

Jimmy Young: How He Exposed 'The Greatest'

Written by Frank Lotierzo

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The 1976 heavyweight title bout between champion Muhammad Ali (50-2) and challenger Jimmy Young (17-4-2) is most remembered for the decision rendered by the referee and two judges scoring the fight. Ali won a 15-round unanimous decision over Young to retain his undisputed heavyweight title. Saying Ali's decision victory over Young is controversial is an understatement. Young forced the champ to fight the type of fight that he was least effective fighting. There were times during the 15 rounds that Ali more resembled a fish out of water flopping on the beach than he did "The Greatest."

Even passionate Ali fans, blinded by their bias, must accept that although he was a great fighter, he was technically flawed. In the years since the fight, Ali's lack of conditioning has been used to justify his poor showing against Young. What has been disregarded is that it was Young's style that nullified Ali's strengths. The simple fact is Ali had no strategic clue how to fight Young.

The most telling thing that took place in the Ali-Young fight has been completely overlooked by too many boxing historians, writers and fans. This is due to an overwhelming percentage of boxing observers who saw the fight and believe Young won. From the time the decision favoring Ali was announced, it's been the focal point of all conversation whenever the fight is discussed. Instead of remembering Jimmy Young for losing the decision, boxing history should remember him as the fighter who strategically plucked the wings from the butterfly, and took the sting from the bee.

Eighteen months after regaining the title from George Foreman, Ali made his sixth defense, this time against Philly heavyweight Jimmy Young. Young was in his seventh year fighting as a pro, and incidentally did his training at Joe Frazier's gym on Broad Street in North Philadelphia. By the end of 1975, Young was ranked ninth among Ring Magazine's top ten heavyweights.

At this point in his career, Ali took two things for granted when he went into the ring. It was only after his fight with Young that it became obvious those two things actually worked against him. With Ali having survived the assault of Sonny Liston twice, Joe Frazier three times, George Foreman, and Ron Lyle, he had so much confidence in his chin, the possibility of him being knocked out didn't exist in his mind. The downside of that mind set sometimes led him to cut corners while training. This resulted in him not being in top condition for many of his post 1975 title defenses. For his title defense against Jimmy Young, Ali weighed a career high 230-pounds.

There was something else Ali assumed when he fought. In his 52 previous fights, he was never forced to fight as the aggressor, especially for an entire fight. He took it for granted that every opponent he faced would bring the fight to him. When Ali's opponents came to him, he was in complete control. Only in his three fights with "Smokin" Joe Frazier did that pattern make the fight harder for him. Frazier's unrelenting pressure forced Ali to fight, not allowing him to pick his spots to flurry with three and four punch combinations. This made Frazier the fighter controlling

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the tempo and ring geography. As long as the fighter coming at Ali wasn't Frazier, Ali had his way and was in control.

Maybe because Jimmy Young trained in Philadelphia, a city known for grooming aggressive fighters, the Ali camp didn't do enough homework on him. Since Young wasn't a knockout puncher, Ali's cast-iron chin was irrelevant. On top of that, Jimmy Young was the antithesis of a typical Philly fighter. He waited on his opponents and never took the fight to them. This was the key to Young's success against Ali. It was more a case of Young's style exposing Ali's lack of boxing basics 101, then it was of Young being a boxing genius.

The bout between Ali and Young started slow. By the end of the fifth round, Ali still hadn't landed a noteworthy punch. It wasn't that he was getting worked over, or hurt, but the only clean punches of the fight were scored by Jimmy Young. What made this fight so different from any other Ali fight was seeing him moving forward and following Young around the ring. By forcing Ali to carry the fight, Young reversed Ali's role in it. With Ali trying to track down Young, he knew where Ali was, and where Ali was going to be. Being forced to fight like George Foreman was not Ali's forte, and something he never had to do before.

For a majority of the 15 rounds of the fight, Jimmy Young made Ali look like an amateur, causing him to lunge and miss with many of his punches. Not only was Ali finding mostly air when he let his hands go, Young countered Ali's missed shots with two and three punch flurries that found their mark, resulting in Ali suffering a broken ear drum.

Throughout his career Muhammad Ali was taken to task by critics for never punching to the body, despite it never costing him in a fight until he fought Young. In Young, Ali faced a fighter who, like him, was hard to hit cleanly to the head, especially with lead punches. However, Young was vulnerable to a body attack. Because Ali ignored his opponent's body his entire career, he cut his scoring territory in half. Against Young, Ali needed that other half that he never needed before.

Ali's style was predicated on him moving back and away, circling to his left. This forced his opponents to stalk him. It was paramount for his opponent to cut the ring off. If they could take away his space, it would be easier for them to force his back to the ropes or into a corner.

With Young moving away from Ali, coupled with the champ's non-existent body attack, Ali had nothing in his arsenal to solve Young's style. Ali's offense was reduced to throwing quick one-twos while he lumbered forward, every once in a while trying to sneak in a right lead. With Young stepping back or moving to the side, one of Ali's best punches, the lead right, was nullified.

What worked against the aggression of Liston, Frazier, Quarry, Foreman and Lyle was offset by Young's non-aggression. Young was also aided by his good hand speed. He didn't have Ali or Patterson-type hand speed, but his hands were pretty quick. For the first time Ali couldn't rely on his instincts to pull a fight out. He was forced to think about what he needed to do. This enabled Young to get off quick flurries during Ali's periods of indecision. On top of that, because Ali never learned to slip, block, or parry incoming punches, it was easier for Young to hit him

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flush. Ali's only true defense was pulling away and leaning back from punches thrown at him. By him moving forward, his effectiveness pulling back was severely comprised.

In this fight, Ali confronted a boxer who was susceptible to all the basics he never thought he needed or bothered to learn. In 17 world championship fights, Ali never needed to go to the body to win. What separated Young from Ali's previous opponents was Ali had to fight as the predator. Ali was used to being pursued, which made it easy for him to catch his opponents as they tried to get inside his jab. That's why Ali never had to rely on leading with his hook, because the counter hook was there against fighters pressuring him.

It wasn't until April 30, 1976 that Ali's lack of boxing basics and fundamental defense became so obvious. For 15 rounds, Young forced Ali to fight as the predator instead of the prey. The problem was Ali only knew how to fight as the prey. When fighting in the role as the fighter being hunted, Ali had all of his physical skills at his disposal. However, when forced to carry the fight, he was out of his comfort zone and no longer "The Greatest."

Jimmy Young should have won the decision in his fight versus Ali. He was the fighter who exhibited superior ring generalship, landed the cleaner punches, and his defense was brilliant, with him rarely getting hit in 45 minutes in the same ring with Ali. What hurt Young was that he stuck his body outside the ropes four different times while Ali had him pinned against them. This gave the impression he didn't want to engage Ali, which made it hard to justify giving the champion's title to the challenger. The challenger has to take the title.

Jimmy Young should be remembered as the fighter who showed the boxing world all the boxing basics Muhammad Ali never learned as a fighter. Because Ali didn't think he needed to. For 52 fights he was right. Until he fought Jimmy Young.

(This is part two of a three part feature on Jimmy Young.)