

Fight Of The Century: 33 Years Later And Still Nothing Like It

Written by Frank Lotierzo
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*There Will Be Nothing Like It In The History Of The Planet
Muhammad Ali March 5, 1971

*After Round 10, It's Just A Matter Of Time Before That Clown Falls.....Forever
Joe Frazier March 5, 1971

There hasn't been anything like it or close to it in the history of sports. Never before in boxing history have two undefeated Heavyweight Champions met when both were at or close to their respective prime. And to top it off, both Joe Frazier and Muhammad Ali had a legitimate claim to the biggest prize in sports, that being the Heavyweight Championship of the World.

Forty seven month's prior to fighting "Smokin" Joe Frazier, Muhammad Ali was stripped of his undisputed title for refusing induction into the United States Army. Ali's refusal was based on being a conscientious objector to the Vietnam War, due to his Religious beliefs. When Ali was taken out of boxing at age 25 on April 27th 1967, he was 29-0 (24).

This turned out to be the beginning of a forty three month exile from boxing. He had just made the ninth successful defense of the title by stopping Zora Folley in Madison Square Garden on March 22nd 1967. This would end up being the last time Ali would fight during the 1960's.

In April of 1967, 23 year old Joe Frazier was coming off of his 15th pro fight, and was 15-0 (14). Over the next forty plus month's, Ali was in and out of court and becoming public enemy number one, due to his conversion to Islam, and refusing Military Induction. Frazier on the other hand was totally cleaning out the heavyweight division going 11-0 (9).

On February 16th 1970, Frazier stopped WBA Heavyweight Champ Jimmy Ellis in five rounds. This was the fight that basically gave Frazier universal recognition as World Heavyweight Champion. By this time Frazier had gone through the top heavyweights in the World. The only thing Frazier didn't have was the name Muhammad Ali on his win column. The talk of an Ali comeback was always hovering over Frazier's title claim. Joe knew he would never be accepted as the real champ until he faced Ali in the ring and defeated him. In October of 1970, Ali was finally granted a boxing license by the state of Georgia, which did not have a boxing commission. On October 26th of 1970, Ali fought for the first time in 43 months. In his comeback fight, Ali stopped second ranked Jerry Quarry in three rounds in Atlanta Georgia.

At this time the whole World was watching. The Ballyhoo for an Ali-Frazier fight had been building up since Frazier won the New York Title in March of 1968 when he stopped Buster Mathis in the new Madison Square Garden. What made the fight so intriguing was that Frazier looked every bit as impressive going through the division, as Ali had a few years earlier. There was constant chatter from early 1968 on, suggesting that the powers that be were close to putting together an Ali-Frazier fight. However, every time it seemed like it was going to happen, something or someone always pulled the rug out from underneath it. Most of the time it was

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some high powered Politician who succumbed to the Political pressure at the last minute, causing the fight not to be realized.

Once Ali was granted a boxing license in Georgia, all the other states followed suit and it was now accepted that Ali was back. After he beat Quarry in October of 1970, Frazier knocked out undisputed Lt. Heavyweight Champ Bob Foster in two rounds at the Cobo Arena in Detroit in November of 1970. Three weeks after Frazier's destruction of Foster, Ali stopped third ranked Oscar Bonavena in the 15th round of a gruelling fight at Madison Square Garden. After the Ali-Bonavena bout, the hype and build up for Ali vs. Frazier exploded. For the next nine plus weeks, the coverage of this fight and its subplots were unprecedented.

On December 30th 1970, Joe Frazier 26-0 (23) and Muhammad Ali 31-0 (25) signed to face each other for the undisputed Heavyweight Championship of the World. The fight was scheduled for March 8th 1971 at Madison Square Garden, and was billed Frazier vs. Ali, and nicknamed "Fight of The Century". Frazier's name would be first on the Marquee since he was the recognized champ, although Ali hadn't lost the title in the ring. In fact Ring Magazine recognized Ali as the champ until the Frazier-Ellis fight. Once Frazier beat Ellis, he was viewed as the established Champ.

Both Frazier and Ali were guaranteed 2.5 million dollars apiece for facing each other. They were actually offered 1.5 million dollars and a percentage of the total gate, but both took the guarantee. Little did they know how big the fight would turn out to be. Although maybe Ali had an idea. After they signed the contracts, Ali stood up and said to Frazier, "hey Joe, they got us cheap". He may have never spoken truer words, the fight end up grossing over 30 million dollars. Had Frazier and Ali taken the 1.5 million and the percentage, they would've grossed over 6 million dollars each.

Sometimes in life, the stars line up perfectly. Which was definitely the case leading up to Frazier vs. Ali. At this time in America, there was a Political and Culture War going on surrounding the Vietnam War. Ali was the Champion of the Liberals and the antiwar movement, and painted Frazier as the Champion of the establishment. Even though Joe never commented on the War or any other Political issues publicly.

Here we had two undefeated heavyweights who both had a claim to the title. On top of that, both fighters were head and shoulders above their peers. Not only were both Frazier and Ali the top heavyweight's in the World, they were both great fighters. What made it even better was that they were polar opposites in and out of the Ring. Ali was a showman and drew attention to all that he did. Ali was definitely a true superstar. Frazier was the quiet and humble hardworking man respected by all, in much the same manner as Joe Louis was. No controversy flying around Joe Frazier, he wasn't a superstar, he was a fighter in the purest form.

Not only were they completely different from a personality vantage point, they were totally different as fighters. Other than both being black men who were born under the Zodiac sign of Capricorn, and being fighters, they shared nothing else. One was tall and the other was short. Ali used the whole ring, where Frazier tried to shrink it as much as possible. One wanted to fight at a distance, the other wanted to be in your chest. Frazier tried to do damage with every punch,

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Ali picked his spots and scored with sharp combinations. Ali liked to move and dictate the pace, Frazier applied constant pressure. One's strength was the other one's weakness, and vice versa. Yes, the stars were in place for this one.

From December 30th 1970 when Frazier and Ali signed the contract, the build up and hype was like nothing seen before or since in sports history regarding the promotion and build up! There were specials on ABC's Wide World of Sports almost weekly. Interviews by celebrities, politicians, and even the average person were constantly being aired. Newspapers and Sports sections always had something on the fight from a variety of different angles. And Vitalas shave lotion filmed two television commercials with both fighters taking turns hanging up on each other. Everybody had an opinion on this fight, and you didn't have to be a Boxing or Sports fan to have one.

The biggest magnetism about this fight for me was the style and personality contrast of both Frazier and Ali. The fact that both fighters seemed unbeatable by March of 71, I just couldn't picture either one losing. Yet I knew on the morning of March 9th, one of them would have a loss on their record. I know on the way up Frazier was dropped by Bonavena, and Ali was dropped by Banks and Cooper. However, that was early in their career, by March of 71 both of them had arrived and were legitimate great fighters.

The style contrast was the ultimate boxer vs swarmer match up. Frazier had never faced a fighter with the speed and overall ability that Ali possessed. And Ali never faced a fighter who applied the constant pressure like Frazier. Frazier was a fighter who was not about to let Ali dictate the pace of the fight. It was just a question of whether Frazier could get to Ali in order to slow him down. As Larry Merchant once said, Frazier was a truth machine.

On the morning of March 8th 1971, Frazier and Ali weighed in at Madison Square Garden. Frazier weighed 205.5 pounds and was never in better shape in his life. Ali weighed in at 215 pounds, the heaviest of his career to date. The fighters weighed in separately because Yank Durham, Frazier's manager and trainer didn't want Joe to see or interact with Ali until they were in the ring that night. By midday, Frazier was a 6-5 betting favorite.

Since Ali weighed in second, he encountered an unforeseen problem. By the time he was through, and ready to go back to his New York Hotel, the crowd outside had grown to almost riot proportion. Meanwhile Frazier had sneaked out the back before the crowd had gathered to its enormous capacity. When the people outside heard that Ali was inside, they surrounded the building. When the New York Cops tried to move the crowd, they were met with serious resistance. When the crowd heard that Ali was still inside, they said they were not leaving until they saw him. Once the cops realized the situation and danger, they went back and told Ali that if he left the Garden, they couldn't guarantee his safety.

The decision was then made that Ali better spend the day in the basement of Madison Square Garden, or there may not have been a Championship fight that night. So Ali and his entourage set up camp in the basement of the Garden. Bedding, TV's and Stereo's were brought in and they tried to make it as close to a makeshift Hotel Suite as possible. I was told by Garden President Harry Markson years later, that the Ali entourage ran up a food bill of over four

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thousand dollars just for that day.

By 8:00 O'clock on fight night, New York City was literally shut down 10 blocks outside of the Garden. I know this because I was in a car with my father and cousin, and we just beat the crowd on our way to the fight. Needless to say this was like no other night in Garden History. I've read and talked to many writers who were also there that night. They have all said that nothing they have ever been too or experienced comes close to the excitement and anticipation that reached it's pinnacle right before the bell rang for the first round. In fact well known and respected Philadelphia sports writer Jack Mckinney once told me that he kept saying to himself right before the fight, "I can't believe it, I can't believe it, Ali and Frazier are actually going to fight, and nothing can stop it now!"

At the bell for round one Ali came out flying, he knew Joe was vulnerable early and was trying to end it quickly. Ali's plan was to go at Frazier with an all out early assault in the hopes of getting him out, or at least slow him down. In the first five rounds Ali did all he could to try and get Frazier out. The thought in his corner was that even if he failed, Frazier would have absorbed so much punishment that he wouldn't have anything left in the last third of the fight. Little did they know.

During those first five rounds, Ali threw and landed some of the hardest punches and swiftest combinations that he had on any other fighter in his career. The problem turned out that Ali didn't possess the tools needed for the quick execution that he had planned. Frazier on the other hand was doing something to Ali that had never been done before, he was taking away his security blanket, his jab. By Joe bobbing and weaving so continuously, he was making Ali miss more often than he ever had before in his career. This was also accomplishing something else, it was enabling Frazier to get inside and work Ali's body. By the eighth round, Ali was slowed to a walk, and was fighting flat-footed which was exactly what Durham and Frazier had wanted.

Going into the ninth round, it appeared that Frazier was taking the play away from Ali and the tide was turning in his favor. Midway through the round, it was still up for grabs. Then Ali exploded with a series of stinging right hands and hooks, and actually had Joe backing up. It turned out to be the only time in the fight that Ali had Joe really shook, and would be the last round he would win in the fight other than the fourteenth. Round ten was even and saw sustained action and could've gone either way. After 10 furious rounds of fighting, it was very close and still not yet decided.

About two minutes into the eleventh round, Frazier cornered Ali and caught him with a beautiful double left-hook, one to the body followed by one to the head. Ali was hurt and was in serious trouble, he staggered all over the ring in the last minute, but Joe couldn't finish him. In between the eleventh and twelfth rounds, Dr. Harry Kliemen stepped up on the ring post near Ali's corner and was considering stopping the fight. But to his dismay, Ali and Angelo Dundee were talking and Ali appeared to have all his senses and didn't seem hurt, so he sat back down and let the fight continue.

In round twelve Frazier took a breather but still managed to win the round. Round thirteen saw them spend the last two minutes of the round trading in one corner without moving. This round

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had to go to Frazier because he finished strong, and was scoring to the head and body opposed to Ali just scoring to the head. In round fourteen Ali got a slight second wind and moved and boxed well, doing just enough to stay ahead of Joe and win the round. Twenty four seconds into the fifteenth and final round, Ali was set to throw a right uppercut when Frazier beat him to the punch and connected with one of the most brutal left-hooks ever thrown. The punch dropped Ali like his legs were taken out from under him. However, Ali was up before referee Arthur Mercante could pick up the count at three. For the rest of the round Frazier was all over Ali, and won what was the biggest round of the fight for either fighter.

Just as the bell ended the fifteenth round, Frazier put his hands up and yelled something at Ali. Exactly what he yelled I don't think anybody knows for sure. But through talking to the people involved with both Ali and Frazier over the years, it was either one of two things. Either Frazier Yelled, "I Kicked Your Ass," or "Who's The Champ Now". Both remarks have come up more than once from people close to both fighters.

When the decision was announced, it was unanimous in favor of Frazier. Judge Bill Recht scored it 11-4 Frazier which was absurd, and drove Ali nuts afterwards. Judge Artie Aidala scored it 9-6 Frazier, which is probably what it really was. And referee Arthur Mercante scored it 8-6-1 Frazier. No doubt it was a clear Frazier victory and he was the better man on the night of March 8th 1971.

Regardless of where you rank Joe Frazier in the all-time heavyweight pantheon, on March 8th of 1971 he was one of the greatest heavyweights of all-time. And in my opinion no fighter in boxing history was ever more prepared and entered a boxing ring as mentally and physically ready as Joe Frazier was for Muhammad Ali in their first fight. It is without a doubt that the biggest and most anticipated fight in boxing history was won by Joe Frazier. And yes, despite the layoff, Ali was a great fighter that night, and was only beaten by the Herculean effort of Frazier. The first Frazier-Ali fight was one of the rare Superfights where the realization actually exceeded the expectation. On Monday Night March 8th 1971, Ali was great, but Joe Frazier refused to be denied. It really was the Fight of The Century .