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1949 was an outstanding year, for it produced two heavyweight boxing immortals. George Foreman was born on January 10 and Larry Holmes was born on November 3. Foreman and Holmes are two of the greatest heavyweight champions of all time. It's not a reach to say Foreman is the strongest and best two-handed puncher in heavyweight history, and Holmes is the best overall boxer. Their names are forever linked together in the record books.

These two legends both won the World Heavyweight Title in the 1970s. Foreman won it in 1973 when he stopped Joe Frazier in two rounds in Kingston, Jamaica. Holmes, who at one time worked as a sparring partner for Frazier, won it in 1978 with a 15-round split decision over Ken Norton in Las Vegas. Norton was a sparring partner for Smokin’ Joe. Holmes was one of Muhammad Ali's chief sparring partners for his title fight with Foreman in October 1974.

Foreman and Holmes also made successful comebacks in their early forties. Foreman had two shots at the title during his comeback. He lost a decision to undisputed champ Evander Holyfield when he was 42 in April 1991. Three years later at the age 45 he knocked out WBA/IBF champ Michael Moorer, who won the titles from Holyfield, in the 10th round to regain the title a second time.

Holmes also had two shots at the crown in his forties. In June 1992, Holmes, who was also 42, lost a decision to Holyfield in a bid to win the undisputed title. Three years later at age 45 he lost a controversial decision to newly crowned WBC Champ Oliver McCall.

There are some other interesting twists of fate linking Foreman and Holmes, but two words link them more than anything else: Muhammad Ali.

Former heavyweight champion Muhammad Ali has been the ghost who has hovered over both of them since they turned pro respectively in 1969 and 1973. Even to this day, all these years later, George and Larry are fighting Ali. It is Ali who, no matter what they do, overshadows them and their accomplishments. And it's not a stretch to say that because of whom Ali is and what he accomplished in boxing, it has influenced both George and Larry to return to the ring in their late thirties and early forties.

As a 15-year-old, George Foreman witnessed the legend of Ali in its infancy, starting with the then Cassius Clay's title winning upset over Sonny Liston. Four years after Ali won the title, Foreman won an Olympic Gold medal at the 1968 Summer Olympics. While Ali was exiled from boxing, Foreman turned pro in 1969. A year later, Ali returned to the ring and overshadowed both heavyweight champion Frazier and the up and coming Foreman.

Twenty-one months after Foreman turned pro, Joe Frazier defeated Ali in one of the biggest fights in history. The thought at the time was that Frazier shattered the Ali legend. With Ali out of the picture, all George had to do was beat Frazier to realize his dream of becoming champion. Twenty-two months after Frazier beat Ali, Foreman challenged Frazier for the undisputed title.

In one of the most devastating exhibitions of punching power of all time, Foreman made Frazier an ex-champ in less than two rounds. A year later Foreman destroyed top ranked contender Ken Norton in two rounds.

Foreman was being talked about as the greatest and most powerful heavyweight champion in history. It was widely accepted that nobody would ever beat him. In between Foreman's victories over Frazier and Norton, Ali exacted revenge over the only two fighters who ever defeated him. Interestingly, the two men who defeated Ali - Frazier and Norton - were actually two of Foreman's easiest fights. After Ali defeated his two fiercest rivals in a pair of rematches, he wanted to reclaim the title he was stripped of seven years earlier.

On October 30, 1974, Foreman fought the fighter who loomed larger than life during his career, Muhammad Ali. When Foreman signed to fight Ali, it was thought that he would not only beat him, but end his career - something that sat well with George, who was tired of Ali upstaging him at every turn in public and in the media. In a fight nicknamed "The Rumble in The Jungle", Ali shocked the boxing world when he knocked out Foreman out in the 8th round in a fight he entered as a 3-1 underdog.

When Ali beat Foreman he did more than just take his title. He shattered his aura of invincibility and spirit. Unlike Mike Tyson thirteen years later, George Foreman really believed he could not be beaten. Foreman was never the same after losing to Ali in Zaire. Two and a half years after Zaire, Foreman was upset by Jimmy Young and retired. Had Foreman stopped Ali instead of himself being stopped, he might have been considered the greatest heavyweight champ ever, instead of being haunted by the ghost of Ali.

Ten years after losing to Young, Foreman came out of retirement and regained the title he lost to Ali twenty years earlier.

Being haunted by phantoms is something Larry Holmes probably knows a thing or two about. When Holmes turned pro in 1973, he was best known for being stopped by Duane Bobick in the finals of the 1972 Olympic Trials, in a fight that was broadcast on ABC's Wide World of Sports with Muhammad Ali and Howard Cosell doing the commentary. Larry Holmes was not regarded as a serious heavyweight title contender early in his career. Many boxing observers said his legs were too skinny, he couldn't punch, and that he lacked heart. Many claimed that Holmes was a cheap imitation of Muhammad Ali, a poor man's Ali. Something he would hear throughout his career.

Two years after his pro debut, Holmes was better known for being a sparring partner for Ali and Frazier than for anything he did in the ring. Finally, after laboring on many Ali undercards and fighting in nondescript venues, Holmes got his title shot against WBC champ Ken Norton in June 1978. By 1978 Norton was best known for two things: (1) giving Ali three tough and close fights in 1973 and 1976 and (2) being the only heavyweight champ in history who never won a title fight.

In what was the best heavyweight title fight since "The Thrilla in Manila”, Holmes won a split decision over Norton to capture the WBC title. For the next seven years Larry Holmes ruled the

heavyweights, making 20 consecutive title defenses. Only the great Joe Louis made more with 25. The problem Holmes faced was that his biggest wins were over an aging Earnie Shavers and Ken Norton, both of whom Ali had already defeated in title fights a few years earlier. Holmes even fought Ali in 1980 and beat him worse than he had ever been beaten in his career. But the Ali that Holmes beat was a shot fighter who hadn't looked great in five years. Thus Holmes did not get the 800-pound Gorilla - Muhammad Ali - off his back. Holmes even beat the undefeated the Great White Hope of his day, Gerry Cooney, in a huge fight, but still wasn't given the props he sought or deserved.

What hurt Holmes was that he sometimes looked vulnerable against fighters who weren't perceived to be anything special. On top of that, he, unlike Ali, didn't have a Liston, Frazier or Foreman in his era to bring out the best in him. Holmes also lacked charisma, something that would really stand out if you're the champ who succeeds Muhammad Ali.

Throughout his entire title tenure, Holmes was put down because he wasn't Ali. By the time Holmes started to finally get some respect, he was upset by Michael Spinks. As luck would have it, Holmes would be the first heavyweight champion in boxing history to lose his title to the reigning king of the light heavyweights.

And if that wasn't enough, the biggest thing to come along in the heavyweight division since Ali was starting to make his mark. Mike Tyson would be the fighter to sandwich Holmes between himself and Ali. Not to mention that Holmes would attempt an ill-fated comeback against Tyson after being retired for two years. A few years after losing to Tyson, Holmes came out of retirement to try and reclaim the title he owned from 1978-85. Due to the success Holmes realized in his forties, he is now finally starting to get the homage he covets and deserves.

George Foreman and Larry Holmes will never rank above Muhammad Ali in the all-time heavyweight pantheon, but their successful comebacks have moved them slightly closer to Ali, who was shot by the age of 36. At 42 Foreman shook the undisputed champ, Evander Holyfield, pretty good in a title fight, and Holmes came within two or three points of beating Evander. At age 45 Foreman won the title with a one-punch knockout over a then undefeated champ, Michael Moorer, and Holmes lost a razor thin decision to Oliver McCall, the fighter who knocked out Lennox Lewis to win the title in his previous fight.

Because of the Ali mystique, Foreman and Holmes were not content in retirement, which ultimately led them back to the ring for another run at past glory.

By defeating Foreman and regaining the title, Ali solidified his legend at the expense of Big George. During Holmes' title reign, all the things he couldn't do as well as Ali were brought up, which no doubt hurt his perceived status as champion.

Ali won the heavyweight title from Foreman in the ring and never lost the peoples’ title to Holmes outside it.

Today, Foreman and Holmes are respected as all-time greats and are the center of attention wherever they go . . . at least until Ali shows up.