“But Ali always sucked it up…. He always did.” –Angelo Dundee

Timing is the most important thing for a trainer. They only get one minute to give instructions in between rounds. Yet by the time the fighter sits on his stool, takes a sip of water, and the cut man attempts to heal his wounds, who knows how much info resonates in the mind over the course of fewer than sixty frantic seconds?

Therefore Angelo Dundee sent short but concise messages to the combatants that he worked with. “Sit down, relax, I will take care of this,” Dundee told a young Cassius Clay after the fourth round of the first Liston fight. Clay was blinded by a burning substance that his opponent, Sonny Liston, allegedly had on his gloves.

Dundee spoke to TSS of Ali’s coming out party on that fateful evening in 1964 with an honest sincerity. Did Liston attempt to blind Clay in that fight? No one truly knows for sure. However, Liston at the time had a reputation of doing whatever it took to win, so one can only wonder.

“Muhammad felt like there was some dirty work going on. He came to the corner shouting at me to cut his gloves off. He wanted to stop the fight to tell everyone that Liston had something in his gloves,” Dundee said. “You see, Liston was so powerful in the ring and people would talk about him putting something in the gloves all of the time. I mean, they would talk about it openly. I checked Liston’s gloves before the fight. There was nothing wrong with them. But I could tell there was something wrong when he (Ali) came to the corner. So I put my pinkie in his eye. Then I put it in my eye and it burnt like hell. My eyes started burning!”

The bond between Angelo Dundee and Ali has been exhaustively examined. But TSS U never really gets tired of hearing about the interaction between The Greatest and his tutor.

Dundee was screaming in Ali’s ear during the third battle between the two titans, Ali and Frazier dubbed the Thrilla in Manila. The fight was the focus of an HBO documentary that debuted last Saturday. The Socrates of boxing trainers has a different perspective of what transpired in the waning moments of the epic bout than some of the analysts on the program.

“Let me tell you, the thing that they got wrong, Muhammad never said to cut the gloves off. I was there. They must have been thinking about the first Liston fight. When Muhammad got back to the corner after the 14th round, I knew we had Joe. I said ‘Loosen up kid, this is the last round, let’s get him.’ If you see, when we get in the corner, (between the 14th and 15th round) I am pumping my fist as I talk. I am really juiced, because it was amazing the way these two guys were fighting. And Muhammad has always sucked it up.”

So Muhammad never wanted to stop, I asked him.

"No, that's baloney," Dundee said. "Joe didn't want to stop. Do you know what I mean? They are two warriors. No, and Muhammad never said anything about cutting the gloves off. That is nuts. That is not true. That is not real."

Dundee thought there were more untruths in the documentary. Although he enjoyed the show, Dundee felt that those who had the strongest opinions on the program were nowhere to be seen in the Phillipines on fight night.

"Well, I am not a critic, they did the show the way they wanted to do it. But I saw a lot of faces on that show that I have never seen before. And they were the critical ones. You know, I didn't see these people at the event. But they were the ones talking the most. It was dead wrong when they said that Muhammad wanted to cut the gloves off. And the other thing about saying that he collapsed after the fight is silly. The truth is, Muhammad laid down because those guys were jumping on him. So he just sat down and took it easy."

Ali's victory over a courageous Frazier in that Thrilla in Manila was the stuff fairy tales are made of. But to hear Dundee say it, it was not Hollywood movie dramatic. The HBO documentary depicted an image of Ali gasping for air, nearly fainting inside of the ring after the brutal fight against Joe Frazier. But Dundee, the closest man to Ali in proximity, saw it differently.

"That was baloney," Dundee said. "And it has long been a misconception after the fight. Listen, he walked back to the corner by himself. He sat down by himself. He got up by himself. But you know, that is all said and done. I am so grateful for what HBO is doing for boxing. I enjoy everything that they do."

Most of our conversation focused on the HBO documentary. During a critical point in the show, Dr. Freddie Pacheco stated that everyone in Ali's camp, the Muslims, and Angelo Dundee included, urged Ali to continue fighting, except Pacheco himself. I asked Dundee about Pacheco's comments but he refused to throw stones at his former colleague. Instead, Dundee gave his own idea about why Ali continued his boxing career after the third Frazier fight.

"I never played God with any fighter, and told him what to do with his life. Muhammad did with his life what he wanted to do. So did Joe Frazier. I think a fighter has the God-given right to call his own shots, especially with the type of life that they lead. I hinted it to him a number of times, but I am not in the position to tell a man what to do with his life. I will give you an example. Early in his career, Muhammad and I were watching a kid (young boxer) skipping rope.

"I told Muhammad 'See that kid over there?' He said 'yeah.' I said, 'He's stuttering.' Now, near the end of Muhammad's career, we were sitting in a limousine on the way to a press conference. During the middle of our conversation, I said 'You know you are starting to stutter?' He said, 'What do you mean?' The thing is the kid did what he wanted to do with his life. No one forced him to do it. That is who he is, Muhammad Ali."

Dundee and I took a breath. We exchanged thoughts about why Muhammad Ali is still the greatest of all time. "Nobody could duplicate what this kid has done for boxing," Dundee said

calmly. “He just gave it a new level, a new time. People did not realize how much fun we were having until he stopped fighting.”

Frazier’s well documented resentment towards Ali is no secret. Dundee acknowledges Frazier’s frustration but sees little need for it. Dundee thinks it is time to move on for the Philly slugger.

“I think Muhammad is fond of Joe Frazier. Everything that we ever did, we were selling. If Joe took it the wrong way, there is nothing we could do about it. We just tried to sell tickets. We did not mean any harm to anybody. Someone came to Ali with the gorilla doll and he started taunting with the gorilla. You know that kind of stuff. But overall, Muhammad had a lot of respect for Joe Frazier. He was a great fighter.”

The history between Dundee and Ali holds truths only the two men know. It has been nearly thirty years since Angelo Dundee laced Muhammad Ali’s gloves for the last time. Yet, the two boxing icons hold a strong friendship.

“I see Muhammad every chance that I get. I just need an excuse. He asked me to talk at his foundation in Zaire. I got to know the guy that did the movie “When We Were Kings.” He was a real nice man. He and I both talked about our experience in Zaire. That foundation is something else you know. It is a six story building used strictly for teaching kids. It is not a boxing establishment. I assure you. It is a learning institution.”

Margarito Ban

After soaking us in Ali vs. Frazier tutelage, Dundee gave his thoughts on the Antonio Margarito scandal.

“Plaster of Paris, that’s brutal. I am glad they caught it. We don’t need that kind of stuff,” Dundee said about the substances that were detected in Antonio Margarito’s glove before his fight against Shane Mosley. “We had that Billy Collins situation, where they took the padding out of the glove. But this is just horrible. I think this act deserves a ban.”

Dundee continued by saying, “And if you really think about it, putting something that hard in the glove can break his hand very easily. Think about it. Bone on bone. It just did not make sense to do something like that. It takes the sport out of it. The best man will win, you know.”

Ricky Hatton’s Perfect Weapon

Dundee thinks Hatton has a great chance to dethrone the current Pound for Pound king on May 2nd. “If ever there is a fighter that could beat Manny Pacquiao it is Ricky Hatton,” Dundee said.

Why is that, I inquired?

“Aggressiveness, Hatton will take it to him,” Dundee said. “It takes the awkwardness out of the

southpaw if you take it to him. And Hatton has the best punch to beat a southpaw, the left hook. Hatton said it himself, he is bigger, and stronger. Pacquiao is quicker. But I give Hatton a great shot to win. It is because of the style. You take it to the southpaw. I handled six southpaws, that is how I know. I handled the best southpaw in the world, Michael Nunn. But he got hit with that left hook from James Toney. You see, that is the punch. So they will make it a great fight. And I give Ricky a great shot to win."

On May 8th, the Trump Taj Mahal in Atlantic City, New Jersey is hosting a roast in celebration of Angelo Dundee's 88th birthday. HAPPY B-DAY Ange!

Contact Raymond at Raymond.Markarian@yahoo.com