

TSS Closer Look: HBO's The Thrilla In Manila

Written by Ron Borges
Monday, 06 April 2009 19:00

HBO Sports' newest documentary really should be called "The Other Guy" because that is what it is all about.

On the surface it is a dramatic recounting of the "Thrilla in Manila," the story not only of a historic boxing match but of the circumstances and political atmosphere that surrounded the third fight between Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier. It is the story of a night when two men nearly killed each other because their wills were bigger than their skills and their skills were vast. If that was all it was, it would be a remarkable tale well told.

But this is a documentary shot from the point of view of the other guy, which is what poor Joe Frazier always was when he was in the ring or walking in the same world as Ali. It was never fair that Frazier had to trudge forward in such a long, cold shadow but was it fair that God gave him such a left hook either? You didn't think so after it hit you so, in a sense, things even out.

Frazier would agree with that, even when you look at his life and Ali's these past 34 years. Both are old men now, and like most old men life has gotten the better of them in painful ways. Ali's speech, which was always so much of his charm, is gone. So is his health. Frazier's riches are gone, his youth is gone and the skills that once made him one of the most feared and famous boxers in the world are gone. Yet one thing remains for Frazier, the thing that made him Joe Frazier in the first place.

His pride, a lion's pride, lives on at 63. It lives despite the fact he now shares space with it in two small rooms above a gym he built years ago in a rundown section of North Philadelphia known, fittingly if you ever knew Frazier, as The Badlands. For as bad a man as Joe Frazier used to be in the ring, isn't that where he should reside?

Yet pride is a double edged sword. It can drive you to great heights or drive you to the point of near death in the pursuit of victory. Most of all it can trap you and that is where Joe Frazier lives today. Not trapped in North Philly but rather in 1975, the year he and Ali savaged each other for the third and final time until Frazier's loyal liege and corner man, Eddie Futch, stopped the fight in the corner after 14 rounds because Frazier could no longer see the man he hated so supremely and so savagely.

That morning in Manila, as Frazier argued with Futch between rounds to give him those final three minutes with his equally spent but less visually impaired nemesis, Ali, Futch told him softly, "No one will ever forget what you did here today." And no one ever has.

More than three decades later it remains one of the greatest fights ever contested, a fight so fraught with conflicting emotions that HBO saw fit to put its considerable money and heft behind what is the latest in a long line of remarkable documentary films they have commissioned and produced. What makes this one different though is that Ali is not the centerpiece. Old Joe Frazier, Smokin' Joe no more, is.

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We see a case built against Ali, as it pertains to his cruelty, vile racism and hurtful words. We see Frazier's son, Marvis, speak of the taunting he took as a boy after Ali called his father an Uncle Tom so many times that America forgot which one of them grew up a coal-black sharecropper's son in racist Beaufort, S.C. in the 1950s. Forgot which one of them lived his adult life in the gritty ghetto section of North Philadelphia and lives there still.

Forgot that, in actuality, Joe Frazier was a far better picture of the black man's burden in those days than Ali, a beautiful, lower middle class kid who grew up in Louisville, Ky. Certainly there was racism there too but he never lived the hard life Frazier knew, first as a sharecropper and later working at a Philadelphia slaughterhouse to keep himself going in the early days of his boxing career.

Frazier and others tell the story of how he befriended Ali after the latter was exiled from boxing, giving him both financial and public support after he was banned from boxing for 3 1/2 years for refusing to be drafted at the height of the Viet Nam War. Eventually Ali won his case, returned to boxing and began to hunt down Frazier, then the reigning heavyweight champion.

By the first time they met in the ring in 1971, Ali had begun the process of turning Frazier into a political piñata with a dehumanizing and constant verbal assault on his manhood, his blackness, his looks and his family. By the third fight those taunts and insults had filled Frazier with a poisonous bile that would never recede.

"The two men hated each other," narrator Liev Schreiber says. "A personal hatred born out of America's racial politics of the 1970s...Years of animosity festered between these two heavyweight champions...In Manila, it took them to the brink."

To the brink of death, something Ali conceded after the fight and Frazier seemed almost to welcome. Asked if he was willing to have risked his life to fight that final round 34 years ago Frazier says only one, hard word in reply.

"Yeah!" No need for amplification.

The reason, the documentary makes clear, is that Ali "provoked a blood feud for which Frazier believes Ali is now paying the eternal price."

"Whatever you done when you a young man, it comes to bite you in the butt when you get old," a tired-looking Frazier says of Ali's long, and losing fight against Parkinson's, a disease which has struck him silent and left him blank-faced and shaking uncontrollably at times. "Trust me."

Asked if he feels Ali is paying the price for what he'd done as a young man Frazier quickly adds "...and said! God knocks you down."

It was bad enough that Ali called him ugly, stupid, a "flat-nosed pug" and an Uncle Tom but he took it even deeper before the Manila fight when he began to call him a gorilla two days after he'd arrived in the Philippines. To a black man at that time of revolution in American society there could have been few worse things to suggest. Ali did it time and again, even producing a

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tiny rubber gorilla he used to beat up at press conferences. The crowd laughed. Frazier did not.

The more Ali did it the deeper and more infectious the bile grew inside Frazier, finally spilling forth in the ring that morning in Manila, when the two of them nearly beat the life out of each other for 14 rounds.

“Joe was ready to lay his life on the line...and he did,” recalled Dave Wolf, a Frazier confidante at the time and a long-time boxing manager.

It was 125 degrees and staggeringly humid the morning of the fight, only adding to the agony the two of them would experience. For the first few rounds, Ali dominated with his jab and his speed but soon Frazier began to work his way inside and tear at his body like an angry jackal coming across a freshly bleeding carcass. From the fifth round through the 11th Frazier extracted a price from Ali's kidneys and liver that left him urinating blood for several weeks after the fight.

But Frazier was going blind to do it. Already nearly blind in his left eye from a 1964 training injury he never made public, now his right eye was rapidly closing as if a dark shade had fallen. As it came down, Ali began to savagely beat on Frazier's face with right hands Frazier told Futch he could no longer see.

Ali, meanwhile, was exhausted and told his corner men this was what death must be like. Yet the two fought on and the documentary paints the picture in savage slow motion and with full speed assaults. “Years of bad blood assured that neither man was willing to yield,” Schreiber intones as their fists chop at each other.

“You want to know what makes the crowd scream and holler?” asks Ferdie Pacheco, Ali's long-time physician and the verbal co-star of this documentary. “Look at round 14.

“Round 14 is the closest I've seen to somebody killing somebody. Ali was very close to killing him. Very close. That's what gets people killed in boxing. When the fight becomes more important than life and death.”

So it was to Frazier, who would never yield to a man who had, in his mind, betrayed his trust, forgotten the friendship he'd extended to him when he was in exile from boxing and insulted him as a man in a way so deep, nothing but inflicting and absorbing pain could sooth it.

As Frazier watches the tape he hears the ring announcer suggest Ali might stop him and he snorts, “Naahhh. He couldn't take me out. He was dead. Both of us (was), I would say.”

After 14 rounds Frazier returns to Futch with his eye closed to a slit and his face a hematoma. As Futch argues with him about stopping the fight, Ali has gone to his corner and ordered his trainer, Angelo Dundee, to cut his gloves off. He wants no more of Joe Frazier, a fact a Frazier colleague from Philadelphia, Willie Monroe, hears from his seat and tries to make clear to Frazier's corner.

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Ali later confirmed this as does Pacheco in the film. Futch doesn't know this however and stops the fight to protect Frazier. When Ali realizes it, he stands up, waves one arm and then collapses on the floor.

Frazier watches and then says, "He was the one says he wasn't going to come back out I don't think. Yeah."

Later Ali would summon Frazier's son to his locker room. Marvis Frazier recalls how Ali apologized to him for the things he'd said and asked him to tell his father. Happy to finally hear Ali soften his words, he returns to his father's locker room to tell him. What he recalls, even 35 years later, shows the depth of the pain Joe Frazier endured and still carries today.

"He said, 'Hey, son, why didn't he say it to me? You're not me, son. He said it in front of all them people. He said all those words. All them nasty things. Let him come to me and tell me.'"

Ali never did and so two old men sit now with their memories, one a silent icon trapped inside a broken body who helped change the world; the other an old fighter living in a north Philly ghetto still overflowing with the same bile that nearly killed him and, he believes, made Muhammad Ali the broken man he is today.

"I'm just proud to let them see the stuff that they said," the old Joe Frazier says in the film. "The damage I done to this man, both mind and body, let them see."

Occasionally Frazier's position on Ali softens in public but anyone who thinks that's really how he sees things now is quickly disabused of that notion by Frazier's brother, Tommy. He asks the film crew if they've ever dialed his brother's cell phone. When they say they haven't he does and then turns the phone to the camera.

Next thing you hear is Frazier's gravelly voice saying, "My name is Smokin' Joe Frazier. Sharp as a razor. Yeah. Floating like a butterfly, stings like a bee. I'm the man that done the job. He knows, look and see. Call me. Bye, bye."

Ali, of course, was the man who once claimed to float like a butterfly and sting like a bee. Joe Frazier is still the man who claims he plucked the wings off the butterfly and swatted the bee. Why that remains important to him after so many years is clear after watching "Thrilla in Manila," a documentary that could just as easily been called "The Other Guy" because sadly that's still what Joe Frazier remains.

An angry "other guy" who produced a trilogy of fights with a friend who became his arch enemy and filled him with a hate that not even old age and hard times can soften. Surely that's why, right near the end of the film he calls Ali "Clay" one last time, the given name Ali came to regard as a symbol of racism.

Then, as if he was speaking to Ali, Frazier says, "Ask the Lord to forgive him. That's all. Before you take that last gasp – you ask for forgiveness."

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Until then, Joe Frazier will remain still Smokin' Joe.

□□ *Editor note: "Thrilla in Manila" debuts Saturday night 8-9:30 pm Eastern, 10-11:30 pm Pacific prior to the debut of Pacquiao-Hatton 24/7 and a middleweight fight between Winky Wright and Paul Williams. It will re-air numerous other times on HBO and HBO2. Check local listings.*