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GIVE FOREMAN, HOLMES CREDIT FOR CHARACTER TO SHOW CRAFT

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Body

Apparently, many people think it laughably strange that Larry Holmes and George Foreman, two wealthy men approaching the age of 50, will probably fight each other for money in the coming months. These people would be less dismissive of the fight if Holmes and Foreman were slimmer, faster and cuter.

But Holmes and Foreman are competent men of substance who act their age. They have slowed down and spread out a great deal, but sports fans and sportswriters who call them "old" exhibit more gall than wit. Give me two well-matched elder statesmen who know what they are doing, and you can keep Mike Tyson and other short-fused action dolls with nothing left to offer but the spectacle of self-destructive aggression. If neither Holmes nor Foreman is even half the fighter he once was, they are both still twice the fighter that most professional heavies will ever be. Neither suffers from the shortwindedness of character that bends lesser champions' careers into a truncated arc.

I, for one, look forward to the Holmes-Foreman fight. Two men rich in the currency of ring history and wisdom will be ending their era as they address the age-old fistic problem of boxer versus puncher. And they will be moving at a stately pace, so perhaps even those viewers who usually watch boxing just for the knockouts will be able to follow.

Among the great heavyweight champions, Holmes ranks as the best boxer since Jack Johnson. Holmes' career constitutes a monument to the skilled tradesman's virtues of steadiness and technique. He was never as inspired as Muhammad Ali, never a puncher of exceptional power (several rungs below Foreman, Rocky Marciano and the other bombers), never a theatrically imposing scowler like Sonny Liston or Tyson.

Rather, Holmes was, and is, "good". He offers the heavyweight division's greatest example of pure craft - both in the sense of shrewd self-possession and in the sense of the expert worker's mastery of his trade. If it's foolish to say that Holmes in his prime would certainly have defeated Johnson or Joe Louis or Ali in theirs, it would be equally foolish to bet a lot of money on any of them to defeat Holmes.

Foreman, while not a champion of Holmes' distinction, will be remembered as one of the greatest punchers of all time. In his prime, he hit as hard as anybody ever did, and even now he still hits as hard as anybody around.

He is most famous for his defeat at the hands of Ali and for his return to the limelight as a weirdly jolly pitchman, but his legacy can be read more accurately in the craters he has left in the bodies and careers of opponents. Ask Michael Moorer (who lost a championship when the supposedly over-the-hill Foreman KO'd him) how pathetic or cuddly he found George when they fought.

Raymond Chandler once said of another Holmes, Sherlock, that "in the end he is mostly an attitude and a few dozen lines of unforgettable dialogue." Larry Holmes is mostly a craftsman's attitude and a rigorous left jab, the least glamorous and most important of punches. Foreman is mostly power and a few dozen unforgettable blows

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that have crushed some of the best in the business. Their fight will be about work, skill, accrued wisdom and damage, and the widely applicable drama of technique matched against force. That makes it a fight worth seeing, unlike most fights people regard as worth getting excited about these days: make-believe dustups in the movies and on talk shows, pantomime affairs between basketball players who wave at one another while making angry faces, or Tyson's next comeback.

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