

## What IF: Frazier vs. Holyfield

Written by Frank Lotierzo  
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When former heavyweight champs Joe Frazier and Evander Holyfield are mentioned, many of the same adjectives can be used to describe them. Words such as heart, toughness, determination and character immediately come to mind. It can be said with impunity that Frazier and Holyfield gave their all every time they climbed into the ring.

Many distinct parallels can be drawn between these two great fighters, one of them being that they're both former Olympians. At the 1964 U.S. Olympic Trials, Joe Frazier lost to Buster Mathis in the finals of the heavyweight division. However, Mathis injured his hand shortly before leaving for Tokyo. As a result Frazier, as the alternate, went in his place. When Frazier returned to U.S. soil, he was the only American fighter to have won a gold medal.

Evander Holyfield's Olympic memories are not quite as good as Joe Frazier's. At the 1984 U.S. Olympic Trials, Holyfield, fighting as a light heavyweight, was not the favorite in the division, and had to beat the favored Ricky Womack twice within 24 hours to make the team. At the Games in Los Angeles, Holyfield was disqualified in the semifinals for knocking out his opponent with a left hook that was ruled to have been thrown at the break. Because he was DQed, Holyfield had to settle for the bronze medal.

Frazier and Holyfield both went on to become all-time great heavyweight champions. The fact that they achieved greatness in two of the deepest heavyweight eras in boxing history - the '70s for Frazier and the '90s for Holyfield - is further testament to their greatness. They were lucky to have other great fighters to measure themselves against.

In my opinion, Frazier and Holyfield are overlooked by some boxing writers and historians. Frazier had the misfortune of fighting during the Ali era, and rarely gets his due as a great fighter. For Holyfield, it was the presence of Mike Tyson that lingered over him and all that he accomplished.

Almost thirty years have passed since Frazier traded punches with Ali in Manila. What has been lost in the memory of Manila is that Joe Frazier won the biggest of the three fights he and Muhammad Ali fought against each other. The second and third meeting were two of Ali's toughest, most hard-earned victories. Only one question was asked of Frazier during his career: could he beat Ali? On March 8, 1971, Frazier answered that question - yes, he could beat Muhammad Ali.

What Ali was to Frazier, Mike Tyson was to Evander Holyfield. On November 9, 1996, Holyfield showed an unbelieving boxing world that he could defeat Tyson, by beating him convincingly. The rematch was the only time in Tyson's career that he got a second shot at someone who beat him. In that fight, whatever chance Tyson had of salvaging the rivalry was lost forever; after losing the first two rounds, Tyson bit both of Holyfield's ears in the third and was disqualified.

Before Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier ever traded punches, Ali was perceived as the greater

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fighter. After fighting 41 rounds over the course of three fights, Ali is still viewed as the greater fighter in the eyes of history. However, Ali said, "I always bring out the best in my opponents but it's Joe Frazier who brings out the best in me."

Mike Tyson was thought to be the better fighter before he and Evander Holyfield faced each other. With his two wins over Tyson, Holyfield proved that he was the greater fighter and must be ranked higher historically.

### Style Matchup and Common Opponents

Frazier and Holyfield can best be described as the quintessential overachievers. They were not physically big heavyweights, and often gave up height, weight and reach to their contemporaries. However, "Smokin' Joe" and the "Real Deal" had something that helped compensate for what they gave up in size; something that didn't show up on the tale of the tape. They were fighters down to their core, and both possessed an unbreakable will to win.

In the ring Frazier and Holyfield were true warriors and loved to fight. Holyfield was a counter-puncher who also had good boxing skills. He was versatile fighter; adept at figuring out what his opponent didn't like to do, then forcing them to do it. Holyfield was also willing to slug it out with his opponent at the drop of a hat.

Frazier was a relentless swarmer who applied constant pressure. He only knew one way to fight: cut off the ring and try to get inside. Everything he did was centered on landing his left hook, thrown like a whip, to his opponents head or body. It didn't matter as long as it made contact. Frazier was a tireless worker with tremendous stamina and fought better as the fight progressed.

Jerry Quarry was the only fighter Frazier fought who was similar to Holyfield in style and temperament. Quarry was a counterpuncher like Holyfield who was also more than willing to trade. The difference was that Quarry didn't load up and loop punches as much as Evander in the heat of battle. Another thing Quarry and Holyfield had in common was their huge heart and the ability to take a great punch. The difference between them was Holyfield was a little bigger and stronger and wasn't prone to getting cut like Quarry.

Holyfield fought three opponents who were similar to Frazier: Dwight Muhammad Qawi, Bert Cooper and Mike Tyson. Qawi wasn't as big as Frazier and didn't hit as hard. Cooper was a Frazier protégé, but lacked Joe's endurance and toughness. Mike Tyson had quicker hands and was a better two handed puncher than Frazier, but Frazier was a stronger inside fighter and cut off the ring better.

There were other differences between Frazier and Tyson. Frazier was much tougher mentally and emotionally than Tyson, and applied more pressure while cutting off the ring. Tyson, a quick starter, was considered more dangerous early, but faded down the stretch, especially if confronted with resistance. Tyson was also vulnerable to self doubt and lost confidence if things didn't go his way during the fight. In contrast, Frazier fought through adversity and never thought he couldn't win.

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### Who Would've Won

Frazier fought his best during the years 1968-71, and Holyfield performed at his best between 1990-93. Both were most comfortable fighting in the 205-210 pound range. Had they faced each other at their respective apexes, I doubt the fight would go the distance.

For Holyfield to beat Frazier he'd have to keep from going to war with him; something he'd find difficult. Holyfield could punch, but not like Foreman, so I doubt he could take Frazier out inside the distance. He also didn't have the hand or foot speed of Ali, and didn't exhibit as much pinpoint accuracy in his punch placement.

Holyfield was super-tough and much stronger than he gets credit for. But Frazier was so good at cutting off the ring, Holyfield would have no choice but to go to war with him. Holyfield was also susceptible to being slowed by a sustained body attack, and Frazier was one of the best body punchers in heavyweight history.

In the end Holyfield's mindset of "kill or be killed" would draw him into a slugfest with Frazier. That's the wrong approach, especially if you don't possess one-punch knockout power. In my opinion, Frazier at his best comes out on top against Holyfield at his best. The difference would ultimately come down to Holyfield's heart being too big and his punch not being quite big enough.