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Tuesday, 14 April 2009 19:00

It was nice to see a documentary on the Ali-Frazier trilogy shot from the Frazier perspective as was the case in the one presented by HBO this past weekend. Other than referee Carlos Padilla revealing that Muhammad Ali sang a few nursery rhymes to Joe Frazier during the "Thrilla In Manila," I don't think much else in the way of news was learned from the piece. Most boxing observers are aware of Frazier's disdain for Ali and his theatrics before all three of their historic bouts. And like all HBO specials and documentaries, the production was terrific.

In full disclosure I must submit that I trained at Frazier's gym as an amateur and professional middleweight circa 1978-82. I befriended Joe's oldest son, Marvis, who happens to be one of the best people I've ever met in my life. Along with that, I've always considered Joe Frazier and Sonny Liston the two most underrated heavyweight champions in boxing history.

During the documentary, "Smokin¹" Joe conveyed how deeply hurt and bothered he was by the rants and cutting insults hurled at him by Muhammad Ali. And it's true that Frazier testified before Congress and President Nixon with the hope of persuading them to re-instate Ali's boxing license. He also lent Ali money during his 43 month exile. It's also a fact that Marvis Frazier bore the brunt of Ali's insults on the schoolyard playground the day after they were made in front of the whole world. However, Frazier isn't totally pure in his actions either, and his self-interest was in play too. Remember, Joe's biggest pay day before he fought Ali in 1971 was slightly less than half a million dollars. He knew Ali represented his lottery ticket ($2.5 million guarantee for their first bout). More importantly, Joe knew if he never fought and defeated Ali, history would view him as a caretaker to the heavyweight title, and not the all-time great he truly was. There's no doubt about it that it was in Frazier's best interest for Ali to return to the ring.

Joe's bitterness, although he may have carried it too long, is justified. Sure, Ali was a showman and drew attention to everything he did, but in the run-up to all three of his fights with Frazier, there was a reason for his sometimes over the top antics. And that reason was Ali knew Joe Frazier had no fear of him whatsoever. It didn't slip past Ali that he couldn't irritate or get under Frazier's skin like he did Sonny Liston, or disrespect him the way he did Ernie Terrell, nor could he intimidate him like he had Cleveland Williams and some other title challengers. Frazier clearly understood that he had the perfect style to give Ali a fit and make it hard on him in the ring, and by 1970 he had that style down pat. In Frazier, Ali was facing a fighter for the first time who he couldn't conquer psychologically before the bell to begin the first round. The fact is, Joe was not con-able.

The thing Frazier struggles with today is Ali's mythic popularity. And don't give me it's that way because of Ali's current physical affliction. Look how popular George Foreman became in his second career imitating Ali in many ways. Imagine Ali with good diction and clarity doing color on HBO Boxing during the years Foreman¹s second act unfolded? Had that been the way history progressed, Ali would be even bigger than he is today. Joe's blinded by his belief, and it's a legitimate one, that he's Ali's equal as a great fighter. It must be frustrating living in Joe's world watching Ali being celebrated on the world stage when he's not. Joe never got the credit

he deserves for winning the biggest and most celebrated fight in boxing history on the night of March 8, 1971. Do you think Joe ever goes a day without remembering he won the biggest fight in history, and it was Muhammad Ali who lost it? Unfortunately for Frazier, losing the biggest fight in history turned out to be a blessing for Ali. By him losing to Frazier, it provided Ali with two great fighters and foils to conquer in Joe Frazier and George Foreman during the early to mid-seventies.

As a personality, Ali dwarfs Frazier and every other living athlete, with the possible exception of Michael Jordan, as a legend and icon. Frazier is punished in ways he can't control because of Ali's career transcending boxing. Ali's life inspired conversations throughout the world on war, politics, culture and race. On top of that, he just happened to face and defeat the greatest generation of upper-tier heavyweights in history. Yes, in many ways lady-luck smiled upon Ali more than once or twice. Joe, outside of being an all-time great heavyweight champion, was just another citizen of the world. In a crazy way, just as Frazier can't grasp why Ali is so popular and beloved, Ali never understood the more he denigrated Joe, the worse he made it for himself on fight night.

Separated By Three Rounds

Over the years the Ali-Frazier trilogy has been discussed and debated. The question is, how close were the 41 rounds they fought spanning three fights? I know this will upset some Ali fans, me being one of them, but I live in reality. Had there been no "Thrilla In Manila," it is Frazier who got the better of Ali during their first two fights encompassing 27 rounds.

Here's Why:

Joe clearly won the first fight 9-6 in rounds. He won the 11th round big, and almost had Ali out. So much so, that Dr. Klieman who was the attending ring physician considered stopping the fight before the start of the 12th round, but was convinced by Ali's interaction with trainer Angelo Dundee that he'd recovered and was fit to continue. In the 15th round Joe floored Ali with a massive left-hook, which Ali had to get up from his grave to finish the fight. Thus, Frazier was the clear winner of fight one via a unanimous decision.

When they met in a rematch 34 months later Ali was in much better shape and Frazier had been dethroned by George Foreman a year earlier almost to the day. Like in the first fight Ali came out fast and hurt Joe in the second round. Referee Tony Perez mistakenly separated them 20 seconds before the bell rang to end the round. However, Joe quickly recovered and would've
survived the round regardless. In fact Ali never had him in trouble again during the next 10 rounds. When the fight concluded Ali had stabbed and grabbed his way through the fight winning a unanimous decision, 7-5 in rounds, thereby giving Frazier the edge 14-13 in rounds overall. But more than that, Frazier won the first fight by a wider margin than Ali did the rematch.

As it has often been said the Manila fight represented the championship of each other for both Frazier and Ali. In truth, it was three fights in one. Ali had the better of it through the first five rounds and Frazier had the better of it through the mid-point of the 11th round. It has been

documented that Ali took a terrible beating to his body during the fight, and said it was the closest thing to death he'd ever experienced.

Starting in round 12, finally, Ali's physical size and reach started taking a toll on Joe. With both eyes closing, he was no longer able to get low and inside on Ali, and Frazier became a sitting duck for Ali's suddenly crisp left jabs and lead right hands. In the 13th round an Ali right hand sent Frazier's mouthpiece into the crowd some 10 rows back from ringside. Round 14 saw Ali hit Frazier at will as he couldn't miss a slowed Frazier who no longer held the edge in punching power. This had to cause Frazier's tranier, Eddie Futch great concern. Seeing Joe at center ring confronting Ali who was now fresher and sharper, not to mention carrying the bigger guns, left him no choice but to stop the fight before the start of the 15th and final round.

What Separated Them?

Had there been an earthquake after the 11th round in the Quezon City of the Philippines, Ali and Frazier would have to be considered equal, at least in their head-to-head match up inside the ring. Therefore it wasn't until the last three rounds of their trilogy that Ali's size, speed and reach became too much for Frazier to overcome. That's why I believe they're only separated by three rounds as fighters.

One last thing about the fight in Manila. Anyone who thinks Muhammad Ali would've quit had Eddie Futch allowed Frazier to come out for the 15th round, isn't the most informed boxing person around. If you watch the end of the 14th round, a round Frazier almost went down two or three times, Frazier has to be guided back to his corner by referee Carlos Padilla. Ali walks briskly back to his corner. The idea that Ali or Frazier would ever submit to the other while they still had a heartbeat is completely asinine. Had the Manila fight gone to a 15th round, it would've ended like the final fight between Sugar Ray Robinson and Jake LaMotta. Like Jake, Joe wouldn't have gone down, but he would've endured an unnecessary pummeling and been stopped while on his feet, end of story.

Joe Frazier sees the world more literally than Muhammad Ali-- being they were near-equals as fighters, he believes that their recognition and fame should be equal. The inescapable problem for Joe is, Muhammad Ali is a much bigger personality world wide than he is, and that clouds the projection of most fans and people when they think of Frazier and Ali as the great fighters they were.

It doesn't seem right that some recall Frazier's career by hearing Howard Cosell's call of "Down goes Frazier," and Ali yelling ³It's gonna be a thrilla and a chilla when I get the gorilla in Manila." Hopefully, one day Joe Frazier will get his due as the great fighter he was.

Joe Frazier won the most celebrated fight in history and Muhammad Ali lost it!