

Why I Don't Believe Those Who Say They Picked Foreman Over Frazier

Written by Frank Lotierzo

Sunday, 01 February 2004 18:00

First off, let me just say that I will be very blunt in my opinion and assessments in this column. It concerns former heavyweight champ George Foreman and his career prior to taking the title from undefeated champ "Smokin" Joe Frazier. I've grown tired over the recent years of so many revising history to make themselves come off smarter than they really were. I have noticed this a lot lately when the fight has been discussed. I was around at the time of the title fight between Frazier and Foreman. Although I was only 13, I followed it better and more closely than anybody.

I love how so many now say they knew Foreman was going to demolish Frazier before their 1973 title fight? And there are quite a few of you. No Way! I lived through that period, and I'm telling you nobody thought Foreman had prayer-one versus Frazier, nobody. Like him or not, there was only one person who thought Foreman was going to beat Frazier, Howard Cosell. That's right, not one fighter, retired great fighter, boxing writer, or broadcaster thought Foreman was going to win other than Cosell. And it's documented on tape.

I have the ABC archives footage where Cosell is holding court with the boxing/sporting press and tells Barney Nagler of the daily Racing Forum that he thinks Foreman is gonna kill Frazier. Cosell goes on to tell Nagler that Frazier took a bad beating in the Ali fight and that he has basically retired mentally from fighting. Cosell went on to say Frazier's only interested in making lousy records and soaking up the stardom he's gained from defeating Muhammad Ali.

Other big time writers were at this gathering while Cosell took an informal poll among them, and some great former ex-champs as well. Guys like Dick Young, Dave Anderson, and Red Smith were all in agreement that Foreman is a sitting duck for Smokin Joe. Ex-greats like Dempsey, Tunney, Walcott, Graziano, and Pep are some of the ex-fighters who Cosell polls for a pick. Everyone of them agrees with the writers and all like Frazier in a big way. Back then retired champs used to go to and care about the big championship fights.

Look, I'm not putting Foreman down, I think he is an all-time top three or four heavyweight champ. However, going into his fight with Frazier, Foreman's record was viewed with the same disdain as the record of Shannon Briggs' was viewed while he was undefeated. Another words, he had many impressive knockouts, but who did he really knockout? Would anyone have picked Briggs to beat Tyson two fights removed from Michael Spinks. The answer is no and Hell no.

Tyson looked so-so after Spinks when he fought Bruno. Yet nobody would've taken Briggs to beat Tyson if he fought him after the Bruno fight, despite his size and knockout record. The same thing applies with Frazier and Foreman. Although Frazier looked so-so versus Daniels and Stander after he beat Ali. Nobody thought he would lose to a big wild swinging fighter like Foreman. After Frazier defeated Ali, some were hailing him as possibly the greatest heavyweight champ in history. Frazier's rep after the first Ali fight was every bit as hyped as Tyson's was after Spinks, if not more.

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Just look at Foreman's record going into the Frazier fight. Who'd he fight that would even be mentioned in the same sentence with an undefeated Frazier? Not a single fighter. No way was there anybody who spoke out that thought Foreman would beat Frazier other than Cosell.

At the time it was thought that Frazier matched up better with big fighters. It was said he could get under their jab and work the head and body with his left-hook. Frazier is often accused of being slow. This was mainly because he was most often measured against his Nemesis, Ali. Compared to Ali, every bodies hands look slow. The fact of the matter was that Frazier had extremely fast hands, especially on the inside. Frazier didn't have a good conventional straight right hand. However, he had a dynamite right to the body.

Foreman was thought to be slow and ponderous heading into his title fight with Frazier. His punches were wide, he had no attack plan, and had questionable endurance. His chin was also a huge question mark at that time, and even his punch was questioned by some. Looking back now we know his chin is one of the great heavyweight beards in history. His pure strength and power are virtually unmatched in heavyweight history. All these things are now well documented, but they weren't heading into his first fight with Frazier.

In October of 1972, three months prior to fighting Frazier, Foreman stopped 3-14 Terry Sorrell in two rounds. It's a wonder that Foreman was only 3-1 underdog versus Frazier. Going back to the beginning of Foreman's career, there is nothing, including his Olympic Gold Medal to suggest he had anything for Frazier.

In August of 1969 Foreman fought tough Chuck Wepner in his fourth pro bout. Wepner at the time was 18-4-2, but was more known for being one of Joe Frazier's toughest sparring partners. Although Foreman should be commended for taking on a toughie like Wepner in only his fourth fight, there was nothing he showed that in a couple years he'd be ready for the reigning champ, Frazier.

Two fights after beating Wepner, Foreman stops journeyman 7-11-1 Cookie Wallace. After beating Wallace, he stops "Big" Vernon Clay in two rounds who is 8-3 at the time. In his next fight after Clay, he is taken the distance for the first time as a pro by 13-15 Roberto Davila. In his next 3 fights he stops Leo Peterson, Max Martinez, and Bob Hazelton who were a combined 12-16. Next he is taken the distance by 19-22 Levi Forte. Think anybody is yet whispering, "Frazier better beware of George Foreman?" Hell NO! It wasn't even an after thought!

After going the distance with Forte, Foreman stops 3-4 Gary Wiler, 10-14-3 Charlie Polite, and huge Jack O'Hallaran who is 18-5-2. After stopping these three trial horses, Foreman fights long time light heavyweight contender Gregorio Peralta 78-5-8. Peralta has just recently started to fight at heavyweight. Peralta takes Foreman the distance and loses a unanimous decision. Foreman won this fight on youth and sheer brute strength. The Foreman-Peralta fight was on the under card of the Frazier-Ellis championship fight. My father took me to this fight in February of 1970. The fights were at Madison Square Garden. I remember leaving after the Frazier-Ellis fight, nobody, but nobody was even considering that Foreman was ever going to be the one to take Frazier's title shortly down the road. In fact it was just the opposite. Most felt that Foreman would be nothing more than a heavy bag with eyes if ever matched with Frazier.

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In Foreman's next five fights, he scores 5 KO's. The only name even worth mentioning of those five is George "Scrapiron" Johnson 14-15-4. Johnson is known for taking Frazier to a decision, and losing to Jerry Quarry. After scoring the fifth KO in his previous five fights, Foreman fights tough contender George Chuvalo 59-15-2. Chuvalo at this time is four years removed from losing a 15 round decision to former heavyweight champ Muhammad Ali, and three years removed from being stopped by current champ Joe Frazier. Going into the Foreman fight, Chuvalo has never been knocked off his feet. Something no fighter ever accomplished. Foreman goes onto stop Chuvalo in three rounds, one less than it took Frazier.

After beating Chuvalo, Foreman stops highly touted at the time Boone Kirkman 22-1 on the Frazier-Foster under card. Next, trial horses Mel Turnbow 8-10, and Stamford Harris 15-23-1 become Foreman knockout victims. After Harris, Foreman fights a rematch with Gregorio Peralta 83-6-8 and stops him this time in the 10th round in Oakland California. Again, there has not been one mention at this time that Foreman could possibly be the fighter to dethrone Frazier. Not in the paper, not in the Boxing publications, not by anybody?

After stopping Peralta in the rematch, Foreman wins nine in a row by stoppage. Among those victims are fighters who at best can be considered trial horses/journeymen. Fighters such as LeRoy Caldwell 11-8-1, Luis Pires 18-7-1, and Miguel Paez 42-16-13. In his next fight after Paez, and his last fight before challenging Frazier, Foreman destroys the infamous 3-14 Terry Sorrell in two rounds.

Of all the fighters and so called contenders that Foreman fought on the way up, only Chuvalo fought for the heavyweight title. And that was four years prior to him facing Foreman. As much as I love the finished version of George Foreman, the pre Frazier version of him really didn't beat any fighter of note other than Chuvalo. Foreman who held a gaudy 37-0 (34) record heading into the Frazier fight had a record comparable to the undefeated Shannon Briggs. No way anybody but Foreman, his handlers, and Cosell thought Foreman could win, let alone actually pull it off.

I know Frazier's manager and trainer Yank Durham had reservations about Joe facing George, but all managers worry about their fighters opponents. Durham basically thought it made more sense for Joe to face Ali again. Yank knew that Joe had a style match up over Ali, the money was four and a half times better, and even if Joe lost, it was doubtful that he would be stopped. He also figured a Frazier defeat by Ali would make them 1-1 versus each other, so he knew the third fight would always be there.

Remember, nobody knew better than Yank that Frazier hadn't really spent too much time in the gym after he beat Ali. Although Durham felt Foreman would be tough for Frazier, I know for a fact he never felt certain that Frazier wasn't going to come out on top. Foreman was thought by many to be made for Frazier, not the other way around. Now, there are plenty who say, Oh, I knew Frazier was all wrong for Foreman and that Foreman was going to take him apart. None of you were saying anything close to that on January 21 1973.

Heading into his bout with Joe Frazier, Foreman hadn't fought anybody close to an undefeated Frazier. There wasn't one opponent on Foreman's record to suggest he is Frazier's conquer, not

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one. Frazier was the solid favorite and deservedly so. The only thing that made Foreman seem formidable vs Frazier, other than his size, was him being an Olympic Champion with a lot of knockouts and maybe Frazier would look past him. Even at that, it was perceived that Frazier didn't have to be at his best to defeat Foreman.

The bottom line is that I don't believe any of the Monday morning quarterbacks who now claim that they knew back then that Foreman matched up favorably vs Frazier. It was still questioned at the time as to whether or not Foreman had the power to really hurt Frazier and keep him off. The only one who picked Foreman over Frazier publicly was Howard Cosell. And of course Foreman himself.

In fact Foreman said in an interview with *Boxing Illustrated* before he fought Frazier that he considered himself lucky to be the guy getting Frazier after the Ali fight. George stated that Frazier is not the same fighter who defeated Ali. He said Frazier is ready to be taken in his next fight. Bottom line is I don't believe those who say they knew Foreman was a lock to beat Frazier. I just don't believe you. If you said it, you said it to yourself. There was nothing on Foreman's record to even suggest he deserved being a 3-1 underdog. Only Cosell picked Foreman publicly. And of course Foreman. He said it in *Boxing Illustrated*, and he did it in Jamaica.

I'm sure all those who picked Foreman in 1973 to beat Frazier, are the same guys who just knew that Leonard was going to upset Hagler in 1987. You guys were a ghost in 1973, just like in 1987. I know some guys picked these upsets, but not nearly as many who now claim so. Oh, you must be the same guys along with Ron Borges who picked Holyfield to take Tyson apart before their first fight in 1996?

Writers Note

Just for the record, I picked Frazier to knock Foreman out in 1973. My feeling was that Frazier would be able to push Foreman back and work him over. I picked Leonard to decision Hagler when they fought in 1987. I felt Leonard's speed and chin would keep him on his feet through the 12th round. I felt Leonard was being overlooked. Leonard waited for the right time to challenge Hagler, after his tough fight with John "The Beast" Mugabi. I figured if Leonard was on his feet at the end, he'd get the decision. Lastly, I picked Holyfield to beat Tyson originally when they were slated to fight in November of 1991. However, when they fought in November 1996, I picked Tyson. So I was wrong on the actual fight. I always knew Holyfield at his best was better than the best Tyson. But, Holyfield looked awful in losing to Bowe in their third fight, and struggling with Czyz in his last fight. The only reason why Tyson agreed to fight Holyfield in 1996 was because he thought it was safe. We all did. Even though I have no doubt Holyfield was better than Tyson, I didn't think the 1996 version was. And neither did anyone else other than Borges?