



Four Kings: Leonard, Hagler, Hearn, Duran and the Last Great Era of Boxing

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By the late 1970s, boxing had lapsed into a moribund state and interest in it was on the wane. In 1980, however, the sport was resuscitated by a riveting series of bouts involving an improbably dissimilar quartet: Sugar Ray Leonard, Marvelous Marvin Hagler, Thomas Hearns and Roberto Duran. The 'Four Kings of the Ring' would fight one another nine times throughout the decade and win sixteen world titles between them.

Like Ali and Frazier, Dempsey and Tunney, Robinson and LaMotta, these four boxers brought out the best in each other, producing unprecedented multi-million-dollar gates along the way. Each of the nine bouts between the four men was memorable in its own way and at least two of them - Leonard-Hearns I in 1981 and Hagler-Hearns in 1985 - are commonly included on any list of the greatest fights of all time. The controversial outcome of another - the 1987 Leonard-Hagler fight - remains the subject of heated debates amongst fans to this day.

Leonard, Hagler, Hearns and Duran didn't set out to save boxing from itself in the post-Ali era, but somehow they managed to do so. In *Four Kings*, award-winning journalist George Kimball documents the remarkable effect they had on the sport and argues that we will never see their likes again.

Four Kings: Leonard, Hagler, Hearns, Duran and the Last Great Era of Boxing Details

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Joshua says

Great read for anyone who's in to boxing history. Excellent stories about a classic era.

Godowd says

Good factual account of one of the great eras of boxing. Unfortunately it does not really delve into some more depth with some of the players. He also betrays a favouritism towards Sugar Ray and lets him off the hook a bit in how he avoided Hagler for so long, and some of the more unsavoury parts of his life - that would really let us judge a bit better the characters. It nearly is a case of the Good, the bad and the ugly in the book (except there is 4 of them), Ray - Good, Bad - Hagler, Ugly - up to you...

Whilst this is an entertaining book - there needs to be a more comprehensive and critical book about this era - even though these guys dominated their weight divisions - they only met 9 times in total - with Duran the busiest being involve in 5 of them. This was a very telling time in boxing where promoters, managers and boxing commissions were dominant. Some nice swipes at Don King though.

Dylan says

At its beautiful best, boxing can be a noble battle of the mind, a struggle for dominance using skill and wit, and a gargantuan test of human fitness, heart and endurance. At its worst, it's full of braggarts, money spinners, bullies and hate. In the post Ali late 70s, boxing was tending towards ugliness. During the 80s, these four riveting fighters (Sugar Ray Leonard, Marvin Hagler, Roberto Duran and Thomas Hearn), brought back some of the vanishing beauty. And drama, pathos, poetry, and romance.

The four boxers couldn't be any more different: Sugar Ray smooth, graceful, all jazz and soul, Duran tough, dirty, raw and playful, Marvellous Marvin a shaven headed macho bullet, and Hearn the talented classy Detroit gentleman.

This is a great, thrilling ride through the years when these four were kings of the ring. Kimball writes with the easy flow of a fine sports journalist, with an eye for noirish detail and a sly humour ("a Panamanian street dog had stopped Ken Buchanan with a punch to the family jewels"). There's a hint of Hemingway in the clipped punchy sentences. An atmosphere thick with cigar smoke and the dull thud of gloved fist thumping hard flesh. He records the poetry of boxing; describing rounds as "stanzas" and gifted dancing moves as "pirouettes". The first Leonard/Hearn fight is said to be "a symphony in five distinct movements".

Kimball himself could have stepped right out of Damon Runyon - ex hippy poet turned shabby sportswriter, losing an eye in a bar room brawl (may not be true), Lucky Strike chain smoker permanently hustling a deadline.

It's a ringside seat that pulls no punches, and takes us to the gyms, promoter's offices, restaurants and lounge

bars where deals are made, and to over heated TV broadcasts in saturated blood heavy 80s colour. (And thanks to the ubiquity of YouTube, all these fights are quickly located - the commentary on the first round takedown of Leonard vs Andy Price is timeless).

This is Dashiell Hammett for the baby boomers. Writers who can capture this pace and excitement seem long gone, and the boxing ring now seems a detached, hostile place, lacking glamour or style. A much missed era.

Andy says

A fine dive into the last golden era of boxing, Kimball is fair and even-handed, discussing the rise and fall of four very different men, four rivals, and their various entourages.

Christopher William says

I've read a few reviews of *Four Kings* on here. The two major criticisms seem to be focused on the author being biased towards Sugar Ray Leonard, and the writing itself being of too 'newspaper-reportery' a style. These criticisms hold no water.

Firstly, the Sugar Ray bias: Sugar Ray Leonard featured in six of the super fights, a trilogy against Duran, two against Hearn, and one against Hagler. The other three, excluding their clashes with Sugar Ray, only fought each king once. So out of the nine fights of interest in the book, Sugar Ray Leonard featured in two thirds of them. And if he wasn't participating, he was probably involved in the broadcast. In spite of this, I perceived very little Sugar Ray bias. It's explicitly mentioned that Hearn could well have beaten Ray on points if he'd known how to clinch at the time of their first fight, and I was left with little doubt that Duran was the toughest, and Hagler, quite possibly the horse you'd bet on if your life depended on it.

As for the quality of writing: it's a sports book. If you wanted anything else, you should have read a novel or watched a film. I've not got my copy of *A Fighter's Heart* to hand, but Sam Sheridan gives some chat about famous writers like Hemingway and (probably) Mailer mythologising fighters above what they really were. I think whatever he wrote applies here. Where the context is four protagonists winning and losing over nine super fights, it's difficult to write it any way but objectively and clearly. It's difficult to imagine wanting anything else when you've chosen to read it.

Bad critiques de-bunked, this is an excellent read for anyone wanting to learn more about the four kings, or anyone with a general interest in boxing or sports journalism. And as for the added extras which some people complained about for being shoe-horned in, or mentioned for mentioning's sake: I thought they were great. I learned a lot about Don King, promoting in that period, the impact on the game that introducing extra weight classes has had, and the bigger picture of boxing history.

Apsalz08 says

I'd been looking for a good book about boxing for awhile now, and the consensus seemed to be that this was one of the best out there. If this is.... well, I won't be coming back to boxing books any time soon. There was nothing wrong with this book. Great factual information, Kimball had access to tell some great stories that

I'm sure were not known before it was published, and it is comprehensive. However... oftentimes it felt more like a factual recitation of what happened, without really delving into why or really analyzing things. Also, at certain points he would run a paragraph reciting results of the fighters with one or two lines on the fights. That seemed more like he was trying to mentioning them just to mention them.

Even with my complaints, this was a fun read, and I think I breezed through it in a week. Also, it was nice to have something lighter after reading HST. Overall, if you're a boxing fan and don't know much about this era, then it's worth it. Otherwise, I'd stay away from this.

foundfoundfound says

books on sport ought to be as well written as those on history. they seldom, however, are. hagler, hearns, leonard & duran deserved better than this.

Rob Anderson says

As an unrepentant fan of boxing, this book was great. I was still in my teens when these guys were fighting, and for me, this was the golden era. All these fights are available on YouTube, so I watched them all again is I read the book. All of these guys were amazing. I feel for Duran, because he was already a bit past his prime, but still showed up to fight against all these guys. Fun stuff, and George Kimball provides the classic beat writer repartee that suits the subject matter perfectly.

Tony McMahon says

Having written the biography of boxer Errol Christie - who is mentioned in this book - I had to read this hugely well-informed odyssey through the glory years of the sport. The story focuses on four of the best fighters and the interplay between their careers. It's beautifully written, observant and evokes the era perfectly. Recommend!

Robert S says

HL Mencken once wrote that he considered news reporting above all else, to be the life of kings. However, there was a time in the world where boxing held the crown. Boxing as a sport has seen better days in terms of popularity and quality of fights. Much like print journalism, boxing has been fighting for survival against newer and more sleek offerings that ultimately it may not be able to compete against.

There was a time when an upcoming boxing fight would not just warrant discussion or ordering it on PPV (over \$60 now seems a ridiculous price in the world of Netflix) but it was considered must-see. This is true from the days of Rocky Marciano to Jack Dempsey to Joe Frazier to Muhammad Ali and finally the era of boxing discussed in *Four Kings*. Boxing is a unique sport in its own way since fighters legacies are not just defined by their own ability but also about who they step into the ring with over the course of their career. Ali is arguably the most popular boxer (if not one of the most popular athletes) in human history and a large

part of that boils down to his opponents. He didn't just fight men like Joe Frazier or George Foreman, he went to war with them. For those watching then or now, it seems at times that one or both men might not leave the ring alive (which considering the fighting you're talking about, not a far off proposition).

Boxing has garnered a certain level of unpopularity in some circles due to the brutality of the sport (after all, some die in the ring) but honestly the lack of men like Leonard, Hagler, Hearn, and Duran bring the demise of the sport before anything else. In a world where UFC reaches record high numbers yearly and we seem not even fifteen years away from enacting our own version of Stephen King's *The Running Man* in our society, violence doesn't seem the downfall of the sport.

Boxing certainly has benefited most in history when it had a strong cast of heavyweights (Ali, Tyson, etc) but some of its greatest fights happened at the weight class right below. The four men in this book put on not just fights but epic battles which will stand the test of time.

Four Kings is a good book to explore the subject, although I would have enjoyed a bit more detail in a number of areas.

David says

The author of this book reported on and was at every fight between the four kings. The details leading up to their fights are terrific and the fight descriptions themselves are great. I took the opportunity to read about each fight in detail, then stop and watch each fight to get my own sense of it before going back to the book. Thank you YouTube! A couple fights I had seen in full before and most I had seen highlights of over the years, but they were great to see again. It was a fantastic way to experience the book and get into it even more.

A great read. I now look forward to seeking out each fighter's own autobiography and getting their version of these events and their lives in general.

Shawn says

As someone who is a lifelong boxing fan and spent his junior high school and teenage years during this time, this book was a great way to take a nostalgic look back at a wonderful time for the sport.

The "kids" these days prefer MMA as their preferred choice of hand-to-hand combat. So with MMA eclipsing the sweet science in terms of popularity, this time of Hagler-Hearn-Leonard-Duran may just truly end up being the very last great era of boxing.

Sunny says

This has to go up there as one of the best boxing books I have read. The era these 4 kings dominated was one of halcyon and some of the most mouthwatering fights a fight fan could have wished for. The book talks about the fights between Leonard, Duran, Hagler and Hearn (my personal ranking in that order also). They fought each other 9 times and the fights are still discussed today. None more so than the infamous No Mas fight between Duran and Leonard. the book also talks about other things like the trainers and other fighters

these guys fought and is very rich in that sense. The way Hagler destroyed Hearns 2/3 rounds was incredible. Similarly Hearns' destruction of Duran was incredible. Leonard's comeback fight with Hagler was again arguably one of the best. Very hard to choose between some of those fights. Highly highly recommended book for anyone interested in the fight game.

Gisela Hausmann says

Pete Hamill, American journalist and novelist, writes in his Foreword to George Kimball's book "This book is about the last Golden Age of boxing. That is, it is about a time when the matches themselves transcended the squalor of the business side of the sport, and focused only on the men who fought."

This lucky reviewer was privileged to see the end of this era, to watch the last two of the nine super fights these four boxers fought with each other. Thus I was delighted to find this beautiful book, which told me details I had never heard, even though I followed the fighters and the sport closely. "Four Kings: Leonard, Hagler, Hearns, Duran and the Last Great Era of Boxing" radiates the feeling boxing fans had in these glorious days.

Naturally, all of it began with the childhood of the four kings, Duran, Hagler, Hearns, and Leonard. Please note that I listed their names in alphabetical order because I do not want to give preference to any of them; the book makes clear how each of them helped to bring out the best in all others. Kimball tells us how it happened.

Duran came from the very poorest circumstances: "Food was scarce; unable to care for him, his mother literally gave the boy away on several occasions. He (Duran) followed Toti to a boxing gym at the age of eight, and had his first amateur bout a year later."

Hagler was shy: "On his first night Hagler once again watched in silence. On the second, Goody (Petronelli) walked over and asked with a smile, "Hey, kid, do you want to learn how to fight?" "That's what I'm here for," said Marvin. Goody told him to come back the next night and bring along his gear. Gear? All he had was a pair of cutoff jeans and some tennis shoes."

Hearns was skinny, worked hard, and was grateful to be able to participate at out-of-town trips Kronk Recreation Center's Emmanuel Stewart arranged for. Leonard, who among boxers was described as having "choirboy"-looks really sang in a church choir before he started boxing.

The book also tells the stories of their trainers, promoters, and gyms. All of them evolved with their respective fighters. There are also the stories in connection with their names. Ray Charles, after who Leonard was named, sang "America the Beautiful" before the second Leonard-Duran fight, at the Superdome, in New Orleans. Leonard won that fight. Hagler had his name legally changed from Marvin Nathaniel to Marvelous Marvin Hagler. Hearns had gotten his nickname because: "Tommy's like a Hit Man," the manager observed. "He does his business and then gets out of town." And Duran had more colorful descriptions assigned to him and his name, than anybody's mother would like to know.

Kimball's writing style is fast-paced, information-packed, and entertaining.

Fight Hagler vs Duran: "The rows of scar tissue Hagler wore like combat ribbons around his eyebrows could

provide an inviting target, even for a boxer more observant of the Marquis of Queensberry rules than Roberto Duran."

Readers, who may not know about the "Queensberry rules for the sport of boxing", (written in the 19th century these are the rules, on which the rules of modern boxing are based), as well as other facts might have a harder time with this book; boxing fans however will be mesmerized by the riveting content Kimball manages to tie together to complete a beautiful picture of the boxers, the sport and the times.

Those, who miss the days when boxing was shown on the networks rather than pay-per-view, when ratings came from who fought who and not from manipulated or hyped stories, and Tommy Hearn (hailing from Detroit) could be "Motor City Cobra" with pride, will love this book.

In a way it is a neat thing that this book was written now. I read it close to my computer and watched some of the fights again on Youtube.

If you are ever looking for a gift for an important man in your life age 55+, who lived through the Golden Era, I recommend to buy this book. The chances to go wrong with "Four Kings" are remote.

Thank you, George Kimball, for this treasure.

Gisela Hausmann - author & blogger

Simon Garnett says

Knock-out stuff!
