

Jimmy Young: A Career Worth Remembering

Written by Frank Lotierzo

Wednesday, 02 March 2005 18:00

Jimmy Young stood slightly over 6'1" and weighed between 209 and 213 pounds during the prime fighting years of his career from 1974-77. His style was hard to interpret. Some considered him a boxer and others viewed him as a counterpuncher. He was known for being extremely hard to hit. Young actually went entire fights without being caught once with a solid punch. He frustrated the boxers and took the bullets out of the guns of the sluggers. He had good hand speed, but he was more sneaky than fast. His basics were sound, but he was more cunning than he was a great boxer. Young's opponents were often frustrated by his unconventional tactics. His lack of one-punch knockout power led some to think he couldn't compete with the upper-tier heavyweights of his era, but he beat some of the greatest punchers in heavyweight history during his career.

Many of his fights were hard to score and his style wasn't considered crowd-pleasing by many purists, which may have been the reason he lost a few close decisions in some of the biggest bouts of his career. Jimmy Young fought in the 1970s, a time many historians believe was the best era in heavyweight history. His name is sometimes wrongly omitted from the lineage linking Ali, Frazier, Foreman, Norton, Quarry, Lyle and Shavers.

In January of 1969 Young turned pro and won a four round decision over Jimmy Gilmore. In his sixth bout he lost a four round decision to the 6'5" 230-pound Roy "Tiger" Williams, who at the time had twice as much experience as Young. In my opinion that was the first mistake made by Young's management. Williams was too big and dangerous at the time for the inexperienced Young, and the upside of winning wasn't worth the risk.

But the biggest injustice by his handlers came in his 11th bout when they matched him with rising knockout artist Earnie Shavers, who stopped him in the first round. This fight can only be rationalized by someone in the Young camp who was desperately in need of money, or due to total ineptness on the part of the person who had the final say. When Jimmy Young fought Earnie Shavers the first time, he only had 10 fights under his belt. Shavers was a former National AAU champion being managed by Don King. On top of that, Shavers was 42-2 in 44 pro fights, winning 41 by knockout. Young's management made a monumental mistake putting him in against Shavers in only his eleventh fight. It's remarkable his psyche wasn't shattered and he went on to beat the fighters he did after that.

A year and a half later Young (13-4-1) fought a rematch with Shavers (46-4). This time the fight went the scheduled 10 rounds. The fight was declared a draw and would later prove to be an omen for Young's career when it came to getting the call in close fights. I have only seen this fight on tape, but I scored it for Young. Over the years I've talked to more than a few fighters and trainers who were at the fight and saw it live. Everyone says the same thing. Young won it.

After his rematch with Shavers, Young fought another former National AAU champion and rising

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knockout artist named Ron Lyle (30-1-1). Prior to fighting Young, Lyle had defeated former champ Jimmy Ellis, as well as veteran contenders Buster Mathis, Oscar Bonavena and Larry Middleton. The only blemish on Lyle's record was his upset loss to Jerry Quarry two years earlier. Lyle, like Shavers, was a heavy favorite to defeat Young. Young fought one of the best fights of his career versus Lyle, winning by unanimous decision. With two impressive showings against ranked contenders Earnie Shavers and Ron Lyle, Young was right in the middle of the heavyweight title picture. Young posted two wins after Lyle and finished 1975 ranked ninth among The Ring's top ten heavyweights in the world.

Young kicked off 1976 by defeating former title challenger Jose "King" Roman on February 20, raising his record to 17-4-2, while extending his unbeaten streak to 12. On April 30, 1976, seven years after turning pro, Jimmy Young fought undisputed heavyweight champion Muhammad Ali on ABC. At the time, Ali was bigger than boxing. Young would be the sixth fighter Ali defended his title against after regaining it from George Foreman in October of 1974. In Ali's last six fights before he fought Jimmy Young, he won five of them by stoppage. Among the fighters Ali stopped were George Foreman, Ron Lyle and Joe Frazier - and neither Foreman nor Lyle had ever been stopped before fighting Ali.

In the biggest fight of his career, Jimmy Young not only survived, but you could count the number of times he was hit cleanly by Ali. Young took Ali out of his game, causing him to miss more punches than any fighter Ali ever fought. Young forced Ali to fight as the aggressor the entire fight, and that wasn't Ali's forte. Young totally frustrated and bewildered Ali for 15 rounds. Ali tried everything against Young, but was unable to solve his style. At the end of the fifteenth round, Ali was no closer to figuring out how to fight Young than he was in the first round. In a fight that most thought he lost, Ali won a unanimous decision over Jimmy Young to retain his title.

Due to his terrific showing in his fight with Ali, Young remained in title contention with Foreman, Norton and Lyle, who were all vying for a rematch with Ali and a shot at the crown. Six weeks before fighting a rematch with Ron Lyle in November of 1976, Muhammad Ali won a unanimous decision over Ken Norton to again retain his title. Although some viewed Ali's victory over Norton as controversial, it wasn't controversial to the same degree as the decision verdict that went against Young. There were just as many who saw the fight for Ali as there were those who saw it for Norton. Everyone knew Young totally outclassed Ali and made him look like an amateur.

The Young-Lyle rematch was shown on ABC. Young outboxed Lyle, this time for 12 rounds instead of 10. Young won another unanimous decision over Lyle in a rematch that looked like a rerun of their first fight. Four months after beating Lyle, Young, as the third ranked heavyweight in the world, fought former heavyweight champion George Foreman. Foreman was the top ranked heavyweight in the world and in the midst of a five bout knockout streak since returning to the ring. With Ali having escaped Young and Norton in 1976, Foreman was next in line for a title shot. Foreman clamored for a rematch with Ali ever since losing the title in Zaire. Only Jimmy Young stood between Foreman and a rematch with Ali. For Foreman it was simple: beat Young and Ali will be forced to fight him again.

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On March 17, 1977, George Foreman (45-1) fought Jimmy Young (20-5-2) in what was billed as a world heavyweight title elimination bout between the division's first and third ranked contenders. The fight was held in the heat outside Roberto Clemente Coliseum in Puerto Rico. Young arrived in Puerto Rico a week before the bout fit and ready to go at 213 pounds. Foreman didn't show up until the day before the fight and weighed in at 229. By showing up the day before the fight, Foreman never had a chance to acclimate to the temperature.

For the first five rounds Foreman was content to follow Young around the ring as Young picked his spots to flurry. Sensing he was behind, Foreman picked it up in the sixth round. The seventh round is where the fight slipped away from Foreman. Foreman nailed Young with a left hook that literally sent him to the other side of the ring. Young remained on his feet but was in serious trouble, appearing to be a punch or two away from being stopped. But Young didn't panic and smartly concentrated on making sure Foreman didn't catch him clean with another big shot, instead of foolishly trying to fight him off. Foreman emptied the wagon in the last minute of round seven trying to get Young out, but was unable tag Young with another big shot to finish him.

From the eighth round on, Young outthought and outfought the tiring Foreman. By the 12th round the crowd was chanting "Jimmy Young, Jimmy Young, Jimmy Young," which actually sounded like they were saying "Gimme Young." In the final minute a flurry of Young punches knocked the exhausted Foreman off balance, causing his knee to touch the canvas, which was ruled an official knockdown. When the decision was announced, Young was the unanimous decision victor by the scores of 118-111, 116-113 and 115-114. The Foreman-Young bout was voted 1977 Fight of the Year by Ring Magazine. After the fight Foreman retired. It was Young who was thought to be next in line for a title shot at reigning heavyweight champion Muhammad Ali.

On September 14, 1977, two weeks prior to Muhammad Ali's title defense against Earnie Shavers, Jimmy Young and Ken Norton fought what was billed as a double main event. With Norton and Young both winning, they maintained their rankings at the top of the division and waited for Ali and Shavers. On September 29, 1977, an aging and eroding Muhammad Ali made his 10th consecutive successful title defense winning a unanimous decision over Earnie Shavers.

This is where things became interesting and the influence of Muhammad Ali was never more evident. With Ali's win over Shavers, and with Foreman's retirement, the question became who would Ali defend the title against next? It was just a year earlier that Young lost a controversial decision to Ali in April, and Norton lost a disputed decision to Ali in September. This is where Ali, as the heavyweight champ, called the shots, but with the pressure on Ali to fight both Norton and Young again, he was in a bind. But Ali, being the escape artist he was, found a way out. Ali told the media that he's old and getting ready to retire. With that he implied: I'm not fighting both Young and Norton. He suggested that Young and Norton fight and that he would defend the title against the fighter who won. And so it was.

On November 5, 1977 at Caesars Palace in Las Vegas, number one ranked Ken Norton (39-4) fought number two ranked Jimmy Young (22-5-2) in what was billed as a WBC heavyweight title

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eliminator. The fight was shown on ABC with Ken Norton's number one cheerleader, Howard Cosell, doing the commentary. Cosell was joined by another famous boxing personality rooting on Norton: a man named Muhammad Ali. Throughout the entire bout Ali made no attempt to hide his feelings as to who he wanted to win. Despite Norton's style giving him trouble in three fights, Ali was able to hit Norton with hard right hands and shook him pretty good in their second and third fights. That wasn't the case when he fought Young. The few times Ali hit Young cleanly, and there weren't many, he was never able to follow it up, thus he never gained control of the fight. There was no doubt about it. Ali viewed Norton, the fighter whose style troubled him more than any other opponent he ever fought, as being the easier fight. On top of that, Norton represented a bigger payday for Ali than Young did.

The Norton-Young bout unfolded the way most thought it would. Norton tried to cut the ring off and go to Young's body. Young tried to keep from getting caught against the ropes while trying to catch Norton with right hands as he was coming in. During the fight Young froze Norton in his tracks for a brief second with a couple of rights hands he landed from outside. Norton had his best rounds during the middle of the fight when he was able to force Young to the ropes, scoring big hooks to both sides of Young's body. Despite Norton's effective body attack, Young made him pay, answering with clean hooks and straight right hands to the head.

The pattern and flow of the fight didn't vary much and both fighters had their moments. Norton came out with a sense of urgency in the 15th round, giving the impression he felt he was behind. For the first half of the round Norton physically controlled Young, but Young caught a second wind and fired back with three and four punch combinations forcing Norton back. When the bell rang ending the fight, Young appeared more confident of victory than Norton.

When the decision was announced, Young found himself on the losing end of a split decision. Two of the judges had the same score total 147-143 for Norton, with the third favoring Young 144-142. Norton's victory over Young was viewed by many boxing observers as being questionable. Many felt Norton lost. Once again, Young's non-aggressive style worked against him.

The biggest money fight in the heavyweight division heading into 1978 was Ali-Norton IV, not a rematch between Ali and Young. It wasn't hard to figure out that Norton's image and style would work to his favor and most likely result in him getting the nod in the close rounds. However, there was only one fighter who was hurt or stunned during this fight, and that fighter was Norton. Young landed more clean punches and was never hurt or in trouble once in 15 rounds. It also helped that Norton was seen as being the better fighter before the fight started.

Young's decision loss to Norton was the third major fight - the others being his rematch with Shavers and his title bout versus Ali - of his career that he came up on the wrong side of a close decision in a fight many believed he won. Based on what happened in the ring, it should have been Young slated to face the Ali-Spinks winner in February 1978.

After Young's heartbreaking loss to Norton, he was never the same fighter. He fought for more than 10 years after his fight with Norton, but he seemed to be just going through the motions. Young became a trial horse playing the role of the spoiler for the up and coming young

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heavyweights. Future heavyweight titleholders Michael Dokes (14-0), Greg Page (18-0), Tony Tubbs (15-0), and Tony Tucker (25-0) all won decision victories over Young on their march to the title. Only Gerry Cooney (22-0) stopped Young in 1980 with a vicious, slashing uppercut. In his bout with Cooney, Young was more than holding his own before the cut affected his vision. But even Cooney couldn't knock him out or stagger him while unloading numerous left hooks on a defenseless Young, who couldn't see because of all the blood.

It must also be mentioned that Young spoiled Marvin Stinson's hopes at a top-ten rating as the result of Young taking him to school in 1981. And Young all but retired prospect Wendell Bailey (13-1) when he knocked him out on the undercard of the Larry Holmes-Mike Weaver WBC title bout. The hard-punching Jeff Sims also viewed Young as an easy win before losing by unanimous decision.

When all is said and done, Jimmy Young will most likely not be elected to the International Boxing Hall of Fame. But if Jimmy Young is judged by what he did in the ring during his prime, it's not so easy to say he doesn't belong.

The 1970s are considered to be the best era in heavyweight history, with dominant fighters like Ali, Frazier, Foreman, Norton, Quarry, Lyle and Shavers (Larry Holmes is an '80s fighter and was only a factor during the 1970s from June 1978 forward.)

Young fought five of the magnificent seven mentioned above, missing only Frazier and Quarry. His record during that period says he's 3-3-1, losing to Shavers, Ali and Norton, but after an evaluation, it could easily be argued that he is 6-1 and the loss was to Shavers, when Young had just 10 fights under his belt compared to Shavers' 44. I see that loss as being the result of a terrible decision on behalf of his handlers.

The other two losses are to Ali and Norton with the draw coming in his rematch with Shavers. I saw Young's fights with Muhammad Ali and Ken Norton. I don't need anyone to try and justify what I saw. What I saw was Jimmy Young outbox and outpoint both Ali and Norton. Take away the name Ali and Norton, and Young gets the decision every time. As far as the Shavers rematch, I've only seen that on tape. Watching the tape I scored it for Young. On top of that, in the 30 plus years since the fight, I've never talked to one single fighter, trainer or fan that saw the fight who didn't think Young won.

Need more? In 27 rounds against the fighter who is usually rated no lower than number two all-time, Muhammad Ali, and the fighter considered the strongest and hardest puncher in heavyweight history, George Foreman, based on the fighting that took place in the ring, Young is 2-0. Name another heavyweight who can make that claim.

If what happened in the ring is secondary to a decision rendered by the officials, then Jimmy Young probably shouldn't make the Hall of Fame. However, if what actually happens in the ring during the fight counts for anything, then it can be said that Jimmy Young beat Muhammad Ali (50-2), George Foreman (45-1), Ron Lyle (62-5-2), Earnie Shavers (88-6) and Ken Norton (39-4) a combined 284-18-2. Other than Muhammad Ali, no other heavyweight who fought during the 1970s beat as many top fighters as Jimmy Young. Go ahead and try to come up with

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another heavyweight from the 1970s, excluding Ali, who can say they bettered five fighters of that caliber in the ring.

I'll tell you right now, Joe Frazier can't claim victory over five fighters of that caliber. Neither can George Foreman, Ron Lyle, Earnie Shavers or Ken Norton. Ali, Frazier and Foreman make almost every historian's all-time list of top-ten heavyweight champions. Ali, Frazier and Foreman are first ballot Hall of Famers.

Ken Norton was recently elected to the International Boxing Hall of Fame. George Foreman knocked out Ken Norton. Jimmy Young beat George Foreman. Ken Norton looked the other way when Ron Lyle was mentioned as a possible opponent for him to fight. Jimmy Young beat Ron Lyle twice while he was in his prime.

Muhammad Ali and Larry Holmes are considered two of the greatest heavyweight champions who ever lived and both defeated Norton by decision in a world title fight. Jimmy Young beat Norton easier than Ali or Holmes, and was never hurt by him, unlike Ali and Holmes. Ken Norton is in the Hall of Fame. Jimmy Young beat Ken Norton. Somebody please explain why Young isn't worthy of Hall of Fame consideration.

(End of part one of a three part feature.)