

Jimmy Young: A Personal Recollection

Written by Frank Lotierzo

Wednesday, 16 March 2005 18:00

On February 20, 2005, after a six day stay at Hahnemann University Hospital in Philadelphia, former heavyweight title challenger and contender Jimmy Young, 56, passed away. The cause of Young's untimely death was heart failure. The passing of Young caught me by surprise and hit me hard. He was more than a fighter I saw on television. I knew Jimmy Young. We weren't friends, but from about mid-1977 through early 1982, Jimmy and I worked out at the same gym and I got to know him.

It was about six months before he challenged Muhammad Ali for the undisputed heavyweight title that I began to follow his boxing career. In October of 1975 my family moved to Cherry Hill, New Jersey. With the exception of rush hour, Cherry Hill is roughly 20-25 minutes outside the city of Philadelphia.

Shortly after moving into the new house, workmen came to hang the drapes my mother ordered. Since the workmen were from Philadelphia, I asked them if they ever saw Joe Frazier around town. One of the guys said he was a huge boxing fan and often went to Frazier's gym on Broad Street to watch the fighters train.

During the conversation he asked me if I ever heard of a Philly heavyweight named Jimmy Young. I told him that I knew he upset Ron Lyle, but never saw him fight. I remember him specifically telling me to remember the name Jimmy Young. He said Young was a slick boxer that nobody wanted to fight. After they left, I found Jimmy Young's record in a recent issue of Ring Magazine. Being young and dumb, I wrote him off after seeing he had four loses on his record. Years later when I knew how to interpret a fighter's record, I understood how mismanagement led to those early defeats and how insignificant they were.

On April 30, 1976, six months after being told to remember the name Jimmy Young, he fought Muhammad Ali for the undisputed heavyweight title on ABC. Young wasn't given much of a chance to take the title from Ali, despite Ali weighing a career high 230 pounds for the fight. Ali retained the title by winning a 15-round unanimous decision over Young, a fight many who saw it thought Ali lost.

Less than a year after the Ali-Young bout, I started boxing at the Cherry Hill Police Athletic League (PAL), under the tutelage of former middleweight champ Joey Giardello. I had such passion for boxing that I quickly picked up everything he taught me. After training for about five months, despite being a middleweight, I was too advanced for even the heavyweights training at the PAL.

One day Mr. Giardello said to me that I was getting a little too happy with myself and wasn't being challenged when sparring with the other fighters at the PAL. He said, "If you want to be the champ of Cherry Hill, fine, stay here. But Frank, if you're serious about boxing, you'll never get any better then you are now unless you go to the city and train. Tomorrow morning be at Frazier's Gym around 10:30 and ask for Georgie Benton. Tell him that I suggested you start

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training in the city, and ask him if he would be willing to work with you."

The following day I did exactly as he suggested. This is where I first met Jimmy Young. Young had just defeated top ranked and former heavyweight champ George Foreman in his last fight, and was getting ready to fight Jody Ballard in Vegas.

I remember Jimmy drove a turquoise Lincoln Mark V. On the trunk the words "Jimmy Young" were en-scripted with a boxing glove hanging down on each side. One of the first memories I have of Jimmy is him coming into the gym with Ted and Slim, and a big boom box playing the song "You Know I Love You" by Breakwater. Within a few weeks Jimmy and I began talking on a regular basis. When Jimmy got back after beating Jody Ballard, we started talking more frequently. Our topics were usually music, cars and boxing, in that order.

A month after returning from his fight with Ballard in September, he left for Vegas again for his next fight scheduled for November 5th. His opponent was number one ranked Ken Norton. Since Jimmy was ranked second, the fight between them was billed as a title elimination bout. The winner of Norton-Young was penciled in to fight Ali for the title in early 1978. Jimmy was in great shape for Norton and fought a terrific fight against him. The fight turned out to be more action packed than anticipated and went the scheduled 15 round distance. When the decision was announced, Norton won a controversial split decision. And as Jimmy has been quoted saying over the years, "He (Norton) didn't think he won it, and was as surprised as I was when it was announced."

Since his passing, it has been widely reported that he lost his desire after losing the decision to Norton. Jimmy told the story more than once about how he ran into Norton in Vegas, while he was out there to fight Ossie Ocasio on the Norton-Holmes undercard. Young said Norton told him that he thought the decision was going to Young before it was announced.

In my opinion, Jimmy never put his all into training and getting in shape as a result of his disappointment over the decision in the Norton fight. A year and a half after fighting Norton, as he was getting ready to fight Don King's latest protégé, Michael Dokes (14-0), somebody brought up his fight with Norton. He reflected back and said that the decision to Norton was worse than the decision to Ali. He said because Ali was the champ and bigger than boxing, to get a decision against him a fighter had to really beat him beyond a doubt. Young thought by him beating Foreman, Ali-Norton IV became the big fight in the division, and that worked against him when he fought Norton.

During the summer of 2001, Ken Norton was a guest on my ESPN radio show "Toe To Toe." He was in the midst of his book tour promoting his autobiography "Going The Distance." Ken was very candid and talked openly about his career and the opponents he faced. With one exception, he wouldn't tell me when I asked him: Who hit harder, George Foreman or Earnie Shavers? He just said "next question." I mentioned his three 15-round fights that ended in controversial decisions. He responded by saying that the one he won against Jimmy Young was the one he felt, before the decision was announced, was going to go against him. And the two he lost to Muhammad Ali and Larry Holmes, he felt he won.

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The fight I think Jimmy put the most into post-Norton was his May 1980 fight with Gerry Cooney. While training for Cooney, his trainer George Benton was always reminding Jimmy that Cooney's management agreed to the fight because Jimmy wasn't a knockout puncher, and still had a name. Jimmy did a lot of sparring while getting ready for Cooney, but struggled to get his weight down. For the undefeated Cooney, Jimmy weighed 223 pounds, which was 10-14 pounds more than what was considered his best fighting weight.

Despite the extra weight, Jimmy fought well against Cooney until getting cut. He was finding Gerry with his jab and actually moved him back a few times with right hands. When Cooney went to his body, Jimmy caught him with counter rights and short hooks to the head. Gil Clancy, who was doing the color commentary on CBS with Tim Ryan, said that Young was exposing Cooney's lack of experience.

The fight came to an abrupt end after Cooney caught Jimmy with a half left uppercut/hook that opened a nasty gash over his eye. Cooney then began unloading his best uppercuts and hooks on a stationary Young. Although Jimmy was never staggered or close to being hurt, he couldn't answer Cooney with his own assault because his vision was severely impaired from all the blood flowing into his eyes. The fight ended in the fourth round, and, along with it, so did his hopes of ever getting back into title contention again in his career.

Although it hasn't been reported, his loss to Cooney frustrated him and I think took whatever remaining spirit he had for boxing. Losing to Cooney cost Jimmy what he felt was his last shot at the title, which was something he badly wanted. Through different conversations between Jimmy, Randall "Tex" Cobb and me, Jimmy gave the impression that Don King thought if he beat Cooney, he could make a fight between Young and Holmes. Implying a win over Cooney would make him a more marketable opponent for Holmes, than was his last opponent Leroy Jones.

Losing to Cooney because of a cut, something that never happened to him in his career, was the final straw. I still remember George Benton saying in words that cannot be repeated in this writing, leading up to his fight with Cooney, that if he ever wanted another shot at the title and big money, he had to win. Jimmy nodded in agreement.

In the years after Norton, Jimmy talked openly about his career whenever he was asked a pointed question. He tired of always being asked about Ali and why he ducked in between the ropes during the fight; although he did say he did it to frustrate Ali. He further stated that the referee never once took a point from him or even threatened to penalize him. He loved talking about his two fights with Ron Lyle. Young said Lyle told him during their second fight that he fought like a girl, hoping to con him into fighting his fight because he was so flustered by his style.

I always used to ask him to rank Foreman, Lyle, Shavers and Norton as punchers. Only I would do it in different ways to try and trick him, but he never fell for it. One day I would ask him to rank the four of them. A week later I'd say "Jimmy, Ali said Lyle hit harder than Shavers. What do you think?" He'd laugh and ask "What's changed in the last week?" Sometimes he'd clown and say that Joe "King" Roman and Richard Dunn hit harder than either Shavers or Foreman,

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only he couldn't keep a straight face. For those who must know, as I did, Jimmy rated the big punchers he fought in the following order: Shavers-1, Foreman-2, Lyle-3 and Norton-4.

One of my favorite stories, circa mid March 1981, involved Jimmy Young and Randall "Tex" Cobb. George Benton was the trainer for both Jimmy and Randall at the time. Cobb was ranked among the top ten heavyweight contenders due to his upset of Earnie Shavers in his last fight. Jimmy and Randall worked with each other a lot preparing for their fights in the early eighties. On this day they were sparring for the final time before Cobb was to leave for Las Vegas for his upcoming fight with Michael Dokes (19-0-1) on ABC.

During the second round while they were sparring, Jimmy nailed Randall with a couple of clean uppercuts to the face. This worried Benton, and he began saying loudly: "Be careful, Tex. I don't want to chance you getting cut this close to the fight." All of the sudden Benton screamed "TIME!" He jumped into the ring and said, "Jimmy, stop throwing F***ing Uppercuts. We're leaving for Vegas later and I don't want Tex getting cut." With that, Randall turned to Benton and said "F*** it, George! Throw 'em Jimmy, Dokes sure as hell will." With that, Benton began lecturing Cobb about how he had to be extra careful with the fight being so close. Benton said the last thing they needed was for Cobb to get cut while sparring, causing the fight to be cancelled.

After Jimmy and Randall yes'd Benton a few times, assuring him they were on the same page, they resumed sparring. The first punch Jimmy hit Randall with was another uppercut to the face. For the rest of the round Jimmy threw nothing but uppercuts at Randall.

What I'll never forget are the funny faces Jimmy was making at George behind his back while he was lecturing Randall, trying to cause him to break up. Cobb was the type of guy who could ignore things like that if he wanted to. But Jimmy had this goofy look on his face while holding his glove up and moving it as to imitate Benton going on and on. Randall literally had to look away from Jimmy to keep from breaking up in George's face in the middle of his rant.

I remember Jimmy Young. He was always friendly and greeted everyone with a smile. When people would come up to him and talk, he would always ask about their family and if they had kids. If there was ever something bothering him, you couldn't tell by his demeanor. I never heard him once speak badly about anyone. What I respect about him is, despite being cheated out of the two most important decisions of his career, he never whined and felt sorry for himself.

I don't know if Jimmy Young will be elected to the boxing hall of fame. What I do know is, if there was a people hall of fame, the Jimmy Young I knew would be first ballot. Rest in Peace Jimmy.

(This is the last part of a three part feature on the late heavyweight contender Jimmy Young.)