He is the only undefeated heavyweight champion in boxing history and retired with a sterling record of 49-0 (43). On Sunday night, August 31, 1969, former Heavyweight Champion Rocky Marciano was killed on the eve of his 46th birthday—35 years ago today. Marciano was killed when the single-engine plane he was flying in crashed. Today, September 1, 2004, would've been his 81st birthday.

Rocky was flying back to his home in Ft. Lauderdale to attend a birthday party planned for him by his 16 year old daughter Maryann. Rocky was scheduled to make a ringside appearance for a friend of his who had interest in a fighter fighting that night. He was flying from Chicago to De Moines for the appearance. Tragically, the plane crashed into an open field with a tree in it near a wooded creek. All three aboard the plane were instantly killed—the pilot, Rocky, and his friend. The National Transportation Security Board's report stated, "The Pilot attempted operation exceeding his ability and level."

It's almost unfathomable that it's been 35 years since Marciano's tragic death. It just so happened to be that three months prior to his death, Marciano completed filming the Computer fight between him and Muhammad Ali, the only two undefeated Heavyweight Champs in history at the time. The idea of the Computer fight was something thought up by a man named Murray Worner of Worner Productions.

Warner came up with the idea in 1969 when Muhammad Ali was exiled from boxing for refusal to fight in the Vietnam War, due to his religious beliefs. At the time it was a widely held opinion that Ali would never be granted a boxing license or be allowed to fight again. Worner reasoned since Marciano and Ali could never fight, and they were the only two undefeated heavyweight champs in history, why not let the Computer determine who's the greatest of all time?

Both Marciano and Ali were paid ten thousand dollars for the Computer bout. Marciano had a couple of businesses that weren't doing well. And Ali hadn't fought in almost three years and needed the money. Marciano took it seriously and trained for it like it was a fight. He actually lost almost 50 pounds getting in shape. Ali didn't take it seriously at all and did nothing to prepare for it. Marciano wanted to be in the best shape he could be in, just in case Ali tried to make him look bad. He even wore a toupee during the filming just to make him look more youthful. Rocky and Ali filmed and acted out the seven possible endings. Each fighter winning by decision, knockout, or technical knockout, and even a draw was factored in.

What took place was Marciano and Ali lightly sparring for 70 one minute rounds. Punches to the head and face weren't allowed, but punches to the body were permitted, which was good for Rocky since Ali never punched to the body. During the filming they didn't actually fight each other or spar all out, but sometimes a couple got away. In fact, during one session, things got pretty intense.

This is the story that has been relayed by those who were there (Worner, Marciano's brother

and a friend, Angelo and Chris Dundee, and Ferdie Pacheco). Supposedly Ali kept jabbing at Marciano's hair piece and knocking it off. Marciano thought Ali was trying to humiliate and embarrass him. After a couple times, Rocky started to get furious. He finally warned Ali that if he did it again, the fight would be real and he'd hurt Ali. Well, Ali couldn't let that go and the next time they came in contact, he jabbed the toupee off. It's been told that Marciano ripped a body shot into Ali that dropped him to his knee. The story goes that Ali got out of the ring and demanded two thousand dollars more or he wouldn't finish the filming.

This has been told by more than a few who were actually there. I don't know if I believe it completely. Marciano was 45 at the time, and Ali took a better body shot than any heavyweight who has yet lived. Let me say this, it's not hard for me to envision Ali trying to mock Rocky a little, so the wig story could have some validity to it. Do I think Rocky dropped Ali with a body shot? Maybe. I'll say this, I have no doubt that Marciano may have loaded up to get his attention somewhere during the filming.

On January 20th 1970, Worner Productions released the Hypothetical Computer fight between the only two undefeated heavyweight champions in history, at the time. When the Computer rendered the verdict, Rocky Marciano stopped Muhammad Ali in the 13th round. Needless to say Ali was annoyed by the result, and sadly Rocky never lived to hear it. For awhile, the hypothetical Marciano-Ali bout was widely discussed and talked about. It lost some of its novelty when the same Computer was used in September of 1970 to forecast the November title fight between heavyweight champ Joe Frazier and light heavyweight champ Bob Foster. In that hypothetical fight, which would be realized two months later, the Computer picked Bob Foster to stop Joe Frazier in six rounds. As most boxing fans and historians know, Frazier hit Foster so hard in the second round, that he sprained his ankle falling down. Foster was counted out a little over a minute into the second round.

It's been over 50 years since Rocky Marciano won the Heavyweight Championship of the World. There have been some great heavyweights in those 50 years—Liston, Ali, Frazier, Foreman, Holmes, Holyfield, Lewis, and Tyson. However, not one of them have remained undefeated, not one. Some boxing observers justify Marciano going undefeated simply because the best fighters he defeated were greats who were past their prime. And that is a fair point. The best names on Rocky's record are Louis, Walcott, Charles, and Moore. All four of them were past their peak when they faced Rocky.

However, that's not Marciano's fault. What is never mentioned is that all four of them agree on one thing, Marciano was the best they ever faced. Joe Louis said that even at his peak he wouldn't have defeated Marciano. Jersey Joe Walcott said nobody hit him like Marciano, not even Louis. Ezzard Charles said Marciano had stamina and strength like no other fighter he's ever been in the ring with. And Archie Moore remarked Rocky is a life-taker with either hand. Even Ali said, after feeling a 45 year old Marciano during the filming of their Computer fight, that he couldn't believe how strong he was and couldn't imagine what he must've been like in his prime. In fact, if you noticed over the years when Ali went into his mock the past greats routine, he never included Marciano. To this day Ali respects and talks highly of Marciano, more so than any other past great.

Another myth about Marciano was that he was a crude slugger. The truth is he was an awkward swarmer who fought out of a crouch and was difficult to hit with consecutive punches. You have to search hard and long to find highlights of his fights where he is getting with hit multiple punches in a row. Sure, he could be nailed with one big shot, but not two and three in succession. Rocky also had dynamite in both hands and is one of the best two handed punchers in heavyweight history. And like Jefferies, Louis, and Frazier, Marciano carried his punch from round one to fifteen. He was dangerous throughout the fight and could end it at any time with one, especially the "The Suzy Q", better known as his right hand. Rocky was also a little faster with his hands then he is generally given credit for. Remember, when he landed one of the most brutal punches in history in the 13th round of his title winning fight with Jersey Joe Walcott, he actually beat Walcott's right hand, which was already on the way when Marciano launched his.

This is what we do know as fact. Rocky Marciano never lost a fight. He was the best conditioned heavyweight in the history of the Sweet Science. Marciano went away to camp for every big fight of his career. He never took holidays off and ran on Christmas and Easter, even if he wasn't scheduled to fight. Rocky never underestimated any challenger, and entered his fights as a champion with the mindset of a challenger. He was supremely confident because he knew his body couldn't be beat. He was often quoted as saying, “maybe they're better than me, but they can't beat my body.”

Marciano also had a reputation for being cheap and loving money. The only thing he may have loved more than money was the heavyweight title and being treated like royalty. He also new being undefeated would be his legacy and took pride in it. He could've sold out after he was retired and came back and fought for more money in one fight than he made in just about his whole career. He turned down a King's fortune to come back against Patterson, Johansson, and Liston. Not because he was fearful of them. He just realized that he couldn't summon the desire and dedication that he once had.

On top of that he didn't want to risk Patterson, Johansson, and Liston having his name on their win column. No, Rocky's ego was too big in a good way. If those fighters were to have his name in their win column, it would have to be earned against him when he was at his best. Marciano couldn't live with himself knowing those fighters could claim they defeated him, when it was only the name that remained when they achieved it.

Is Rocky Marciano the greatest heavyweight champ of all time? Probably not. But his name must be included in every conversation or discussion when the topic is discussed.