

## Polarizing Fighters: Believing Isn't Seeing - Part 1

Written by Frank Lotierzo

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2004 was an historic year in the sport of boxing. No doubt Mike Tyson and Roy Jones being stopped every time they fought, and the retirement of heavyweight champ Lennox Lewis, had to be a few of the more memorable happenings.

On a personal note, 2004 concluded my 40th year as a certified boxing junkie. Ever since seeing Cassius Clay as a four year old on the evening news ranting about his fight that night with heavyweight champion Sonny Liston, I've been a boxing addict.

Over the last few years, I don't know if it's me paying more attention or if fan bias in boxing has risen to the level of Political bias - how scary is that? But I've noticed that some boxing fans and writers blatantly omit facts and reality to boost the image and perception of their favorite fighters. And sometimes overstate weaknesses to tarnish fighters they dislike. This is not a blanket statement pertaining to all, but it's more than a silent minority who are guilty of trying to rewrite boxing history. It's almost as if the manhood of some is directly linked to the wins and loses of the fighter they've adopted as their man.

The often and overused saying "opinions can't be wrong" is a complete fallacy - and that's not an opinion. An opinion can definitely be wrong. My opinion, like anyone else's, has no validity if it ignores fact and reality pertaining to the subject in question. Reality is not a gray area to any objective and knowledgeable boxing observer.

Unfortunately, when debating some of the fights and fighters of boxing's most popular stars over the last 40 years, reality and wishful thinking sometimes run side by side. If you doubt this, try and tell an avid Ali fan that he wasn't a great boxer, or a big Tyson fan that his lack of mental toughness and character define him more than his hand speed and power. Try making the case to a Roy Jones fan that he has a suspect chin. Only a fanatical fan of Ali, Tyson or Jones would attempt to refute those statements as being unfounded. But I seriously doubt anyone who is a boxing fan first - before they're an Ali, Tyson or Jones fan - would consider them unfounded. How could they if they really knew what they were watching?

If there is a bigger fan of Muhammad Ali than I am, he lives on another planet. However, not many passionate Ali fans can bring themselves to admit that he was overrated as a pure boxer. He was absolutely a gifted athlete and an all-time great fighter. But the truth is that because he possessed physical speed and reflexes never before seen in a heavyweight fighter, he didn't think it was necessary to learn boxing basics and fundamental defense. That's why he started to get hit more frequently when he started to slow down just a bit. Defensively, Ali was often out of position, only his great speed and instincts enabled him to escape without being nailed. As he aged his speed started to erode and he was no longer un-hittable and capable of outrunning his mistakes and fundamental flaws.

Muhammad Ali was also the loser in the biggest fight of not just his career, but in the biggest fight in boxing history. The first fight between Ali and Joe Frazier, titled the "Fight of the

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Century", was the most anticipated and comprehensively covered sporting event in history. Frazier vs. Ali, as it was billed, was four years in the making and the hype actually began when Frazier showed up while Ali was working out for the press before defending his title against Zorn Foley. Frazier showing up unannounced triggered Ali to begin promoting Joe as a future title threat. While both fighters posed for a picture taken together, Ali remarked Frazier was too short to give him any real trouble, which prompted Frazier to say "we'll see about that" - thus starting the Ali vs. Frazier countdown.

To this day almost 34 years after their first fight, some loyal Ali fans justify him losing to Frazier simply because he only fought twice after a 43 month exile from boxing before facing Joe. With the underlying message being: Frazier would have never had a chance if Ali never left boxing. And that couldn't be more wrong. I'm not saying the layoff wasn't a factor. Only a fool would say it wasn't. What I'm saying is because Ali lost the fight, it's impossible for many observers to fathom he fought one of the best fights of his career that night against Smoking' Joe. This is the only loss of Ali's career when he actually fought great. The problem for some Ali fans is in comprehending he could lose a fight that he fought great. But in reality, Frazier's effort in winning "The Fight Of The Century" says much more about his greatness as a fighter than it takes away from Ali's.

The first meeting between Joe Frazier and Muhammad Ali is the fight I have re-watched more than any other fight since I've been addicted to boxing. I'll never admit to just how many times I've watched it. Lets just say more than 100 times and less than 1000. Because of the style contrast, hype, and the fact that I couldn't picture either fighter losing to the other, it's my all-time favorite fight. And I say with complete conviction, Muhammad Ali was a great fighter during Superfight I.

In their 1971 fight, Ali threw and landed some of the hardest punches of his career in rounds one through five while trying to knock Frazier out. He did so for three reasons: (1) it was well known that Frazier wasn't a fast starter, (2) no fighter ever pressured Ali as unrelenting as Frazier did, which basically left Ali no choice, and (3) was even a bigger factor - Joe was trying to take him out with every punch he threw. The term punching with bad intentions wasn't coined for Mike Tyson. It was coined by the late Jim Jacobs for Joe Frazier when he discussed the punching contrast between Ali and Frazier before their first fight, in the documentary Jacobs produced on the bout called "The Fighters".

The reality is Joe Frazier fought the greatest fight of his life against Ali in their first bout. Frazier was better prepared mentally and physically for Ali prior to their first meeting and knew exactly what he had to do to beat him, more so than any other fighter I've ever seen for their opponent. Another factor in the Ali-Frazier equation is Frazier had the perfect style to give Ali trouble every time, regardless of when they fought. Ali didn't lose to Frazier in their first fight because he wasn't a great fighter the night they fought. Frazier won because in his mind his life and career depended on it and he refused to be denied.

Muhammad Ali was, like it or not, a flawed boxer.

Mike Tyson is the best known fighter since Muhammad Ali. However, a book could be written

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on the facts routinely ignored by some Tyson followers who attempt to justify him as one of the greatest of the all-time great heavyweight champions. I'll only address one of the scenarios where reality and perception are as different as night and day. And that is the circumstances surrounding the first fight between Tyson and Evander Holyfield in November 1996.

One of the greatest examples of passionate fans avoiding reality is the faction of Tyson supporters who try and justify him losing and being stopped by Evander Holyfield. What they would like history to show is that Holyfield won because Tyson wasn't at his best. That statement is beyond misleading. It's an outright lie. Only one fighter was coming off the two worst fights of his career to date when they fought, and it wasn't Tyson. The fact is Holyfield was twice as washed-up as Tyson before their first fight. He was only thought to be on his game after beating Tyson, but definitely not before.

Only one fighter was perceived to be so physically finished that the Nevada State Athletic Commission demanded he get physical clearance by the Mayo Clinic before they would approve and sanction the fight. That's a fact. And the fighter wasn't Mike Tyson. Add to that the fact that Holyfield is four years older than Tyson, and he wasn't nearly as protected during his career. Holyfield went out of his way to fight the best fighters of his era, and that's a fact. Tyson went out of his way to avoid them and pay step aside money. But there is a faction that denies this to be the case, but it is a fact. And prior to his first bout against Tyson in November of 1996, the last fighter Holyfield stopped was Bert Cooper in November of 1991.

In the five years that passed between fighting Cooper and Tyson, Riddick Bowe won two out of three fights against Holyfield. Bowe won a unanimous decision in their first meeting and stopped him in their third. Holyfield regained the title from Bowe in their second fight and lost it to Michael Moorer in his first defense. During the years 1991-1996, Holyfield won decisions over 42 year old former champs George Foreman and Larry Holmes, Riddick Bowe, Alex Stewart and Ray Mercer. The only fight Holyfield won that didn't go the distance was against former middleweight contender and light heavyweight champ, Bobby Czyz. Czyz didn't come out for the sixth round due to an eye rash that flared up during the bout.

Tyson, who was two days shy of turning 30, only managed to win one round, two at the most, and was knocked down and stopped by a 34 year old Holyfield. And Holyfield never looked worse as a fighter than he did in his previous two fights before fighting Tyson. The biggest lie ever told in boxing history is that Holyfield beat Tyson because Tyson was washed up. When in reality the complete opposite is true. There is no doubt that it was Evander Holyfield who was further removed from his best than Mike Tyson. Only rumor and wishful thinking by some Tyson fanatics suggests otherwise. Historically and factually, Evander Holyfield was a greater fighter than Mike Tyson. Regardless of how you try and spin it, he accomplished more and beat Mike twice in two fights in head to head confrontations when he was the more eroded fighter.

Roy Jones is a lightning rod in much the same way as Mike Tyson. There's simply no middle ground. Similar to Tyson, there was a belief that Jones couldn't lose. And if he did, it was because of what he didn't do more so than what his opponent did. Only he had control, in others words, of the outcome. There just had to be some complex reason lurking somewhere for it to be accepted. But this isn't about Roy Jones' greatness as a fighter, because he was a great

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fighter and without question one of the best of his era. This is strictly an assessment of the facts pertaining to his chin. And the reality is Roy Jones at best has a suspect chin.

Since being knocked out by one punch in his last two fights, Roy Jones chin and ability to take a punch has been a topic of much intense debate. Many of Jones' loyal followers want to believe that moving up to heavyweight and back down to light heavyweight made him more vulnerable. Although a review of his career indicates it's much more realistic that he has a questionable chin.

Roy was weakened the most in his first fight against Antonio Tarver after winning the WBA heavyweight title in his previous fight. While he fought in the fight which he appeared the most weakened, he was never was down and barely hurt. And that's because Tarver never caught him with a memorable punch to the head or jaw. For the rematch with Tarver, Jones hired conditioning guru Mackie Shilstone as his conditioning trainer. And prior to the Tarver rematch both men repeatedly said Jones couldn't be stronger or in better shape.

The second fight with Tarver was the first time that Jones went into a fight and had something to prove, since his victory in their first fight was seen as being controversial to half of those who saw it. In the rematch Tarver knocked Jones out with a hybrid left hand in the second round. The knockout punch landed by Tarver was the only meaningful punch he landed in less than two rounds. In his next fight against Glen Johnson, Jones fought as if either Tarver took his heart or he had no confidence in his chin. One thing Glen Johnson will never be called is a devastating puncher. Despite Jones fighting tentative and glove shy during the fight, he was close to going down and maybe out in the fifth round from a single punch. In the eighth round Johnson caught Jones with a solid right hand and knocked him out. Not only was Jones counted out, he was down for over eight minutes. How many great fighters has that happened to who had anything close to an outstanding chin? Let alone a great chin?

Fighters who really had outstanding chins were able to take a beating even at the end of their careers when they had nothing left without being stopped, especially by one punch. Actually, the chin is one of the last things to go on a fighter as he ages. As far as Jones' legs being shot and the reason why he was knocked out twice, there wasn't a whisper his legs were close to being gone before fighting Tarver. And it's an undeniable fact that Roy Jones most likely took less punishment than any other great champion by age 35, and wasn't hit anywhere near enough to account for his chin to be considered softened up.

The two fighters who stopped Jones both did it with a single punch. Neither Tarver nor Johnson is known to be a light heavyweight knockout artist. On top of that, how many fighters did either of them take out in the fashion they did Jones prior to fighting him? It's unrealistic to try and believe Jones went from being like Ali to being John Tate in regards to taking a punch overnight. The Jones-Tarver-Johnson triangle provided a rare opportunity in boxing, being that all three faced each other in the same calendar year.

After Tarver and Johnson knocked out Jones in each of their last fights as big underdogs, they fought for what was recognized as the undisputed light heavyweight championship. In a fight that went 12 rounds they both nailed each other with several big shots, similar to what they hit

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Jones with, and not once did either of them seem hurt or close to going down or out. So Antonio Tarver and Glen Johnson either have a Tex Cobb like chin, or Jones has had a suspect chin that he was able to hide because of his blinding speed of hand and foot.

The reality is Jones was knocked out with two of three biggest punches he was ever hit with. The right that Lou Del Valle knocked him down with wasn't nearly in the league with the shot that Tarver and Johnson caught him with. And when he went down against Del Valle, the replay clearly showed that he was off balance when he got hit. Only a right landed by John Ruiz in the first round of their fight may have been in the same league as the two shots that stopped him. Without a doubt, facts and reality make a much better case that Roy Jones has a questionable chin, than indicating he doesn't. Again, I didn't say he had a glass jaw, but his chin is suspect at the least.

***[Read PART 2](#) of this 2 Part Series as Frank Lotierzo analyses those who analyse the fighters.***