

Why We Never Saw Foreman-Tyson

Written by Frank Lotierzo

Monday, 15 September 2003 18:00

On March 9 1987, former heavyweight champion George Foreman stopped journeyman Steve Zouski in the fourth round. Foreman's fight versus Zouski was the official beginning of the second leg of Foreman's 18-year career, after being retired for ten years. Foreman's bout with Zouski was his first fight since losing a decision to third-ranked contender Jimmy Young back on March 17 1977.

Foreman said he came back to reclaim the title he lost to Muhammad Ali back in October of 1974. After beating Zouski, Foreman fought on a schedule that had him in the ring just about every other month. He would constantly tell anyone with a microphone after each fight that, he came back because he knew he could beat Mike Tyson and wanted to fight him for the title. Through Big George's first ten to fifteen fights, he was laughed at for the quality of the fighters he was fighting and wasn't taken seriously. Foreman never made excuses for them and admitted that he was fighting guys who had no chance of beating him. He said that he wanted to get used to being back in the ring and was in no hurry. In 1987, Foreman fought five times; in 1988, he fought nine times and in 1989, he fought five times. After 19 fights, Foreman was 19-0 (18). During the course of those 19 fights, Foreman only fought two name fighters: former light heavyweight and cruiserweight champ Dwight Muhammad Qawi (formerly Dwight Braxton), and fringe contender Bert Cooper, stopping both.

On January 15, 1990, Foreman fought former heavyweight title challenger, the hard-hitting Gerry Cooney. Cooney was making a comeback after not fighting in almost two and a half years. Cooney viewed Foreman as an easy win and figured he could capitalize off of Foreman's name and jump to the front of the heavyweight picture with an impressive victory. Going into the fight neither Foreman or Cooney were perceived to be a real threat to any of the top heavyweights in the world, let alone Tyson who was just 23 and the unbeaten, undisputed champ.

By January of 1990, Foreman had built up such a following and fan base that the Foreman-Cooney fight was only seen on PPV. It took Foreman less than two full rounds to mutilate Cooney sending him back into permanent retirement. Foreman displayed accuracy and devastating power in stopping Cooney. It wasn't until after Foreman's destruction of Cooney that he was taken as a serious title contender. Before the boxing world had time to digest Foreman's showing against Cooney, it was dealt an even bigger shock 26 days later.

On February 10 1990, 42-1 underdog James "Buster" Douglas literally turned the boxing world upside down when he traveled to Tokyo and knocked out undisputed heavyweight champ Mike Tyson. Don King promoted Tyson, at the time of his defeat. After Tyson's loss to Douglas, King wanted to have Tyson fight in a high profile fight. He figured a spectacular knockout win over a name opponent would get Tyson back on track to being the man in the heavyweight picture again. King thought he found the perfect opponent in Foreman who was all over television after beating Cooney. Foreman never passed up an opportunity to take a shot at Tyson and throw out challenges to him while doing the talk show circuit.

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In the subsequent months following Foreman's victory over Cooney and Douglas' upset of Tyson, there was much talk of a Foreman-Tyson fight. It was a potential fight that captured the public's imagination, and not just the boxing public. In fact, there were several reports that the fight was signed and about to be announced. ESPN Sportscenter devoted numerous segments on the fight assuming it was going to happen. Shortly thereafter, there was an announcement that Foreman and Tyson were going to fight on the same card. In late April of 1990, it was announced that Foreman and Tyson would be fighting a co-main event on June 16 to be broadcast on HBO. Foreman's opponent was Adilson Rodrigues, who was ranked in the top ten by two of the major sanctioning bodies. Tyson's opponent was the unranked Henry Tillman. Tillman was best known for beating Tyson twice in the 1984 Olympic trials.

At this time, Evander Holyfield was getting ready for his sixth fight as a heavyweight against Seamus McDonagh on June 1 in Atlantic City. On the day of the Holyfield-McDonagh fight, I went to grab something to eat with Georgie Benton, Lou Duva and Bobby Goodman. At the time, Goodman was, and still is, Don King's matchmaker. I've known Benton for many years, through him I met Duva, and was introduced to Goodman a couple weeks before Tyson fought Larry Holmes at the Convention Center in Atlantic City in January 1988.

While we were eating, Benton said, "Bobby, what's up with Foreman and Tyson, how come they're not fighting each other on the 16th? Isn't that the fight that King was trying to make?" He said, "Georgie, You'll never believe this but, Fuckin' Tyson is scared shit less of Foreman and wants no part of him. I was there when Don was trying to make the fight. He was telling Tyson that Foreman represented huge money, plus he was old and slow and would be no problem. Tyson got up and screamed at King saying, 'I'm not fight in' that Fuckin' animal, if you love the motherfucker so much, you fight him!'"

Goodman stated that Tyson said Foreman was much better than people thought, and was a dangerous fight for any of the top heavyweights. Goodman proceeded to explain how Tyson was calling Foreman a big con man, and explained that the grandpop act was just a front. He said Tyson saw Foreman as trying to set up the boxing world into thinking he was a pushover, knowing that he really wasn't. Tyson said Foreman was a wolf in sheep's clothing. Goodman continued to say that after seeing Tyson's response to King trying to push him into a fight with Foreman, he had no doubt that Tyson had fear of Foreman. He also said that from that point on, he felt that if Foreman and Tyson ever fought, Foreman would knock Tyson out!

Throughout the lunch Goodman, Duva, Benton, and myself shared stories and thoughts on the fight game. Out of the blue Goodman said, "Oh I remember why else Tyson wanted no parts of Foreman. He said that King had found out from Steve Lott that Tyson and Cus D'Amato used to watch the Frazier-Foreman fight over and over." He continued saying that Tyson loved that fight because he was awed by Foreman's power and Frazier's toughness and how he kept getting up after every knockdown. He also said that Lott told King that Cus sat alongside Tyson saying, "It's suicide against Foreman if you're short and fight a swarming attacking style like Marciano or Frazier," never figuring that Foreman could be a possible Tyson opponent down the road. He said that Cus said the only fighters who had a chance against Foreman were, tall rangy fighters who could fight him from a distance while moving away from him, and no way any swarmer could beat Foreman by going to him.

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Those are the words of the man who actually had a hand in trying to make the Foreman-Tyson fight, and was in the room when the negotiations broke down. Over the years, I've talked to many people who were involved with Tyson and Foreman and they all verify the story, every one of them. I have also talked to people who were involved with promoting Foreman, including Ron Weathers who promoted a few of Foreman's comeback fights. He told me the same story. The fight didn't happen because of Tyson being fearful of losing to George. Bob Arum also said that he dreamed of making Foreman-Tyson. He said it would be huge money and that Foreman would stop Tyson easier than he did Frazier. This is something Arum often repeated to the press. I have also heard this from George's brother Roy who was his business manager. I co-hosted a boxing show with Roy in Atlantic City for a little less than two months and this was a regular topic when discussing Tyson. Anyone who covered boxing at the time or knew any of the involved parties knew of this. It's not breaking news.

It is absolutely a fact that Mike Tyson was afraid to fight 41-year-old George Foreman--the same Foreman who Evander Holyfield would fight and beat in April of 1991. I have not a doubt that had Foreman and Tyson fought anytime between 1990 and 1997 that Foreman would have knocked Tyson out inside of three rounds. Tyson just has nothing to beat Foreman with; his edge in hand speed would have been a non-factor. He can't beat him by backing away, and he would have gotten his head handed to him if he brought the fight to Foreman. In addition, Foreman was bigger, stronger, tougher and hit harder. Not to mention the fact that Foreman had a better chin and no fear or doubt, unlike Tyson, who was full of fear and self-doubt.

Think about it, Foreman-Tyson was the biggest fight that could have been made in 1990. Foreman was perceived to be an easy fight for Tyson, and it would have been his biggest payday to date. There can only be one reason why Tyson didn't fight Foreman, and that's because he feared losing to him.

I haven't a morsel of a doubt that Tyson just doesn't match up with Foreman, and he knows it. If Tyson of 1990 was afraid of an old Foreman, think how petrified he would of been of a prime Foreman, the one who stared down both Joe Frazier and Muhammad Ali in 1973 and 1974.

Writers Note

The above account is of a quick get to together for something to eat between myself and the above mentioned parties. The only thing I can't recall for certain is if it took place after the Holyfield-McDonagh final press conference, or the weigh in? However, the above quotes are just that, quotes. Everything there is exactly how the conversation unfolded. Whether you chose to believe it or not is up to you. All I can say is that is exactly what was said. To disbelieve this you have to assume a lot of people close to both Foreman and Tyson are lying. Remember, Tyson is a student of boxing and boxing history. If there ever was a fighter who understood styles and match ups, its Tyson. He was smart enough to know that Foreman was all wrong for him. You can talk about his speed and defense for the next 100 years. The fact of the matter is he had nothing to beat Foreman with! Sometimes the truth is very hard to believe and accept, but the truth is the truth. And the truth is, Mike Tyson was fearful of fighting George Foreman in 1990. The only reason why Foreman-Tyson was never made is because Tyson was afraid Foreman would beat him.