

Ali's Journey Back Started 30 Years Ago Tonight

Written by Frank Lotierzo

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Thirty years ago, on September 10, 1973, Muhammad Ali began the journey back to the top to put the final stamp on his career, solidifying him as an all-time great. On that September morning, Ali was definitely not considered the greatest of all time.

When Ali awoke that day, he was just hours away from fighting Ken Norton for the second time. This was a crucial turning point in Ali's career. In his previous fight six months prior, he lost a split decision to the seventh ranked Norton. Not only was Ali beaten by Norton in their first fight, but he also suffered a broken jaw in the fight.

On the day of the rematch with Norton, there were many questions surrounding the career and future of Muhammad Ali. First and foremost was the question of whether Ali was a shot fighter at age 31. In September of 1973, Ali was 0-1 against former champ Joe Frazier, who had just been mutilated by the then champ George Foreman back in January of 1973. It looked very bleak for Ali at that time. Not only had Ali been bettered by Frazier, but he also was 0-1 versus Frazier's former sparring partner Ken Norton. And forget about Foreman, at that time it wasn't even conceivable that Ali could beat the menacing champion.

After Frazier defeated Ali in March of 1971, Ali went on a campaign to fight all the top contenders in the world. His goal was to eliminate all the contenders so Frazier had nobody left to fight except him again. From July of 1971 when Ali fought Jimmy Ellis, through March of 1973, Ali fought and beat all the top contenders in the world. During that period, the plans for a rematch between Frazier and Ali always fell through every time it seemed close to being finalized.

The main stumbling block was money. In the first fight, Frazier and Ali split a five million dollar purse. Frazier had no trouble agreeing to that since he and Ali were both recognized as the champ. Frazier had beaten every heavyweight in the world except Ali, and Ali hadn't lost the title in the ring. For a rematch with Ali, Frazier demanded the lion's share of the purse. His contention was that he was the undisputed champ and he had defeated Ali in their first fight.

Ali's contention was that he was the draw, and everybody was coming to see him. In the end, Frazier turned down the fight which would have had him splitting a six million dollar purse with Ali, guaranteeing him three million dollars. So on January 22, 1973, instead of Ali, Frazier fought second ranked George Foreman for \$800,000 and lost the title when he was stopped in the 2nd round. Two months later Ali fought the seventh ranked Norton and lost a split decision.

Going into the Norton rematch, Ali had three huge hurdles to clear if he was to get back the title of which he was stripped on April 27th, 1967. Those hurdles were Norton, Frazier, and Foreman. Yes, this very well may have been the lowest point in Muhammad Ali's career. Before fighting the rematch with Norton, at best Ali was considered the fourth best heavyweight in the world.

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Leading up to the second Norton fight, many questioned how Ali's healed jaw would hold up under Norton's assault. There were also rumblings that at 31, Ali wasn't capable of fighting and moving for twelve rounds. For Ali to even the score with Norton, it would require him to be in the best shape of his comeback.

On the morning of the weigh-in for the rematch with Norton, Ali weighed in at the lightest he had for any fight during his comeback. Ali weighed 212 pounds and promised to dance all night this time. Norton also showed up in the best shape of his career weighing in at 205, five pounds lighter than he was for their previous fight.

When fight night finally arrived, Ali was only a 7-5 favorite over Norton. This was down significantly compared to the 5-1 favorite he was in their first fight. At the bell for round one, Ali came out fast and was up on his toes circling to the left nonstop. For the first five rounds of the fight, Ali moved better than he had in any fight since his 43 month exile.

During those first five rounds, Ali was clearly controlling the fight and Norton couldn't touch him. Starting about the middle of the 6th round, Ali came down off his toes and Norton started to catch up with him, scoring to the body. In rounds 7 and 8, Norton worked over a tiring Ali. Ali and Norton traded rounds 9, 10, and 11 with Norton taking two of the three.

Going into the 12th and final round, the ringside press had the fight scored extremely close. Most of them had it even or Ali up by a round. Ali opened round 12 with a big flurry stunning Norton. After Ali's flurry, he and Norton had some spirited exchanges with neither fighter gaining the advantage. With about 30 seconds left in the round, Ali scored with another hard flurry which backed Norton off. At the bell ending the fight, both fighters were draped over each other, and neither celebrated going back to their corner to wait for the decision.

When the decision was read, it went as follows, 6-5-1 Ali, 6-5-1 Norton, and the deciding vote was 7-5 Ali. Ali had saved his career with a 12th round rally capturing the round on all three scorecards. Over the years some have said that Norton deserved the decision. Although it was a close fight, Ali won it fair and square 7-5 in rounds. The only way this could have been remotely controversial, is if Norton had pulled out the last round, which he didn't.

A few years back Ken Norton was a guest on my radio show "Toe-To-Toe" when he was doing his book tour promoting his autobiography, "Going The Distance". I asked him about this fight and he even admitted that Ali won. He said that he thought it was close, but that he felt Ali had won it.

Looking back over the passage of time, this has to be considered the turning point in Ali's career. After winning the rematch with Norton, it was now time for Ali and Joe to settle the score. On January 28th, of 1974, they finally met in a much anticipated rematch at Madison Square Garden. Ali went on to score a 12 round unanimous decision over Frazier to knot them at 1-1. Ten months after beating Frazier, Ali fought George Foreman for the undisputed heavyweight championship of the world. On October 30, of 1974, Ali entered the ring as a 3-1 underdog and shocked the boxing world when he stopped the then undefeated heavyweight champion George Foreman in the 8th round.

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Ali's victory over Foreman was the culmination of a seven year journey to reclaim the title he was stripped of back on April 27, 1967. However, the first step began back on September 10, 1973, when he defeated Ken Norton in their rematch. Had Ali not beaten Norton 30 years ago, he would not be regarded today as one of the greatest fighters and heavyweight champions in boxing history. Just imagine what that means. There would not have been a "Rumble in the Jungle" or a "Thrilla in Manilla." And that is just unthinkable!