

Ranking The Heavyweight's 'Louis Through Lewis'

Written by Frank Lotierzo
Sunday, 25 May 2003 19:00

Why Louis through Lewis

Being a fight collector, I've seen all the films that are available of Jack Johnson, Jim Jeffries, Jack Dempsey and Gene Tunney along with other past greats. Personally, I don't feel comfortable ranking fighters that far back. It's too easy for some to dismiss them saying they weren't that good, but I don't adhere to that mind set. It's just very hard to grasp their greatness due to the old films, which captured them. The films do them no justice and, with no audio, make it even more difficult to get a true appreciation of their greatness. I have a problem with those who just brush them off because they fought in another era and have adopted the attitude that if it wasn't shown on HBO or it wasn't a Sportscenter highlight, it doesn't mean anything.

Starting around the Joe Louis era the film and audio quality improved tremendously. There is plenty of good film available on the fighters from Louis forward, and I feel that it's more than adequate to get a good feel for the fighters. Plus, Louis was the new wave of fighter, way ahead of his time.

Louis & Ali

In this writer's opinion, Joe Louis and Muhammad Ali are at the top of boxing's heavyweight Mount Rushmore. I am very confident that both of them would defeat all the fighters on this list. Ali and Louis have too many weapons and skills for the other fighters, and they are much more resourceful and complete. So, why do I have Ali over Louis? Most of the time when great fighters face each other, it very often comes down to styles. In a Louis-Ali match up, the style advantage goes to Ali. Other than Billy Conn, and Jersey Joe Walcott, most of Louis' opponents went to him, which played perfectly into his style. Fighters who moved away or circled caused him some difficulty.

Ali's overall speed and movement would make it very difficult for Louis to catch him to where he could unload his precision combinations in order to do the damage he would need to slow Ali. On the other hand, Louis fights a style that Ali is accustomed to facing. Louis would pressure him but not like Frazier or Foreman did, trying to force Ali to react when he didn't want to.

Louis applied more subtle pressure, which is something Ali could handle and exploit, and Louis didn't change for any fighter. Louis would just bide his time waiting for Ali to make a mistake, instead of trying to force him into making one like Frazier and Foreman did. This favors Ali. The bottom line is I take Ali over Louis mainly because Louis would have to change and adjust his fighting style and posture and Ali wouldn't. Another reason I favor Ali over Louis is that he beat better fighters. In Liston, Frazier and Foreman, Ali beat three fighters who make almost everyone's all-time heavyweight top ten ranking. In the case of Frazier and Foreman, Ali defeated them after his 43 month exile, while they were in their respective prime. Ali also is the only heavyweight champion in history whose opponents cannot be questioned, even by the harshest critics. One final thought on Joe Louis and Muhammad Ali, it is my firm belief that both of them are plenty big enough to more than handle the "so-called" giant heavyweight's fighting today. Both Louis and Ali defeated fighters as big or bigger than those currently fighting today.

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When reviewing both of their career's, it's quite obvious that both of them were more troubled by smaller and quicker fighters opposed to the bigger hulking type ponderous fighters of today.

Below are my heavyweight rankings in order from Joe Louis through Lennox Lewis. From number three George Foreman on, I give my scenario on how I see a match up involving Louis & Ali versus the fighters ranked 3 through 10.

How I Rated the Fighters

I'm a believer in head-to-head, and feel it carries much weight when rating one fighter over another. For me to rate Fighter A over Fighter B, I must feel strongly that A would've defeated B had they confronted each other on their best night. I also think length of title reign can sometimes be misleading. For example, Liston made only one title defense and Foreman only made two. However, both of their title tenures were cut short because they fought during the Ali era. Had Ali not been around, Liston could have remained champ through 1970, and Foreman could have reigned champ from 1973 into the 1990's. Remember, Foreman did capture the title a second time in November of 1994, and that was after a ten-year ring absence.

I ranked George Foreman very high for the fact he was the best puncher in heavyweight history, and had he not lost to Ali, he may have never been beaten. A closer look at Sonny Liston's career reveals that other than losing a decision to Marty Marshall in his eighth pro bout, which he avenged twice, Liston totally went through the division. His defeats by Ali were later in his career and he was an old man by the time Leotis Martin beat him.

Next is Joe Frazier, whom I have no doubt some will say I have ranked too high. In my opinion, Frazier is admonished too harshly for his defeats by Foreman. Those that say Frazier couldn't fight big punchers basically mean Foreman! Foreman is the best puncher in heavyweight history. On top of that, from a style standpoint, Frazier is made for Foreman, and Foreman is the only fighter to walk through Frazier. Of the ten times Frazier's been down, eight are by the sledgehammer fist of Big George. Frazier never lost to any fighter he shouldn't have. Other than Marciano, no other fighter on this list can say that.

It also must be pointed out that Frazier gave Ali life and death all three times they fought, and on the night of March 8th, 1971 Frazier gave boxing one of the greatest performances by any heavyweight ever, winning the biggest fight in boxing history. I rated Frazier above Marciano mainly because I just can't envision a fighter smaller than Joe beating him, and Marciano would be more prone to getting cut had they fought. However, I go back and forth on Frazier and Marciano, on another day I could easily rate Rocky over Joe.

Some may think Rocky Marciano should be ranked higher because he was undefeated, but I think that it's very realistic that had some of the above fighters fought during the time he did, they also may have gone undefeated, and that's not taking anything away from Rocky. Marciano had dynamite in both fists and a jaw that was immune to being hit. He was the best-conditioned heavyweight ever, and no one was tougher.

Next is Larry Holmes, who possessed the best jab in heavyweight history along with Liston. Holmes had the heart of a champion and was most dangerous when he was hurt. He also could

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fight and adapt to all different style opponents.

Evander Holyfield is next, and without question, he's the biggest overachiever in heavyweight history, he also was outweighed in all of his fights at heavyweight except four. He also defeated every top fighter of his generation.

Current champ Lennox Lewis has never met a fighter he wasn't able to defeat, and like Holyfield, fought and defeated the best of his era (I rate Holyfield above Lewis because I say at their best Holyfield decisions Lewis. When they fought, Holyfield was capable of only fighting in spurts, which made it impossible for him to outscore Lewis in hopes of winning a decision. Evander also had a better chin than Lennox, which is a must in the heavyweight division).

Mike Tyson is next. I think Tyson is somewhat of an underachiever, despite having tremendous physical talent. He is also winless against the best fighters he's faced. However, his punching power and hand speed cannot be denied. I also throw out a fight when a great loses to another great when one fighter is coming out of retirement or is obviously a shell of what they were at their best. Regarding the fighters on this list I don't consider, Holmes over Ali, Marciano over Louis and Tyson over Holmes when making my rankings. The way I see it, number three beats number four more times in 10 fights than number four would beat number three. This is how I come to my conclusions ranking the fighters one through 10.

Rankings 1-10

1-**Muhammad Ali**: (times knocked down-four) (times stopped-one)

Muhammad Ali had more weapons and ways to beat great heavyweights than any other heavyweight champion in history. He was the fastest heavyweight ever of hand and foot, blessed with a cast iron chin and very underrated physical strength. Ali had the ability to endure a body shot as good or better than any heavyweight who has yet lived, coupled with never before seen recuperative powers. Ali was the master at psychological warfare and had an indomitable will to win. He could adjust and adapt to all different fighting styles. Ali used his strength to out muscle the boxers, and his speed to out box the swarmers and sluggers, and was as tough as could be. It must not go unmentioned that Ali fought and dominated during the best era in heavyweight history, despite being out of boxing the four best years of his physical prime. Unlike Louis, Ali was probably the most flawed heavyweight champion ever from a fundamental boxing standpoint. He just out sped his flaws and mistakes because of his great athletic ability. The one thing Ali lacked was one punch knockout power that some believe a dominant heavyweight champion should possess

2-**Joe Louis**: (times knocked down-ten) (times stopped-two)

Joe Louis is the most faultless fighter in boxing history. He is the textbook on boxing, did everything perfect and was light years ahead of his time. He had perfect form, wasted no punches and threw every punch perfectly with speed and accuracy. He had dynamite in both hands, applied subtle pressure to set his opponents up and was a great combination puncher who carried his punch throughout the fight. Louis also had an outstanding chin. Some say his chin was his weakness but they are wrong. History shows he was down seven times. But he was only stopped early in his career before reaching his peak by Max Schmeling, after Louis

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absorbed countless flush rights to his jaw; And don't be fooled, Schmeling had a stiff right hand. The other time Louis was stopped was when he was an empty package at the age of 37, fighting Rocky Marciano, one of history's greatest punchers. Other than these two fights, Louis was never close to being stopped. He was knocked down but jumped right back up, in what is known as a flash knockdown. The only kink in the armor of Joe Louis was that he was sometimes vulnerable to boxers with good foot movement.

3-**George Foreman** (times knocked down-three) (times stopped-one)

vs.... Louis: This fight comes down to styles. Louis and Foreman are the two most dangerous fighters in heavyweight history when the opponent goes to them, it's literally suicide. The fighter who advances toward the other in this fight loses. I see Louis drawing Foreman to him. This would set up Foreman to be hit and countered with Louis' cat-quick combinations. I see Louis being too precision and fundamentally sound for Big George. Foreman's power would be dangerous for Louis, and a Foreman knockout win would not be an upset or even a surprise to me, but I'd give the Brown Bomber the edge winning by a lopsided decision or a late stoppage if Foreman tired.....vs.... Ali: This fight we actually had the privilege of seeing. Ali's overall speed and experience provided him a huge advantage. However, what really tilted the fight in Ali's favor was his overall physical strength and cast iron chin, which enabled him to stand up to Foreman's fierce assault. Foreman is made for Ali!

4-**Sonny Liston** (times knocked down-two) (times stopped-3)

vs.... Louis: This is a real intriguing fight. In the late '50s and early '60s, some historians felt Liston was even greater than Louis. Liston's jab would've been troublesome for Joe, however the difference in this fight would be the overall hand speed of Louis. Louis would be able to get his punches off first and faster, and Louis was a much better combination puncher than Liston. I see Louis winning a comfortable decision. As with Foreman, Liston's power would make him dangerous throughout the fight and a Liston knockout victory can't be considered an upset.....vs.... Ali: Again like with Foreman we saw Ali-Liston, though it wasn't a prime Liston. Ali just has too many weapons along with size, speed, strength, and chin to be defeated by Liston. Like Foreman, Liston is made for Ali.

5-**Joe Frazier** (times knocked down-10) (times stopped-three)

vs.... Louis: Frazier is tailor made for Louis. Frazier's aggressive attacking style would play into exactly what Louis would've wanted Frazier to do. Louis would catch Frazier clean as he was coming into him. By Frazier coming in, the punch would land with even more impact. Also, Frazier was sometimes vulnerable to being hit with the straight right hand. Louis' right hand was snake like quick with the explosiveness of a stick of dynamite. I see Louis stopping Frazier. If Frazier could make it to the last third of the fight, he may have a shot with his pressure possibly getting to Louis, but I can't see Frazier making it that far.....vs.... Ali: This match-up we saw three times, and we can't thank the Boxing-Gods enough for allowing us the gift of witnessing all three fights!

6-**Rocky Marciano** (times knocked down-two) (times stopped-0)

vs.... Louis: Yes we saw this but, Louis was shot and 37-years-old. In their prime, I see this fight close to how I see Louis vs.... Frazier. Marciano, like Frazier, applies constant pressure, which is instant death against Louis. Louis would land smashing right hands and devastating right

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uppercuts to Rocky's head. Marciano is more prone to cuts than Frazier is, but since he doesn't apply quite as much pressure as Frazier, he may last a little longer. I think Louis would decision Marciano or possibly cut him leading to a possible stoppage. Again, like with Frazier, if Rocky is around in the last third of the fight he could stop Louis. However I do see Marciano having a better chance to upset Louis than Frazier.....vs.... Ali: Forget the computer garbage; The computer had Marciano winning in the United States, and Ali winning in Europe. I see Ali-Marciano similar to Ali-Frazier. However, I don't believe Marciano would've been quite as tough on Ali as Frazier was. Marciano didn't cut the ring off as well as Joe, and Frazier had faster hands than Rocky on the inside where Marciano would have to try and force the fight. I think Frazier had a little better head movement than Rocky and was harder to hit as well, which benefits Ali. I see Ali winning a more one sided decision over Rocky than he did Joe, unless he cuts him.

7-Larry Holmes (times knocked down-six) (times stopped-one)
vs.... Louis: I see Holmes doing well vs.... Louis in the early going due to his great left jab. Holmes would make Louis work to get close, however the longer the fight goes I see Louis getting to Holmes and scoring with his short straight right hands inside of Holmes' jab. Once Holmes starts to slow, Louis would be deadly with his body punching against a Holmes whose legs are starting to get heavy. Louis would start landing his explosive right hand and left hooks more regularly, eventually wearing Holmes down and winning a clear-cut decision.....vs.... Ali: Unfortunately we saw this fight, only it was a thoroughly shot Ali two months shy of his 39th birthday, facing Holmes at his peak. As anticipated, if both were in their prime, I believe this fight would be painful on the eyes to watch. The problem is, both guys depend on their jab to set up everything they do, and both guys hated to be jabbed at, (see Ali vs.... Jones, Bugner and Young -- see Holmes vs.... Witherspoon, Williams and M. Spinks). Another factor in this match-up would be, which fighter could get the other fighter to assume the aggressors role. Since both guys like to have their opponent come to them, the fighter who is the aggressor is at a disadvantage in this match up. This fight will definitely go the distance because both Ali and Holmes have great chins, and neither have a big enough punch to knock the other out. I see Ali getting Holmes to be the aggressor and having the advantage, along with Ali being a little faster and stronger and having greater stamina. I see him winning a very boring and ugly decision.

8-Evander Holyfield (times knocked down-four) (times stopped-one)
vs.... Louis: The problem for Holyfield in this match-up with Louis is his heart is too big. Holyfield would be only too willing to engage Louis and trade with him. Louis would apply enough pressure on Holyfield so that he would be forced to try and fight back. Holyfield doesn't have the boxing skill or punch to discourage Louis from coming at him. Once this fight becomes a toe-to-toe slugfest, the "Real Deal" would be stopped. I don't see any scenario in which Holyfield beats Louis..... vs.... Ali: This is another match-up that Holyfield has nothing to win with. He can't out box or out speed Ali , and he's not a big enough puncher to bother him or wear him down. I see Ali circling and boxing Holyfield, being able to pick his spots to do whatever he wants whenever he wants. Ali wins every time, most likely by a decision.

9-Lennox Lewis (times knocked down-two) (times stopped-two)
vs.... Louis: I see Lennox's jab keeping Joe at bay for a short time like Holmes, but again, Joe is too fast and sharp a puncher not to get inside and hit Lennox on his chin. Once Joe is inside,

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he'd start working on Lennox's body with short crisp left hooks. Once Louis is on the inside, the fight ends. Lennox is such a huge target I can't see him eluding the Louis assault, and no way he stands up to Joe's power. Maybe early on Lewis might catch Joe, but I doubt he'd fight aggressively enough facing a fighter with the two handed power of the Brown Bomber, Louis stops Lewis.....vs.... Ali: I don't see Lennox presenting many problems for Ali. Lewis is too big, too cautious and slow to bother Ali, and Lennox is too big a target for Ali to miss. Ali could pick his spots to go in and out whenever he chose to. I see Ali taking Lewis to school, giving him a thorough boxing lesson. The only thing Ali would even have to think about is not running into a Lewis right hand. Even at that, I can't see Lewis' right hand being as dangerous as the left-hook of Frazier or any power punch that Foreman, Liston, or Shavers landed on Ali. Ali wins by lopsided decision.

10-**Mike Tyson** (times knocked down-four) (times stopped-four)
vs.... Louis: I see Louis getting inside of Tyson's looping right hand and left hook. Tyson has fast hands, but Louis' were also fast, and since Joe throws straight punches, he would beat Tyson to the mark. Once Louis has landed a couple short explosive right hands on Tyson, Tyson would lose his will and confidence, and attempt to try to land one big punch to get Joe out. Once this fails, Tyson will go through the motions as he did with Lennox Lewis until Joe knocks him out. Tyson, like Foreman, Liston, Marciano and Frazier could always get lucky but I don't see it. Louis is too hard a puncher and refined fighter to lose to Tyson.....vs.... Ali: Again, I see this playing out like Ali vs... Frazier and Marciano only not as tough for Ali. Tyson doesn't put as much pressure on as Frazier and he's easier to hit. He doesn't take a punch as good as Frazier or Marciano and he's nowhere near as tough as either of them. He has faster hands than either Frazier or Marciano, but against Ali, he still will be out sped. As far as punch goes, Tyson's hook isn't as good as Frazier's, but his right is better. Tyson has a better hook than Marciano, but his right isn't as good. Another big difference here is that Marciano and Frazier got stronger as the fight progressed, where Tyson is at his best in the first couple of rounds. After the third round, he slows down and he doesn't quite carry his punch throughout the fight like Rocky or Joe. To beat Ali, he'd have to get lucky early in the first or second round. Ali defeated better punchers than Tyson and definitely tougher fighters than Tyson. Ali stops Tyson!

Writers Note

The above ranking is my personal opinion of who I think the ten best heavyweight champions are from Joe Louis of 1937 up to Lennox Lewis of May 2003. Remember, to me, head-to-head confrontation means a lot. What determines who is the better fighter? Why is Liston better than Patterson? Patterson is the better technician, more fundamentally sound and was a two-time champion. Patterson also made six defenses of the title compared to one for Liston. However, in a head-to-head meeting, Liston's overall physical strength overwhelms Patterson's skill. So, Liston has to be ranked above Patterson since he defeated him twice. Same with Frazier and Foreman. Frazier made ten title defenses and Foreman made two (Foreman's comeback doesn't come into focus to me, because he wasn't at his best during his comeback. I compare prime vs.... prime). Frazier was a better overall fighter than Foreman and was even a better champion. However, like Patterson with Liston, Frazier was beaten by Foreman's strength and punch. Foreman must be rated above Frazier.

I'm sure my rankings of Frazier, Marciano, and Tyson will cause the most outrage, especially

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with the fight fans 35 or younger. However, I saw prime Frazier and Tyson, and have all of Marciano's major fights on tape. I have also spoken with some of the trainers and fighters from Rocky's era including Jersey Joe Walcott. So, I'm confident that I have a realistic grasp of his greatness. Some fans dismiss Marciano because they think he was too small at 185-190. What's not widely known is that he walked the street way above 200 in his prime and almost 250 when he retired--and he wasn't a slob, he was solid. His weight came down so low because of how hard and long he trained for his fights. Frazier and Marciano: I constantly go back and forth with regarding who should be ranked over who. I have no problem with anyone who thinks Rocky could have defeated Joe, or ranks him above him.