Positoid: Let It Bleed

Our favorite hemo squares off with the elephant in the ring

July 1, 1997 By Shawn Decker

Around the time that Tommy “The Duke” Morrison tested positive for HIV, Shawn “The Puke” Decker tested positive for a reality check. Now, I’m a huge fan of boxing; I even write for the boxing newsletter *Heavyhitters*. So I was no stranger to Mr. Morrison that February night when my dad, my brother, my buddies and I settled down in front of the TV to watch him square off against a fighter none of us had heard of. But his opponent’s identity never mattered -- during Tommy’s fights anything could happen. The Duke always gave a show. But this time the drama wasn’t unfolding in the ring.

That something was wrong was obvious when the commentators announced that Tommy Morrison had been suspended worldwide from the sport of boxing. A worldwide suspension? This was a strict and prompt penalty for a sport usually very lenient toward its athletes regarding their criminal conduct. And Tommy boy, a handsome, pale pugilist with a tender chin and a granite left hook, was a big-time division moneymaker; he’d never be relinquished without a fight if he were guilty of the usual drinking, drugging or mugging.

So with such pronouncements as “It’s not fair for us to speculate,” I had that feeling in the gut every closeted person knows all too well: The proverbial elephant was in the room, and reeking quite badly, but no one would brave mentioning it. I wasn’t about to bring it up. Here I was, chilling out with friends -- the last thing I wanted on my mind was the fact that I had a deadly virus. Then -- boom! -- I started to sweat. Did everyone else have the same thought as me: “Is it HIV?”

Since then, much has happened to the Duke and the Puke that neither ever dreamed of. Morrison has had to deal with having HIV in public, surviving that battle to box again, while I’ve taken to wearing my once-secret status symbol proudly on my sleeve.

So Tommy’s tackling AIDS, the most uncouth of diseases, and boxing, the most uncouth of sports. Most people just can’t conceive of the strategy and finesse at the core of this great contest; it’s competition stripped down to the essentials -- just two men testing their speed, strength and stamina against each other. Probably the biggest turnoff to Joe Public is all that blood. For me, the sight of plasma spouting from someone’s face isn’t disturbing in the slightest. All my experience as a gusher figures in this response, I’m sure, as I’ve spent countless hours in front of the bathroom mirror, blood rushing down from my nostrils. But at least boxers bleed for a reason -- they had a fist slammed into their kisser. As a hemo-wonder, I never get that satisfaction. Once, I

lost close to four pints of blood in a single episode of my own personal ER. So as far as I'm concerned, these big boys don't bleed enough.

But there's a spiritual theme to boxing as well. Just take one look at last November's Evander Holyfield/ Mike Tyson battle. From the moment word got out about the bout, most commentators feared for Holyfield's health. But Holyfield had no intention of losing. He spoke confidently and believed in himself (others said he was in denial). Tyson just rested on his reputation, expecting Holyfield to be consumed by the terror of his presence alone. While Holyfield looked within to find the courage to meet this challenge, Tyson relied on the public's perceptions to take him through another "victim."

I picked Tyson to win in the fifth. Many, including boxing's most prominent magazine, *The Ring*, expected Tyson to steamroll Holyfield in the opening round! My prediction rested on the fact that Evander Holyfield was never a quitter. No way he was going out that early. And in the end, it was his will that overcame Tyson, who wilted in the 11th when the referee saved him from Holyfield's unquenchable thirst for victory. As Evander would say, "All you gotta do is believe."

I do believe. I could care less if I die tomorrow, because I know that this disease has not imposed its will on me. Holyfield said before his fight with Tyson that he was a winner no matter the outcome because he would give his all.

So the next time you see a boxing match while channel surfing, watch for a while. And remember that HIV and boxing have much in common, especially now that Tommy Morrison enters the ring with attention focused more on his CD4 count than on his left hook. And if you're lucky enough to catch Tommy in action, be sure to cheer him on as he beats some helpless negatoid into a state of unconsciousness. Go, Tommy!

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