

Ron Stander Still Standing Tall

Written by Robert Mladinich
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When Ron Stander challenged Joe Frazier for the heavyweight championship of the world at the Omaha Civic Auditorium in Nebraska on May 25, 1972, his wife Darlene described the perceived mismatch as being akin to putting a Volkswagen in the Indianapolis 500. One overly dramatic writer in Boston, where Stander trained for the bout, said if Stander won he would open his kitchen and serve breakfast to the Viet Cong.

Even now both descriptions seem especially harsh, because for most of the four complete rounds that the fight lasted, Stander never took a backward step, gave nearly as good as he got, and even staggered Frazier with a left hook early on. However, he incurred four deep gashes on his face -- one on the eyelid, one on his cheek, and one on each side of his nose -- and the ringside doctor wisely ordered the fight halted at the end of the fourth round.

With his shoulders slumped and tears running down his cheeks, the 5'11", 218-pound Stander cried unabashedly. "I wasn't crying from the cuts," he says now. "There were more than 10,000 people in the arena and I thought I let them all down. Frazier must have hit me with 90 left hooks. He was the favorite in the ring, and he proved why. But if we fought in an alley or a barroom, I would have been the favorite."

Stander was snapped back to reality when his young son Frankie, who is now 40, told anyone within earshot that "Ron Stander is my dad, and he did good." Even though it is more than three decades since that fateful night, Stander is still man enough to cry unabashedly over that particular memory. (Stander also has a daughter Angela, 36, from his marriage to Darlene.)

"I still tell him he didn't get beat, he got cut," said Stander's current wife Becky, to whom he has been married for 16 years and has two sons, Rowan and Ryan, 15 and 16 respectively. "I was just a little girl (nine years old) when Ron fought Frazier. I remember my mother screaming at the television 'Go Big Ron' and saying to myself, 'Who the hell is Joe Frazier?'"

Considering the fact that Stander had only 18 amateur fights, and had taken up boxing just a few years earlier -- after losing a college football scholarship because of poor grades -- he deserved to be commended more than condemned by the worldwide press.

"I loved being a boxer, but sometimes I think I should have been a pro football player instead," said Stander, now 60, and a resident of Omaha, which is just over the bridge from Council Bluffs, Iowa. (During his heyday, both municipalities claimed him as their own, hence his nickname The Council Bluffs Butcher.) "When I was playing high school football I once tackled Gale Sayers. That was easier than fighting Frazier. But my tackle didn't do much good. He still scored four or five touchdowns the times I didn't tackle him."

When Stander challenged Frazier his record was an impressive 23-1-1 (15 KOs). Included in that ledger was a sensational fifth round knockout of Earnie Shavers, who was giving him a frightful beating before being overwhelmed by Stander's tenacious ferocity. He also won

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decisions over the top-rated or highly regarded Thad Spencer, Jack O'Halloran, and Manuel Ramos (with whom he also fought to a draw).

"In my first fight with Ramos I was worried about going the distance," said Stander. "It was my first ten-rounder, and his style was to lay back like a dog and try to counterpunch. I was a face fighter, so I was expending all the energy."

Against the much taller O'Halloran, who later became a somewhat successful actor, appearing in such films as "Superman," "The Flintstones" and "Farewell My Lovely," Stander says "He was a big target. I couldn't miss his body."

But it was his fight with Shavers, not Frazier, which is his greatest source of pride. "Without a doubt, the Shavers fight was my best," he said. "Every time he hit me with a jab, it was like getting hit with a night stick. His right hand was like a sledgehammer. It felt like a whip cracking against my head, a lightning bolt stinging me. I kept telling myself this is unbelievable, this guy is the real deal. At some point I think my body went into shock and I felt no more pain. That's when I knocked him out. I was Rocky before there was a Rocky."

"Ron really showed what he was made of in the Shavers fight," said longtime Omaha promoter, matchmaker and manager Tom Lovgren, who lives just blocks from Stander. "He showed a tremendous amount of heart, and really got the city of Omaha behind him."

With the possible exception of the College World Series, which is held every year at Rosenblatt Stadium, Stander's fight with Frazier is the most talked about athletic event to ever occur in Omaha.

Things began to go downhill for Stander after the Frazier bout. He began fighting on the road, often on short notice for little pay. His career high purse was \$100,000 for Frazier, of which he took home \$40,000. Most of his other purses were south of \$5,000. The spark that once propelled him was gone, and he couldn't get it back. He was drinking more than he should have been, and even lived briefly in the New York City area where he worked as a bouncer at the famous P.J. Clarke's saloon.

By the time he retired in 1982 with a record of 37-21-3 (28 KOs), he had lost to such notables as Ken Norton, Gerrie Coetzee, James "Quick" Tillis, Scott LeDoux and Jeff Merritt.

His fight with Merritt has a bit of historical significance, for more than the obvious reasons. "When I fought him (in November 1973), I think that was Don King's second promotion ever. He was operating out of a motel room on Euclid Avenue in Cleveland. I knew Don well. I was his little white whipping boy whom he beat over the head with \$100 bills, but I guess you can say I helped break him into the business.

"Near the end, I just didn't give a f***," he adds. "I was having a good time living like a big shot. I met a lot of great people and made a lot of good friends, including Bob Guccione (the publisher of Penthouse and the now defunct Viva magazine, who gave the likeable Stander an abundance of publicity in his publications)."

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For 13 years, until it closed down in 2000, Stander worked as a machine operator at Vickers Inc., an Omaha-based manufacturer of hydraulic equipment. He earned \$20 an hour, which enabled him to pay off his house and cars and live modestly but well. "I went from sugar to sh** in no time," he deadpanned.

Although Stander has been told he is in the early stages of dementia, he is extremely lucid and downright charming. While he jokes that his short-term memory is fading, he had no problems remembering anything on the day we met at his home in mid-May. He was not only keenly aware of the past and present; he was surprisingly and refreshingly introspective.

He described being born in Columbia, South Carolina, to a mother he adored. His father, who was in the Air Force, abandoned the family shortly after he was born. Stander's given surname is Lemon, but was changed to Stander when his mother Marie remarried and returned to her Midwest roots. It is obvious that Stander, for all of his athletic prowess as a high school football star and a bonafide local boxing icon, has experienced no shortage of emotional turmoil and learned an abundance of lessons, many of them the hard way. It is also obvious that he is truly a fighter at heart, and steadfastly refuses to give into whatever maladies or travails the future might hold for him.

Although he is much too humble to admit it, you just know that he is extremely proud of his fight with Frazier, and is still stung by all of the criticism he endured. Even if he's not willing to say it, Lovgren sure as hell is.

"Ron made a lot of people proud," Lovgren said. "He fought and beat Earnie Shavers, who was probably the hardest hitting heavyweight in history, right here in Omaha. Then he brought Joe Frazier, the heavyweight champion, to this little city. For one night the whole (boxing) world was focused on Omaha. He's a lot more special than he thinks."

"What happened was my destiny," concedes Stander. "Beating Frazier wasn't meant to be. But I still get a measure of satisfaction from one thing. In his next fight, Frazier got knocked out by George Foreman in two rounds. I like to think I softened him up for Big George."