

Jimmy Young: A Contender Who Deserved Better

Written by Randy Gordon

Tuesday, 01 March 2005 18:00

At the tail end of sports sections and sports columns around the country for the past week, there has been a tiny item saying something like, “Former heavyweight contender Jimmy Young died on February 20 at the age of 56. His most notable fight was a 15-round decision loss to Muhammad Ali for the world heavyweight championship in April 1976. In a career which lasted from 1969 until 1990, he also faced George Foreman, Ken Norton, Ron Lyle, Gerry Cooney and Earnie Shavers. His career record was 35-18-3 with 12 knockouts.” That was about it. Hardly anything more. Mostly less. He deserved so much better.

Jimmy Young wouldn't hurt anybody. That was his problem. He wouldn't hurt anyone, either out of the ring or in it. He was as pure a boxer as I have ever seen. His passive style makes IBF Heavyweight Champion Chris Byrd—who has been criticized as being too cautious and too defensive—look like Joe Frazier.

Through the first 11 bouts of his career, you would have never known that Young would go on to become a solid, world-class contender. Over that time, he was 7-4, hardly the making of a fighter who dreamed of becoming heavyweight champion.

However, after his fourth professional loss, a first round demolition job at the hands of hard-hitting Earnie Shavers on February 19, 1973, Young went on a tear, going undefeated in his next 12 bouts over the following three years. Included was a stoppage of contender Richard Dunn in 1974, a draw in a rematch against Shavers, and decision victories over contenders Jose Luis Garcia and Ron Lyle.

Ali, who was coming off a fifth round stoppage of European champion Jean Pierre Coopman and his classic win against Joe Frazier in the “Thrilla’ in Manila” four months before that, was looking for a soft touch win. His brain trust picked Young, with his 17-4-2 (five knockouts) record.

Young's lack of aggressiveness that night cost him the world heavyweight championship against Ali. During the course of the fight—which were probably the duller 15 rounds in heavyweight history—on April 30, 1976, in Landover, Maryland, Young curiously stuck the upper half of his body through the ropes and out over the ring apron. Neither man did much that night. However, Ali was the champion. Young's job was to remove the crown from Ali's head. None of the three judges thought he did enough. It was a bout that, with a bit more aggressiveness, Young could have won.

A few days after his non-fight against Ali, I asked Young why he employed such a defensive stance against Ali for the better part of 15 rounds. Young was as baffled as all of us were in the boxing world.

“I have no idea why I fought like that,” he told me. “I had my opportunity and I let it get away. I'll never let that happen again.” But he never complained.

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Young came back strong after the loss to Ali. In September, he knocked out Lou Rogan in two and then Mike Boswell in four just eight days later. Less than two months later, he outpointed Ron Lyle over 12 rounds. The victory earned him a March 1977, 12-rounder against former world champion George Foreman in San Juan, Puerto Rico.

Foreman had lost his crown to Ali almost two-and-one-half years earlier. Both Foreman and Young had hoped to use the bout as a springboard into another title shot against Ali. Foreman was the heavy favorite.

After 12 rounds in the strength-sapping heat of San Juan, Young outpointed Foreman, dropping him in the final round. Following the fight, Foreman went into retirement. Young went into six months of inactivity, hoping that his phone would ring with an offer to face Ali again. However, Ali chose instead to fight Alfredo Evangelista in May of 1977 and Earnie Shavers four months later. Young took a tune-up fight against Jody Ballard and won a 10-round decision. Coming out of that bout, he was offered a bout against Ken Norton. It would be a title eliminator over 15 rounds. The winner would fight Ali.

On November 5, 1977, Young faced Norton in Las Vegas, Nevada. After 15 hard-fought rounds, Young and Norton awaited the decision. A majority of the crowd and those watching at home on television (boxing was shown on network TV back then!) felt that Young had won. Unfortunately for Young, their feelings didn't count. Of the three whose feelings mattered most, two felt Norton had done enough to win. Young was a split-decision loser. In addition, he took home only \$262,000 of the \$1 million payday he earned against Norton. His management, his promoter and taxes gobbled up the rest.

The loss sent Young into a depression. Drugs and alcohol became a major part of his life. He would never again be the same boxer. But he never complained.

On a few occasions, I ran into him at boxing shows in Philadelphia and Atlantic City in the early 1980s. Still dreaming his dream, he would say to me, "Maybe I'll be able to get a shot at (then-WBC heavyweight champ Larry) Holmes."

Just seven months after his career-shattering loss to Norton, Young found himself on the undercard to Ken Norton's 15-rounder against Larry Holmes for the WBC heavyweight title. Young was matched against unbeaten Osvaldo "Ossie" Ocasio. That night, June 9, 1978, Holmes career as champion began when he won a decision against Norton. That night, Young's career as a legitimate contender ended. He was outboxed and outpointed by Ocasio. But he never complained.

Young and Ocasio went at it again seven months later and the result was the same. From that moment, Young became a steppingstone for other young up-and-coming fighters. Over the next several years, he fought and became a notch on the left side of the ledger of fighters named Gerry Cooney, Michael Dokes, Tony Tubbs, Greg Page and Tony Tucker. After each of them, he never complained. Through all of those fights against such tough competition, Young's battles against drugs and alcohol became tougher than any fight he ever had in the ring.

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He fought on through the 1980s. Finally, and ironically, he hung up his gloves after two victories in 1990. They were two knockout victories - this from a worn-out old pug who couldn't knock out opponents when he was in his prime.

I had a chance to sit down with Young soon after his last fight. I asked him if he could have one wish, what would that wish be? He thought for a moment, then said, "I wish I could have been champion." Nothing more, nothing less.

He could have complained and gone off on his management, his promoters and the judges who voted against him, but he didn't. That just wasn't Jimmy's style.

So many deserve better than what life dealt them. Jimmy Young was one such person.