerned about hurting his opponents; in 1972, he defended his decision to go easy on Buster Mathis in a one-sided fight.

"I don't care about all them people yelling, 'Kill him!' " he told reporters. "I see the man in front of me, his eyes all glassy and his head rolling around. How do I know just how hard to hit him to knock him out and not hurt him? I don't care about looking good to the fans. I got to look good to God. . . . How am I going to sleep at night if I killed a man in front of his wife and son?"

Rodriguez, a school safety officer, thinks often about the hit that could kill.

Colombian boxer Jimmy Garcia "went to a hospital and never woke up," Rodriguez said. "I worry about that when I'm fighting. I think about his family. If I have a guy standing in the ropes and he can't respond, I'll back out. Some guys will keep hitting. But God is watching. God sees all that."

Domenico Monaco, face scarred and nose flattened after 60 fights, has spent years listening to boxers explain how they can be true to their religions and still fight.

"It's all rationalization," said the former Jehovah's Witness. "I shouldn't be doing this, but I choose to. Boxing drives me athletically, and I like to display my technical skill. But it's all a lot of talk to say it's not violent. No matter how you twist it, the purpose is to hurt."

Heavyweight champion Evander Holyfield's hand is raised in victory after his upset of Mike Tyson in a November 1996 title bout. Holyfield, an evangelical Christian, says that "a guy shouldn't be a boxer if he's worried about hurting someone."

BY DAVID LONGSTREATH—ASSOCIATED PRESS

