

What If Foreman Rumbled In The Jungle 30 Years Ago

Written by Frank Lotierzo
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On Monday night March 8, 1971, heavyweight champion Joe Frazier 26-0 (23) defeated former heavyweight champion Muhammad Ali 31-0 (25), handing him his first loss in the biggest fight in boxing history. From mid 1967 through January of 1973, Frazier was only in one fight that he didn't control from beginning to end, and that was against Ali. During that six year run Frazier defeated every top contender in the heavyweight division, and you could count on less than one hand how many times "Smokin" Joe took a backwards step during a fight.

By late 1972, the Frazier and Ali camps couldn't agree on a purse split for their much ballyhooed rematch. So Frazier defended his title against the second ranked and undefeated George Foreman. In a fight titled the Sunshine Showdown in Kingston Jamaica, the 3-1 underdog Foreman became the undisputed heavyweight champion on January 22, 1973.

What Foreman did to Joe Frazier in less than two full rounds is almost frightening. In slightly over five minutes of fighting, Foreman knocked Frazier to the canvas six times, causing referee Arthur Mercante to stop the fight. In a matter of minutes, George Foreman destroyed Frazier's image as a great fighter. After beating Ali, Frazier's image was of him dropping Ali with a massive left hook. Now the image most had of Frazier was of him being lifted off the canvas by one of Foreman's pulverizing uppercuts.

Foreman stopped Joe "King" Roman in the first round in his first defense. Six months later Foreman successfully defended his title with a two round destruction of Ken Norton. Norton had just fought 24 rounds with Muhammad Ali in his last two fights, winning a split decision in their first fight, and losing a split decision in the rematch. Yet he couldn't make it through two rounds with Foreman.

After destroying the only two fighters to defeat Ali, Foreman defended his title against him. Foreman was viewed as being so invincible that Ali was thought to have no chance to win. Finally, after one postponement due to Foreman suffering a cut eye, he defended his undisputed heavyweight title against Muhammad Ali on October 30, 1974.

In an upset almost the magnitude of his against Frazier, (Ali was a 3-1 underdog) Ali employed a ring tactic called "The-Rope-A-Dope," and stopped the 40-0 (37) Foreman in the eighth round. For years prior to fighting Foreman, Ali proclaimed he was the greatest of all time. However, it wasn't until after he beat Foreman that he began to be lauded with those type of accolades. In the ring where Ali gained his legendary status, Foreman lost his.

What IF Foreman Won

What if Foreman stopped Ali in the eighth round instead of being stopped? For starters, he would have never lost to Jimmy Young. George was not the same fighter after losing to Ali. He was full of self doubt, and question his own stamina and attempted to pace himself when he fought. An unbeaten Foreman would've gone through Young.

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Ali went on to fight six years after beating Foreman, and was only stopped against a prime Larry Holmes, two months shy of turning 39. And in that fight, it was his trainer Angelo Dundee who stopped the fight in between the 10th and 11th rounds. So had Foreman stopped a 32 year old Ali, it would've been huge. On top of that, he was the first and really the only fighter to stop Frazier, and he did it twice. Frazier was stopped by Ali in Manila because he couldn't see out of swollen shut eyes. When he was halted twice by Foreman, he was badly hurt in both fights. Being undefeated with stoppage wins over Ali and Frazier would have carried a ton of historical significance for Foreman.

Had Foreman defeated Ali, the only fighter who would've been perceived as possibly having a chance to provide a challenge for him was the up and coming Larry Holmes. Had that been the case, Holmes would've fought Foreman for the title in late 1976 or by mid 1977, instead of Norton in mid 1978. The Holmes of 1976-77 hadn't yet developed into the nearly complete fighter he was in mid 1978. And Foreman would still have the pre-Ali meanness and mindset. Under that scenario, Foreman stops Holmes and in the process prevents him from ever becoming heavyweight champ.

After disposing of Holmes, who's left to confront and challenge an unbeaten Foreman? Dokes, Page, Tubbs, Cooney? It's very possible if Foreman doesn't get bored, he may still be around when Tyson arrives on the scene. How would that turn out?

History provides a little insight here. What we know is Foreman came back after not fighting for 10 years and, at age 42, went the distance with a 28 year old Evander Holyfield—something a 30 year old Tyson couldn't do against a 34 year old Holyfield in two fights. On top of that, Tyson had a chance to fight a 41 year old Foreman during the summer of 1990. According to those who managed and promoted Tyson, he wanted no part of Foreman, citing that Foreman was a bad style match for him based on what he learned from the teachings of Cus D'Amato.

And finally, Foreman won the heavyweight title in 1994 at age 45 with one punch. In his return to the ring after a 10 year hiatus, Foreman was never knocked down or stopped. In his 81 fights, he was only stopped by Ali in his 41st fight in 1974. And Foreman was last hurt by Ron Lyle in January of 1976 in his first fight back after losing to Ali.

On October 30, 1974, had George Foreman stopped Muhammad Ali instead of being stopped, it's not a reach to envision Foreman going down as the greatest heavyweight champ in history. He would've had the credentials to rank among any other champ in history.