

Aaron Davis vs. Mark Breland

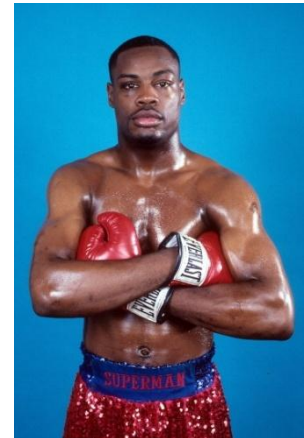
By Sean Nam



With his glasses perched at the tip of his nose, Aaron Davis plopped into a cushy office chair at the Morris Park Boxing Club and took out his iPad. He chuckled every now and then as he swiped at the screen. Meanwhile, he was surrounded by teenagers—some of them Golden Gloves hopefuls—skipping rope and battering Everlast bags. Prizefighting seldom yields contentment, but Davis looks happy managing one of the better-known boxing gyms in the Bronx.

For the youngsters that walk into the gym everyday Davis is simply known as “A.” On this day, a buoyant fifth-grader came over to Davis’ side after his workout and, nearly whispering, asked Davis about the biggest win of his career. “Did you watch it on Youtube?” Davis asked, looking up from his iPad. “Yeah,” said the kid, recreating the scene. “You went like this.” The kid ducked and, in slow motion, extended his right arm. Davis nodded. “Yeah—but with a little more arc,” he said.

In a career that spanned 16 years, Aaron “Superman” Davis amassed a record of 49-6 (31), won a world title in the process, and, despite frequent criticism about his passion for the sport, never shied away from a challenge. His achievements were formally recognized, in 2016, when he was named an inductee of the New York Boxing Hall of Fame.



No, Davis probably wasn’t Nietzsche’s idea of an *ubermensch*, but in one sense he is deserving of his nickname: Davis had 55 fights and was never stopped, a fact the fighter cannot relate without grinning. “Man, all these fighters don’t want to fight,” Davis lamented. He has just finished cleaning out the toilet and spraying down the locker room. “If I was fighting today, I’d be a superstar.”

Davis certainly had his moments, but his poorest outings are difficult to overlook. In his title defense against Meldrick Taylor in 1991, Davis, in arguably his most important fight, shelled up like a turtle, allowing Taylor to batter his body all night with bludgeoning left and rights. “That’s one fight I never bring up in a conversation,” Davis remarked. The loss was one thing, but his performance was inexplicable for someone whose lackluster years were thought to be behind him. After all, it was only a year before meeting Taylor that Davis had managed the improbable. On July 8, 1990, Aaron Davis looked like he was on his way to stardom.

It happened in the neon deserts of Reno, Nevada. Davis, a 6-1 underdog, faced off against Brooklyn wunderkind Mark Breland for the WBA welterweight title. Davis would violently wrest the belt away from his crosstown rival with a picturesque, one-punch knockout in the ninth round. Were it not for Buster Douglas beating Mike Tyson a few months earlier, Davis’ knockout of Breland would surely have been considered the upset of the year.

Aaron Davis was born in the Bronx on April 7, 1967, to Larry and Susie Davis. His father made the rounds in New York as an entertaining club fighter. The locals endearingly called him “Tumbler” because he would enter the ring by flipping over the top rope. In a rare rejection of the typical, often unforgiving father-son partnership in boxing, “Tumbler” never intended to teach his son how to throw a one-two. He preferred that his son pursue a less taxing career. Still, by hanging around gyms so often – first Gleason’s, then Morris Park — Davis would

eventually lace up a pair of gloves himself. “When I was a kid I used to see all the pros spar,” Davis recalled. “When I was 17 or 18, I started beating them up. That’s when I started to take boxing seriously.” At that point, there was little objection from the father. In fact, Tumbler would assume duties as cutman in most of Davis’ fights. “I never felt like that I had to prove something to my dad,” Davis said, dismissing any Freudian subtext. “I never thought about that.” Davis would turn pro at 19 after he inked a contract with MSG promoter Bobby Goodman.

Davis would win one Golden Gloves title in an otherwise quiet stint as an amateur. He was, after all, fighting in a territory where Breland had won five Golden Gloves titles. “I always looked up to Breland.” Davis remarked, without reservation. “I like Breland. He was the man, you know? He brought home the gold.” (Breland won a gold medal at the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles). Few fighters were more heralded than Breland coming out of the amateurs; fewer have been such a disappointment as a pro. By the time Davis crossed paths with Breland, the unbridled hype about how Breland was the second coming of Sugar Ray Leonard had died down. (Dan Duva, Breland’s promoter, once noted that “when [Breland] retires, all welterweights will be measured by him”). A stunning knockout at the hands of Marlon Starling in 1987 and a dismal draw in a rematch a year later killed Breland’s mythic aura.

Nevertheless, coming into the fight against Davis, Breland was riding a seven-fight knockout streak, and, most importantly, he was still in his physical prime. Meanwhile, things were not all rosy for Davis as he was coming up in the pro ranks. After dismantling veteran Luis Santana for a regional title, Davis put together a string of victories before struggling against journeyman Curtis Summit. It was supposed to be a tune-up, but a lethargic Davis was fortunate to escape with a decision. The same pundits who criticized Breland for his lack of zeal also pointed the finger at Davis. Maybe he should fight with more conviction like his father, they sneered. Despite his relatively low-profile, Davis made it a point to call out Breland every chance he had.

He soon got his wish. Once the bout terms had been finalized, Davis’ garrulous manager-trainer, Billy Giles, took to his soapbox and began hyping up the fight by stressing the hometown bragging rights at stake. Naturally, the fight was billed as a turf war—the Bronx versus Brooklyn. Looking back on that period, Davis admits that he got carried away with the pre-fight brouhaha. “I just wanted to win,” he said. “I didn’t care about anything else; I didn’t care about no belts. The battle of the boroughs ... that was all built up by the media. And you know, Billy Giles, he’s always talking.” Davis, nevertheless, rarely refused an opportunity to express

his animosity for Breland, however manufactured the sentiment may have been. “You could say I kind of dislike him,” Davis sheepishly said of his opponent during a pre-recorded interview for the ABC telecast. “I’m going to show him that I’m stronger and take away his heart.”

That the actual fight took place at Harrah’s Resort and Casino—and not Madison Square Garden (the Felt Forum was undergoing renovations at the time)—was the only stylistic faux pas.

On fight night, Davis entered the ring wearing shimmering red trunks with blue trim. Breland wore a robe with “Bed-Stuy Do-or-Die” stitched on the back. From the opening bell, “Superman” fought with the kind of gumption and temerity expected of an underdog, drawing first blood in the opening round with a jab that buckled Breland’s knees. “We wanted to get his respect, to slow him down,” Davis reflected. Years later in an interview with Ring Magazine, Breland would describe that particular punch as a “George Foreman-type of jab. Nothing pretty about it. Just effective.” His words could be a distillation of Davis’ general fighting style, workmanlike and fundamentally sound.

A left uppercut by Davis, followed by a right cross, sent Breland crashing to the canvas towards the end of the third round. Still, Breland beat the count and started to apply his seven-inch reach advantage to greater effect. For all of his early offensive success, Davis was the one who went back to his corner with a patchy right eye. “[Breland] was a professional boxer,” Davis insisted. “When I say a professional boxer, I mean he knew how to box, he knew his range. And he will fight you in the inside. This guy could fight! He kept fighting back. He really wanted that fight. Besides, he was puffing up my right eye.”

To make matters worse, Davis’ corner failed to find their Enswell until 30 seconds into the break going into the sixth. By this time, Davis’ eye had morphed into an organ more appropriate on the face of the Elephant Man. Referee Mills Lane paused the action to let the ringside physician take a look at Davis’ eye. The doctor gave the nod, and the fight went on. But Davis had no idea how long he would be allowed to continue.



“When you know you’re losing, there’s gotta be some desperation,” Davis recalled. “Like hold up, ‘I gotta go get his guy.’ When the doctor said to me that he might have to stop this fight, you know, right then, I knew what I had to do. If I get

knocked out, I get knocked out. I've been dropped once. People gotta understand, when you're hurt, you don't know that you're hurt. You don't know it. It's just a buzz. You don't know, so what are you afraid of? You gotta go out and you gotta fight. You worked too hard all your life to give it away on one night and not fight."

By the 9th round, both fighters were effigies of disfigurement; Breland with the busted nose, Davis with the closed eye. Chants of "Breland, Breland" filled the air of a supposedly neutral arena. Both fighters returned to flicking their jabs in order to catch their breath. Davis loaded up on his left hook, seemingly the only weapon he cared to use. "I don't know that [Davis] has thrown a good right hand this round," play-by-play announcer Dan Dierdorf noted. He would eat those words



five seconds later. With the round winding down, both fighters circled back to ring center. Just as Breland threw a lazy punch, Davis ducked, and with the force of his entire body, came over the top with a right hand that landed square on Breland's face. Breland crashed to the mat like a set of Jenga blocks.

"We kept practicing that," Davis said. "We kept throwing it in the fight, too. I hit him once with that shot. Overhand right, overhand right, overhand right..." Breland, mouth agape, rolled over on his side while Lane reached the end of a meaningless count. At the time of the stoppage, Davis was ahead on two scorecards, 77-74 and 76-75. The third judge had it for Breland, 77-74.

Amid the jubilant mosh pit, Davis' legs finally gave in and, like his fallen adversary, he dropped to the canvas. Tumbler, though, was there to pick him right up. In the post-fight interview, Davis was pure class, telling ABC's Alex Wallau that "Mark is a great man," that he "had more heart than I expected him to."

"He did not want to quit and go back to New York a loser," Davis continued. "Now I'm going back to New York a world champion."

Then he added, clarifying himself: "To the Bronx."

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