

Lennox Lewis didn't get enough credit for his skill in the ring and his grace outside of it when he was an active fighter. He does now.

Lennox Lewis: 2006

Very few fighters end their career at the right time. On a cold wintry day in January 2004, Lennox Lewis was asking himself, "Is this the right time?"

Lewis's rise to prominence had an inspirational tone. Born to a single-parent mother in London, he'd endured a difficult childhood that included a five-year separation from his mum while she built a new life for herself in Canada. Mother and son were reunited in Ontario when Lennox was twelve. Thereafter, he'd won a gold medal in the super-heavyweight division at the 1988 Seoul Olympics and become undisputed heavyweight champion of the world. The high point of his career was an eight-round demolition of Mike Tyson on June 8, 2002. But since the Tyson fight, Lewis had entered the ring only once, besting Vitali Klitschko on cuts in June 2003. Klitschko had been ahead on points at the time of the stoppage.

Lewis and I sat together on that wintry day in January 2004.

"I want to ask you something," Lennox said. "If I retire now without fighting Klitschko again, do you think it will hurt my legacy?"

"No. Your legacy is secure. You beat Klitschko. He didn't get those cuts from the referee. Years from now, when people look at your record, all they'll see next to Vitali's name is 'TKO 6.' You'll be remembered forever as the best heavyweight of your time and the man who broke the American stranglehold on the heavyweight division. And if you retire now, you'll be one of three heavyweight champions in history who retired while still champion and stayed retired."

"Rocky Marciano was one. Who was the other?"

"Gene Tunney."

"I'd beat Klitschko again if I fought him again," Lennox said. "But that's the drug of the sport. There's always someone to fight. It doesn't make sense to establish a legacy and then keep going and going until you fail."

One month later, on February 6, 2004, Lewis retired from boxing. “I am announcing the end of an important chapter of my life and the beginning of a new one,” he told a press conference in London. “During the past twenty-three years, I have set a number of goals for myself and I’m proud to say that these goals have been achieved. Now I am ready to set new goals and start a new career for myself outside of the ring.”

As the years pass, the fact that Lewis retired at the right time will become an important part of his legacy. Meanwhile, since that wintry day in New York, he has traded the heavyweight championship for the dual role of husband and father.

Lennox’s partner in life is Violet Chang, who was born in Jamaica but grew up in New York. “V” is a college graduate and former beauty-pag-eant winner. She and Lennox met six years ago when Lewis was on vacation in Jamaica. They were married on July 15, 2005.

“The time was right,” Lennox says of their wedding. “It was a great feeling. It made my family life complete. It was like, together, we can take on the world.”

The Lewises have homes in England, the United States, and Jamaica. Lennox guarded his privacy when he was an elite athlete, and that hasn’t changed. Neighbors know him as a friendly presence but one who deflects attention from himself. Fatherhood is now the focus of his life.

Landon Lewis was born on June 15, 2004. “Being a father is a joy every day,” Lennox says of his new status. “Landon is happy, jovial, and very affectionate. He gives hugs and kisses a lot and runs everywhere like there’s a turbo in him. But Landon is at an age when he wants what he wants when he wants it, and he’s not old enough to respond to logic. That means, every day, there’s a new challenge.”

“Landon is talking a lot now,” Lewis continues. “He’s saying ‘Yo!’ all the time, and his mother doesn’t like it. She says it comes from me. I tell her it doesn’t. I don’t go around the house saying ‘Yo!’ So now we’re trying to figure out where it came from. Another problem is that, because of who I am, whenever Landon goes out, people shadow-box with him. So now he’s picked it up. He holds his hands up and throws punches and says, ‘Box! Box!’ I’ve made a point not to do it with him. I want him to excel in a variety of sports when he’s older. He can choose which ones, but I’d have mixed feelings about Landon boxing.”

“Marriage and fatherhood change everything,” Lewis notes. “I grew up independent and doing my own thing. But with a wife and child, I can’t do that anymore because it’s not just me anymore. I always have to think in terms of ‘us,’ not ‘me.’ And Landon will have a brother or sister before much longer.”

Lewis spends much of each day tending to domestic chores and caring for Landon. He still plays chess. “And I play poker,” he volunteers. “Not for big stakes. I might win or lose a hundred pounds. If I win, great. If I lose, that was the cost of the evening’s entertainment.” He also provides commentary on occasion for HBO boxing telecasts in the United States. And, in his words, “People are always bringing business ventures to me.”

Lewis’s current professional passion is acting. During his ring career, he made a number of cameo appearances in television shows like *Fantasy Island*, *Arli\$\$*, and *In The House*. His first role in a major film was a brief scene playing himself in the 2001 remake of *Ocean’s Eleven*. Last year, he took a giant step forward when he landed a role in the feature film *Johnny Was*, to be released later this year. It’s the fictional tale of Irishman Johnny Doyle, who decides to leave a life of violence behind and lie low in Brixton. But Doyle is soon enmeshed in goings-on between a pirate radio-station owner, a West Indian drug lord, and an IRA prison escapee.

Lewis plays Rasta DJ, the reggae-loving owner of the pirate radio station. “I’ve known a lot of people who were like Ras,” he says, “so that was a start for me in portraying his character. But I realize now that acting is much more complicated than I thought it was.”

How so?

“One thing I learned,” he explains, “is that I was doing myself an injustice when I started acting because I was acting each part the way Lennox Lewis would rather than the way the character would. I understand now that, to be a good actor, I have to become somebody else. I fight myself on that all the time. I’m taking acting lessons from several coaches. Whatever I do, I always want to get better.”

“Acting is like boxing in that both jobs require training and discipline,” Lennox continues. “And you have to be open to being taught. Acting coaches are like trainers in that they try to make sure you do things correctly and get as much as possible out of you. There’s different kinds of preparation for a fight depending on who the opponent is, and

there's different kinds of preparation for a role depending on the character you're playing. The difference is, in acting, no one is trying to knock your head off."

Fighters, of course, try to render each other unconscious. Everything that takes place in a boxing ring proceeds from that premise. Boxing is a Darwinian jungle in which skill counts more than personality and power often outweighs the strongest character. Still, Lewis says without equivocation, "I enjoyed the time I was a fighter. I'm glad I had that experience. The last few times I was in training camp, I told myself, 'I'd better take all this in now because there will only be a few more of these in my life.'"

Lewis recalls five fights with particular fondness. The first was against former WBO heavyweight champion Ray Mercer at Madison Square Garden in 1996. Mercer, who'd also been an Olympic gold medalist, was a bull of a man with a straight-ahead no-finesse brawling style. "Sometimes it's not enough to just box," Lennox says. "Sometimes you have to fight." Lewis-Mercer was one of those times. In the late rounds, Lennox went toe-to-toe in the trenches with Mercer and prevailed on a narrow decision.

Then came two fights against Evander Holyfield for the undisputed heavyweight championship of the world. The first, on March 13, 1999, was declared a draw to the outrage of the media, most of whom were sure that Lewis had won. Eight months later, Lewis and Holyfield met again and Lennox was awarded a unanimous decision.

"After that, I'd point to my rematch against Hasim Rahman [in 2001]," Lennox offers. "He won the first time we fought. And the fact that I'd lost to him the first time made knocking him out all the sweeter. One of the things I learned in boxing is that defeat, properly handled, makes a person stronger. You can't walk in the rain without getting wet, and you can't be in a boxing ring without getting hit. From the day I started boxing, I knew there could only be one winner for each fight and there was always a chance I could lose. Winning and losing are on the same page in my book, and you have to accept them both. Twice in my career, I slipped [Lewis's other defeat was a 1994 loss to Oliver McCall]. But both times, I came back and beat the man who beat me. I'm proud of that. It was important for me to avenge those losses."

The final encounter on Lewis's list of most-meaningful fights is, of course, his destruction of Mike Tyson. That bout ended with Tyson lying on the canvas, blood streaming from his mouth and nose and from cuts

above both eyes. "I had to fight Tyson," Lennox says. "If I hadn't, no matter how much I accomplished, no matter how many other fights I won, there would have always been people who said, 'Yes, Lennox was good but he never could have beaten Tyson.'"

A wistful tone creeps into Lewis's voice. "When I saw Tyson against Danny Williams and Kevin McBride," he says, "I was looking at a fighter who didn't want to fight anymore. Mike fought those last two fights because he thought he had to, not because he wanted to. If you feel that way, you shouldn't fight."

Did Tyson feel the same when he and Lennox met in the ring?

"At the time, I thought Mike wanted to fight me," Lennox says. "The whole world wanted that fight, and we'd been building to it for such a long time. But looking back, no, I don't think Mike wanted to be in the ring that night."

"Mike definitely didn't want to be in the ring with Lennox," adds trainer Emanuel Steward, who began working with Lewis after the fighter's loss to Oliver McCall and stayed with him through the end of his career. "And I'll tell you something else. Very few fighters in history could have beaten Lennox that night. I make my living by producing winners. That's what I do, so I know what I'm talking about. But the key in boxing isn't the sculptor; it's the marble. And Lennox was a fabulous fighter to work with. All great athletes have bumps in the road, and he had a few himself. But in the end, Lennox did what he had to do. He was a great fighter."

When Lewis formally retired as an active fighter, he closed his public announcement with the words, "Let the new era begin." So far, however, it hasn't been much of an era. The situation is best summed up by former heavyweight great Joe Frazier, who said recently, "I really couldn't tell you who the champ is right now. It puzzles me." And Lewis himself acknowledges, "There's a certain satisfaction when I look at the heavyweight division today. It feels good, knowing that people have come to understand that I was the last true heavyweight champion." But in the next sentence, Lennox adds, "I feel bad for the sport." And he declines to critique today's heavyweights on an individual basis.

"The era of Lennox Lewis, Mike Tyson, and Evander Holyfield is over," Lewis says. "We know that. But boxing is hard enough without other boxers coming down on you. It always surprises me when boxers speak ill of other boxers. We have reporters coming down on us. We have

fans coming down on us. Boxers are a family. We know things about boxing that other people don't. We understand that, even when we win, we lose a little of ourselves every time we get in the ring. We don't need to come down on each other. We should protect each other. So I'll just say that it takes physical gifts, hard work, commitment, and luck to get to the top in boxing. Each of the top heavyweights today has been successful in his way. Anyone who gets into a boxing ring deserves credit for his courage."

Meanwhile, the world has come to understand that Lewis's retirement was for real and he will not be returning as an active fighter. "Boxing is a happy part of my past," he says. "But I don't miss it. It's a hard sport. Boxers are trained to exploit their opponents' weaknesses. It's survival of the fittest. We hit you on your wounds. One bad move and the game can be over. I got out at the right time for me."

And so, at the age of forty, Lewis is on to new challenges. "You can only do things for so long," he says. "Then you get too old or you grow out of them and you move on to another stage in life. Boxing was a big part of my life, but it was never what I defined myself by. I'm the same person now that I was when I was boxing. The only difference is that my goals have changed. Instead of trying to be the best fighter in the world, my goals now are to be the best father I can be, the best husband I can be, and to make a difference in the lives of some of the less fortunate people in the world."