

The tragedy of Rex Layne

Three years ago Rex Layne was the hottest contender in sight for the heavyweight title, a 17-10 favorite over Rocky Marciano. But by the time his manager found out he didn't know his business, it was too late

By Edward Linn

When Rex Layne met Rocky Marciano three years ago-July 12,1951-the fight was billed as a head-on collision between the two best young heavyweight prospects in, the country. As a matter of fact, if one of the fighter's prospects looked brighter than the other's, then that fighter the baby-faced, curly-haired Layne. He went into the engagement as a 17-10 favorite.

It was Marciano, the underdog, who stood, over Layne that night, the road to the championship opening up before him. Before Layne, there was only the long, blood-spattered road, the other side of the mountain.

And yet, Layne's potential was so great there at the beginning, you can't help but be left with the feeling that if he could go back and do it all over again - not back to 1951, but back to 1950, to 1949, he, and not Marciano, might have ended up the heavyweight champion of the world.

You can't go home again, of course, but the temptation to push the comparison between Marciano and Layne is almost impossible to resist. Rarely have two fighters been so strikingly similar in so many ways.

Both were short-armed, heavy-legged sluggers. Both fought with a happy - if awkward -zest. Both seemed to disdain defense for a boring, bombing attack which featured an explosive right. Both had unlimited determination and the ability to take the best their opponent could throw at them and keep pressing in.

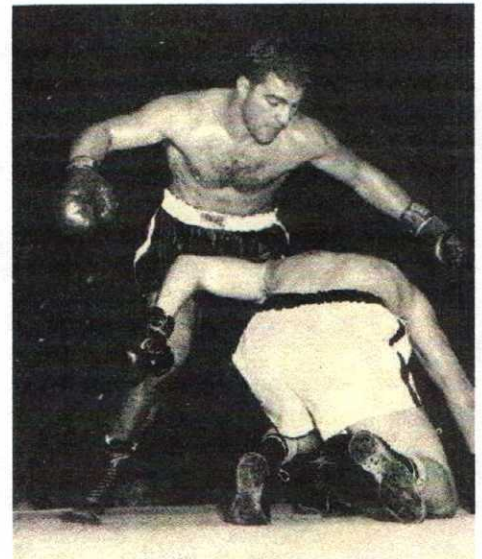
There was much about the similarity, however, that turned out to be more obvious than real. Whereas Marciano's clever little trainer, Charlie Goldman, had incorporated Rocky's awkwardness into a rolling, bobbing crouch, Layne just walked in with the unblinking, unthinking courage of a burglar with a gun in each hand. It didn't take him long to discover that the man didn't live who could shoot it out with Marciano. Rocky lashed him with right hooks and ripped him with right uppercuts. In the second round, an old gash was opened above Layne's left eye, in the third a right to the jaw knocked out an eyetooth, in the fourth he was knocked to one knee. In the sixth, a looping right to the blood-smearred left temple pitched the Utah ploughboy forward on his face. Conscious but paralyzed, he curled up onto his right side and was counted out. Guts and a right hand had taken him as far as they could. For while guts can occasionally lift a man off the floor to pull out a fight, that doesn't really happen too often. In the long run, as Rex was beginning to find out, it only lifts him back into a few more rounds of battering and bleeding. Once you get into the top echelon, fights are won by something which is probably best described as craftsmanship.

The tragedy of Rex Layne is that by the time his manager realized that he didn't know his trade, it was too late in the day to teach him. A secondary tragedy is that Marv Jenson, the thin, handsome West Coast mink rancher who managed Layne into obscurity, is one of the nicer guys in the business. An unfailingly amiable man is openly friendly - as only small town Westerners can be. Jenson's popularity extends beyond the boxing world. Pressed to stand for office, he was overwhelmingly elected mayor of West Jordan, Utah (pop. 2,200). His first civic action, characteristically, was to build a model 20 acre playground for the kids of his and the surrounding communities.

To bitch it up, completely, Al Weill, the far-from-thin, far-from-handsome Eighth Avenue cauliflower rancher who managed Marciano into the championship, is unless new evidence is uncovered the least likely candidate for a brotherhood award upon the face of the globe. Even his best friends (his best what?) are inclined to hate him.

So, Marciano has been the best managed fighter of our time, and Layne the worst. These are hard days for us moralists.

Jenson, a retired fighter, met Layne while training. High school kids around Salt Lake City. But in those days, the farmboy from Lewiston never bothered with managers or trainers. It was only after he had won the 1949 AAU heavyweight championship and was being besieged by big name managers that he sought out Jenson and asked him to take him over. "All those other guys were telling me what they could do for me," Layne says in a drawl so soft that you



have to lean forward to catch him. "I didn't want any part of them. Marv, now, I knew he was a square shooter." Jenson took Layne's ploughboy, you-gotta-give-a-little-take-a-little-and-let-your-whole-heart-break-a-little style, and did nothing at all with it. It was a style which promised Rex quick relief from his baby features, always most embarrassing to a fighter, but it had overwhelmed the boys in the amateurs and nobody could deny that it was crowd pleasing. As a sportswriter had written after the AAU championships in Boston: "He came alone, but left with the crowd ringing in his ears. He was green as grass. But he fought with great determination and he may be a champion one of these days."

Against second-rate professional competition, the same bruising style was more than adequate. After 28 fights he had a record of 18 KO's and only one loss - that to Dave Whitlock, a Pacific Coast trial horse whom he beat twice. He also picked up a testimonial from Joe Louis, a gentleman never noted for overenthusiasm. After facing Layne in an exhibition bout, Joe said, "This is the best looking prospect I've seen in a long time. Good puncher. Plenty of courage. All he needs now is about a year of personal coaching like I got from Jack Blackburn."

Jenson apparently fastened onto the praise and let his eyes slide right past the reservation. Layne had been fighting professionally only eighteen months against nobody you ever heard of when Jenson signed with Al Weill of the IBC to fight Jersey Joe Walcott. Weill, of course, was matchmaking for Jim Norris with his right hand and managing Marciano with his left. So the cry went up from the anti-Weill press (roughly, the entire press of the free world) that Jenson had been lured into a trap. Weill's angle, the story went, was to have old Joe knock Layne out of young Marciano's path, so Rocky wouldn't have to do it himself later when Layne would undoubtedly be a more polished, more dangerous fighter.

Actually, Weill was maligned - proving to skeptics that it was possible. Jenson was at least as eager as Weill to make the match for he really believed that Layne was ready for anyone except possibly the champion, Ezzard Charles. He wanted to start with Walcott because he figured Jersey Joe might be ready to age gracefully at any moment. The tell on Jenson's eagerness was that he accepted the fight for the night after Thanksgiving, a notoriously unprofitable date for any sort of entertainment.

The tell on his lack of foresight, precaution, know how - call it what you want - was that he allowed Layne to fight twice in the month preceding the fight. The fights were against a couple of guys named Dale Hall and Andy Walker, but not even nonentities had ever found Layne a startlingly elusive target. Between them, Hall and Walker opened up the scar tissue above Layne's left eye and sent him into Madison Square Garden at a distinct disadvantage. Walcott needed only two rounds to split the eye so badly that ten stitches had to be taken. It was a rare fight, thereafter, that didn't find Rex blinking away blood.

If Layne had been lucky, Walcott would have come in sharp, given him a lesson in boxing and sent him scurrying back to Utah with the knowledge of exactly how much he still had to learn. Instead, Joe, overconfident and overweight, came in with a roll of fat splayed over his trunks. He was slow and listless. In bouncing a right off Layne's head in the third round, he sprained his wrist, pretty well spiking his attack for the evening.

Walcott, who normally walks away from his man in his own version of the Notre Dame shift, spent the rest of the fight running backward like a Notre Dame opponent. Layne, despite the gash above his eye, grew stronger as the fight progressed. Finishing under a drive, he caught Joe against the ropes in the tenth and cannonaded him with rights.

Layne, the 5-1 underdog, came out with a unanimous decision, and nothing could convince him, Jenson or the TV fans that he wasn't the rising young heavyweight on the American scene. Especially when Walcott, given a title match off his loss to Layne, beat Charles for the championship.

Ten weeks later, the eye pretty well healed, Rex was back in Madison Square Garden and the TV screens against the latest wild bull of the Pampas, Cesar Brion. Neither Brion nor Layne looked like wild bulls or even mild bulls. They looked, instead, like a couple of apprentice matadors tangled in each other's capes. Layne won what was undoubtedly the biggest stinkeroo of the year. There was a flood of loud and unsolicited opinion to

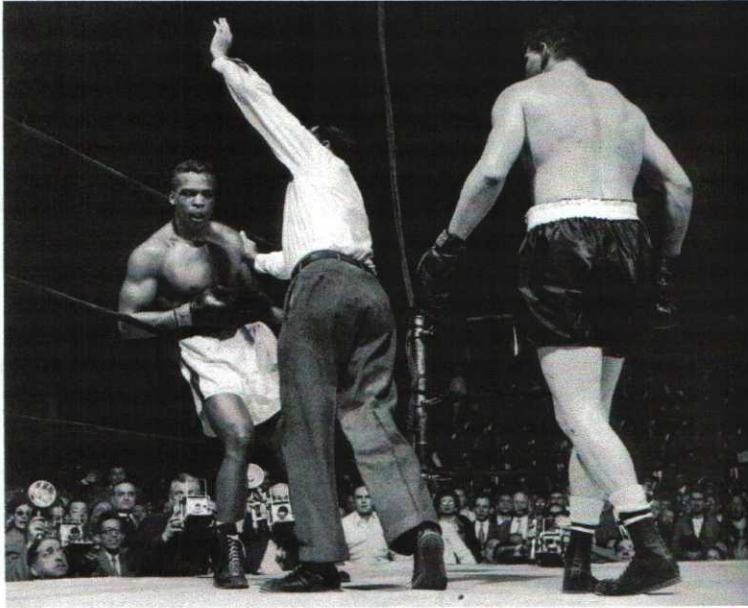
the effect that he would do well to go back to the gym and learn how to fight, and Brion would do even better to go back to Argentina and learn how to raise cattle. But there is an old saying which can be traced back to the day when the first razor blade was honed - that a fighter is as good as his last television appearance. A month later, March 9, 1951, Layne was back in the Carden, back on the TV screens and back on top of the world, the Brion affair either forgotten or remembered as a glorious victory. Against Bob Satterfield, a Chicago lighthheavy with the extravagant reputation of



having "the hardest single punch in the ring," Layne won the kind of blood-and-guts battle for which you have to love a fighter. Satterfield walked out at the bell and dropped Rex with a two-fisted barrage. Layne, in top shape at 190, came fighting back, slogging forward even though his unprofessional tendency of dropping his left after he punched with it left him vulnerable to a steady hammering of rights. In trouble often, wobbly kneed often, bleeding from the nose and of course, above the left eye. Rex kept forcing the fight. In the sixth he walked into a barrage of rights to the head but survived. In the seventh he was staggered by another barrage and again survived.

The climax came in the eighth, Satterfield bent him with a hard right to the kidneys, then straightened him with a right to the jaw. Layne shuddered from stem to stem, and Satterfield stepped back to give him falling room. Layne shook his head, snorted, and plowed in.

Satterfield, incredulous, gave ground. He lashed out with a right, but this time Layne answered with a tremendous right of his own. Satterfield went down. To all practical purposes the fight was over, Layne, who had taken at least twenty solid jolts from the "hardest single puncher in the game," won the fight with his first good blow. The Garden, to keep it simple, went mad.



Among the maddest were ringsiders Jack Dempsey and Gene Tunney. "This is the fighter with the greatest potential for the heavyweight title," Tunney said. "The thing I like the most is that he knocked Satterfield out with a right - hand counter and counter - punching is just heart. You don't think or plan when somebody is bombing you."

But then came that inevitable reservation. "He needs shaping. He must learn better how to advance or retreat without tangling his feet." Said Dempsey: "A great prospect, As aggressive a fighter as I've seen in years. But he gave too much room to a guy like this one who lays back to kill you with one punch. He should have six months of solid work under somebody who can shorten his punches.

In the drama of victory there was a natural tendency to play up Layne's overcoming of the punches and play down their effects. The first warning was on the record, though. Sitting in his dressing room after the fight Layne shook

his head and said, "I don't know how many more of those right hands I'd have been able to take. A few more fights like this and I'll have marbles in my head. Four months later he was in there with Marciano.

In Jenson's defense - it's a weak one - it should be said that he did want to hire a top trainer to get Layne primed for this crucial fight, the pivotal one in his career. Instead of going out and hiring him, though, he decided to talk it over with Layne. Rex didn't want to put out the money. Never mind what Louis and Dempsey and Tunney had said, Layne told Jenson. He was perfectly satisfied with the way Jenson was handling him. He was Rex Layne who either, outhustled them, outpunched them, or outguttled them. He'd handle Marciano like he'd handled all the others.

Jenson, who couldn't care less about the extra money, let Layne have it his way.

In Layne's defense - and it's much stronger than Jenson's - it should be said that he had plenty of cause for thinking that Marciano would be another Satterfield. From the day the match was made, the sportswriters we chortling happily that this was the fight that Al Weill hadn't wanted, the fight that Norris had forced down his gullet. Layne had no way of knowing that, as far as the writers were concerned, it was a classic case of the wish fathering the thought. The truth was that Layne was exactly the kind of opponent Weill had been looking for. Better than anyone else, Weill knew he couldn't keep Marciano down in Providence any longer, piling up stacks of the heavyweight division's deadwood. Layne's win over the likes of Satterfield hadn't impressed him one bit. He had seen how easily Rex could be hit by a right and knew that his man could shatter anybody he could hit with his right.

Weill pretended to be balky because he knew that Jenson would eventually accept almost any terms for a fight he wanted. Jenson - who is not only a successful mink rancher but probably *the* most successful mink rancher in the world - is a man who doesn't like to connive for a buck or two. Weill is a man who likes nothing better, By



acting coy, Weill got Jenson to give Marciano 30 percent of the purse against Layne's 25 percent.

So Marciano got the big end of the purse as well as a great victory, and Layne, demolished, finally went back to Utah to learn how to defend himself. Possibly it was already too late. Habits picked up over four years of fighting, amateur and pro, aren't easy to break. Still, whatever chance Rex had of developing a style which didn't invite destruction went overboard when Jenson took him out of the schoolroom and put him in a Pittsburgh ring to practice his lessons on Ezzard Charles.

It was a fantastic piece of matchmaking, Jenson had had the sense to duck Ez three separate times after the Walcott fight, but now, with that fatal lack of patience, he figured he needed a big win to jump back into the heavyweight picture. Since Layne had beaten Walcott, and Walcott had beaten Charles, he was able to convince himself that Rex had a chance. Charles, starting a comeback of his own, was way off for the first half of the bout. Once he found the range, though, he began to slice pieces off Layne. In the tenth he knocked Rex cold. Unfortunately, the bell stopped the count at eight.

Layne's handlers dragged him back to his corner and got him into condition to stagger out for the eleventh. Charles, leaping across the ring to meet him, battered him unmercifully. Just as it seemed impossible that he could take any more punishment, Layne, calling on that great store of courage, pulled himself together for one final stand. Charles, astonished, had to give ground but it was only for that moment. Coming over Layne's low left with a vicious right he dropped the Utah strong boy in a neutral corner. Bleeding from all pores, Layne tried to pull himself up along the ropes when Referee Buck McTiernan stepped in front of him and signaled that it was all over. Layne was still in such a dazed condition when he was examined by the Pennsylvania Athletic Commission's doctor in his dressing room that he was banned from the ring for three months. It was the second warning. And now that warning was being echoed in some sports pages. Frank Graham of the New York Journal-American wrote: "Maybe it would have been better for Rex in the long run if Ezzard had been right and had sliced him up early, and the referee had stopped the fight inside of six rounds. Cuts heal quickly when you're young and healthy. Solid head and boy beatings sometimes leave something with you ... and whatever it is, it isn't good. The notion here is that this might be the time for him to retire while he is relatively even."

Layne, needless to say, did not retire. He was back in three months, committed at long last to a series of trial bouts against relative pushovers. Jenson, finally ready to admit that Rex needed a personal, Goldman - type trainer, went over Layne's head and asked Manny Seamon, Joe Louis's last trainer, to come down to Boston to work Rex's corner against pushover No. 1, Willie James. Seamon came down the night of the fight, February 7, 1952, and saw a sloppy fat Layne take such a shellacking that the promoter had to apologize to the customers. Whether this was Layne's way of showing that he wouldn't work for any trainer or whether it was only coincidental that he was in the worst shape of his career, only Rex could say. Either way, Jenson knew it would be useless to ask Seamon a stickler for condition-to handle Rex. Manny, disgusted, took the first plane back to New York.

Inevitably, the word began to go around that Rex was a beer-hound. It wasn't true. Layne's trouble was not with the bottle, it was with the knife and fork. He loved to eat and hated to train - a disastrous parley always.

In condition and out, Layne went on to knock over such as Bob Garner, Bill Peterson and Johnny Pretzie. As soon as he got into the ring with a fighter of any accomplishment, though, he was shown up to be almost as inept as ever. Harry Matthews, who had been belted out by Marciano, handled Layne like a sparboy. Rex was now cutting so easily that Matthews split open that cut above the eye with a hard right to the jaw. He followed with another right that split Layne's mouth open.

The only consolation, as far as the Layne camp was concerned, was that the Matthews fight between the two most prominent western heavies drew a record gate for the state of Oregon. Throughout the country sportswriters were now pleading with Rex to take the money and get out of the ring.

Instead, Layne went to Ogden, Utah, and an even bigger gate with Ezzard Charles. This is a fight which belongs more to the heading of Charles vs. Charles than to Layne vs. Charles. Ez fought such a dull fight - the dullest of a spotty career - that Jack Dempsey, who was referee and sole judge, gave Rex the decision on sheer aggressiveness. The story went over the wires that Dempsey scored the fight two rounds for Layne, one for Charles and seven, even, a card which would lead any reasonable man to the conclusion that Dempsey wasn't exactly sure what he was seeing. Actually Dempsey didn't keep score at all. He simply watched the fight like any spectator and, at the end, was of the opinion that Layne had won. When a local reporter asked him, amidst the booing, how he'd scored it, Dempsey said, "Oh, Layne, two to one," meaning, of course, that he figured Layne had been about twice as good as Ez. Taking him quite literally, the reporter concluded that the other seven rounds must have been even.

Rex's end of the purse was over \$40,000 but more important to both himself and Jenson, he was back in the limelight. There was little danger of being blinded by it, though, he remained there only for the length of time it took to come back to the Garden and take on Roland LaStarza, the nonviolent college grad. Since Chuck Davey had just inflicted more damage upon the cause of education than upon Kid Gavilan, Rex was given some chance. It turned out to be one whale of a fight, but LaStarza came on over the last three rounds to get a split decision

The end came, to all practical intents, when Rex got cornered for a third time with Ezzard Charles. This time Charles came up sharp and Layne, with his pale-, white, flabby, slope-shouldered build, came in at 203 pounds.

Rex was down four times and spent the final four rounds barely hanging onto consciousness. If ever a fight typified a man's career, this one typifies Layne's. He held his feet, soaking up punishment until one second before the final bell; then, as if something inside him had clocked the fight, he sagged to the canvas completely spent. Somewhere in that fight he had taken that one punch too many, that one punch which, adding its small weight and wear to a thousand other punches, turns something soft inside a man. It was not a pretty thing to see.

That's how it ended, on April 1, 1953, in San Francisco, for the Utah ploughboy who was never outfought or outguttled.

Layne it is true, has kept on fighting. He took on Canadian heavy Earl Walls, who had been his sparring partner for the Satterfield fight, and was knocked out in one round. He took him on again and was flattened three times before it was called off on account of blood in the sixth.

"This Walls," Marv Jenson announced in awe, "is the hardest puncher in the game. He hits harder than Marciano or Satterfield."

That there was one other possibility. That Layne couldn't absorb a punch like he used to never seemed to occur to him.

"Rex is only 25," he said. "Heavies don't reach their peak until 28 or 29. Rex will get going again." Rex did not get going last February against Tommy Jackson, a young heavy. Layne used up everything he had in six rounds.

And yet, like his manager, Layne can see no reason why he should not keep on fighting. "Farming is all right," he says with a characteristic dry wit, "but only if you have enough money to hire people to get up in the morning and do your work for you."

With the two big purses from the Charles fights, he was able to build and furnish a three-bedroom rambler at the foot of the Wasatch mountains on the outskirts of Salt Lake City. There he lives with his wife Adele and his two daughters.

Adele, of course would not be unhappy to see her husband quit the ring and accept an offer to join a real estate firm owned by two of his best friends. Neither would thousands of fight fans. When Layne takes a punch to the head these days, every knowledgeable fan winces with him. They do a lot of wincing.

Why doesn't Rex get out while the getting is good? Probably because he and Jenson are still able to feed themselves on the memories of the glowing prospect and the occasional triumphs. It was only a little over a year ago that Rex was the second ranking heavyweight in the world. Once he gets his weight down, they say.... Once he begins to train in earnest..... Once he clears up a thyroid condition which showed up in a physical exam that was taken weeks before the Jackson fight.....

What they stubbornly refuse to concede is that they are only acting out a bloody epilogue to the story that came to an end in San Francisco. Rex was through at 25, his once soft, smooth baby-face, wadded and pulpy, his nose battered and bowed, his forehead cut by a thick, 6-inch scar. One of the two most promising heavyweights of our time, he won only three major fights. He beat Walcott when Walcott was out of condition and fighting with a bad hand; he beat Satterfield, who himself never beat anybody; he beat Charles on a disputed decision.

Well, then, it is certainly reasonable to ask, was he really such a good prospect or was he overrated from the start? Boxing men, in a rare instance of unity, insist that Layne was not overrated, so much as rated along to fast. The potential was there. It went unrealized because he was taught almost nothing and thrown into the big time before he was ready.

"Two years too early," one of the most respected manager-promoters in the business said recently. "If I couldn't have moved him along so he'd be ready now - right now - to cash a small fortune, I'd have no right in this business. I don't mean only me, you understand, I mean any of a dozens managers I could name. There's a time to be greedy in this business and a time to be patient. The time to be patient comes first."

Jack Curley, the articulate little manager of Stillman's Gym, summed it up, probably the best of all. "This," he said, "is a business for professionals. Mink ranching is for mink ranchers, fighting is for fighters and managing is for managers. They're all full-time jobs." - **Edward Linn**

