The greatest fight Jersey Joe Walcott ever fought in his career, he lost. The greatest fight Muhammad Ali ever fought in his career, he lost. The greatest fight Evander Holyfield ever fought in his career, he lost. I'm not saying the smartest fight they ever fought. I'm saying the best fight from a physical vantage point.

How many times in boxing history has a great fighter lost on the night he was at his best physically? I'll bet it's not often. However, below are three fights in which the loser is not only an all-time great but, they fought the greatest fights of their career and still lost. It's hard for most to fathom that a fighter fighting his best in a fight in which they lost, but that is the case with Jersey Joe Walcott, Muhammad Ali, and Evander Holyfield.

Just because a fighter lost, doesn't mean he wasn't great on that night. In my opinion, the above mentioned fighters were never more on top of their game or more formidable physically than they were in defeat. In all three fights, the loser never hit harder or sharper, and never demonstrated a better chin or more character.

September 23, 1952 Walcott vs. Marciano I

Jersey Joe Walcott was making the second defense of the heavyweight title he won from Ezzard Charles. His opponent was an up and coming undefeated knockout artist named Rocky Marciano. In his defense versus Marciano, Walcott was never more confident and focused for a fight. He was absolutely certain that he could not only defeat, but also stop Marciano. Walcott was so confident that he could stop Marciano that he jumped right on him in the first round and dropped him for the first time in his career. The left hook that Walcott planted on Marciano hurt him more than any other punch he was hit with in his career. Marciano was still a little shook when he got up and it took him a few seconds to clear his head after he was up. Had Walcott landed that same hook on any other heavyweight in the world at the time, he most likely would've scored a first round knockout. Unfortunately for Walcott, his hook crashed against one of the greatest chins in history, supported by the best conditioned body of any heavyweight history.

For 12 rounds Walcott traded bombs with Marciano, beating him to the punch in most exchanges. Throughout those 12 rounds, Marciano pressured Walcott relentlessly, and Walcott was able to answer with his own bombs.
In this bout, Walcott scored with some of the hardest punches he had ever thrown in his career. On the other hand Walcott took some of the greatest punches he was ever hit with, and showed no visible signs of slowing down going into the 13th round. Going into the 13th round in his first fight with Marciano, Walcott was clearly ahead in the scoring. In fact, Marciano needed a knockout to win on two of the three official scorecards. Had Walcott chose to box Marciano in those last three rounds, instead of trying to knock him out, he probably wins a unanimous decision and retains the title.

Like Meldrick Taylor against Julio Caesar Chavez, his ego got the better of him and he would go for the knockout instead of settling for the decision win. And it cost Walcott the fight as it did Taylor 38 years later. In round 13 Marciano landed a right hand on Walcott's jaw that is considered one of the hardest punches thrown in boxing history. The punch not only knocked Walcott out, but it contorted the side of his face. Fight over!

The fight against Marciano may have been Jersey Joe's finest hour. Never in his career did he demonstrate more courage and better punching power. It's just unfortunate for Walcott that he was fighting another all-time great who caught him with one of the most devastating punches ever thrown. And yes, Marciano had dynamite in both hands, especially his right. And to those fans and writers who question Marciano's power, I guess you know more about how hard he hit than Louis, Walcott, and Moore. All three fighters said Marciano's punches were much harder than they looked, and they all said he was without a doubt the hardest puncher they ever fought. I say they know more about that than either you or me. I'll take them at their word.

March 8, 1971 Frazier vs. Ali I

Frazier vs. Ali I was the biggest and most anticipated sporting event in history. Never before have two undefeated heavyweights both in their prime had a legitimate claim to the title like Ali and Frazier did in 1971. Some insist that Ali was not at his best due to his 43 month layoff when he fought Frazier the first time, and there is much merit to that claim. Even though he stopped the top two contenders at the time in Quarry and Bonavena, before fighting Frazier. However, after seeing the fight, there is absolutely no question that Ali never threw and landed harder punches than he did on Joe Frazier in their first fight. In fact, during the first five rounds of Super-Fight one, Ali was never sharper or punched better. If you doubt that, I suggest you go back and look at the tape of rounds one through five.

Many fans and historians believe Ali's peak was his fight versus Cleveland Williams. Williams may have been Ali's peak regarding his speed and brilliance, but he had not filled out to where he was when he fought Frazier at age 29. The Ali of March 1971 was bigger, stronger, hit harder, and a more formidable fighter than the Ali of November 1966. During Ali's exile he matured and got stronger.

Going into the Frazier fight, many questioned Ali's chin, and toughness. Throughout his first fight with Frazier, Ali was hit continuously with Frazier's devastating left hook to the body and head. Never before or after had any fighter landed on Ali with the frequency and power of Frazier. Also during this fight, Ali launched and landed some of the swiftest and hardest combinations he ever hit any fighter with. Had Ali been fighting any other heavyweight except that Joe Frazier on that night, he would've most likely been a knockout winner.

The problem Ali had, was a prime 27 year old Joe Frazier in front of him. Going into his first fight with Muhammad Ali, Joe Frazier was better prepared mentally and physically than any other fighter in history was for any opponent. Frazier knew he had the perfect style to fight Ali, and at that time in his career, he had it down pat. On the night of March 8th, 1971, Frazier was not to be denied. He was ready for anything Ali had to offer mentally or physically.

Going into Frazier-Ali I, Ali's plan was to beat Frazier up so badly early in the fight that he would either stop him, or have him so beaten up that he wouldn't have anything left for the last five rounds of the bout. By Frazier being so determined to beat Ali, he forced him to fight at a pace Ali wasn't accustomed to. Frazier also forced Ali to punch with authority just to try and keep him off. This resulted in Ali throwing bombs at Joe. Although Ali really rocked Joe in those first three or four rounds, he wasn't able to get him out. From rounds 6 through 15, Ali did all he could to try and impede Frazier's aggression, but Frazier was not to be denied. On this night, Ali never hit harder or demonstrated a better chin. I don't care what fight of Ali's career you think of, he was never better than he was against Joe Frazier in their first fight. He never hit harder or took it better, it's just that on March 8th 1971 Joe Frazier fought possibly the greatest fight of any heavyweight in boxing history.

November 13, 1992 Holyfield vs. Bowe I

When undefeated heavyweight champ Evander Holyfield defended the unified heavyweight title against undefeated top contender Riddick Bowe, the burden of proof was on him. Although Holyfield was the champ, his best wins as a heavyweight were over an out of shape Buster Douglas and two 42 year old ex-champs named Foreman and Holmes. Bowe, at that time was thought to be the future of the heavyweights.

For his title fight versus Holyfield, Bowe weighed in at a very firm 235 pounds. Most point to this as Bowe's signature fight. On the other hand, the 30 year old Holyfield was never better. In his first fight with Bowe, Holyfield was at his brilliant best. Never was he sharper or did he punch faster and harder. He also absorbed some monster hooks and uppercuts from Bowe. In losing to Bowe, Holyfield gained acceptance as being for real and a true heavyweight, despite the fact that he had been the undisputed champ for slightly over two years.

During his first fight with Bowe, Holyfield was never more formidable physically. He hit Bowe with some of the best punches he ever threw and landed on any other fighter he's faced. At the same time Bowe hit him harder and more solidly than any other fighter he ever fought. Had Holyfield been fighting any other top heavyweight of his era the night he fought Bowe the first time, he would have won in a convincing fashion. The Holyfield of November 1992, would certainly have beat any version of Lennox Lewis or Mike Tyson. The Holyfield who fought Tyson in 1996 and 1997, and Lewis in 1999 wasn't anywhere near close to the same fighter that fought Bowe in their first fight.

During the first Bowe fight, Holyfield was capable of fighting the entire round for the entire fight. This was Holyfield at his finest hour, never was he better or did he fight with more purpose. Unfortunately for Holyfield on this night, Bowe was too big and skilled and up to the task as well.

Walcott, Ali, and Holyfield fought possibly the best fight of their lives in a losing effort. Had Walcott not been the recipient of one of the hardest right hands in history, he may have remained champ a couple more years? For Ali, had he been fighting any other heavyweight in history other than Joe Frazier on March 8th, 1971, he would've been victorious. It's just that Frazier was not to be denied, and took out 4 years of pent up hate and anger on the source that

ridiculed and demeaned his career and title tenure. As for Holyfield, he just had the misfortune of fighting the most skilled heavyweight over 6'4" on his best night.

In this writers opinion, Walcott, Ali, and Holyfield share something else besides being great fighters. What they share is the fact that they were soundly defeated on one of the best nights of their career! On the three nights in question, all three fighters fought at a level where they were most likely the hardest to get a win over on any night of their career. It just so happens that on their best night, Walcott, Ali, and Holyfield were in with another fighter who was fighting at such a high level, they had no choice but to give their best effort. For at least one night, their best wasn't quite good enough.