

'Iron' Mike soft in sorrowful return

YOUNGSTOWN, Ohio (AP) - Mike Tyson's return to boxing was no knockout. Not even close. The former heavyweight champion and one-time baddest man alive opened his "World Tour" on Friday night with a ho-hum performance in a four-round exhibition against Corey "T-Rex" Sanders, a former sparring partner who outweighed Tyson by 50 pounds.

Tyson, gasping for air during each of the 2 1/2-minute rounds, floored Sanders early in the first round and then had to hold up his opponent moments later after staggering him with a flurry of punches.

"It was fun, that's my first time boxing since my last fight," said Tyson, who retired last year after losing to Kevin McBride. "I didn't know how tough it would be."

Wearing his familiar black shoes, plain trunks and a sleeveless white T-shirt, Tyson entered the ring at 12:23 a.m. to a rousing ovation from about 4,000 fans in the 6,000-seat Chevrolet Centre, home of the Youngstown Steel Hounds, a minor league hockey team.

The arena, which will host a concert by Disney's Doodlebops on Saturday, erupted as Tyson made his way to the ring. But not long after Tyson knocked down Sanders, the warm buzz quickly faded.

With Tyson and Sanders locked up like two ballroom dancers, the crowd, which paid up to \$200 for a ticket, first began a vulgar chant directed at Tyson and soon began to boo at what looked more like a pillow fight than a boxing match.

Tyson responded with right-left combination that buckled Sanders. But instead of finishing off his opponent the way he almost always did, Tyson wrapped his arms around Sanders to prevent him from hitting the canvas.

"I don't know what people were looking for," said promoter Sterling McPherson, who said Tyson will chose among eight locations for his next fight. "We weren't trying to fool anyone or pull the wool over anyone's eyes. This was an exhibition. People boo at real fights. ...This isn't about him beating anybody up."

The second and third rounds followed a similar pattern with Tyson pawing at Sanders — who wore headgear — with an occasional roundhouse left or uppercut. But there was little snap in the 40-year-old's punches and as the rounds plodded on, the crowd became restless.

"Rip off!" screamed one fan near ringside.

There were moments when Tyson flashed his trademark power, but they were few and far between.

When it was over, Tyson thanked the crowd and shook hands with fans as he was escorted off the floor.

Tyson did not attend a post-fight news conference.

He arrived about 2 1/2 hours before his fight, and the man whose every move used to command the world's attention, dressed in the locker room normally used by the Central Hockey League's Steel Hounds.

Fans lined up outside the building's locked doors more than six hours before Tyson's main event. Some weren't sure what to expect when Tyson climbed onto the apron and through the ropes.

"He's unpredictable, that's why I'm here," said Michael Baker of Poland, Ohio. His wife, Christie, was given two \$25 tickets from her boss, who got them for free from a local radio station.

The Bakers were enjoying a night out, and were wondering if Tyson would do something to make it more memorable.

"I just hope Tyson has grown up and acts responsibly and like a human being," said Michael Baker, who has little sympathy for the former champ. "He's a womanizer. I lived in Las Vegas for two years. He doesn't fool me."

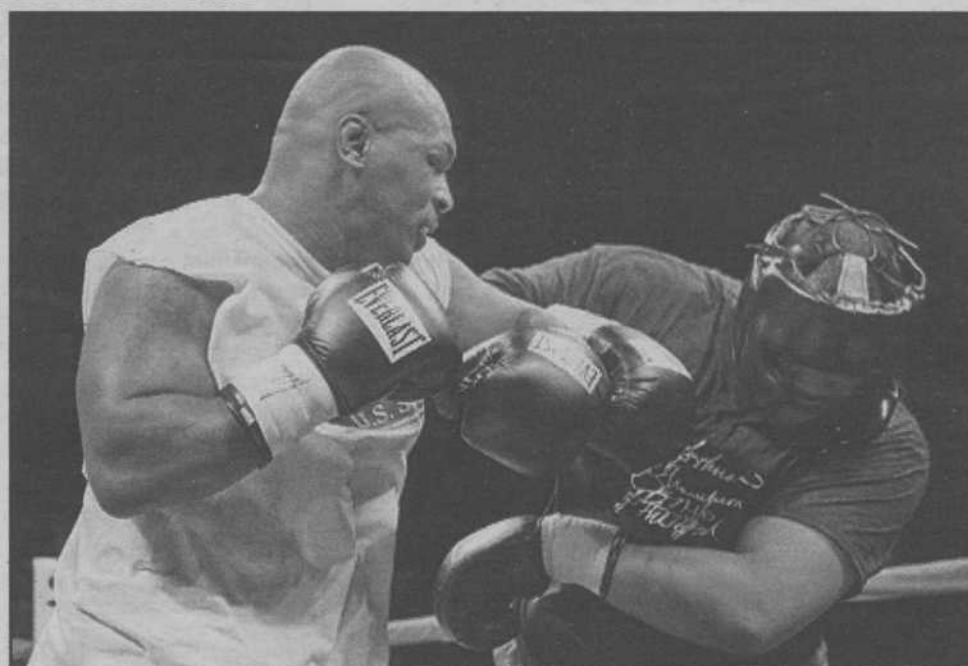
Tyson used to own a mansion in Southington, Ohio, about 20 miles from Youngstown. He and McPherson selected this blue-collar town to launch the tour partly because of the area's rich boxing history.

Gene Tunney, Ezzard Charles and Primo Carnera were among the sport's greats who fought exhibitions in the area, though none of them were as infamous as Tyson.

McPherson said he's in

contract negotiations to take Tyson abroad. He listed China, South Africa, South Korea, Russia and Los Angeles as possible future sites and said Tyson may fight on Super Bowl weekend in Miami. However, no other dates have been announced.

This fight was available for \$29.95 on pay-per-view and McPherson may be waiting to see the size of the worldwide TV audience before planning the next date.



Mike Tyson, left, jabs Corey "T-Rex" Sanders in an exhibition Friday in Youngstown, Ohio. The former heavyweight champion has returned to the sport he once dominated.

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