It was simply a brutal fight. To call it a boxing match does not capture the essence of the contest or its combatants. This was fighting at its core. It was 14 rounds of fighting at its finest. And, perhaps, at its worst. But for all of the punches that were landed and all of the hatred that oozed inside that ring, it would end with the gentle words of a boxing saint.

"Sit down, son. It's all over. No one will ever forget what you did here today."

Those were the words spoken by Eddie Futch, as he told Joe Frazier the “Thrilla in Manila” was over. Thirty years later, no one has forgotten.

On October 1, 1975, Frazier and Muhammad Ali had given all they could give inside a boxing ring. Except for their lives. Afterward, Ali would say, "It was like death. The closest thing to dying I know."

In the end, Frazier's eyes were reduced to slits. Blood was smeared across his lips. "But I want him boss," was Frazier's plea to Futch, as he stood on his feet, waiting to leave the corner for the 15th round.

The round never started. The resumption of war was halted by an act of mercy. Someone had to do it because Ali and Frazier would show no mercy to each other.

Futch informed referee Carlos Padilla that the fight was over and the greatest rivalry in boxing history had come to an end. In the third bout of their epic series, Ali scored a TKO of Frazier to retain the heavyweight title.

There is no shortage of warriors in the sport of boxing. For a century, men have fought with great skill and grim courage. They have pushed their bodies beyond reason and beyond pain.

There may have never been anyone who did it quite like Ali and Frazier. They did it three times, on the grandest of stages, and twice, with the greatest title in all of sports at stake. It was the heavyweight championship of the world. It was the top of the food chain. When men like Ali and Frazier fought as desperately as they did – for 41 rounds in total – it was not about the money. It was about that reservoir of pride that resides somewhere in the belly of all special athletes.

When these men fought, it was as if the rest of the world paused. It was that big of an event. They disappointed no one.

“Their styles were just meant for each other,” said Ali’s trainer Angelo Dundee. “It is remarkable. No matter where or when they fought, if you put them together you couldn’t have a bad fight. I think they both brought each other to a higher level. They brought the best out of each other.”

George Benton, a top middleweight from the ‘60s who worked Frazier’s corner for the third Ali fight, considers the “Thrilla in Manila” the greatest title fight in the history of the sport. “These were two warriors in the ring,” he said. “Joe was so determined. He made it very, very difficult for Ali. But you can’t take nothing away from Ali. He was determined too.”

Perhaps the only stain that tarnishes the memory of this great contest is the pre-fight buildup. Ali took the hype to an undesirable level. Today, his actions would be cause for condemnation, but at the time, the media adored Ali and his antics. From the time the fight was announced, the world was reminded by Ali, that, “It’s gonna be a thrilla and a chilla and a killa when I get the gorilla in Manila.”

In the early footage from the press tour, Frazier was seen smiling but he never found Ali’s derisive taunts humorous. It got worse when Ali pulled out a small rubber gorilla and said to Frazier, “I got your conscience with me and I’m gonna keep it right here in my pocket,” and then Ali placed the gorilla in his breast pocket. It seemed each time a camera was rolling, Ali would display the gorilla and, while holding it in his left hand, he’d punch it repeatedly with his right. All the while he’d be shouting, “Come on gorilla, we in Manila. Come on gorilla, this is a thrilla.”

It was this behavior and Ali’s early reference to Frazier as an “Uncle Tom” that fueled Smokin’ Joe’s hatred of the man known simply as “The Greatest.” The other ingredient that made this a great fight was that each man was past his prime. They retained the same warrior’s spirit, but lost speed and reflexes. When that occurs one thing is guaranteed – a lot of punches will land. Ali and Frazier were not as sharp or fast as they were for the classic first bout in 1971. But they were both as determined.

Ali entered the ring a 2-1 favorite. He was 33 years old and weighed 224 1/2 pounds. Frazier was 31 years old and weighed 215½ pounds. They fought in the Manila Coliseum, which was actually located in Quezon City, six miles outside of Manila. There were 28,000 people in attendance, including President Marcos and the First Lady, Imelda. There have been various reports concerning the temperature inside the arena. It has been reported by different sources ranging from 95 to 110 degrees. The humidity was oppressive and, once the arena was filled with people, the air conditioning was useless. It was as if they were fighting in a sauna.

Like all great fights, this one had a classic ebb and flow. Ali started fast and dominated the early rounds. But Frazier rallied and punished the champion through the middle rounds.

In the first minute of round eight, the fighters engaged in a vicious multi-punch exchange, neither man backing off. Frazier closed strong in that round, pinning Ali to the ropes and alternating his hook between the body and head. Boxing technique and strategy disappeared at this point. The suffocating humidity and the nonstop punching were taking its toll on each fighter. “The Thrilla in Manila” had become a battle of wills.

“With the intensity of the fight and the heat, I was concerned about Muhammad,” said Dundee. “But I felt Muhammad was winning the fight. I don’t know how they did it. To fight the way they fought under those conditions is remarkable.”

Although he would absorb a terrible beating in the 11th round, Ali began to march back into the fight. Somehow, the champion emerged from his corner energized for the 12th round. He began pumping rapid combinations at Frazier, who was bleeding from the mouth and began to lose his vision due to the swelling around his eyes. Early in round 13, a right cross by Ali sent Frazier's mouthpiece flying across the ring. Ali continued to punch in combination as Frazier continued to plod after him. A blistering right-left combination caused Frazier to stumble backward. Somehow, though, he remained on his feet.

The 14th round was dominated by Ali. At the close of the stanza, Padilla helped walk Frazier back to his corner. Then came one of the hardest decisions Eddie Futch ever had to make. In the years before he died, Futch spoke to this writer several times about stopping "The Thrilla Manila." While he always remained firm in his decision, the disappointment he felt for Frazier drew heavy on his conscience.

"It was a very difficult moment for me," he said. "But the circumstances made it absolutely necessary. His vision was impaired to the point that he couldn't avoid Ali's punches. He couldn't see them coming. Ali knew this. I started to make my decision to stop the fight in the 13th round after a right hand knocked Joe's mouthpiece out of his mouth and into the audience. I said to myself, I'll give him one more round because Ali has got to slow up. He was throwing so many punches. But Ali didn't slow up.

"I wasn't going to allow him to take any more punches. Joe was getting hit with so many punches. And all it takes is one to cause some permanent damage. Joe is a great father, a great family man. He's raised a beautiful family. I wanted to see him enjoy his children and I wanted his children to enjoy him. I didn't want to see him incapacitated later in life. I wouldn't allow that. His family hated me for that. One of his daughters came to visit me and she said, "You know, we hated you for stopping that fight. But then we learned more about what you did and why you did it. We love you now because we understand what you did for our father.''

When the fight ended, Ali collapsed in his corner. Moments later he was helped onto his stool by his cornermen and they frantically waved towels in his face in an attempt to revive him. The competitiveness of the fight was not reflected in the scoring. Ali led on all three scorecards: 8-5-1, 8-2-4 and 9-3-2.

The fight was named "Fight of the Year" by *The Ring* magazine and Ali earned "Fighter of the Year" honors from *The Ring*. In an unprecedented move, the Boxing Writers Association of America named both Ali and Frazier "Fighter of the Year."

Ali and Frazier would never fight at such a high level again. They had each left a piece of themselves in that ring in Manila.

Futch was only half correct. No one will ever forget what Ali and Frazier did in Manila.