

Objectively Weighing In On Marciano vs Ali

Written by Frank Lotierzo

Thursday, 16 October 2003 18:00

A few weeks back I wrote about my remembrance of the day a plane crashed carrying former heavyweight champion Rocky Marciano, killing him instantly. Growing up I heard a lot about Marciano from my grandfather, who thought he was unbeatable. Like I said, he was one of those old school Italians who viewed Marciano with blinders on.

Over the years from about 1968 until he died in 1997, we would go back and forth arguing, not debating over who would've won between Marciano and Ali. No doubt that objectivity was thrown out the window by both of us. He couldn't see past Marciano being an undefeated knockout artist, and that he was Italian. I couldn't see past Ali's flash and brilliance.

When we used to have those debates/arguments, I was sure Ali would've beat Marciano if they fought at their peak. At that time I believed all the crap that Marciano was slow, easy to hit, and was undefeated because he fought a bunch of old greats who were past their prime. Over the years I've changed my outlook on Marciano, I've begun to look at Marciano's career more thoroughly and objectively.

Over the last few weeks, I couldn't help but notice the bias by both fans of Marciano and Ali on some of the message boards on the Net regarding a Marciano vs. Ali hypothetical fight. Ali fans remarked that Ali would handle Marciano with the same ease in which he handled George Chuvalo and Henry Cooper. Marciano fans commented that Rocky would beat up Ali like he did Roland LaStarza. I think both sides are way off.

First off, lets make it clear that we are comparing them when they were at their best. To suggest because Sonny Banks and Henry Cooper dropped a young and inexperienced Clay who hadn't fully matured and filled out is crazy. No doubt that the Marciano who beat Walcott would've stopped the Clay who fought Banks and Cooper. However, that wasn't nearly the best Ali.

On the other hand Marciano beat two great fighters in Jersey Joe Walcott and Ezzard Charles. Some mention Walcott was old when Marciano stopped him. What's never mentioned is that Walcott fought the best fight of his life for 12 rounds in his first fight with Marciano, and was ahead in the scoring before being stopped in the 13th round. Regarding his age, Walcott became a better fighter in his mid to late thirties. Don't believe me, I'm just going by what Nat Fleischer and Joe Louis said. Louis should know, Walcott was his sparring partner at one time, and they fought twice. Why is it so easy to believe Lennox Lewis improved with age, but not Jersey Joe? I guess it depends on what fits your argument the best.

Walcott's confidence was at its peak before facing Marciano. Early in his career he was mismanaged and lost some bad decisions. Plus, Walcott came down with typhoid early in his career and spent a year recovering. Walcott's confidence was shot after being stopped by Joe Louis in their rematch and losing two title fights with Ezzard Charles. Finally, after getting past Charles twice en-route to winning and retaining the title, his confidence soared and he was

Objectively Weighing In On Marciano vs Ali

Written by Frank Lotierzo

Thursday, 16 October 2003 18:00

close to being at his best going into his title defense versus Marciano. Don't be fooled by his Won-Loss record. When great fighters fight the best available, they don't win every time.

Ezzard Charles was only two years older than Marciano. In the first Marciano-Charles fight, Charles was said to have been in the best shape of his career, and fought possibly the best fight of his life. Nat Fleischer who sat ringside during the fight, said afterwards "that no fighter in the world could've lasted those 15 rounds against Charles, much less beat him." For ten rounds Charles fought Marciano on more than even terms. However, because Marciano was the best conditioned heavyweight ever, he didn't tire and surged ahead in the last five rounds to win the decision. This was a fight that was so fiercely contested that there was only one clinch in 15 rounds.

How many of Ali's opponents could have fought Marciano as competitive as Walcott and Charles? How about three, Liston, Frazier, and Foreman. I don't include Holmes because Ali was a shot fighter when he fought Holmes. When evaluating Ali's career, most regard him as being great because he defeated three all-time greats in Liston, Frazier, and Foreman. And he beat Frazier and Foreman after he was 32. Outside of those three greats, who did Ali fight that Marciano would've been an underdog against?

Realistically, when you breakdown the careers of Marciano and Ali, it's Ali's defeats of Liston, Frazier, and Foreman which tilt the balance heavily in his favor. However, if you compare Walcott and Charles to Liston and Frazier, and exclude Foreman, there's not such a huge disparity in favor of Ali. If you match Walcott and Charles with Liston, it's not a reach to say either one of them may have been capable of getting by him. They both hung with Marciano for 13 and 15 rounds, and Marciano threw more punches, had better stamina, and applied more pressure than Liston.

How about matching Walcott and Charles with Frazier? Again, if they were capable of staying with Marciano for 13 and 15 rounds, I don't think it's out of the question that they possibly could have upset Frazier. Remember, Walcott was ahead of Marciano after 12 rounds. And Charles was even with him after 10 rounds, and didn't fall behind until the last five rounds, but he still went the 15 round limit with him.

The one fighter who Ali fought and defeated that I can't envision either Walcott or Charles beating is George Foreman of 1973-74. In my opinion, I don't think that there are more than a couple heavyweights in history who could have beat the Foreman who fought Frazier and Ali in the early seventies! Foreman is just too big and powerful for any version of Walcott or Charles.

What most fans tend to do when comparing Marciano and Ali is, they compare how Ali would've cleaned up on every opponent that Marciano fought. No doubt Ali would have had his way with all of Marciano's opponents except Walcott and Charles. Yes, Ali would've beat both of them, most likely by decision. What is not widely known is that Ali said many times during the mid to late 70's, that Walcott and Charles would have been very difficult fights for him because of their style.

How about looking at it the other way? Lets look at how Marciano would've fared had he fought

Objectively Weighing In On Marciano vs Ali

Written by Frank Lotierzo

Thursday, 16 October 2003 18:00

the fighters Ali did, excluding Liston, Frazier, and Foreman, for the moment. Looking at Ali's career, who would've had a chance of beating Marciano outside of the big three. In reviewing Ali's opponents of the 60's, is there anybody other than Liston who would've been favored over Marciano?

Not Patterson or Chuvalo. Patterson doesn't have the size or strength, and Chuvalo doesn't have the skill or the punch. How about Cooper, London, and Mildenberger? Only if there was a sniper in the rafters who was gonna shoot Marciano during the fight. That leaves Williams, Terrell, and Folley. I guess maybe Williams at his peak, because of his punching power could get lucky and catch Rocky early, but I'd bet on Marciano.

Terrell? I don't see it. Ernie doesn't have the punch or strength to keep Rocky off him, Marciano would beat Terrell down and stop him. Zora Folley? Only if you think a poor mans Ezzard Charles could do what the original couldn't. Can there be any doubt that other than Sonny Liston, Marciano would've gone through every opponent Ali fought in the 60's? Not in my mind.

Lets look at the 70's, excluding Frazier and Foreman, starting with Bonavena and Quarry? Bonavena was to crude, and Quarry's willingness to trade with Marciano would cost him the fight. No way either Ellis or the Foster's, Bob and Mac could last with Marciano. Ellis and Bob Foster just don't have the strength to stand up to Marciano's assault, they would both be knocked out by him. I know Mac Foster could punch, but he was knocked dead by Quarry in six rounds. I see Marciano having no problem with Mac Foster.

That leaves Norton, Young, Lyle and Shavers. Norton doesn't have the toughness or the psyche to survive a puncher like Marciano. Young doesn't have the punch to keep Marciano off him, Rocky would beat Young down and stop him. Lyle doesn't have the skill or the stamina, although he could probably drop Marciano, but I doubt he could keep him down. Shavers? Like Lyle, Shavers could probably put Rocky down but couldn't keep him there. I don't think Shavers has the stamina or the chin to beat Marciano.

Excluding Liston, Frazier, and Foreman, there is not one opponent who Ali beat who Marciano also wouldn't have beat. If we include the big three of Liston, Frazier, and Foreman, how would Marciano fare? I would make Liston a slight favorite over Rocky. Sonny had the jab and power to fight Rocky. However, Marciano's crouching style would make it difficult for Liston to nail him cleanly. Mostly all fighters are bothered by fighters who fight out of a crouch. The best shot Marciano would have to beat Liston is if he could extend the fight to about the sixth or seventh round. If Marciano could get that far, his toughness and great stamina may be the difference. Liston like Tyson, wasn't the most stable fighter when the pressure was turned up. That being said, Liston is slightly favored over Marciano in my opinion, but a Marciano win is definitely no upset.

For my money, Marciano-Frazier is the fight I would most want to see if I could match any two fighters from different era's at their best. Although Marciano and Frazier are both swarming type pressure fighters, there is a difference in their aggression. Frazier applies more pressure and comes in faster bobbing and weaving. Marciano crouches lower, which enables him to keep his opponents from reaching him. Frazier cut off the ring better and had faster hands. Marciano was

Objectively Weighing In On Marciano vs Ali

Written by Frank Lotierzo

Thursday, 16 October 2003 18:00

a better two-handed puncher and probably had a slightly better chin. Stamina is close, but if I had to give an edge to one, I'd lean towards Marciano.

As far as weight goes, Marciano fought his best between 185 and 187. Frazier's best fights were fought between 205 and 209. However, what most fans don't know is that Marciano's weight was low because he wanted it to be. He could have easily fought at the same weight as Frazier. Before Marciano started fighting, he weighed between 210 to 215 while playing baseball. I don't really think Frazier had a size advantage other than an inch in height, and a longer reach. Frazier had a 73 inch reach compared to Marciano's 67. In a Marciano-Frazier fight, I doubt reach would have been a factor. If there ever was a pick-em fight, it's Marciano vs. Frazier!

The fighter who Ali defeated who I have a hard time seeing Marciano beating is George Foreman circa 1973-74. Foreman is most likely too big and strong for Marciano. How would Rocky be able to get inside to put any kind of hurt on Foreman? No doubt Marciano's crouching style might slow Foreman down some, but probably not enough to change the outcome. Marciano couldn't beat Foreman by moving away, and it would play into Foreman's style if he tried to pressure him like Frazier. Again, the only shot Rocky would have in my opinion is if he could survive the first five or so rounds. If Rocky could get to the seventh round and beyond, maybe Foreman would tire and Marciano could get to him. However, it's hard envisioning him making it that far against a raging Foreman of the early seventies?

When thoroughly and objectively reviewing the entire careers of Rocky Marciano and Muhammad Ali. It's obvious that Marciano faced only two opponents that would've troubled Ali, Walcott and Charles. Yes Ali would've beat both of them, but it's not the cakewalk some believe it would be. On the other hand, Ali only defeated three fighters who probably would have been favored over Marciano, Liston, Frazier, and Foreman. And it's not entirely out of the question that Marciano could've beaten Liston and Frazier.

The big difference in the resumes of Marciano and Ali, is in the quality of the second tier fighters that Ali fought and defeated. However, Marciano would've definitely defeated every second tier level fighter on Ali's resume. I don't even think that it can be debated?

How do Marciano and Ali compare as fighters? Their styles couldn't be more different. Like Frazier, Marciano wanted to cut the distance between himself and his opponents. Where Ali preferred to keep his opponents outside at a distance. Also like Frazier, Marciano's weakness were Ali's strengths, and vice versa. And both Marciano and Ali had an undeniable will to win, and both could take a tremendous punch.

Some of the differences were Ali often looked past some of his opponents, opposed to Marciano who never did. Marciano trained for every fight as if his life depended on it, and in his mind it did. Ali didn't always enter the ring in top shape during the 70's, unless he was facing a fighter who was a threat to beat him. Marciano soaked up everything that his trainer Charlie Goldman passed along to him between rounds during the fight. Ali sometimes didn't always follow the instruction of Angelo Dundee. Marciano's assets were power and determination, Ali's were speed and movement, along with being able to adapt and improvise during the fight. It

Objectively Weighing In On Marciano vs Ali

Written by Frank Lotierzo

Thursday, 16 October 2003 18:00

must also be noted that Marciano is the one heavyweight who Ali doesn't hold an advantage over when it comes to endurance, and the ability to take a punch.

Over the years there have been two misconceptions about Marciano and Ali. Marciano was not the walk in punching bag that some have tried to pass him off as. Any close review of his fights clearly bares this out. He made many fighters miss him, and when they did connect it was usually with just one solid shot, not blistering combinations. On the other hand Ali could punch better than he's given credit for. When he chose to sit down on his punches and not get out of them quickly, he hit very hard. This was also because he lured his opponent to come into him.

Had Rocky Marciano and Muhammad Ali fought on their best night, I have no doubt that it would have been a very fiercely contested fight. Marciano was definitely on par with the greatest opponents Ali ever faced. So to think that Ali wins easily is totally asinine. Ask yourself what Marciano would have done to the best fighters Ali fought excluding the big three. If you conclude that he would've lost to anyone of them, you're wrong. The only fighters Ali defeated who may have beaten Marciano are, Liston, Frazier, and Foreman.

In a Marciano vs. Ali fight, if both were at their best, I would pick Ali to come out the winner. He probably had too many ways to adapt and adjust to somewhat neutralize Rocky. In some ways I think Marciano would not have been as tough for Ali as Frazier was. Frazier's more relentless pressure I think would be a little tougher on Ali than Marciano's crouching aggression. On the other hand, Ali would not have hit Marciano as cleanly and with as many combinations as he did Frazier.

All I know is that both Marciano and Ali are all-time greats. Marciano may be the most least understood and under-rated heavyweight champion in history. He would not have been a sure win for any all-time great heavyweight champ. His toughness, power, and determination cannot be overlooked. And he was a smarter fighter and better boxer than he's given credit for by both fans and writers.

Over the years when Ali spoke of Marciano, he always showered him with high praise. He said he developed one of the closest relationships with Marciano, more so than he had with any other fighter. Ali was often quoted as saying that he couldn't believe how strong, and how hard Rocky could hit. He said he could feel how great Marciano must have been just from being in the ring with him when he was 45 while filming the computer fight. Ali said that he couldn't even imagine what Rocky must have been like in his prime. Marciano also spoke highly of Ali as well. It's just a shame that Marciano didn't live to see some of Ali's greatest triumphs. No doubt had he lived a little longer he would've gained even more respect for Ali.

Yes, in my opinion the best Ali beats the best Marciano. However it's not the easy walk over that some try to push it off as being. Ali definitely would've had his hands more than full with Marciano, but in my opinion he would have most likely had his arms raised if they fought on their best night. Ali's size, speed, adaptability, and toughness, make him the favorite over any past or present heavyweight champ in my book.

Writers Note

Objectively Weighing In On Marciano vs Ali

Written by Frank Lotierzo

Thursday, 16 October 2003 18:00

Forget the computer fight. It was just a novelty. Marciano and Ali were both paid \$10,000. Ali needed the money because he hadn't fought in two years and had no income along with piling legal debt. Marciano was in good shape financially, but he did have some investments that lost money. Marciano took it seriously and trained for it like it was a fight. He wanted to be ready in case Ali tried to make him look bad. Ali was in horrible shape and didn't take it seriously.

As far as Marciano dropping Ali with a body shot? Who knows for sure. There is a part of me that finds it hard to believe because Ali took it to the body better than any heavyweight ever. However, I don't believe that it's a total fabrication either. Lets just say that it's very likely that Marciano got Ali's attention somewhere during the filming with a body shot. Body shots were allowed during the 70 one minute rounds they were in the ring, so I could see Marciano sneaking in a big one to get Ali's respect. The bottom line is that it doesn't matter, it wasn't a fight.

Here's all you need to know about computer fights. In September of 1970, they used the same computer that produced the Marciano-Ali fight to pick the winner of the Joe Frazier vs. Bob Foster heavyweight title fight in November of 1970. The computer picked Foster to stop Frazier in the sixth round. Since Frazier knocked Foster out in the second round, the computer could not have been more wrong. In fact, Frazier hit Foster so hard that he injured his ankle while he was going down.